Working Paper II

THE MOBILITY OF PERMANENCE

THE PROCESS OF RELOCATING TO KATHMANDU

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Abstract

This paper addresses the experience of physical mobility in a recently settled locality on the urban periphery of western Kathmandu. Residents tend to understand their new position in the city as a residence, or *basāĩ*, in relation to a more permanent home, or *ghar*. Interestingly, the tension between *basāĩ* and *ghar* extends far beyond one's current residence in Kathmandu and village home. It refers to a spectrum of previous locations and future destinations, stretching from Nepali towns, villages, and cities to foreign opportunities as varied as employment in the Gulf or education in the United States. Importantly, however, this spectrum is not just geographic, but is given social significance through a dual understanding of global, national and local economic conditions and symbolic representations of prestige, goods and kinship. As such, the most recent relocation to Kathmandu must be understood as part of a process involving a complex web of places and meanings.

Introduction: Between the *Ghar* Ideal and the *Basāĩ* Reality

When speaking to a resident of Maitri Nagar, a predominantly upper-caste (Bahun-Chhetri) *nayā basti* ('new settlement') in Kathmandu's urbanising periphery, very rarely will you receive the same answer to the two questions: *ghar kahā chha?* ('where is your home?') and *kahā basnuhunchha?* ('where do you reside?').[1] In answering the former, most refer to one of Nepal's 72 districts outside of the Kathmandu Valley, usually somewhere in the Tarai plains or hills of mid-west Nepal. A few, most often Newar respondents, will speak of a home in the older cities, towns or villages of the Valley. Even fewer will refer to a nearby residence outside of the Ring Road. For most, then, their current residence in Kathmandu is known as *basāĩ*, a temporary place of stay in opposition to the more permanent *ghar*.

The distinction between *ghar* and *basāĩ*, however, refers to much more than an owned house and rented residence. In terms of geography, one's *ghar* depends on the location of the conversation. From the capital or a foreign country, it is a district. From the district, it is a town or village. From a town, it is a neighbourhood. From the neighbourhood or village, it is a specific house or cluster of houses. But, more than a physical place, *ghar* connotes the material symbols of property and the social bonds of kinship, caste, ethnicity and territorial identity. According to geographer Bhim P. Subedi:

> *Ghara*[2] is not just the house to live in and not something that can be anywhere and can be exchanged, but an irreplaceable centre of significance. It is neither limited to physical structure nor a physical space to carry on livelihood. It captures broader networks, intimate relations with the land and environment, and a place of rooted memory.[3]

While the geographic, material and social ties of *ghar* instil it with a sense of permanence and fixity, *basāĩ* evokes a feeling of transience. In fact, *basāĩ*, a nominalisation of the verb *basnu* ('to sit or reside'), can also be translated as 'a settlement in a place other than one's own village or country' and is often coupled

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1 I would like to thank the Centre for the Study of Labour and Mobility (CESLAM) for inviting me to present this as a paper at the conference on migration in Nepal held in April 2012. I would also like to thank the six conference panelists for offering valuable feedback on the paper. The data presented comes from ethnographic research conducted for my doctoral dissertation in 2008 and 2009.

2 Subedi refers to the more colloquial pronunciation of the term, *ghar*, with an additional 'a'. For the remainder of the article, I refer to *ghar* when discussing my own data and analysis, while reserving *ghara* when alluding to Subedi's analysis.

3 Subedi, 1999, p. 138.

with the nominalisation of the verb *sarnu* ('to move'), as in the phrase, *basāĩ-sarāi* to denote permanent relocation.[4]

For the majority of Maitri Nagar residents, the recent move from a rented flat in the city to an owned house in the urban periphery is not a shift from *basāĩ* to *ghar*, but rather a continuation of a life of *basāĩ*, one of many moves, and most likely not their last. Their recent move to Kathmandu's urban periphery needs to be contextualised within a sequence of relocations in between a variety of settlement types (village, bazaar, highway town, district centre, Tarai city/village, large city, foreign city). Now residing in Kathmandu, many residents seek to send their children to foreign countries for employment or university education. Thus, life is often lived in terms of the mobility of *basāĩ*, and not just one final migration from village to city. The question remains, thus, how informants reconcile the fixity and permanence of a *ghar* left behind with a life of transient and temporary *basāĩ*s.

The tension between *ghar* and *basāĩ* is by no means unique to Maitri Nagar residents, but telling of the long history of mobility for Nepali society. Although the topic of mobility was long overlooked by social scientists in Nepal, the last two and a half decades have generated a wealth of scholarship documenting how the historical conditions of feudalism, colonialism and capitalism have forced millions of Nepalis into migration patterns of north/highland to south/lowland;[5] rural to urban;[6] and domestic to foreign[7] for the purposes of exporting their labour power. While these studies draw critical attention to the powerful role of mobility in Nepali society, they tend to approach mobility as a process of push (from the rural highlands) and pull (to the urban and often foreign production centres), which fails to appreciate a more nuanced and integrated relationship between the places of home and away.

In this paper, I build on two approaches to migration that have provided frameworks for integrating the multiple places of physical mobility. James Ferguson has addressed this issue in Zambian mining towns, showing how the rural, or 'local', persists in the lives of urban migrants—albeit only in times of economic downturn.[8] From the village looking out towards destinations of migration, Subedi understands 'home' and 'away' as an 'integrated whole' from the phenomenological perspective of a Nepali village.[9] In my analysis, I view *ghar* and *basāĩ* as integrated not in terms of economic conditions or experiential meanings alone but in how informants interpret mobility as a reflection of material conditions and symbolic

4 Hutt, 1998, p. 197.

5 Mikesell, 1988; Shrestha, 1990; Adhikari, 2008.

6 Graner, 2001.

7 Des Chene, 1991; Shrestha, 1990; Seddon et al, 2001; Graner and Gurung, 2003; Sharma, 2008.

8 Ferguson, 1999.

9 Subedi, 1999; 2006.

meanings. From three case studies, I show how mobility entails a continuum of places socially produced from informants' understandings of local economies, state policy, the global economy and prestige systems of goods, education and employment opportunities, and kinship networks.

