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'Inauthentic' *Sukumbasi*: The Politics of Aesthetics and Urgency in Kathmandu

Sabin Ninglekhu

This article discusses how claims of the urban poor for the right to the city come up against governmental programs seeking to secure norms of private property, environmental sustainability, and elite aesthetics. Here, the city in question is Kathmandu, Nepal, and the urban poor are referred to as *sukumbasi*, squatters. Baviskar (2011) defines 'elite politics' as a mode of expressing anxieties of the self in relation to one's physical surroundings. I interpret a liberal environmentalist project—the Bagmati Action Plan—in terms of such an elite politics, and explore the ways in which this river restoration program was taken up by the Nepali state. I show how bourgeois liberal environmentalism, when it encounters 'the slum,' produces spatial imaginaries, such as 'pure rivers' and 'green riverbanks,' and representations of *sukumbasi* as 'inauthentic' residents. This logic often furnishes the rationale for violently expelling *sukumbasi* from the slum and the city.

Adopting the state's governmental frames to distinguish between 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' *sukumbasi*, the Bagmati Action Plan's leadership produced class cleavage among the landless—between squatters, who were alleged to be 'landed' and those given a 'landless' designation. As such, this article asks two questions: How does the threat of violence forge *sukumbasi* political subjectivity and inform renewed strategies of inhabitation? And, what implications these strategies have for understanding the challenges facing the politics of the poor? These inquiries locate the practices of the poor within the context of a 'politics of urgency'—an ad hoc creative and counterintuitive 'non-movement' forged in the crucible of crisis, in which the organized practice of everyday life is disrupted and stretched in new and uncertain directions.

Keywords: Kathmandu, *sukumbasi*, solidarity, politics, inauthenticity, aesthetics.

Introduction

September 3, 2010, signaled a watershed moment in the restoration of the Bagmati River. The river has its origin in *Shiv Puri*, the northeast end of the city. Along with its tributaries, the Bagmati cuts through the city of Kathmandu and exits the Kathmandu Valley from the south. Discussions for the Bagmati Action Plan (BAP), as the river restoration effort is called, had begun in 2007 after a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between the United Nation's Environment Program (UNEP) and the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC). A complete version of the plan was developed in December 2009. Madhav Kumar Nepal, prime minister at the time and a prominent leader of Nepal's United Marxist Leninist (UML) Party, marked the occasion with a jubilant remark: "Just like everyone here, I dream of being able to jog along the Bagmati banks early [in the] morning and breathe fresh air. I urge all to support the government bid of restoring the Bagmati to its original pristine condition" (*The Himalayan Times* 2005).¹ He followed the call by declaring the BAP a project of national priority.²

The following year, in 2010, an implementation committee for the BAP was formed, called the Bagmati Civilization Integrated Development Committee (BCIDC). As a five-year project, BAP's goal is to clean up the Bagmati River by installing wastewater treatment plants on the riverbanks and restoring the river's aesthetic and cultural values (BAP Draft Report 2008). Under the plan, it is mandatory that 20 meters on either side of the river be cleared of any kind of activity—commercial or residential. Eviction of fourteen settlements on the banks of the Bagmati and its tributaries was therefore deemed mandatory for implementing the BAP.

This article and the research it represents is part of a larger body of work that examines the interface at which state-led projects of development in the city encounter the livelihood of city inhabitants. One question guiding this work is: How do state-led projects, as they encounter the 'slum,' produce spatial imaginaries and portray subjects? For example, the state mobilizes phrases such as 'pure river' and 'green parks' as part of a discursive exercise to promote the BAP. Concurrently, the state also portrays *sukumbasi*, the urban landless who inhabit the riverbanks, as 'inauthentic' residents who are obstacles to realizing the goals of the BAP.³ Together these discourses provide a rationale expelling *sukumbasi* from the settlements and the city and add a sense of urgency to this endeavor. This leads to another, interrelated question: How does the threat of violence and eviction forge *sukumbasi* political subjectivity and inform renewed strategies of inhabitation as well

as resistance to the BAP? This second question, in turn, prompts an examination of the limits and potential of the politics of the poor.

The first section of the paper focuses on the discursive ways in which the state portrays the BAP to the public in the city. The erasure of *sukumbasi* settlements on the riverbank is a necessary precondition for implanting the action plan. This, in turn, necessitates that the state furnish a 'rationale' for the plan to justify the potential violence contained within the plan. As such, this section shows how the state takes recourse to a double-sided politics of aesthetics. This brand of politics at once expresses nostalgia for the city rooted in 'civilization,' and articulates a desire beholden to the spirits of a homemade version of the 'world class city.'⁴ This politics of aesthetics is not only in the service of the production of space. Co-constituted with the production of space is also, as mentioned earlier, a portrayal of the *sukumbasi* as 'inauthentic.'

