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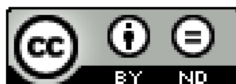

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On the Road to Nowhere: Stalled Politics and Urban Infrastructure in Kathmandu

Dannah Dennis

During the period leading up to the passage of the 2015 constitution in Nepal, the roads of Kathmandu were often interpreted by the city's residents as symbols of the stalled constitutional process and of the faltering and corrupt nature of national politics in general. By detailing specific moments in which the inadequacy of roads and the inadequacy of the state were directly juxtaposed in everyday conversations, this article calls for sustained attention to the interrelationship between urban infrastructure and national- and local-level politics.

Keywords: Kathmandu, Nepal, roads, infrastructure, politics.

> Today Kathmandu holds out the prospect of a muddle where one loses one's identity in a maze of dark alleys enticing one to a confused destiny ... the streets of Kathmandu are thick with forebodings.
>
> —K.P. Malla (1967 [1979] 217, 222)

Introduction: Planting Rice on the Road to Sinamangal

On the morning of July 10, 2015, I was in a café in Dhobighat, Kathmandu, waiting to meet a friend who was coming down from Chabahil in a tempo. He texted me to let me know that he was running late because a large street protest in the Purano Baneshwor area had caused a major traffic jam. Curious about the protest, I began checking the various Facebook pages and Twitter accounts that Kathmandu's activist groups used to coordinate and publicize their activities. Was it pro-Hindu-state? Pro-ethnic federalism? Anti-corruption? I was particularly eager to know the nature of this protest because, after years of deliberation, a draft of the constitution had been released just two days earlier, and the two-week period designated for the collection of public feedback on the draft was underway. As it turned out, the protest was targeting a problem seemingly far more mundane than the questions of representation, citizenship, human rights, and governance which dominated civil society's dialogues and debates around the forthcoming constitution. The protestors at Purano Baneshwor that morning had come out to demonstrate *the abysmal state of the road* leading from Purano Baneshwor toward Sinamangal. Ingeniously, they planted rice paddy saplings

in the ankle-deep mud and standing water of the road to make its impassibility evident. This action also highlighted the absurdity that a major road in the metropolitan capital of a supposedly modern nation-state was better fit for agricultural production than for urban traffic.

During my two years of fieldwork (January 2014-December 2015), I attended dozens of protests, marches, and demonstrations in the streets of Kathmandu. For groups across the political spectrum, these street protests were an important venue to advocate for their political goals while also demonstrating their level of popular support. Rather than offering a detailed typology of street protest,[1] in this article I focus on moments in which the streets themselves became the subject, rather than merely the site, of political comment and contestation. Several months into my fieldwork, I began to ask myself: "Why is it that when I ask people what they want to see in the new constitution, the conversation turns to roads?" Residents of Kathmandu often expressed skepticism about the promise of the forthcoming constitution, since the government seemed unable to provide even the most basic municipal services. As one taxi driver joked with me while attempting to navigate a maze of muddy potholes in Thapatali: "How are they going to make a constitution? They can't even make a good road."

In recent years, anthropologists have increasingly turned their attention to the study of infrastructure in urban settings, exploring the ways in which these infrastructures articulate various political and economic rationalities (Anand 2011; Björkman 2015; Collier 2011; Fennell 2011; Larkin 2013). Roads, in particular, are rich sites for investigating concepts of mobility and modernity as they are embedded in particular social and material contexts (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012; Harvey and Knox 2015; Khan 2006). In Nepal, the recent construction of new roads outside of Kathmandu, particularly of highways that cross the Nepal-China border, is having major impacts on aspects of life ranging from public health and food security (Grocke 2016) to livelihoods and trade relations (Cambell 2010; Murton 2013). In this article, I use the roads of Kathmandu as a starting point for thinking about state-citizen relations at a particular moment in the city's recent history: namely, the years immediately preceding the adoption of the constitution of 2015 (2072 v.s.). During this time, the overcrowded and impassable streets of Kathmandu were a pervasive and tangible reminder of the decrepit state. I argue that roads have come to serve as a powerful metaphor for the broken promises, frustrated hopes, and overwhelming sense of inertia that have characterized Nepali politics since the 1990s. I will return to this idea of inertia in my conclusion. Under the new constitution of 2015, the roads of Kathmandu will no doubt continue to be 'good to think with' regarding state-citizen relations in Nepal, particularly as those relations are inflected by class and region.

Figure 1. Road from Purano Baneshwor to Sinamangal.