Mobility in Nepal Social Science

Despite the frequent mobility of Nepalis, social science has only recently started to pay attention to internal and international movements in Nepal. Similar to what Sheller and Urry call 'sedentarist theories',[10] that is, a bias in scholarship to downplay the role of mobility, Nepal studies has tended to emphasise immobility and a place-based agrarian identity over mobility, change and urbanism. With a few noteworthy exceptions that have studied trading groups,[11] the bulk of Nepal ethnography has overlooked mobility in favour of studying ethnic groups in a given, usually mountainous village.[12] Even the ethnography of the urban Newar has typically focused on the agrarian culture of 'urban peasants',[13] and the centripetal structure of neighbourhoods and houses as an example of 'urban villages'.[14] In a more telling example of sedentarist bias, the abundant literature of development in Nepal has been largely based on the assumption that Nepal is an immobile agrarian society. Sharma has illustrated how this assumption leads researchers to view migration as an aberration from the agricultural norm, and, thus, a problem to be corrected by investing in agricultural programmes and rural development projects.[15]

The focus on village settlements and agriculture has not only normalised immobility, but it has also produced a seeming cultural separation between city and village, urban and rural. Anthony Leeds (1994: 56) argues against this separation in the following statement:

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10 Sheller and Urry, 2006, p. 208.

11 Several ethnographies have discussed trading communities, such as highland Himalayan traders bringing Tibetan salt to Nepal (Fürer-Haimendorf, 1975; Fisher, 1986; Fisher, 2001); Newar and Tibetan traders in central Kathmandu (Lewis, 1989) and those in bazaars of the hinterland (Lewis and Shakya, 1988); or the transnational trade of the Manangi into Southeast Asia (Ratanapruck, 2008).

12 Fisher, 1987; Mishra, 2007b. This has changed recently with a surge of scholarship about Nepalis in India (Shneiderman, 2010; Bruslé, 2007; Bruslé, 2008; Sharma, 2008; Thieme and Müller-Böker, 2010; Hollema et al, 2008), the Gulf (Graner and Gurung, 2003; Seddon et al, 2001; Bruslé, 2010b), United States (Dhungel, 1999; Sijapati, 2010), and the United Kingdom (Adhikari, 2010).

13 Gellner and Pradhan, 1999.

14 Levy, 1990, p. 182; Parish, 1994, p. 53.

15 Sharma, 2008, pp. 308-309.

> [Social Scientists] have failed to see that the participants are already urban people because the observing anthropologists have interpreted the 'rural' as tribal, that is, as nonspecialized in any significant degree in any of the senses I have defined, and as largely isolated from the 'urban' (i.e., city) society as a result of some inherent property of rurality, while sociologists have treated the 'rural' as some sort of converse of the city—the opposite of density, large size, anonymity, secondary relationships.[16]

In fact, Marxist anthropologists and geographers have demonstrated how the penetration of capitalism, often embedded in colonial power structures, extends the material conditions of 'urban society' beyond the city to the hinterland to create a single socio-economic system based on the specialisation and exchange.[17] Thus, the question is not what separates the village from the city, or a villager from an urbanite, but rather how dominant economic structures remake both into an urban system to include everyone within what Ferguson calls the 'brutal, repressive, and labor-extractive colonial capitalism' of the nationalist state, commodity capitalism, and a dependence on wage labour and cash income.[18] Leeds defines this urban system as the combination of two processes: the centralisation of production and the detachment of labour supply from 'geographic and social contexts of origin'.[19]

While Nepal social science has been slow to address the structural inequalities embedded in migratory lives, numerous examples from Nepali literature have provided vivid descriptions of the problem. As early as the 1930s, B.P. Koirala's (Nepal's first elected prime minister) short story, 'Madhestira' ('To the Lowlands'),[20] drew attention to the connection between inequalities in the hills and migration to the plains. The story narrates the journey of a widow and four men from the hills to the lowlands in search of a better life. While the hills represent a life of misery, shameful and laborious work, the lowlands represent 'salvation' of inexpensive and fertile land and the chance to start life over. In addition to highland to lowland mobility, authors have highlighted emigration to India. In Krishnabam Malla's 1968 short story, 'Halī' ('The Ploughman'), an agricultural labourer, burdened by immense debt, gives his land to the landlord and moves to Assam where he intends to herd cows. In perhaps the most popular migration story,[21] Lil Bahadur Chhetri's *Basāī̃* also connects economic conditions to emigration. In it, the economic

16 Leeds, 1994, p. 56.
17 Wolpe, 1980; Leeds, 1994; Ferguson, 1999.
18 Ferguson, 1999, p. 90
19 Leeds, 1994, p. 61.
20 Translated by Hutt, 1991, pp. 201-205.
21 According to the literary scholar and English translator of the novel, Michael Hutt (2008, p. xx), *Basāī̃* 'is one of a handful of Nepali novels that almost every Nepali reader knows well.'

exploitation by landowners and moneylenders and social conservatism of the village force the main character and his family to emigrate to India (‘*muglān*’).[22]

These literary works draw our attention not just to mobility, but also to the material structure of Nepali society that has left many without alternatives to lives of relocation. Several significant academic works by the anthropologists Mary Des Chene and Stephen Mikesell, and the geographer, Nanda Raj Shrestha, instigated social science approaches to the relationship between political and economic structures and mobility.[23] Like the literary works, they demonstrate how colonial, feudal and capitalist power structures have rearranged Nepali society by: i) devastating local production, and ii) forcing Nepalis, particularly young men, into out-migration labour schemes towards global centres of production.