The article then turns toward the politics of subjectivity, which may be understood as "...the lived multiplicity of positioning" (Blackman et al. 2008: 6). How can the politics of subjectivity provide a way to analyze the multiple ways in which the poor reframe their subject position in relation to the state-led politics of aesthetics? In response to the BAP and its attendant politics of aesthetics, *sukumbasi* find tactical ways to acquiesce to the allegations of 'inauthenticity'. In so doing, they tend to aestheticize their own politics, thereby producing a cleavage within *sukumbasi* communities. As such, if lived experience is central to the formation of *sukumbasi* solidarity, then the recourse to aesthetics renders the solidarity ad hoc, and in the process, reveals fractures within the *sukumbasi* class group.

The final section of this article examines the 'right to the city'—a politics that is forged by the urban poor, in response to being culturally marginalized and materially oppressed, to make claims for formal as well as substantive rights (Marcuse 2012). Here, I discuss the implications of the co-constituted politics of aesthetics and inauthenticity for examining the limits of the politics of the poor.

Bagmati Action Plan: A Case of Bourgeois Environmentalism

Kathmandu's transformation in the last two decades may be characterized by several factors: the "gentrification of state-spaces" (Ghertner 2011) that favor the propertied residents for accessing municipal services; the vision of 'urban gigantism' underwriting direct investments which fund the construction of high-rise buildings and gated communities; and the conformity of such transformations

to elusive logics such as ‘aesthetics,’ ‘civilization,’ and ‘modernity.’ However, in imagining Kathmandu as an unfolding processual politics of a potentially bourgeois desire, one ought not lose sight of a relational co-constitution of the production of ‘slum’ as an attendant politics of the transformation.

These urban transformations may be seen as a mode of expression of the anxieties and desires of the self in relation to one’s physical surroundings; the ‘self,’ for the purposes of this article, may be understood as the state or the civil society in its myriad incarnations: NGOs, neighborhood associations, community-based organizations and many similar assemblages. Some of such politics contain exclusive tendencies that urban sociologist Amita Baviskar (2003) chooses to call “bourgeois environmentalism”: an organized force that links upper class concerns around aesthetics, public health, safety, leisure and civic order with environmental concerns. According to Baviskar, these concerns combine to see, and portray, the urban poor as “the specter of dirt, disease, and crime, a monster threatening the body civic” (2003: 92). The politics that is assembled around putting bourgeois environmentalism to motion, Baviskar argues, also challenges us to critically investigate the configuration of a public sphere that promotes the voice of the upper class as legitimate, while excluding, in the process, the concerns of the urban poor and their most basic service needs. A similar mode of class politics is evident in Kathmandu when one traces the discursive and political terrain from which the BAP gleans a ‘moral’ content. I interpret the bourgeois project of environmentalism, which got taken up by the state in the form of the BAP, in terms of such class politics. More specifically, I focus on the alignment of middle-class aspirations with the ideals of the state insofar as it relates to the BAP, and the modalities of the exclusion of the urban poor that such an alignment would engender.

BAP is not exclusively driven by market demands or private alliances. It does not come across as a branding mechanism dictated by the logic of the ‘World City.’ While the BAP is partially funded by the Japan Water Agency (JWA), the funding is still not part of the circuit of capital and ideas that are dictated by global financial capitalism. In a report that describes the plan in detail, specific reference is made to a rehabilitation of Nanjing-Qinhuai River in China as an example from which to draw inspiration. Citing the apparent success of the rehabilitation project that faced similar problems that the Bagmati River faces—“illegal squatters,” a “filthy environment,” and a “contaminated smelly river” as described in the report—now “Nanjing-Qinhuai River has become a historical scenic

zone, a cultural scenic zone and tourism scenic zone characterizing the ancient civilization of Nanjing” (BAP 2009: 5). The reference to ‘civilization’ as one of the logics for rehabilitation of the Bagmati River comes up frequently during interviews with the planners involved in the BAP. But no other symbolic or material links can be traced to the Nanjing-Qinhuai project. BAP does echo what Ghertner (2015) calls a ‘World-Class City Aesthetic’—an idealized vision of a modern, ‘green’ city that is devoid of slum-like dirt. As such, for a city-making project, such as the BAP, that confirms to such aesthetic standards, creating a field of perception is a necessary step in the production of city spaces that are considered desirable. However, unlike the World Class City projects, the field of perception is yoked less to “fantastic futurism” (Ghertner 2015), and more to the time in which the river and its banks were the habitus and harbinger of ‘civilization.’

The Bagmati water has always been a potent carrier of purity. Traditional waterspouts, rest homes, and temples are found on the banks of the Bagmati. *Ghat*, platforms on which Hindu mortuary rituals are performed, line the river. Pointing to these structures and rituals, Mahesh Basnet, the ex-chairman of the BAP, claims, “The civilization of the city hinged on the river and its purity. Therefore, it is important to protect the river” (Interview, 12 September, 2012). In the nostalgic pursuit of what may be called the ‘authentic’ city, photographs and maps of the river and the riparian landscapes depicting the pristine-looking river are highlighted during meetings, seminars, and interviews to advance a certain politics of aesthetics necessary to reclaim the authentic city—the city that was. However, the realization of this politics of aesthetics, which is intended to make the BAP legible and *legitimate*, hinges on the eviction of the poor from the spaces they inhabit. One necessary tactic the state deployed, as a result, was to mobilize the discourse of ‘inauthenticity.’