(Dennis, 2014)

Old Cities, New Problems

The troubled condition of Kathmandu's roads during my fieldwork must be evaluated in the light of several historical factors. First, urbanization is not new to the Kathmandu Valley; the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley developed a complex urban civilization well over a thousand years ago. The influence of Newar architecture, with its spacious interior courtyards and relatively narrow exterior alleys (*galli*) is still deeply embedded within the built environment, particularly in areas surrounding the historic palace and temple complexes of Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur. But while Kathmandu is not a new city, it has seen a very rapid increase in population over the past several decades. According to the national census, from 1991 to 2011, the population of Kathmandu itself increased from around 400,000 to over 1,000,000, and the growth rates in the other cities of the Kathmandu Valley such as Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, Thimi, and Kirtipur have been comparably high. The adaptation of existing infrastructure and the installation of new infrastructure has not been able to keep pace with this major population boom.

The city's roads must also be understood in the context of the major road expansion project in 2011, initiated by then-Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai. This controversial project sought to finally enact a set of reforms that had been passed more than thirty years prior under the Urban Development Implementation Act of 1977. It resulted in the partial or complete destruction of thousands of private buildings and homes, with little to no compensation forthcoming from the government. The road-widening project was widely seen as the major achievement of Bhattarai's term as prime minister. Given the massive gap that usually exists between formal state planning and on-the-ground realities in Nepal, Bhattarai's push to implement the 1977 act was interpreted by many as an admirable display of initiative and effective power. Furthermore, by widening the main roads in Kathmandu, the post-war Maoists were catering to an urban demographic who might have felt previously alienated by their earlier promises of land to the tiller and other sweeping social and economic reforms. This effort to win over Kathmandu's middle- and upper-class residents was at least somewhat effective. While giving me a ride over the Kalopul bridge on her scooter, one of my most staunchly anti-Maoist friends declared the road-widening project to be "the only good thing" that Bhattarai and the Maoists ever did for Nepal.

However, Bhattarai's road-widening project could also be understood as a form of 'selling out.' My friend Ishwari,[2] a leftist poet and the daughter of a well-known politician, had had high hopes that the Maoists might bring greater equality to Nepal by working on behalf of the poor and marginalized. For her, the road-widening project was a shameful reminder of the fact that the Maoists had abandoned their commitment to the poor and working classes in order to join the political establishment. "Wider roads are the one thing that middle-class people need from the government that they can't do for themselves," she explained. Within the walls of their own homes and compounds, it is possible for middle and upper-class people to install generators and reserve water tanks in order to mitigate the problems caused by routine shortages of water and electricity. Posh housing colonies and apartment complexes are even able to drill their own wells, promising their residents a supply of water completely independent of the municipal system.[3] But when middle- and upper-class people leave their homes to go to work or to travel around the city, they are forced to navigate congested, poorly paved streets. Because roads are a public resource that everyone is forced to depend on, they represent one of the few connections between elites and the public city. But, as I will explain in more detail later, even the building of roads can be privatized to some extent in neighborhoods which have sufficient financial means and organizational capacity.

On another occasion, I was out at a bar with two middle-aged Nepali women, Chari and Meena, who have well-paid positions in the international development sector. When the conversation turned, as usual, to the worthlessness of politicians, Chari said that in her opinion, Baburam Bhattarai was probably the best prime minister in recent years because at least he did *something* by making the roads wider in Kathmandu. Meena disagreed with her, saying "Yeah, now we have wider roads here, and that's nice, but it doesn't really mean anything." Meena argued that Bhattarai didn't do anything good for people outside of Kathmandu, including those who had supported and died for the Maoist movement. Moreover, leaders should be held to a higher standard of accountability than simply doing something as opposed to nothing; they should actually do something *good* for the country, she argued. Even as Meena finished making this case, both she and Chari were laughing sardonically at the seeming impossibility of such a high standard. Like many of my other interlocutors, they were so deeply disillusioned with promises of democratic reforms that they regarded the idea of expecting positive change as a bitter joke.

Roads, Constitutions, and the Ideology of Development

For the Kathmandu middle class, the expectation that it is the responsibility of a good government to provide good

roads is instilled from an early age. I spent eight months of my fieldwork in 2014 doing participant observation in a private school. I studied the ways in which lessons of citizenship and national history were being taught, even as it was still unclear what form of government would ultimately emerge from the constitution-writing process. In September 2014, the students of Class 8 social studies were given an assignment which required them to imagine themselves as lawmakers in the Constituent Assembly. Their task was to survey their family members and friends and to take down a list of ten suggestions that should be included in the Constitution.