Des Chene revealed how the Rana rulers used Nepali soldiers in the British military (Gurkhas) as tools of colonial diplomacy in exchange for political independence and financial assistance from the British Raj. Importantly, the Gurkha tradition established a category of person, ‘the Lahure’, broadly defined as someone who ‘exchanges labor for wages outside of his own community’,[24] a trend that persists to this day. It was not just colonial arrangements that took Nepalis to India, but also 19th century feudal land policy, again under the Ranas, that precipitated massive migration of Nepalis into northeast India.[25] Starting in the 1820s, many indebted and enslaved Nepalis fled to northeast India (Sikkim, Bengal, Assam and Darjeeling), Bhutan and Burma.[26] Rather than the pull of the Raj’s militaristic ambitions, it was the exploitative land policies of Nepal’s own feudal elite that drove these migrants abroad. The Shah and Rana rulers allotted land as the property of the king, and thus expropriated it as gifts to civil servants, priests and soldiers loyal to the sovereign, an arrangement which turned many cultivators into indebted tenants of their state-appointed landlords.

Following the end of Rana rule in 1951, the favoured migration destination shifted to the Nepali lowlands, or the Tarai. According to Shrestha,[27] the eradication of malaria combined with governmental and international investment in the Tarai served as a pressure valve to release the ecological pressure of a growing population in the mountains and hills as well as growing resistance to the feudal land structure, which was beginning to be challenged in the 1950s. Mikesell, meanwhile, points instead to the incursion of colonial capitalism as the

22 ‘*Muglān*’ literally means ‘the land of the Mughals’ in reference to Mughal India, but was often used in the context of Nepalis emigrating to or returning from India (Hutt, 1998, p. 201).

23 Des Chene, 1991; Mikesell, 1988; Shrestha, 1990.

24 Des Chene, 1991, p. 236.

25 Shrestha, 1990.

26 Ibid, Chapter 4.

27 Ibid, Chapter 6.

cause of highland to lowland migration.[28] Starting with the colonial penetration of manufactured fabrics in the 19th century, Nepali merchants created markets for products imported from England, which, in turn, destroyed indigenous production of fabrics and appropriated control of land, effectively converting local producers into wage labourers alienated from their land. The disappearance of production in the hills gave way to a situation in which foreign produced goods travelled from the lower lands of India and the Tarai into the Nepali highlands, while people moved in the opposite direction.

Although the highland and remote villages might have been devastated and forgotten in terms of production, it is necessary to account for how they remain rich symbols of cultural imagination for relocated populations. Subedi interprets the relationship according to experiential accounts of mobile lives.[29] From the ethnographic position of a village in eastern Nepal, he argues for understanding mobility of being away while remaining within the fixity of home. Inspired by Yi-Fu Tuan's notion of topophilia,[30] Subedi describes the desire for experience and expertise of *para* ('beyond') as co-existing with the intimate relations and identity formation of *ghara*. As such the home serves as an anchor of identity while moving between other places.

Unlike Subedi's phenomenological explanation of the relationship between the rural and urban, in his ethnography of Zambia's Copperbelt, Ferguson classifies the performative behaviour of rural migrants in the city into two 'styles': localists, who align themselves with rural ways of being; and cosmopolitans, who identify with urban and foreign ways of being.[31] Importantly, he interprets these opposing styles as adaptations to economic conditions. While the copper boom of the 1950s and 1960s enabled a cosmopolitan attitude in which subjects could reject rural-based obligations, the economic downtown of the 1970s onwards created a need for mineworkers to re-establish rural-local allegiances.[32]

I bridge Subedi's and Ferguson's respective approaches to the question of how mobility integrates multiple places into one framework. Like Ferguson, I highlight perspectives from the city (*basāĩ* in Kathmandu) looking towards the hinterland (*ghar* in the village) and foreign destinations. However, although I consider the role of national policies and global economic conditions to be central to our understanding of mobility, I am hesitant to reduce causation to economic factors. Building on Subedi, I provide equal weight to the moral, symbolic and social meanings of mobility and fixity. But, instead of seeing mobility as experientially

28 Mikesell, 1988.
29 Subedi 1999; 2006.
30 Tuan, 1974.
31 Ferguson, 1999.
32 Ibid, pp. 230-233.

subordinate to fixity, I suggest understanding the notion of fixity, or *ghar*, as itself mobile, and adjustable to a life of mobility, or *basāĩ*.

Maitri Nagar: A Portrait of Regional and Transnational Mobility

Located between the western edge of Kathmandu city and the Newar town of Kirtipur, Maitri Nagar consisted of rice fields, brick kilns and a buffalo slaughterhouse until the late 1990s when people started buying plots of land there for the purpose of building houses. While many new localities in the Kathmandu Valley consist of long-time Kathmandu residents who have relocated from the city centre to the periphery, Maitri Nagar is unique in being home to people who have recently relocated to the capital. Additionally, unlike the ethnic-caste heterogeneity of most new localities, Maitri Nagar is mostly Bahun-Chhetri. For these reasons, this paper's portrait of mobility is not meant to provide a general picture of contemporary Nepal, or even of Kathmandu, but rather a specific take on the culture of mobility for upper-caste residents of a recently settled locality in Kathmandu's urban periphery.

This paper's focus on mobility stems from a larger research project on the transition of the Kathmandu Valley's peripheral areas from predominantly Newar farmland into new residential localities, home mostly to non-Newars. As already stated, the story of Maitri Nagar must include a story of migration as almost all of its residents identify their origins somewhere outside of Kathmandu Valley. In order to understand the informants' conceptions of mobility, I conducted interviews regarding their and their family's experiences with relocation, and maintained a survey of where, when, why and how they relocated. At the time of research, Maitri Nagar numbered approximately 250 houses of which I interviewed people in 82 houses.