Fourteen squatter settlements on the banks of the Bagmati and its tributaries are under threat of eviction due to the BAP. These settlements all fall under the plan’s urban zone, for which there are four different goals outlined: improve the river quality; improve the riparian landscape; manage the squatter settlements along the riverbanks; and conserve and regenerate tangible and intangible cultural heritage (BAP 2008). Together, these goals link concerns for the environment with concerns about heritage, and of course, the livelihood on the riverbanks. The benevolent intention inherent in these goals is met with questions by the *sukumbasi*, some NGOs, and the public because of the propensity for violence implicit in one of these goals also contain—namely, the state’s attempt to manage the squat-



Figure 1. A *sukumbasi* settlement on the banks of the Bagmati River.

(Ninglekhu, 2013)

ter settlements. In the past, such ‘management’ has either resulted in outright eviction with no resettlement plan or attempts at relocation that have failed one after another. It was therefore important for BCIDC to add legitimacy as well as urgency to the plan to make it a project that was mandatory not just on environmental grounds but also necessary on ethical grounds. As such, the recourse to discourses of the different variants of ‘the environment’ and the ‘inauthentic *sukumbasi*’ was a necessary tool for BCIDC to provide a rationale for the legitimacy of eviction with or without resettlement. Such discourses would normally animate public events that BCIDC organized to promote the BAP.

One such event was primarily targeted at journalists. A handful of prominent political leaders representing Nepal’s major parties were invited to the event as speakers. After an opening presentation by one of committee members outlining BAP’s implementation methods and its intended targets, the politicians took turns speaking. The common theme in their speeches was nostalgia for the river that no longer was what it used to be. Every now and then, the ‘inauthentic’ *sukumbasi* would be held responsible for the river’s degradation, rendering their expulsion from the riverbanks necessary. As her opening remarks at one of the meetings, a top leader of the United Marxist Leninist Party (UML) revisited her experience of the Bagmati from almost a decade ago. She was at the Bagmati River to pay tribute to her dead husband, who had also been a prominent UML leader. As part of the ritual, she remembered dipping her hands into the river to pocket a cupful

of water. She let the water rest in her palms momentarily, and then let it slip through her fingers as she said prayers for the departed. Returning home that day, she could smell something but wasn’t sure where the smell was coming from—herself or her surroundings. This smell lasted for a few days. It was only later that she realized she had been walking around with a pair of hands that carried the stench of the Bagmati water. She later lamented the river’s loss of ‘purity.’ Another speaker later endorsed BAP with a nod to those hands: “As long as the river is not clean, just like the fellow speaker’s hands, the civilization of this city, too, shall always stink.” The anecdote presents water as a potent carrier of purity. The metaphors serve the purpose of combining threats to religious practices with threats to the body and the city—‘civilization’ being the overriding theme. As such, *sukumbasi* had to be something more than just an ‘obstacle’ settled on the riverbank that was not so much ‘land’ as the river’s right-of-way. They also had to be portrayed as polluters of purity.

Anne Rademacher (2009) notes that in the immediate aftermath of the state of emergency in late 2001, during the time when the People’s War was at its peak, *sukumbasi* were portrayed as a “security concern.” The *sukumbasi* settlements on the riverbanks, the state feared, were “a relatively uncontrolled space where rural dissent and rebellion might assemble and take refuge in the city” (Rademacher 2009: 520). State-led environmental interventions, therefore, had to be understood in the broader context of the People’s War as well as the prevailing understanding of *sukumbasi* as ‘dirt’ and an ‘eye sore.’ Relocating a *sukumbasi*

settlement to the outskirts of the city was therefore, also, finding a place for *sukumbasi* culturally, environmentally, as well as politically—to secure the city from a potential upsurge of class-based violence.

Official documents indicate that what *sukumbasi* claimed as land was not ‘land’ per se, but rather the Bagmati’s riverbed. It was so because channelization of flow from harvesting of sand and municipal out-takes up-stream had reduced the water level, and prevented the Bagmati River and its tributaries from flowing at their previous levels for many years. Dams built in response as restoration schemes for re-submerging exposed sand flats would trap sediment during the annual monsoon and thereby raise riverbed levels. The raised riverbed, according to the planning documents, would be claimed by *sukumbasi* for encroachment. “*Sukumbasi* were thereby considered obstacles to restoring that flow, having claimed river territory as land in a way that was inconsistent with perceived ecological order. Their land claims were rendered illegitimate in urban environmental terms as they were in legal terms,” claims Rademacher (2009: 519). However, maintaining water flow is crucial to the environment as much as it is to ‘culture’—which the BAP committee frames through the discourse of ‘civilization,’ as alluded to by a former Deputy Project Manager of BCIDC, Anil Bhadra Khanal. Khanal says, “[Restoration] is not just about the river. It is also about religious and cultural heritages that lie on the riverbanks. These are structures that ensure sustenance of our cultural and religious practices, which are tied to civilization. Our festivals and mortuary rituals that we perform on the river needs water flow. To ensure that the festivals and rituals continue to exist, we need to make sure that the river continues to flow” (Interview, 23 October, 2012).

