Collective Powers in Common Places: The Politics of Gender and Space in a Women's Struggle for a Meeting Center in Chitwan, Nepal

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In 1988, several hundred women in a village in Chitwan District held meetings, rallies and demonstrations to demand a piece of former pasture land on which to establish a women's center. They had begun discussing their need for a place to meet in 1987 in literacy classes organized by local activists. These discussions gradually extended into the wider community. Women marked the beginning of their struggle on International Women's Day, March 8, 1988, when for the first time, they publicly articulated their demand for land for establishing a *Mahila Jagaran Kendra* (Women's Social Action Center). After village officials refused their demands, women organized a more far-reaching campaign not only to establish their center, but also to reclaim other common spaces to which they had gradually been losing access. They also brought women's personal problems into community discourse. As women began taking over community spaces, they confronted opposition from conservative, high caste men.

Women did eventually win control over four *guttas* (0.13 hectares) of community land next to the compound which encloses the village *pañcāyat* office and Śiva temple. They built a two-room brick building and are using it as a center for expanding literacy classes, establishing tree nurseries, and for planning maternal health care, legal aid, and cooperative production programs.

Significantly, the literacy classes and movement for community space included women of various *jāti* (ethnic/caste groups) reflecting the cultural diversity of Gunjanagar village and Chitwan District. The women's campaign included immigrant Parbatiya Hindus (Brahmin, Chetri, Kāmi, Sārki, Damai), Tamangs, Gurungs, Magars and indigenous Tharus. Although "high caste" (*māthilo jāti*) Brahmin-Chetri women often dominated village-wide meetings, Tamang, Magar, Gurung and Tharu women participated in and sometimes led village-wide meetings and have become literacy teachers and outspoken leaders in their respective neighborhoods. So-called "low-caste" (*thallo jāti*) Kāmi, Sārki and Damai women have also participated to varying degrees. Although often divided by economic interests and cultural experiences, women shared, at least temporarily, enough common ground to organize as women around broadly defined gender issues.

This localized women's campaign challenged me to consider the gendered construction of space as a central arena of political contestation. I initially went to Gunjanagar in 1987 not to study gender and space, but to examine how women's experiences of class were mediated by caste and ethnic constructions of gender. The emergence of the women's campaign to claim space, uniting women across class, ethnic and caste boundaries, gave historical prominence to the spatialization of gender relations. I was forced to ask: why in 1988 did women find enough common ground to organize collectively? And why did they organize around the issue of claiming space?

The case study I present here is based on twelve months of field research in Gunjanagar and included active participation in women's literacy classes, meetings and rallies. My relations with both women and men in Gunjanagar were mediated primarily by my social location as a *buhari* (daughter-in-law) in a local, Brahmin family. Most significantly, by marrying into an extended family which had long been active in social and political work, I became enmeshed in local processes of conflict and change. My own relatives became important actors in initiating women's literacy classes and building a women's movement.[1] I helped my niece, mother-in-law, husband, and brother-in-law begin literacy classes for women.[2] My own "illiteracy" in local,

social relations, organizational networks, and the subtleties of language limited the role I could play in early work. Women requested (more often demanded) that I play a greater role when they began organizing a movement. Literacy classes created an umbrella under which women could express themselves and make social critiques. This process evolved into intense political debates about women's control over common spaces in Gunjanagar.

Rethinking Space and Gender

In order to understand both space and gender, I have had to overcome my own tendencies to privilege class and time. Analyses of power have primarily been concerned with the revolutionary necessities of time and history and have largely ignored dimensions of space (Soja 1989). As Foucault points out,

> Space was treated as the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile. Time, on the contrary was richness, fecundity, life, dialectic...A whole history remains to be written of spaces - which would at the same time be the history of powers - from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of habitat (1972: 70).