From these interviews, a complex picture of mobility emerges that is more nuanced than the assumed pathways connoted in the phrase rural to urban migration. With all but one exception of the households surveyed, *ghar* is somewhere outside of the Kathmandu Valley. For most, it refers to districts in the hills (63 per cent) or in the Tarai (35 per cent). Interestingly, of those originating in the hills, a third trace their migration to Kathmandu via the Tarai, a form of 'triangular' migration. Thus, in total, prior to moving to Kathmandu, over half of the households interviewed identified their most recent relocation to the Tarai. Similarly, just over half entered Kathmandu around the same time in the early to mid-1990s to take advantage of opportunities for university degrees or government service. The majority of respondents identified education as their

main reason for migrating to Kathmandu. Whether to enrol their children in an English-medium private school, pursue their own postgraduate degree, or find employment teaching in a school or university, education served as the main pull factor to the city. Thirty-four per cent of the total households questioned had one or more adults engaged as school teachers, university professors or as students.

Besides education, employment opportunities in the commercial, government and NGO sectors also serve as strong attractions to the capital. While 23 per cent of the households had someone working for the government as civil servants, police, military or engineer, 9 per cent were employed by NGOs. Many also found employment in transportation, real estate or financial services. Beyond education and employment, informants spoke of coming to the city to follow relatives, or access the better infrastructure and commercial opportunities of the city. The rapid increase of government centralisation, international development aid, carpet-garment production, education and tourism produced a situation that has been depicted as 'surprisingly large amounts of cash "floating around" in Kathmandu which rarely went beyond the Valley'.[33] By the mid-2000s, despite comprising only 7 per cent of the national population, the Kathmandu Valley accounted for 40-60 per cent of sales, 45 per cent of electricity consumption, 75 per cent of fixed telephone lines, 90 per cent of mobile phones, 90 per cent of cars, and 80 per cent of motorbikes.[34]

The extreme disparity of wealth and opportunities between Kathmandu and the hinterland played no small part in motivating the 10-year civil war between the state and Maoist insurgents (1996-2006).[35] However, the war's end in 2006 did not lessen this disparity, but only led to increased migration into the capital. Since most people in Maitri Nagar were already in Kathmandu by the peak of the Maoist insurgency in the early 2000s, the insurgency did not push them into the city. In fact, only two informants attributed their decision to relocate to 'insecurity' or 'safety'. While one came from a village in Ramechhap, where he claimed only Maoist supporters remained, the other decided to take his family away from the 'ethnic turmoil' of the Tarai, Biratnagar specifically, in the aftermath of the 2006-2008 Madhes uprisings. The influx of insurgency refugees did, however, precipitate a steep increase in rental prices and land values in Kathmandu. By one estimate, the going rate for a flat in the central city in 1990 was NPR 500 (USD 7) per month, which by the time

33 Liechty, 2003, p. 51.

34 Shakya, 2009, p. 64.

35 Bhattarai, 2003; Mishra, 2007a; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2004; Pyakuryal, 2001; Pettigrew, 2008, pp. 321-322. However, as Shah (2004, p. 193) has pointed out, economic marginalisation does not explain why the insurgency's 'epicentre' was located in the mid-western Rapti zone, which, 'is by no means the most marginal region in Nepal'.

of research had grown to be between NPR 5,000-10,000 (USD 70-140). Likewise, the rate for renting a room grew from NPR 100 (USD 1.40) to NPR 2-4,000 (USD 27-55) per month.[36] The price of land, similarly, tripled between 2003 and 2009.[37]

We must also understand the move to Kathmandu within the pathways of transnational labour and educational opportunities. Many informants thought of their family's move to Kathmandu as a step closer to the opportunities for foreign travel and living, which often embodied hopes of their children acquiring student visas for Europe, North America or Australia. In addition to hoping their children would travel abroad, many of the respondents worked or studied in foreign countries. Forty per cent of the total households interviewed have a member who has worked or is currently working or earning a degree abroad. Of these, 41 per cent are working in the Gulf or Malaysia. Thirty-five per cent have earned or are earning a degree or wages in India (Delhi, Assam, Punjab and Mumbai). The remaining 24 per cent of transnational links refer to people earning degrees outside of South Asia, in China or the United States. Much like those relocated from the hills to Kathmandu via the Tarai, another form of triangular migration applies to foreign labourers who leave Nepal from a village but upon returning settle in the city. As Bruslé notes, Kathmandu is a 'stepping stone' to opportunities in foreign countries[38]—a node rather than a destination.

The recent explosion of Nepali labourers heading to the Gulf and Malaysia to join the 'transnational proletariat',[39] has only continued and exacerbated the dual trend of the outmigration of labour and the decline of production in the hinterland. It highlights two further important political-economic transformations taking place: i) the expansion of Nepali labour from the colonial markets of South Asia to the new domains of global capital; and ii) an economic shift from Nepal's agricultural base to a 'remittance economy'. From 2002 onwards, remittances have served as the largest source of foreign currency earnings in Nepal, which is greater than that from exports, tourism and foreign aid combined.[40] The number of households in Nepal receiving remittances more than doubled from 23.4 per cent in 1995 to 55.8 per cent in 2010, and the volume of remittances grew from NPR 13 billion to NPR 328 billion.[41]

36 Adhikari, 2009.
37 UN-Habitat, 2010.
38 Bruslé, 2010a, p. 20.
39 Gardner, 2010.
40 Graner, 2010, pp. 28-29.
41 CBS, 2011.