On reading through the lists that the students produced, I found that no mention was made of whether there should be a presidential or a parliamentary system, nor any mention of legislative, executive, or judicial matters. Instead, the focus was placed squarely on services that the government should provide, such as health care, education, and jobs. Roads and transportation appeared frequently in the lists: "Road transportation must be extended to the headquarters of the district, so that trade and agriculture can be developed;" "The government should construct roads system in rural areas and provide electricity also;" "They should construct the road and school and health post in remote area;" "There must be proper transportation facilities for transferring goods and services." By pointing out that roads took precedence over descriptions of the formal structure of government in these lists, I do not mean to imply that the students were unaware of the normative elements of a constitution. Rather, I emphasize that talk about the state's responsibility to provide roads and other forms of public infrastructure—often lumped together under the English word 'facilities'—was pervasive to such an extent that both students and their teachers widely considered the guarantee of such facilities to be a fundamental requirement of the constitution.

It was not only schoolchildren who expressed a belief that the new constitution should address the problems of urban infrastructure. In August of 2014, I interviewed Lalitha, a teacher in the Art of Living movement, one of the many new religious movements that was proliferating in Kathmandu during the early 2000s (Toffin 2013: 125-157). Toward the end of our conversation, I asked Lalitha what she would like to see in the new constitution. I expected that she might return to the topic of secularism and the Hindu state, which we had discussed at some length, but she did not. In a reflective tone, she said that the needs of poor people must be addressed, and that "everything should be done fairly, everywhere." Then, suddenly becoming more animated, she said, "Do you know, I have seen this road out here[4] being pitched ten or twelve different times. Why does the government do like this? They should spend money properly." She complained that as soon as the road was pitched, the drinking water, electricity, telephone or drainage companies would come along and tear it up again. "There should be coordination among these agencies," she asserted with a note of exasperation. She then went on to insist that corruption should be curbed among members of the Constituent Assembly and other members of government: "If their only goal is to make money, they should have been businessmen, not politicians!" Like many others, she was convinced that the shoddy condition of the roads was not due to mere ineptitude on behalf of the government, but to active collusion between politicians and construction companies to siphon off money from public works projects.[5]

While it is beyond the scope of this article to develop this connection fully, I want to point out that the widespread expectation that the constitution should address Kathmandu's infrastructural shortcomings makes perfect sense in light of the discourses of development (*bikas*) that have shaped Nepal's internal and external political relations since the country was 'opened up' to the outside world in the 1950s (Bista 1991; des Chene 1996; Fujikura 2013; Panday 1999; Pigg 1992, 1993; Shrestha 1998). To oversimplify: it has long been promised that development and modernization come as part of the same package, as gifts from the outside world which must be modified to reflect Nepal's particular social, economic, and geographic characteristics. A road, as a material object which channels the arrival of other material objects and facilitates a wide variety of connections and communications, is perhaps the most visible and recognized symbol of development; a place without proper roads cannot be said to be properly developed. A constitution is also a symbol of development, as it speaks to the promise of democracy. In the school where I did my research, the teachers often emphasized that the constitution must fulfill "the aspiration of the people" in order to find widespread acceptance. Although a singular "aspiration of the people" is clearly a figment of imagination, if such an aspiration were to exist in Nepal, its material form might be that of a road.[6]

"We Do Not Need to Wait for the Government:" Neighborhood-Level Efforts

Among my interlocutors, it was widely accepted that in the realm of formal politics, the primary interest of the principal actors is to enrich themselves, not to act for the benefit of all. This conviction suggests that it may be more productive to seek solutions to the everyday problems of urban

life in Kathmandu outside the realm of formal politics, without waiting for the fulfillment of promises such as the constitution. Scholar and activist Anil Bhattarai effectively summarized this point of view in a 2011 editorial for The Kathmandu Post. Beginning with a few prominent examples of high-profile politicians coopting public resources for personal ends, Bhattarai argued:

> Let's ask ourselves some hard questions: what difference does a timely constitution make to the current arrangements of the Nepali state? What new relationships will be established between citizens and the state? Will the constitution ensure that Madhav Kumar Nepal delivers back his vehicle as soon as he vacates his public post? Will the constitution guarantee that Bhim Rawal does not spend ten million rupees buying a vehicle while people die of hunger and disease in his home district of Achham? ... No, constitution-making is not the real issue. Clean drinking water in Kathmandu is. Creating safe public places for children is. Ensuring a creative environment in our schools is. Ensuring mobility without jammed streets and an atmosphere without choking pollution is. Constructing bicycle paths across cities is. Let's stop talking in generalities such as 'deshko bikas garau' (let's develop our country) or 'sabai milera basau' (let's all live in harmony). There are thousands of issues that politics has to address that the inert paper called 'constitution' cannot. Reinventing politics? Let's think beyond constitution. (Bhattarai 2011)