A critical history also remains to be written of gender. As a derivative of class in Marxist analysis, gender is treated as undialectical, "dead," in contrast to class which is the rich, dialectical, revolutionary engine of history. Hartmann describes attempts to wed active notions of class with passive notions of gender as an "unhappy marriage."

> The 'marriage' of Marxism and feminism has been like the marriage of husband and wife depicted in English common law: Marxism and feminism are one, and that one is Marxism...Either we need a healthier marriage or we need a divorce (Hartmann 1981: 2).

Notions of space, particularly the universal dichotomy between domestic and public (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974), have been used to explain differentials in women's power and independence in Nepal. Most studies of women in Nepal presuppose a universal separation of domestic (inside) and public (outside) spheres and measure women's status as the degree to which women participate in public spheres of politics, culture and the market economy (e.g., Acharya and Bennett 1981). Despite fundamental inequalities in access to material resources, women who participate in the greatest number of "outside" activities and have the most "autonomy" are deemed to have the highest "status." Because such studies presume that higher "status" results from women's access to public, "outside" activities (e.g., earning income outside the home), they shed little light on the complex dynamics of male outmigration, divisions of labor, and differential access to sources of social power.

The analytical separation of spheres conflates historical and cultural constructs, such as oppositions between inside/outside, domestic/public, private/political, male/female into a universal theory of gender inequality and is inadequate for capturing the complex dimensions of women's lives.[3] As I will briefly illustrate, the collapsing of such categories certainly obscures more than it reveals about gender, space and power in Nepal.[4]

First, in contrast to liberal democracies, where the separation of "public" and "private" has been an important ideological theme, the power and authority of the Nepalese state, a Hindu theocracy, historically rested on its extension into and regulation of "private" life. For example, the first national legal code (*Muluki Ain*), completed under Jang Bahadur Rana in 1854, represented an attempt to unify the geographically and culturally diverse communities of Nepal into a single, rigid, caste hierarchy. More than one third of this code (66 chapters, or nearly 250 pages of a total 690) dealt in exhausting and intimate detail with inter- and intra-caste sexual relations (Höfer 1979:42). "The scrupulous accuracy of the legislator confirms the importance these relations have for the maintenance of the hierarchy (Höfer 1979:69)." The centrality of gender and sexuality in the construction of state power in Nepal deserves greater attention. While such issues are not my primary concern here, I highlight them in order to illustrate how an analytical paradigm which presumes a separation between public and private spheres cannot possibly reveal the historical dimensions of gender relations in Nepalese state formation.

Second, by separating public and private spheres and conflating them with dichotomies between political/ personal or formal/informal politics, analyses can never reveal the complexity of either women's or men's political practices even in contemporary Nepal. Studies of women's status in Nepal conclude that although women may exercise some "informal" power and make substantial contributions to an inside sphere of domestic economy, decision-making and rituals, they are relatively unaware of "outside," political spaces and activities (Acharya and Bennett 1981). Such spaces are by analytical definition the domain of men. When the political is associated with the public and outside, women are by definition excluded. Similarly, the inside sphere of domesticity becomes by definition the domain of women and thus devoid of politics.

For example, in their aggregate analysis of eight ethnographies of women's status in Nepal, Acharya and Bennett conclude that women do not participate to any significant extent in formal politics (1981: 193). For each case study, researchers attempted to measure political participation and awareness by questioning women about the names of local administrative divisions (wards and *pañcāyats*), local administrative officials (e.g., *pradhān pañca*), and their attendance at *pañcāyat* meetings (Acharya and Bennett 1981: 193). The majority of women in all the case studies revealed little knowledge or interest in *pañcāyat* divisions, officials or meetings. While questioning women about such issues might have revealed the inability of the *Pañcāyat* System (1961-1990) to integrate women, it provides a poor measure of women's and men's political practices under a widely contested political regime. For instance, women's extensive participation in the pro-democracy movement in early 1990 and recent publications of political literature suggest that the political silences which social researchers have often interpreted as apathy or lack of awareness must be reexamined.[5] After all, how does one measure political awareness in a country where all political opposition was banned from 1961 until 1990; where many women and men considered the formal, political system at best inefficient, and at worst corrupt and illegitimate? The official banning of political opposition in Nepal never silenced oppositional political expression, except in ethnographic representations; it gave voice to alternative forms of resistance and subversion. The fact that surveys show few women participating in official, village councils does not necessarily reflect ignorance of public, political issues or a reluctance to engage in political acts. At the very least, it may reflect an astute lack of interest in ineffective, village councils, or an unwillingness to acknowledge administrators, controlled by an increasingly centralized regime. Lack of participation in "formal" politics does not necessarily constitute ignorance or passivity. In some instances, non-participation may be an active, political decision not to cooperate with formal structures. Clearly, a public/private dichotomy cannot reveal the subversive potentials of silence, non-participation, or non-cooperation.