The Moral-Geographic Continuum of Places, Things, and Deities: Towards a Culture of Migration

In addition to these interviews, I travelled with several informants to their homes in towns and villages outside of Kathmandu Valley. These travels complicated my image of *ghar* and *basāĩ* further by complementing it with personal narratives and experiences. In my account of these travels, I draw attention to how they understand and frame the material and social links between Kathmandu and foreign countries, and the cities, towns, and villages of the hinterland.

The **bajār-tira** *continuum: Travel to Trishuli with Bijay*

Bijay, a 25-year-old Bahun, was born in a village in Gorkha, but has since lived in Pokhara and Narayanghat before moving to Kathmandu in 2005. His family is similarly spread across the country and world. His younger brother lives in Jhapa, and his father and mother live in Trishuli, Nuwakot. Bijay and I travelled to Trishuli, a four-hour bus ride from Kathmandu, in July 2009. Despite being slightly northwest of Kathmandu towards the Himalaya, Trishuli exists in a deep river valley at a lower altitude than Kathmandu. As an administrator in a public hospital, Bijay's father, Ram, lives in government housing—a cement block of two rooms in a U-shaped collection of houses—a far cry from the stone-mud architecture of his village house in Gorkha.

In addition to Bijay's family, the families of his grandfather's five sons also live outside Gorkha. Two live in their own home in Kathmandu; one in a government quarter in the western hill district centre of Surkhet; and one works in Afghanistan while his wife and children live in their own house in Pokhara. According to Bijay, his family has stopped going to the village for Dashain and Tihar celebrations, leaving them with just one trip every two years to worship the *kul deutā* ('lineage deity').

Bijay understands his family's mobility not in terms of rural to urban movement, but rather according to the phrase, *bajār-tira* ('towards the market'). Much like Skinner's famous hierarchy of markets to understand urbanisation in China,[42] *bajār-tira* refers to the urban as a sliding spectrum of market sizes. Bijay's schema presents several increasingly complex layers. First, there are the smaller markets and district centres located along trade routes (established prior to roads), typically on ridge-top plateaus. Next, are the larger towns and markets located along highways and river basins in the more accessible districts. The final stage along the *bajār-tira* spectrum is the larger cities of Pokhara and Kathmandu in the hills, and the cities of the Tarai.

42 Skinner, 1964.

According to Bijay's schema, Trishuli exists somewhere in the middle as it lies along the Trishuli River and served as a main market along a Kathmandu-Tibet trade network that dates back to the late 18th century when Prithvi Narayan Shah built the nearby Nuwakot Palace. However, in the 1960s, the Nepal government shifted the district headquarters south from Trishuli to Bidur. The cultural historian Prayag Raj Sharma explains this historical transformation as telling of urbanisation patterns in Nepal.[43] He documents how, since the 1960s, the construction of highways and government's selection of administrative centres shifted the flow of commerce and trade from ridges and hill-tops along trade routes to valley basins along highways and, ever more increasingly, to Tarai towns. The access provided by roads supplanted the bi-directionality of south-north trade routes with the one-way movement of goods from south to north; and, one could add, people in the opposite direction from north to south. Although Trishuli lies in a river basin, its commercial activity has shrunk due to the end of the Tibet trade and shift of the district headquarters to Bidur.[44]

Bijay's spectrum is determined not just by markets but also by exchange and property relations. Although Trishuli Bazaar has decreased, it remains large enough for Bijay to think his parents can get the same things as in Kathmandu—and thus it was unnecessary for us to carry gifts to his parents' house. However, if he were travelling to Gorkha, he would be expected to bring *bajārko kurā* ('things of the bazaar'), gifts, such as fruits, clothes, medicine for elders, *nayā khāne kurā* ('new things to eat'), and books and notebooks for the children. *Bajārko kurā* is considered *bikāsi* ('developed'), a term which Stacy Leigh Pigg states is not just referring to things, but also applicable to distant people, things, and ways of being in opposition to the supposedly unmodern and undeveloped village.[45] In returning from the village, one is expected to take 'natural *chij*' ('natural things')—rice, dāl, butter, nuts, and vegetables. Another informant summarises this exchange as representative of the 'artificial city' of manufactured commodities and the 'natural village' of cultivated foods. On our return to Kathmandu, Bijay and I encountered an alternative form of exchange. As expected, we met others returning from villages in Nuwakot and Rasuwa (the district north of Nuwakot) carrying large bags of grains and vegetables. Interestingly, one of them, Roshan, added a variable to this exchange circuit. When the bus stopped at Bidur, 30 minutes down the road from Trishuli, Roshan used the time to sell his rice. As he explained, 'I prefer to just bring back money, it is easier.'

Bijay and his family, however, do not engage in this exchange network for the

43 Sharma, 2004c.
44 Ibid, 2004c, p. 329.
45 Pigg, 1992; 1996.

simple reason that trips in between Kathmandu and Trishuli rarely require much shopping for gifts since one can obtain most of the same *bajārko kurā* ('things of the bazaar') in the smaller town as in the city. Additionally, even if going to their village in Gorkha, it is unlikely they will be able to return with rice and vegetables since most of their grandfather's land has been sold or left fallow. When his grandfather died, his five *ropani* (0.25 hectare) of land was split five ways among the sons; half of which is left uncultivated today. Although Bijay's father's portion is cultivated, since it is contracted to a local villager for NPR 25,000 (USD 350) a year, they do not have access to its produce. Like Roshan, the Rasuwa villager, they exchange land, or the product of land—cultivated goods, for money before returning to the city.