In middle or upper-class neighborhoods, residents frequently took matters into their own hands, organizing to pave their own roads and address other infrastructure-related concerns.[7] In September 2014, I met with several members of the Shanti Marga Society, a neighborhood (*tol*) association in Maitidevi which had formed in 2004 with the initial objective of addressing the shortage of drinking water.[8] Over the years, the members of the society had taken on additional tasks such as organizing celebrations for SLC graduates, blood drives, and lectures on social issues. However, their primary concern was still infrastructural matters, such as building and maintaining good roads within the *tol*. In order to do so, they collected money from each of the 54 member households and worked out an agreement with the Kathmandu Municipal Corporation: the municipality contributed 70 percent of the costs, and the society contributed the remaining 30 percent. The municipality was in charge of doing the road construction and maintenance, but members of the society supervised the process in order to ensure the quality of material and workmanship; the residents of the *tol* were only too familiar with the problem of paved roads that looked good but could be washed out by a single heavy rainfall due to shoddy construction and use of poor materials. "If we are aware of what we should get, we do not need to wait for the government," explained the treasurer, a man in his sixties. "The biggest challenge is not street repair, but repairing of the mind. If we are broad-minded, everything is possible." While the smoothly-paved roads within the *tol* seemed to testify to his optimistic attitude, the main road leading to the neighborhood was still ankle-deep in mud from late monsoon rains.

Bidita, a friend who lives in Chabahil, told me a similar story about the paving of the road in her neighborhood. In 2008, residents began organizing to collect road pavement fees. However, tensions developed over how the fees should be structured. Eventually, it was agreed that residents living immediately adjacent to the road would pay more than those whose houses were set further back, and those with larger plots of land would pay more than those with smaller plots. Bidita readily acknowledged that it would have been impossible to work out such an agreement in a neighborhood where residents were not at least middle-class in terms of income: "Here, everybody was willing and able to say, 'yes, take my 15,000 or 20,000 rupees, and build us a nice road.'" (For the sake of comparison, 15,000-20,000 rupees was roughly equivalent to the monthly salary of a Kathmandu public school teacher in 2014-2015.) Like many of their neighbors, Bidita's family owns a car, which they bought after their road was paved; thus, private vehicles and the roads on which to drive them are interlinked indicators of class status. Another friend living in Naya Baneshwor told me that the nine houses in his *tol* each contributed 25,000 rupees in order to get their road paved in 2014. However, just a few months after the paving was complete, "the Melamchi pipe guys came and ruined it again," by digging up the pavement to install pipes for drinking water.

In both the Chabahil and Naya Baneshwor neighborhoods, residents contributed a total of 40 percent of the cost of the road, while the municipal government contributed 60 percent. The discrepancy between these figures—a 30-70 percent split in Shanti Marga versus a 40-60 percent split in the two other neighborhoods—suggests the lack of consistency and resulting uncertainty that Kathmandu residents often experience when accessing government services. Furthermore, there is a strong sense that 'source-force,' personal influence and connections, can be used to influence the government's prioritization of road projects, just as it is believed to hold sway over aspects

of life ranging from school admissions to getting jobs to registering new businesses. As an example of source-force in road-building, Bidita cited the home of Sher Bahadur Deuba, a long-time Nepali Congress leader and a three-term prime minister. Deuba's home is in Buddhanilkantha, which is located on the northern edge of the Kathmandu Valley, outside of the Ring Road and far from the urban center. For years, Deuba's grand house was surrounded only by fields. But despite the low population density of the area, a wide and well-paved road connected Deuba's house to the Ring Road and enabled easy access to the city. Bidita also acknowledged that for her own neighborhood in Chabahil, the fact that a former minister and several other well-connected people live nearby probably helped to ease the passage of the local road-paving project through the Kathmandu Municipal Corporation's bureaucratic machinery.