Therefore, rather than resurrecting the static dichotomy between domestic and public space which has informed most studies of women in Nepal, I distinguish between privatized and common spaces and examine the gendered power relations which construct them and cut across them. This distinction actually shifts attention to women and their relations to "public" spaces, thus disrupting the notion that women are primarily fixed in "domestic" spaces. By focusing on the multiple spatial dimensions of gender relations, I can begin plotting the history of both gender and space.

Common Spaces in Chitwan District

Gunjanagar is a "village"[6] of approximately 9,000 people in Chitwan District in the inner Tarai. Over the last forty years Chitwan specifically, and the Tarai more generally, have been at the center of broad social and spatial transformations in Nepal (Goldstein et al 1983, Ojha 1983, Shrestha 1990). During the colonial period in India, parts of the Tarai such as Chitwan, along the Indian border remained heavily forested to form a strategic barrier against invasion. After the Shah monarchy regained power from the Rana regime in 1951, they contracted with international aid agencies to open up Tarai areas for extensive settlement and agricultural development. The Rapti Valley of Chitwan became an early experimental ground for Nepal's development in the 1950s. The monarchy with the help of the United States Agency for International Development (then, United Overseas Mission) and the World Health Organization implemented an integrated plan, including deforestation, malaria eradication, road-construction and planned resettlement. The plan also provided extension services and agricultural credit to encourage immigrants from the hills to claim land and settle in Chitwan. Since then the valley's subtropical forests of (*Shorea robusta*) and its indigenous inhabitants, the

Tharus, have been largely displaced by irrigated, crop lands and thousands of new immigrants from the hills. With numerous roads, schools, health posts, agricultural banks, markets, transport systems and agricultural research institutions, Chitwan is viewed throughout Nepal as a region of opportunity and development. Migrants still flock to Chitwan in the hopes of claiming land or finding employment.

Common spaces have become a primary site of political contestation in Tarai regions, such as Chitwan. Geographer Nanda Shrestha (1990) has argued in his analysis of landless encroachment on common lands in the Tarai, that because land resources have become such a scarce commodity; common lands, still relatively abundant in the Tarai, have become increasingly politicized.

> The main reason why common lands have become such a political football is precisely because they are common resources, not private properties. As such, every citizen has the right to claim them although they are under state control. Consequently, they are readily subject to manipulation by both the ruling class and different segments of the populations. Since most common lands are available in the Tarai, the region has served as a stage where this political drama is being played out (Shrestha 1990: 152).