Subedi notes how property in the village serves as one of the main sources of affiliation with the rural *ghara*—even if people no longer spend much time there.[46] Even though Bijay and his family spend little time at their Gorkha *ghar*, their land does indeed serve as a vital connection. This was particularly the fact before his family bought property in Kathmandu in 2005, when they were all tenants in Jhapa, Nuwakot, Chitwan and Kathmandu.[47] Bijay reflects negatively on his time as a tenant in Kathmandu and Chitwan. He complains that landlords offer little privacy and expect tenants to obey certain rules. For instance, his landlords would lock the house gates at nine in the evening and not provide keys to him, which made evening excursions nearly impossible. Additionally, renting a room in someone else's house, especially non-Bahuns, provided a source of shame. He remembers, 'I didn't consider my room to be pure, it was not a place to celebrate festivals and rituals.' Even living in a house with a Bahun landlord did not erase this feeling. He refers to one Bahun landlord's family as 'Fusion Bahuns', by which he explains, 'They followed eastern culture one day, western culture the next.' For instance, for their son's *bratabhanda* (male initiation into patriline), the first day was in a temple, but the next day they celebrated in a 'party palace' where they served alcohol and meat.[48]

Bijay's reflections on his time as a tenant bring him to the moral component of his spectrum. Indeed, the material appeal of *bajār-tira*—of which he lists employment

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46 Subedi, 1999, p. 138.

47 In Samrat Upadhyay's 2003 novel, *The Guru of Love*, the main protagonist, Ramchandra, exemplifies the precarious position of the tenant in the city. Ramchandra's lack of a house and land ownership in Kathmandu means the city 'was not his' (p. 18). For this reason, 'He was no different from the driver of this three-wheeler, who probably had to rush passengers to various destinations all day and then go to the small room in a squalid part of the city where his wife and kids waited for him' (p. 18). Although Ramchandra affords a flat in the city, it is described as dilapidated, 'with its rickety stairs and cracked ceilings, its cramped, dank rooms that never got enough sunlight, this house controlled by a landlord who came rapping on the door if the rent wasn't paid on time, where deafening traffic from the street penetrated the thin walls, shook the rooms, and made reasonable thinking impossible' (p. 2).

48 A party palace is a venue that can be hired for private catered events.

opportunities, hospitals, schools, and goods—certainly outweighs staying in or returning to Gorkha. However, this appeal comes at a moral cost. Like other Maitri Nagar residents, Bijay attributes the moral deficit of the city to the practice of displaying prestige through owning commodities. In his study of Kathmandu middle class practices, Liechty makes an important distinction between the old materialism of land and gold and the new materialism of commodities such as TVs and motorbikes.[49] While the old reflects a consumer ethic of accumulation and permanence, the new is for the 'pursuit of enjoyment'. As Bijay and his neighbours attest, it is the new consumerism that represents a moral threat, which Liechty describes as 'almost hostile intruders into the domestic sphere, extracting resources and, not insignificantly, often associated with addiction'.[50]

From my discussions about the process of migration, Liechty's old and new materialism can map onto a village and city distinction. Whereas land is valued in the village, especially if cultivated, in the city, it is the material possessions of cars, motorbikes, large houses and cellphones that people value. Ironically, for most, the move to the city often requires a choice between either selling/renting out village land or leaving it fallow. In either case, the migrant is disconnecting him or herself from the village's status-granting symbol—cultivated land. Once in the city, one becomes more susceptible to moral corruption, as Laxmi, a housewife from Chitwan says, '*shaharī hāwā pānīle bhetyo*'—literally, 's/he met the city's air and water', but more figuratively, 's/he has become influenced and ruined by the corrupt environment of the city'. To my question of what qualifies as 'urban environment', she answers, 'boys growing long hair' and 'girls wearing short clothes'. Whereas the village is seen as a caring and cooperative place, the city is depicted as a place full of selfish and uncaring neighbours. In the village, life is so hard that everyone must depend on each other for help. The city is equally difficult, but for different reasons. When asked to define the meaning of 'urbanisation' (*shaharīkaran*), one informant replied that it means being concerned only with '*āphno ghar, āphno kām, āphno chorā amerikā pathāune, arulai pardaina*' ('own house, own job, sending your own son to America, without concern for others'). Thus, the material exchange necessary for migration—selling of land for things of the city—can quickly lead to the moral separation of the new urbanite from his village.

As Bijay and I walk around the Trishuli market, he judges the in-between status of Trishuli as even more morally deficient than the city. He categorises Trishuli as in between the undeveloped village and the developed city; as such, it is 'mixed' in how it has the development facilities without the opportunities of the city.

49 Liechty, 2003, pp. 97-99.
50 Ibid, p. 97.

Therefore, he explains that people, especially the youth, will know about the modern world through its goods and media, but have no way to live it, leaving them with nothing but 'drinking, sex, drugs and laziness'. He sees the houses as a metaphor for Trishuli's liminal status. The houses have cement plaster only on the street-facing facade, leaving the brick face exposed on the other three sides. Similarly, he sees the town as only superficially urban, and, thus, even more susceptible to the moral threats of modern urbanism.

The Hierarchy of Foreign Destinations: Travel to Pokhareltok with Nilkantha

Although Bijay's spectrum ends in Nepal's larger cities, for many others it extends beyond Nepal's borders to the destinations of Nepali workers and students abroad. Similar to Bijay's moral hierarchy of urban spaces, it is common to hear international destinations, too, ranked according to a hierarchy of prestige. At the bottom is India; then, the increasingly popular destinations of the Gulf, Malaysia and East Asia; finally, the world of North America, Europe and Australia. Importantly, the avenue of travel, labour or education factors into this hierarchy as educational purposes are valued as superior.