Living in Kathmandu, Living in Humla

As ethnographic luck would have it, I was able to gain extensive personal knowledge of the impacts of road widening and other road-related construction projects. For the duration of my fieldwork, I lived with my host family on Mahankal Road, between Bouddha and Kopan. Our road was one of the last to be widened under the initiative begun in 2011 by Baburam Bhattarai. Although Bhattarai was no longer Prime Minister when my fieldwork began in early 2014, some of the components of the road-widening project were carried forward even after his resignation. The section of road where we lived was to be widened by two meters on each side. Thus, while none of the houses around ours had to be completely removed, almost every house had to remove its front portion or push back a garden wall. In our case, the required alterations were relatively minor: about one meter's width of the front porch (*pidhi*) had to be removed, and a tap had to be relocated. My host family chose to hire private contractors to do the work rather than leave it in the hands of government employees. Though they were not a wealthy family, they felt that the expense of hiring private contractors was justified because it allowed them to have some degree of control over the timing of the process and the manner in which the work was done. The grandfather of the family, like many of the older men who lived on our road, spent an enormous amount of time overseeing the work, and trying to salvage bricks and other bits that might be fit for resale. "The government is not paying us even one cent for this," he said to me gloomily and repeatedly, in both English and Nepali.

In December 2014, a few months after the road widening work had officially ended, a series of pipes around two feet in diameter were laid end to end along the sides of the road. The pipes lay untouched until February 2015, when bulldozers appeared and began to dig up the road to install the pipes, which were intended to supply local drinking water. In addition to making the road impassable to all but the most determined pedestrian traffic, the project regularly disrupted water, electricity, and phone service in the neighborhood. Nani, the teenaged daughter of my host family joked with me, "We're not living in Kathmandu, we're living in Humla!" By comparing Kathmandu to one of the poorest and most remote districts of far-Western Nepal, Nani was humorously exaggerating the inadequacy of municipal services and the resulting frustration. I shared her sense of exasperation: living in a national capital city seemed incongruous with the daily reality of arriving at home with my feet and ankles covered in mud from the street, only to find that there was no running water for washing up. But Nani was also participating in the widespread practice of what Stacy Pigg has called "inventing social categories through place" (Pigg 1992). When Kathmandu residents speak of Humla, it is often as an example of a place that is utterly lacking in the material forms of development (*bikas*). By identifying Kathmandu with Humla, Nani was placing Kathmandu at the bottom end of the development scale and emphasizing its marginality relative to the so-called developed world, of which she took me as a representative member.[9]

Shortly after the pipes for the local drinking water supply were finally laid down on both sides of the street, a series of enormous pipes, around six feet across, appeared. These, I found out, were intended to bring the water from the planned Melamchi drinking water project into Kathmandu, in order to address the city's chronic water shortage. In the process of digging up the road to lay down these bigger pipes, the supplies of drinking water, electricity, and phone service were disrupted all over again. The pace of the project was delayed for months at a time, first by the earthquake, then by the monsoon. Although my host family and the other residents of the neighborhood complained about the inconveniences, it seemed to me that they were bearing the situation with remarkable patience in light of the fact that the promised water from Melamchi was a dream that had been deferred for decades (Colopy 2012: 157-180).

Conclusion: Roads, Politics, and Inertia

I have shown that for upper- and middle-class Kathmandu residents, the city's roads were often interpreted as

symbols of the stalled constitutional process and of the faltering and corrupt nature of national politics in general. The failure of the state to build adequate roads led citizens to doubt that the state could succeed in the abstract project of building the nation through the constitution. Furthermore, when the constitution was finally passed in September 2015, the resulting blockade once again demonstrated the ineptitude of the state with regard to roads, as Madheshi protestors and their Indian collaborators significantly impacted daily life in the capital by blocking major transit points on the Indian border for five months. The Nepali government was humiliated by this demonstration, as the entire national economy is dependent on maintaining connections with India, and those connections are facilitated by roads.

Because of their association with interconnection and mobility, roads are often closely linked with ideas of modernity and progress. However, in this article I have pointed to the ways in which Kathmandu residents experienced their city's roads as symbols of inertia, both physical and political. Making one's way across the city is a daily experience of grinding, tedious, frustrating slowness. Jams, whether caused by the volume of traffic or intentional blockage by demonstrations, are an everyday fact of life. Accidents are a regular, and sometimes deadly, occurrence.[10] Even when the roads are relatively clear of obstructions, pedestrians and vehicles must still move slowly because of the tendencies of roads to make tight turns, to become almost impassably narrow, and to disintegrate into dust and mud.