These claims of environmental health in relation to cultural practices added legitimacy with recourse to a nostalgia that was meant to evoke memories of a civilized Kathmandu and, subsequently, a desire to restore civilization by rebuilding heritage along the riverbanks. When I questioned Mahesh Basnet, the ex-chairman, about what ‘civilization’ indicated, he said: “[the] Bagmati carries not just the river’s civilization, but civilization of the entire city. Therefore, to revive the city’s civilization, it is important that we bring back our traditional structures like water-spouts, temples, and so on.” Restoring structures on the riverbanks to revive civilization has functional as well as aesthetic value, as Basnet implies. But when deployed as a tool with a political function, ‘civilization’ becomes a potent weapon to delegitimize the poor. The particular strategy of enmeshing culture and morality with the environment in attempts at river restoration has a long

tradition that has relied on ‘othering’ migrants as people without the ability of understanding the river’s culture. What is peculiar about Kathmandu’s case, however, is that it is the state seizing the middle-class discourse about ‘civilization’ and ‘inauthenticity’ to endorse the project of environmentalism. The prevailing consciousness considers clean river water and green river banks more important than livelihood and shelter for the working poor who inhabit the riverbank. These raise a pertinent question: How does ‘the environment’ serve as an optic through which poverty and the poor are reframed en route to building the good city?

The ‘Authentic’ City

Hutta Ram Baidya is a Kathmandu native who comes from a middle-class family. An engineer by profession, he has earned the moniker ‘Bagmati Baa’ or ‘the Bagmati Man’—a tribute to his lifelong dedication to, in his words, “saving the Bagmati.” A native of Kathmandu, after working independently for several decades to clean up the Bagmati River, he has now retired from the activism that gave him the moniker. For all the recognition that is granted to him as an environmental activist, the river has little to show for Hutta Ram Ji’s lifelong dedication. The section of the river that flows through the heart of the city looks like an open sewer.

When I went to see Hutta Ram Ji in his residence, my hope of hearing him speak about his Bagmati restoration efforts were momentarily dashed. His opening was rather dismissive, “So you want to know about the Bagmati? What do you want to do with it? There is nothing to know.” It was as if it was he who wanted to know nothing more about the Bagmati. He then lifted himself up and walked away from the patio overlooking the busy street. The pungent smell coming from the nearby Tukucho—a tributary of the Bagmati—did little to comfort me as I waited for his next move. A few seconds later, from inside his room, Hutta Ram Ji raised his voice, instructing me to come inside his bedroom. I obliged. He gestured with his right hand that I sit on the chair next to him, while his left hand played with the mouse, frantically moving the cursor up and down on his desktop screen. He then turned to me, feigned a wry smile and asked, in a hopeful tone, if I would be able to read an email from his son in the United States. He said his eyes hurt.

After I hesitantly read the email, he pointed to a corner of the room. There were three old suitcases, one on top of the other. He then asked me to fetch him the one in the middle, place it on the bed next to the computer, and open

it. In it was a pile of documents—newspaper cutouts, old photos, certificates—all of them related to the Bagmati River. Most of them black and white, the newspaper cutouts and photos depicted the pristine-looking Bagmati of history. He picked one from the pile, a picture that he took of the UN Park, built in the 1990s on a section of the riverbank in Thapathali by the Ministry of Environment and Population. It was to commemorate the 50th-year anniversary of the UN's presence in Nepal. At the end of the park bordering the river, there is an embankment made of concrete walls.

The river cannot speak. Therefore, Hutta Ram Ji speaks on its behalf, in the process abstracting the nature, the river, from its social entanglement. The river has its own culture that is eroding after it came in contact with 'development.' Hutta Ram Ji bemoans, "Why regulate the flow of the river? Are we supposed to clean up the riverbank by building parks and dams, or do we first try to understand what Bagmati's heart desires and follow accordingly. Who are we to control nature? How can we say we are protecting her when we are regulating her?" He insinuates that the UN Park is a case of "development" disrupting the river's natural state. "It is impossible to clean the Bagmati just by spending millions. There is no need to murder the river's culture in the name of development. Development is not good when there is no consideration for nature and culture."

Across the river, at the opposite end of UN Park, there is a *sukumbasi* settlement called Paurakhi Basti. It is not very far from Hutta Ram Ji's house. Therefore, when Hutta Ram Ji confides in me his concerns by pointing to one of the bedroom walls, it may be fair to assume that he could be talking about Paurakhi Basti that is to be blamed, just like the state is to be blamed, for ruining the river. "They [the *sukumbasi*] are the culprits that disrespected Bagmati's culture. They encroach because the government is too weak to do anything about it. Because they find the government weak, they then started making demands." He continues, "Why demand land? Why not other necessities of life? What about employment?" After pausing briefly, he bemoans, "The Bagmati was not always this bad."

Hutta Ram Ji continues, "Those who came to the city early on were hard working people. Even if they lived on the riverbanks, they worked hard to make a living, and would later move elsewhere. It was those who followed the early migrants that would never leave. They have remained on the riverbank ever since...These people [the *sukumbasi*] do not know about the river's culture because they are not from Kathmandu. They do not care." The objectification of

nature, the river, as something with a culture of its own, is lent further credibility via subjection of *sukumbasi* as people ignorant of the river's culture.