For Nilkantha and his family, Bahuns from a small village just south of Pokhara, the bottom of the ladder, India, has been their only option—until recently. In fact, Nilkantha's parents met, married and started their family in India in the 1960s and 1970s. His father left his village, Pokhareltok, as a teenager to seek the forest-land of the northeast Indian state of Meghalaya, where he, along with fellow villagers, used to graze cows. Nilkantha's mother was the daughter of a Nepali truck driver in India, and was born and raised in Shillong. However, after the Khasi indigenous revolt of 1986, Nepali-speakers became targeted as 'foreigners' and started to leave.[51] While many of their fellow Nepalis resettled in Ratna Nagar in Chitwan, Nilkantha's parents returned to Pokhareltok. Although born in India, Nilkantha lived most of his life in Pokhareltok until he finished school at age 17 and like his father, emigrated to India to find work. In the state of Punjab he worked as a domestic worker in several wealthy houses. When he returned to Nepal in 2002, he entered Pokhara University where he met his wife, Nandita, from Chitwan. His academic success inspired him to continue with an M.A. programme in English at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu. Moving to Kathmandu was a 'dream' for Nilkantha, but not for the reason of getting a job or staying there, but to gain access to the United States. With a post-graduate degree in Kathmandu, he believes he has a better chance of acquiring admission and a scholarship to pursue a PhD in the United States.

51 Passah, 2009, p. 243.

Whereas Nilkantha entered the transnational scheme at the bottom of the ladder as a labourer in India, he hopes to move to the top rung by seeking an education in the United States. The majority of his foreign-travelled fellow villagers, however, have entered in the middle—as labourers in the Gulf. As we walk around Pokhareltok, Nilkantha points to what seems to be every other house that has a son working in the Gulf. This represents an important shift for foreign labour options for Nepalis from India to the Gulf. As Shakya points out, two events of the 1970s—India's Emergency and the Gulf's 'oil boom'—shifted labour demand from India to the Gulf countries.[52] As evidence of this shift, remittances from the Gulf and Malaysia increased 3000 per cent from 1995/1996 to 2003/2004.[53]

While walking around Pokhareltok, Nilkantha points out signs of the shift from India to the Gulf. Like those returning from Kathmandu to the village, returnees from foreign countries are compelled to bring gifts. Des Chene refers to a tradition of the Nepali foreign workers, or 'Lahures', returning with 'foreign commodities and knowledge'.[54] 'Foreign', argues Des Chene, could be substituted for *bikāsi* ('developed'), which, like *bajārko kurā* is opposed to the 'local' or '*jangali*' ('of the jungle') things of the village. What changes is the actual content of gifts as reference points for one's foreign knowledge or 'developed' attitude gained abroad. In particular, Nilkantha sees signs of the foreign-returned in the village architecture. While the standard house in the village is of *kachhā* style (mud-stone), the reinforced concrete cement (RCC) houses of, as he says, 'Middle East influence', are increasingly common. RCC refers to houses constructed with reinforced concrete pillars instead of timber and brick/stone structures.[55] He also points to the 'flowers on rooftops' as an Arab influence as opposed to the Hindu preference for flowers planted near the *tulsi* (holy basil) plants in the front yard.

From Pokhareltok, by migrating to India, and increasingly to the Gulf, labour remains the most plausible vehicle for foreign travel. In fact, one Maitri Nagar resident was able to calculate his options in monetary terms. He estimated that hiring a broker to arrange a labour visa to the United States would cost him NPR 1.5 million (approximately, USD 20,500), whereas for a visa to Afghanistan or Iraq would be merely NPR 300,000 (approximately, USD 4000).[56] According to Nilkantha, however, it is only through academic success that he can even imagine going to the United States. Many Maitri Nagar residents echo this sentiment, referring

52 Shakya, 2009, p. 156.

53 Graner, 2010, p. 29.

54 Des Chene, 1991, p. 10.

55 It is unclear, to me, why Nilkantha associates RCC houses with the Gulf as they have become the common architectural form in Kathmandu and other Nepali urban areas.

56 After 12 Nepalis were murdered in Iraq in August of 2004 (which led to riots in Kathmandu), the Nepali government banned travel to Iraq and Afghanistan. The ban on Iraq was lifted in 2010.

to foreign travel as one of the main reasons for moving to Kathmandu. Only in Kathmandu, so goes the logic, can children learn English at a good private school, and, thus, earn the possibility of attaining a student visa from a developed country.

The Migration of Deities: Travel to Chitwan with Hari

As soon as Hari and I arrived at his village in Chitwan, he took me to see the nearby shrine of his *kul deutā* ('lineage deity'), an aniconic stone in a dense patch of forest several kilometres from his house. At the shrine, he announced, 'We are moving the shrine to Kathmandu.' *Kul* refers to the most commonly recognised and ritualised form of agnatic relation in Bahun-Chhetri society, typically ranging five to six generations of common descent.[57] The members of a *kul* will travel to the deity's shrine for a *pūjā* ('worship') anywhere from twice a year to once every 12 years in a ceremony called *devālī*. It is extremely important that members attend *kul pūjā* to guarantee the well-being of kin. As opposed to death rites focused on continuing the patriline, *kul deutā pūjā* is concerned with horizontal relations between brothers.[58] Even when there is no land or kin left in the village, Maitri Nagar residents typically speak of one last tie in *kul deutā pūjā* ('lineage deity worship'). As one person puts it, 'If we moved the *kul deutā*, we would never visit the village. We need to have at least one reason to visit the village.'

As Hari's statement shows, *kul deutā* can, like people, move. The members of Hari's *kul* have all left their Chitwan village for various cities in Nepal and around the world. Of his immediate family, Hari has two sisters and a brother living in Kathmandu, and one brother living in Saudi Arabia. Since most have a house in Kathmandu, it is the likely destination of the new shrine. In the previous year, Hari explains how the members of his *kul* met and decided not to relocate the shrine because they could not find the ideal piece of property to where they would like to move it. Ideally, a shrine is located in a 'secluded spot on a hilltop or in the woods where outsiders cannot easily see the ceremony',[59] which, in the diminishing land supply of the Kathmandu Valley, is becoming increasingly difficult to find. Once they have located a new place for the shrine, the *kul* will relocate the shrine by breaking off a piece of the stone and transporting it along with soil from the original site to the new one.