My own research supports Shrestha's general argument. In Gunjanagar many of the major political conflicts and collective efforts over the past 30 years have centered on the communal pasture land (*gauchar*). When Gunjanagar was first established in the late 1950s, government officials and the first settlers had agreed to reserve a *gauchar* for common use. The *gauchar* provided a crucial resource for agricultural production. Each village *pañcāyat* in Chitwan District originally had such land set aside as pasture, not intended for private ownership or cultivation. In 1988, Gunjanagar residents still referred to the strip of land running perpendicular from the main road up to a secondary school as their common *gauchar*. However, all that actually remained of the original pasture for the 9,000 people in the village was a field next to the school used both for soccer matches and grazing. Some villagers continued to gather there regularly to graze their livestock on scattered patches of grass persisting in the dust and mud. Most sought scarce fodder for their animals along the pathways and irrigation canals or paid a fee to cut grass in forest reserves. The Gunjanagar *gauchar* has been claimed by cultivated fields, a *sukumbāsi* (landless) settlement, an enclosed compound for the Śiva temple and *pañcāyat* office and youth meeting center, and most recently by *Mahila Jagaran Kendra*. Each of these sites on the commons embodies a complex history of struggles between social classes, genders, political parties, religious forces and the state.

Shrestha (1990) emphasizes three actors - the state, rich and middle peasants, and the landless - and examines conflicts among them based on their relative access to land as a source of material production. Without dismissing Shrestha's important analysis of class conflicts in Chitwan, I add another set of actors, women, and another dimension of social relations, gender, to the analysis of conflicts over common lands. In order to understand women's relations to common space, we must view space as more than a material resource and view it as a multidimensional source of social power. Following this line of thinking, I develop a dialectical and multidimensional approach to analyzing spatial practices, which can highlight gendered conflicts and also link material experiences with cultural contestation and cultural production.

Theorizing Gender, Space and Power

To make sense of the women's movement to reclaim and produce common spaces, I draw on the work of Marxist geographer, David Harvey (1989). Inspired by Henri Lefebvre's analysis of the spatial dynamics of capitalism (1974), Harvey outlines useful ways for conceptualizing the multiple dimensions of spatial practices and their interrelations.

Harvey shows how changes in social relations in different periods of Euro-American history have entailed concomitant shifts in spatial uses and conceptions because "any struggle to reconstitute power relations is a struggle to reorganize their spatial bases" (Harvey 1989: 238). His analysis offers provocative ideas for research into colonial and post-colonial power relations in South Asia. For example, his insights into how the

homogenization of space for liberal democratic ends challenges monarchical power embedded in place suggest a starting point for analyzing contemporary politics in Nepal.

In what follows I draw loosely on Harvey's attempt to capture the complexity of spatial practices in a multidimensional "grid" (1989: 218-222). He outlines how conventional geographical categories—the *use*, *control* and *production* of space—crosscut material practices (*experience*), representations of space (*perception*), and spaces of representation (*imagination*).[7] This multidimensional approach enables spatial analysis to account not only for material practices but also for cultural representations of space. Thus, for example, the uses and appropriations of space are not only physical experiences; they are also perceived and imagined through human practice. The poetics of space are dialectically related to the spatialization of economic production and reproduction. As I will show, a focus on the dialectical relations between experience and imagination is particularly important for understanding women's spatial practices.

These dimensions and their dialectical relations will become clearer through specific examples. A brief description of the dynamics of space in women's literacy classes will highlight the importance of various dimensions. I can then turn to a more focused discussion of women's spatial practices with reference to Harvey's framework.

The difficulty of finding a safe space in which literacy classes could meet in 1987 made clear the importance of the commons to women in Gunjanagar.[8] Men's harassment of women in these classes legitimized women's recovery of common space. In the first literacy class established in 1987, women purposedly chose not to meet in the local school or *pañcāyat* buildings for several reasons. They said that bad men (*narāmro māncheharu*) would make trouble (*hallā*). They recalled incidents of sexual harassment in a government-sponsored, adult education program in 1986. *Sukumbāsi* (landless) women also said they had often been discouraged from entering official, common spaces, such as the *pañcāyat* compound and school buildings. These various fears led women to hold literacy classes in the private sheds of sympathetic families.