Hutta Ram Ji passed away in December 2013. He left behind rich imprints on the on-going restoration efforts led by social groups as well as the state. He is credited with coining the term 'Bagmati Civilization,' which articulates a desire to restore the city's civilization through restoration of the Bagmati River. BCIDC borrows its naming from Hutta Ram Ji's phrase. 'Civilization' continues to be an enduring environmental theme in citizen-led environmental activism for river restoration. 'Civilization,' in such a sense, is indeed about restoring old temples and traditional taps, as is officially invoked. In addition to rebuilding the heritage, 'civilization' is also protective of the 'culture' (of the river), which is only possible once the polluter of the culture is identified, and subsequently removed. As a result, subsequent efforts towards preserving the Bagmati have done so by separating the polluters from the protectors. Unlike Hutta Ram Ji, who blamed both the state and the society for ruining the river, these latter efforts, such as the BAP, or the Friends of Bagmati, have firmly put the blame on one section of the society: the *sukumbasi*.

"It was Hutta Ram Baidya who made the government realize that preserving the Bagmati was not just about restoring the health of the river water but also about restoring civilization," says Megh Ale, president of Friends of Bagmati, an NGO committed to the goal of restoring the Bagmati's environment. While it is not clear from their website what 'environment' suggests, restoring it implies addressing more than just the water quality. The organization laments the loss of 'purity' and 'integrity' of the 'scared' river. As stated in organizational documents, it is committed to saving the Bagmati's "cultural, natural and heritage significance from pollution and other threats." One of the flagship events of Friends of Bagmati is the Bagmati River Festival, an annual event. Over the course of the day, the event turns into a spectacle for the public. Public officials, political party leaders, NGO representatives, and media personnel are all invited to the event as 'stakeholders.' "We live here on the riverbank, yet somehow we are not the stakeholders of the river," says a resident of a settlement in *Sankhamul*.

Ghertner (2010) contends that in the absence of maps, statistics, and documents, the raw materials that legitimizes rule, and on which rule is founded, aesthetics serves as a governing logic for doing development. The politics of aesthetics is one of the central logics of the BAP. Aesthetics, as a politics of desire, also becomes a discursive site

around which state and middle and upper-middle class interests coalesce as a force of bourgeois environmentalism that puts under threat structures and people that are deemed to potentially disrupt the making of the order of aesthetics. The environmental and ecological practices led by the elite in collaboration with different state bodies, actively and passively, therefore seek to draw the lines between migrants and the natives of Kathmandu; between those who belong to the city and the river versus those who do not; between those who know the ‘culture’ of the river and those who do not. Throughout the politics of aesthetics, what is apparent is not the pitting of ‘nature’ against ‘civilization.’ Instead, the coalescing of nature with civilization is made visible, creating a ‘natural civilization’ to be reclaimed through the BAP—the reclaiming of the authentic city. What is it about the urban environment that selectively allows only elite and middle-class citizens to make claims about matters of public interest? Why are the public, and their other variants such as Friends of Bagmati so exclusively defined that it would leave out the urban poor?

The ‘Inauthentic’ *Sukumbasi*

There is a tendency to use “poverty of place” interchangeably with “poverty of people” (Gilbert 2009). The dwellers (people) have to represent the dwelling (place)—normally a decrepit shack—in their appearance for them to be counted as real, or authentic. In other words, one has to *look* like a *sukumbasi* to be one. Therefore, a common expression that pervades middle-class conversations about *sukumbasi* in the city is: “How can they be *sukumbasi* when they are so well-dressed and ride motorbikes?” In other words, they have to look like “matter out of place,” to use Mary Douglas’ (1966) metaphor of ‘dirt’ as a conceptual frame. In the case of *sukumbasi*, the optics of ‘slum’ is used as a figurative reference to gauge of the ‘purity’ (as an ‘authentic’ figure) of the *sukumbasi* identity as it is claimed. It is a commonly held belief among members of the BAP committee that a majority of the *sukumbasi* populations in the city are ‘inauthentic’ because “they own land—if not in the city then elsewhere” (Mahesh Bahadur Basnet, Interview, 12 February, 2012). Basnet further claimed, “I live next to the Buddha Nagar settlement.⁵ I have lived there for many years now and know many *sukumbasi* people there very well. I can say for sure that many I know have land either in Kathmandu or elsewhere. I don’t really know of any Nepali that are landless.”⁶ The subtext here is that *sukumbasi* are ‘inauthentic’ squatters because they are landowners in some place in Nepal if not in Kathmandu.