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57 Bennett, 1983, p. 18. Other terms of agnatic descent in Bahun-Chhetri society are the *gotra* (members who share descent from one of seven mythical sages) and *thar* (members who share the same surname). However, while *gotra* and *thar* groups share no fixed marriage rules or worship obligations, the *kul* produces obligations to observe birth and death pollutions and attend regular worship practices at kul *ghar* or shrine.

58 Ibid, p. 131.

59 Ibid, p. 132.

While Bennett attributes the fragmentation of the *kul* to poor record keeping or quarrelling,[60] I have found it to be more reflective of a society adapted to migration. For example, moving Hari's *kul deutā* to Kathmandu would not be its first relocation. For a mobile society, the *kul deutā* represents a way of spatially organising kinship. When Hari was a teenager, his father and his cousins moved the shrine from their parents' village in Dhading to their new home in Chitwan. At the same rate, I also met Maitri Nagar residents who elected to not continue the *kul deutā pūjā* in their village or Kathmandu. As Narayan, a Chhetri from Palpa explains, 'City people don't do *kul pūjā*.' But, as we talk further, he admits that it is more a question of kin solidarity than of urban lifestyle. He reports that, 'People move their *kul deutā* only if brothers move to the city together,' but because his brother is a 'drunk', he feels no need to transplant the shrine or continue its worship in the village. In this case, the discontinuation of *kul deutā* worship appears to be less representative of a disconnection from the village and more of a disconnection between brothers—a rupture along kin rather than territorial relations.

Comparison to Newar digu dyaḥ pūjā

A comparison with the structurally similar Newar ritual of *digu dyaḥ pūjā* illustrates the mobility of Bahun-Chhetri society.[61] Like the *kul*, the Newar notion of *kawaḥ*[62] or *phuki*[63] also tends to range between five and seven generations of a single agnatic ancestor. Also, Newars worship *digu dyaḥ* during *devālī* and represent it in aniconic stones placed in a public space outside of the city's boundaries.[64] However, what distinguishes these two rituals is the mobility of the Bahun-Chhetri version versus the relative immobility of the Newar one.

There are many cases of Newars relocating their *digu dyaḥ* shrine; few, however, are related to migration.[65] Newar migration (mostly from inner city to peripheral areas) has simply meant farther trips to the shrine, less commitment to the lineage group, or worshipping inside the house.[66] Typically, when the lineage fragments due to a quarrel or some other reason, the new kin group, a *bā-phuki* continues to worship the same stone at the same place, but on a different day.[67] The difference

60 Ibid, p. 18.

61 As cited in Toffin (2007d, p. 307), K.B. Bista's 1972 article on *kul deutā* makes a convincing argument for the historical interaction and mutual influence of *kul deutā* and *digu dyaḥ*.

62 Toffin, 2007a, p. 58.

63 Levy, 1990; Gellner, 1992, p. 207; Parish, 1994, p. 61.

64 Gellner, 1992, p. 240; Levy, 1990, p. 159.

65 According to ethnographic accounts, Newar *digu dyaḥ* shrines have moved due to the urbanisation of Kathmandu Valley (Lewis, 1999, p. 56; Gellner, 1992, p. 372), or political conflict, as in the case of Bhaktapur's Hindu priests (Toffin, 2007a).

66 Gellner, 1992, pp. 238-243; Quigley, 1999, p. 102.

67 Levy, 1990, p. 140; Toffin, 2007b, p. 96.

between the Bahun-Chhetri and Newar version is not a result of ritual structure, but rather reflective of each society's history of mobility.

Although Newar society has witnessed its fair share of migration,[68] its emphasis on territoriality, as evidenced in the relationship between the caste, kin and territorial bonds of *guṭhī* organisations and land plots, has no equivalent in other Nepali caste societies.[69] One telling example of this contrast appears in the respective ideologies of kingship for the Newar Malla and the Bahun-Chhetri Shah. While the history of the Malla kingship emphasises attachment to a place, the Kathmandu palace and Taleju tutelary goddess, the kingship of the Shah royalty appears 'warlike and mobile', emphasising a dynastic line rather than a place.[70] Although we should be careful while affiliating the practices of the Shah royalty with the population of Nepal's Bahun-Chhetri, a structural homology links the practice of establishing a new kingdom by transplanting a piece of their tutelary 'goddess rock',[71] and the more common practice of transplanting the *kul deutā* shrine. The mobility of *kul deutā* shrines reflects the historical mobility of Bahun-Chhetri societies, and the culture of migration that has developed in response to the creation of the Nepali state.

Conclusion

From these three cases, mobility emerges as a process of relocation along a complex continuum of places invested with material and moral meaning. The relocation of migrants to Maitri Nagar must be contextualised within a series of moves in between unevenly structured positions along a spectrum of differentiated pathways linking rural hinterlands, domestic urban zones (*bajār-tira*), and foreign production centres. While Kathmandu might represent a destination, it is a temporary one at that, a nexus of trajectories in between Tarai towns, Gulf cities, and European-American universities. Importantly, as Nepal's unstable position in the global economy shifts, so do the moral and prestige registers associated with the various places to go and how people get there. Not only are people relocating, but also their things, property and kinship relations. Thus, while *ghar* might signify land and kin in the rural hinterland, chances are that the key symbols of *ghar* are in the process of relocation as well.

68 Newar trading castes have established markets in the hill-towns of the hinterland and controlled trade routes between Tibet and India (see Lewis and Shakya, 1988).

69 Toffin, 2007c.

70 Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009, p. 195.

71 Ibid, p. 198.

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