This physical feeling of being stuck, even while one may still be moving, mirrors the political inertia that has characterized Nepal for the last several decades. While a superficial reading of events might lead an observer to conclude that the years since 1990 have been politically dynamic—marked as they have been by three different constitutions, a decade-long civil war, the end of a centuries-old monarchy, and the official adoption of secularism and federalism—my interlocutors tended to speak of politics with a sense of exhaustion. Although twenty-three governments have been formed since 1990, in addition to a period of direct monarchical rule, the post of prime minister has been rotating among a very limited cast of characters. When KP Oli became the prime minister after the passage of the 2015 constitution, a friend taught me the proverb 'jun jogi aayepani, kan chireko' (no matter which yogi comes, their ears are cut), expressing the sentiment that all politicians are alike in their insincerity. Political parties and alliances form, break up, and re-form, but there seems to be no lasting change for the better. In Nepali politics, as in the streets of Kathmandu, it is often difficult to find a way forward.

Dannah Dennis is a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at the University of Virginia. Her dissertation, entitled *Nepali First: Citizenship and Privilege in Nepal*, examines changing narratives of national identity in the midst of Nepal's constitutional transition to secularism and federalism. She has published articles on the gendered and regional exclusions that shape Nepali citizenship law and on the political significance of Nepali claims to Buddha's birthplace, along with a piece of ethnographic fiction exploring the effects of international migration on Nepali middle-class families.

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Endnotes

1. For a discussion of various types of street protests common in Kathmandu and their broader implications for democracy in Nepal, see Lakier (2007).

2. Names of some people and organizations have been changed.

3. For an analysis of these housing colonies and the forms of self-governance and upper-class sociality enacted by their residents, see Nelson (2011).

4. She was referring to Madan Bhandari Path, the main road that connects New Baneshwor to Maitighar.

5. Another striking example of the corrupt nexus between politicians and companies intended to provide public services is the abrupt and dramatic reduction of load-shedding in Kathmandu in the fall of 2016. After a new director was appointed to the Nepal Electricity Authority and reorganized the allocation of electricity, the general public was able to access 24-hour electricity, instead of enduring power-cuts of up to 108 hours per week during the dry season, as has been the norm for years. While it remains to be seen whether this apparent solution to Kathmandu's electricity problem will be sustainable in the long term, it seems clear that the long-standing load-shedding problem was not due to technical limitations, but rather to mismanagement on a grand scale (Shrestha 2016).

6. It is arguable that roads do not fully deserve their status as ultimate symbols of development. During the

1950s-1970s, with the aid of various foreign governments, the newly re-empowered Shah monarchs constructed a network of highways throughout the country, naming several of these highways after themselves (Whelpton 2005: 133-138). And yet, as the classic *Nepal in Crisis* by Blaikie et al. points out, the actual economic effects of these roads were mixed at best, suggesting that "strategic and security considerations were fundamental to the decisions regarding road construction" rather than concern for economic development (1980: 4).

7. While my research focuses on those who are middle or upper-class, a similar type of civil-society organizing to procure basic services also takes place in marginalized squatter (*sukumbasi*) communities in Kathmandu; see Ninglekhu (2012) for an overview of *sukumbasi* community organizing. Toffin (2013: 159-181) provides a brief account of the relocation of a *sukumbasi* settlement in order to construct a road linking Kalimati and Sorakhutte. The NGO Lumanti and various *sukumbasi* organizations actively negotiated with the Kathmandu city government to ensure that the residents of the settlement were compensated and provided with alternative housing via the Kirtipur Housing Project. Of course, not all interactions between *sukumbasi* communities and local government are marked by such negotiation for a mutually satisfactory outcome. Rademacher (2011) documents the forceful removal of *sukumbasi* settlements at Maitighar, Tinkune, and the Bagmati Bridge in Thapatali in late 2001-early 2002 in preparation for a SAARC summit hosted in Kathmandu. Clearly, not all residents of Kathmandu have equal standing when it comes to negotiating with the city government for municipal services.

8. For a more in-depth study of these neighborhood associations, including the possibilities that they represent for the creation of civic space, see Ninglekhu and Rankin (2009).

9. Mark Liechty has written about this sense of periphery often experienced by young Kathmandu residents in his 2010 collection of essays, *Out Here in Kathmandu: Modernity on the Global Periphery*.

10. Several scholars have recently taken accidents as a starting point for thinking about a host of important concepts such as agency, desire, time, contingency, event, materiality, safety, violence, and risk (Bear 2014; Bize 2016; Bize 2017; Harvey and Knox 2010; Morris 2010). Following these models, I suggest that road accidents in Nepal (both inside and outside Kathmandu) would be a productive object for future ethnographic research.

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