In relation to comparative cases elsewhere, for example in Indian cities, critical urban scholars have argued how courts and media are the domains in which elite politics coalesce, crystallize and become more concrete (Baviskar 2011). This germination of politics has led some to suggest that analysis of contemporary urban politics “account for the court not only as an arbiter of justice but also as a parallel administrative and executive body” (Bhan 2009: 134). Starting September 2011, Nepal’s Home Ministry and subsequently the Department of Urban Development and Building Construction (DUDBC) started issuing eviction notice to the riverbank settlements via different news dailies on a regular basis. In response, *sukumbasi* filed a case in the appellate court challenging the validity of the order by referring to an earlier case that had played out in 2001. That year, under Kathmandu’s then mayor, Keshav Sthapit, the municipality had signed an agreement with Society for Preservation of Shelter and Habitat, or Basobas, meaning habitat in conversational terms, that in principle provided amnesty to *sukumbasi* from eviction. The agreement, signed between Basobas and the mayor of the Kathmandu Municipality, was eventually rendered as having no legal mandate to protect *sukumbasi* from eviction. Consequently, the appellate court issued a 35-day stay-order to the plaintiff, the *sukumbasi*. Later, the Supreme Court of Nepal issued a ruling in favor of the government’s notice of eviction. The involvement of the court in such processes has continued to take place in the promotion and implementation of BAP.

The Politics of Subjectivity: Acquiescing to the Accusation of ‘Inauthenticity’

Critical development and postcolonial studies scholars who give voice to the struggles of the urban poor do so from the standpoint of a “politics of patience”—to use Arjun Appadurai’s framing (Appadurai 2002: 30). This kind of politics is gleaned from ‘ordinary’ everyday practices that involve, for example, relations of patronage with lower-level state officials that are patiently built over a long period of time. These relationships enable access to basic services that are crucial in transforming vacant public lands into properly functioning and livable neighborhoods imbued with a sense of place and a sense of community. In these accounts of the politics of the poor, through their contribution to the production of space and the emotion and labor invested in it, the poor are able to form and make claims for the right to the city. However, when the politics of patience encounters a state-led development project that destabilizes the routine of the everyday life, the existing relations of patronage no longer work because it is normally the national-scale

government bodies, not the lower-level individual officials, that are the source of eviction threats. The poor are thus left with devising a new kind of politics that may be termed ‘politics of urgency.’

Critical urban scholarship that has documented the interface at which state-led development programs encounter the livelihood of the poor do so from the standpoint of governmentalization of the state. Such an approach focuses on the techniques of governmentality that the state adopts by mobilizing certain discursive practices that render the poor expendable, their settlements, and practices therein. However, an inquiry into the ‘politics of urgency’ during the time of crisis can show that the poor are not merely passive recipients of developmentalist intervention from the top patiently devising “governmentality from below” (Appadurai 2002: 35). A politics of urgency can reveal the tactical ways in which the urban poor renegotiate their claims for the right to the city by turning on their heads the discursive tools that the state mobilizes to subjectivize the poor. In the case of Kathmandu, *sukumbasi* couch their renewed demands with the state not on the same terms that were set in the ‘normal’ time dedicated to the politics of patience, in which space, and inhabitation, are central; rather, realizing the importance of time as a commodity in short supply during urgent moments, *sukumbasi* acquiesce to the state’s allegations to make renewed claims to ensure that their right to live in the city, to be in the city, is ensured. Aware of the limits of the politics of patience, *sukumbasi* employ tactical ways to renew their demands by making surprising attempts to act jointly *with* the state, not *against* the state, in distinguishing the authentic from the inauthentic *sukumbasi*. The state, therefore, is not merely adversarial but also instrumental to the goals of realizing the *sukumbasi* demand to maintain a place in the city, in the sense that it permeated a new mode of subjectivity geared toward differentiation rather than solidarity amongst *sukumbasi*.

Aestheticization of Politics

Ananya Roy (2009: 160) describes “civic governmentality” as neither top-down nor bottom-up, but rather as a “dialectical movement between insurgency and institutionalization.” Borrowing from Roy’s framework, I see the acquiescence to the accusation of ‘inauthenticity’ as a technique of civic governmentality that rely on what may be called an aestheticization of politics from below. Such politics is dialectical in nature, in that they engage the same terms —aesthetics and inauthenticity—produced from above in forging their politics. However, the modality through which such politics is forged is engineered from below.

In 2001, Basobas conducted their first self-enumeration survey; the same year they had reached the agreement with the mayor that I describe towards the end in the previous section.⁷ Enumerators from Basobas visited *sukumbasi* settlements to survey household conditions, household size, and the demographic composition of families in the settlements. All family members had their photos taken in front of their house after each house was assigned a number. Family IDs issued thenceforth would contain the person’s name, age, sex, household number, and length of stay in the settlement. New settlers or migrants after 2001 would no longer be issued such ID. Apart from being ‘formally’ identified as *sukumbasi*, the ID would also provide a basis for accessing basic services from the local government—in lieu of the citizenship card or landownership certificate. That was the agreement reached with the municipality.

When I asked Hukum Bahadur Lama, ex-president and one of the founders of Basobas, why they no longer distributed family IDs, he seemed to evade the question and suggested that the call was made to enable them to manage the *sukumbasi* movement more effectively. A larger number of *sukumbasi*, he explained, would mean a larger number of issues that must be dealt with. Whatever the rationale was to stop issuing the family IDs, the upshot of the decision, over time, was that it became harder for new *sukumbasi* to claim formal citizenship rights, landownership, or inhabitation. Basanta Jaisi alludes to the distinction that evolved among *sukumbasi*—between ID holders and those who didn’t hold IDs—regarding who could claim authenticity: “There are *sukumbasi*, *hukumbasi* and *dadal*⁸ in those settlements. We have never said that we are all authentic. But the government has rolled us all into one.” Jaisi signals a concession that there are *in fact* inauthentic *sukumbasi*: those without the ID. This concession, in turn, opens up political possibilities for *sukumbasi* collaborating with the government. Leaders like Jaisi are prepared to embrace the state-produced discourse of ‘inauthenticity’ in the hope of forging a working collaboration with the state. This willingness was soon put to action in the middle of an anti-eviction campaign in 2012.

In early January 2012, Basobas members seemed to radiate excitement at the prospect of incorporating a scientific technology that was believed to add credibility to the demands upon the state. Their counterparts from India, staff members of Slum Dwellers International (SDI), had brought a biometric survey tool—a self-identification technology that was deemed to be successful in India.⁹ SDI members, along with Basobas staff gathered in a settle-

ment on the southwest end of the city, where the survey tool would be tested. As they approached the settlement carrying a laptop, attached to which was a device that was part of the survey tool, they were met with a few curious onlookers who seemed to have little clue about what to expect from these people with gadgets. After taking a picture and collecting fingerprints from individual household members, the biometric survey software would digitally overlay the householder's headshot, fingerprints, and the number on the front door of the person's house into a digital database. The number, as discussed earlier, would have been issued during the self-survey conducted by Basobas in 2001.

In theory, such a system would permanently digitize and archive the Family ID obtained in 2001, and prevent *sukumbasi* householders from swapping, selling, or renting out their 'property'. Including the archived data into the government data system, a goal of the self-identification project, would also help the government crosscheck if any *sukumbasi* household legally owned land anywhere else in the country. Basanta Jaisi, another member of Basobas, explains:

The biometric survey helps to identify *sukumbasi* along with their settlement and house number. Having that scientific information will make it easier for the government to locate *sukumbasi* in the city. Right now the survey is at an experimental phase. People from India are doing it. But some of us will learn how to use it soon. We want to show the results of the experiment to Mahesh Bahadur Basnet.¹⁰

This scientific method lends credibility to that political move through the employment of scientific logic and bureaucratic rationality, which in turn would help create a social field of possibility, indicating the will of *sukumbasi* to collaborate with the state in separating the 'authentic' from the 'inauthentic.'

More recently, Basobas collaborated with Social Science Baha to create digital maps of the settlements in the city. A research team comprising members of Social Science Baha and Basobas finished conducting the survey in 2014. Social Science Baha trained the researchers and provided them necessary research tools such as GPS machines. "When we Google Kathmandu, our settlements are not mapped. We are invisible. The long-term goal of this survey is to make ourselves visible through Google," says Smita, one of the Basobas leaders. The mapping project, however, also has a tendency to re-inscribe the cleavage among *sukumbasi*.

Smita further claims, "Once we have the map, it is easier for us to manage the settlements. In that, we can prevent new addition of households to the existing settlements, which is important for staying away from the 'inauthenticity' blame."

This project of visibility reveals not only the means of reproduction of authenticity/inauthenticity discourse, but also the privileging of 'time' as a maker and logic of authenticity. The prevention of 'new additions' indicates that there are and there will be *sukumbasi* who will not be eligible for making claims as the 'authentic' *sukumbasi* through the logic framed by Basobas. In Kathmandu, these groups are among the *sukumbasi* who have a relatively more recent history of settlement in the city, and as a result, do not share as strong links with the local and municipal states as the older ones—those without enough political and symbolic capital to weather the storm of eviction. Equally importantly, one may argue, digital maps and biometric procedures conducted through the deployment of technologies such as laptops, cameras, and GPS systems, are a project of visibility that has a tendency to aestheticize the politics of the poor in the process. This kind of aestheticization of politics led by the *sukumbasi* is necessary to keep open the field of possibility for collaborating with the state.

The use of the different devices to strategically inhabit the state's claims of 'inauthenticity' enable *sukumbasi* to enact a 'scientific' subjectivity with the hope that such a move would help create governable space for *sukumbasi* to co-inhabit with the state. In other words, through the adoption of the biometric survey tool and Google maps, some section of the *sukumbasi* were willing to accept the fictitious authentic/inauthentic dichotomy in order to be able to work collaboratively with the government to find out 'inauthentic' *sukumbasi*. As Chatterjee (2004: 57) might argue, this was the *sukumbasi* way of "investing their collective identity with a moral content of a community," whereby, a certain politics of aesthetics begins to take shape in the form of digital IDs, digital maps and aerial photographs. The adoption of biometric survey tools and the self-enumeration survey results indicate that the urban poor are not just passive recipients of instruments of governmentality imposed on them from above. Rather, these tools are actively utilized on 'scientific' grounds, to engage the state's demands but through the devices that the *sukumbasi* deploy.

Conclusion

I have, so far, discussed two key ideas, aesthetics and inauthenticity, which coalesce to frame the environment along with the poor. To recall, certain imagery of aesthetics was conjured to cater to the middle-class sensibilities. The content of the politics of aesthetics was not so much derived from ‘fantasy futurism,’ as many ‘world class’ aspirant cities might desire. Rather, riparian aesthetics is to be reclaimed via revival of ‘civilization’ and restoration of the river’s ‘purity.’ In the process, poor and poverty are reframed through similar logic of aesthetics as the riparian environment. The politics of aesthetics as it is deployed portray the poor and poverty through the frame of what Ghertner (2016) calls “codes of civility and appearance.” Meaning, if the urban poor, or *sukumbasi*, appear like they can afford to follow these codes, they are ‘inauthentic’ and they are assumed to own land elsewhere in the city. They have to ‘look’ poor.

Ananya Roy calls this logic the “aestheticization of poverty,” which alludes to the reduction of relationship between the viewers and viewed to one of “aesthetics rather than politics” (2004). “Thus reduced, evictions and resettlement become not tales of destruction of individual people’s lives and livelihoods, but simply the erasure of an image of a slum, emptied of the people who live within it,” argues Bhan (2009: 140). But politics of aesthetic and authentic, as deployed, become not just tales of erasure of livelihood and lifestyle. There is more to it. Poor people are not merely passive recipients of the politics of aesthetic deployed by the state or other powerful actors. Instead, they devise ways to inhabit the state-produced discourse of ‘inauthenticity,’ and turn it on its head to find newer ways to make demands. This acquiescence to allegations of ‘inauthenticity’ may first appear as inclusionary as it could potentially encourage (some) collaboration with the state; in reality, is exclusive. However, the strategy of gaining state legitimacy inevitably reproduces the discourse of ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic,’ without transcending the ideology and politics that produce such a discourse in the first place. In so doing, their acquiescence produces new class cleavages among *sukumbasi* while re-inscribing the older ones. The problem with this strategy is that although this may help to achieve participation in the planning process for some *sukumbasi* households, it does so at the expense of a collaborative mode of engagement among wider *sukumbasi* communities. Adopting the state’s frames to distinguish between ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ *sukumbasi*, the movement’s leadership produces class cleavages among *sukumbasi*—between those who were alleged to be ‘landed’ and

those given a landless designation. Finally, the relational co-constitution of bourgeois environmentalism—that which aspires to produce the authentic city—with the politics of the poor ends up reducing the politics of the poor into the realms of aesthetics. This dynamic creates a rupture amongst the poor, not just on terms of ‘authenticity/inauthenticity,’ but also in terms of aesthetics.

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Endnotes

1. Ramesh Prasad Bhusal, "PM inaugurates BAP," *The Himalayan Times*, December 25, 2009, accessed November 16, 2016, <<http://thehimalayantimes.com/kathmandu/pm-nepal-inaugurates-bap/>>.
2. Pragati Shahi, "Shouldering burden to revive lost glory," *The Kathmandu Post*, August 7, 2012, accessed November 16, 2016, <<http://kathmandupost.ekantipur.com/news/2012-08-06/shouldering-burden-to-revive-lost-glory.html>>.
3. This notion of 'inauthentic *sukumbasi*', or 'inauthenticity', that I use frequent in this chapter, and that forms one of the central concepts of this chapter, is an English translation of the Nepali term '*nakkali sukumbasi*', that state officials mostly use during interviews as well as informal conversations.
4. I call this a 'homemade version' because Kathmandu's march to modernity is not directly dictated by global financial capitalism in the same way the aspirants of the 'world class' tag such as Delhi or Mumbai.

5. Based on interviews conducted with some of the earlier *sukumbasi* settlers in the city, *Buddha Nagar* is one of the oldest settlements in the city, its origin dating back to the 1970s.

6. No one, including *sukumbasi* or Lumanti, who work with them, disagree that there are landowning *sukumbasi* either in Kathmandu or elsewhere. However, the land owned elsewhere is uninhabitable for several reasons. For example, it is in a remote area without access to services. Additionally, in the last five years, there has been a notable increase in the number and size of loans borrowed from cooperatives for purchasing land in the city. Lajana Manandhar, who works closely with the cooperatives, claims that *sukumbasi* purchasing land in the city own the land but cannot afford to build a house. The bigger question, reminds Manandhar, is how do we address housing and shelter as poverty moves from the countryside to the city—from the rural to the urban? (Rademacher 2009).

7. Basobas is a central organization of the *sukumbasi* population in Nepal. It has a federated network spread across forty-four different districts. A rights-based organization, Basobas advocates for landownership-based shelter rights of *sukumbasi* in Nepal.

8. *Hukumbasi* is a term that is used derogatorily to denote landowning *sukumbasi*; *dalal* is a derogatory term for a land broker.

9. SDI is a network of urban poor communities, including squatter communities, in over thirty-three cities in the global South. SDI occasionally provides funding to Basobas on a regular basis for covering logistics and organizational expenses. But more importantly, they also provide different template for Basobas that become the basis for organizing around advocacy works.

10. Mahesh Bahadur Basnet was the chairman of BAP during the time of the fieldwork in 2012. His term ended in 2013.

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