During the first few months of literacy classes, the basis for women's fears became clear. Both drunken and sober men harassed women along the pathways at night as they walked to their classes. Some men also disturbed the classes. The first class for *sukumbāsi* women met in a shed in a private home near the *sukumbāsi* settlement. Unfortunately this shed happened to be directly across from the tea shop in the settlement, where men drank liquor and played cards late into the night. Many men began hanging around outside the shed, talking loudly and sometimes disrupting the classes. Some were curious about the classes or concerned for the safety of their friends or wives. Some did not intend any harm; they told jokes to make women laugh. Others purposely teased women or attempted to direct the lessons when they did not approve of women's discussions.

Women and male supporters attempted to control the disruptions but without success. After about a month, women agreed to move the classes to a house, several minutes walk away from the original site. Men did not bother to disturb the classes after that. New classes that opened up rallied tremendous support in their neighborhoods. Most took place in public buildings, such as schools. Men and women supporters protected the classes from intruders and troublemakers each night. However, women still endured verbal harassment from men as they walked to their classes in the dark. Such incidents came to symbolize women's diminishing control over common spaces and natural resources.

Within the classes themselves, women had intensive discussions about the importance of space. To teach reading and writing, facilitators used key words, problematizing aspects of social life. Discussions in each class began as women commented on drawings, which illustrated the key words. The words which sparked the most lively discussions were *daurā* (firewood) and *tās* (playing cards). These words symbolized the multiple dilemmas of diminishing common spaces and women's increasing exclusion from existing common spaces. While learning to spell *daurā*, women discussed how deforestation and the privatization of lands had made their work of collecting fodder and firewood increasingly difficult. For *tās* women discussed men's gambling, drinking and harassment of women in common spaces.

These are some of the incidents which have compelled me to theorize space. Now I can lay out in more detail the dimensions of women's spatial practices, perceptions and imaginings. Using Harvey's framework, I link the dynamics of appropriation, domination and production of common spaces in material practices

(experience), representations of space (perceptions) and spaces of representation (imagination). In these three dimensions, I ask: 1) How is space used and appropriated by women? 2) In what ways do women dominate or control the uses of space, or conversely how are they excluded through male domination of space? 3) To what extent do women produce new spaces and/or new ways of representing or imagining them?

Material Spatial Practices

Material spatial practices are in the realm of experience. They involve the physical flows, transfers and movements that occur in space to insure social production and reproduction (Harvey 1990:218). In Gunjanagar, while women can make few direct claims over private lands, they have access to, dominate and even produce certain common spaces, both physical and ritual. It is access to these common spaces which enables women to negotiate power in various arenas, including their households.

Women's access to common lands supports production and reproduction in the agrarian economy. For example, women collect fodder and firewood for their families and do so in ways that ensure the protection of those resources for the future (Bajracharya et al 1990). However, they experience increasing difficulties in appropriating these common resources for domestic production and reproduction.

While women carry primary responsibility for managing domestic economies, they have experienced decreasing control over both private and common resources. Women do not control the privatization of land and space. Land is a central means of production in Nepal, and one which women have had, at least in the history of modern Nepal, little secure claim to. While men have had varying degrees of security in land tenure depending on their *jāti* and family fortune; women have had few legal rights in ancestral properties in various versions of the national legal code (*Muluki Ain*). Women gain access to land through their relations with men - fathers, brothers, husbands and sons. While progressive legislation since 1951 has expanded the conditions under which women can inherit ancestral property, it does not give women unconditional rights to inherit either a father's or a husband's property (Bennett 1979). Women inherit ancestral property only in exceptional circumstances. For example, if a woman remains unmarried until age 35, she can claim a full share in her father's property. If a marriage fails after the husband has separated from his brothers, then a woman can claim a share of land equal to that of her husband and any co-wives provided that she has been married for fifteen years and is at least 35 years old. In a study of the legal system of Nepal, the research organization, New Era concludes that "these exceptions to the rule point out that women's family property rights usually depend on the social fact of marriage, whereas men's property rights spring from the biological fact of their existence" (New Era 1988: 40).

Women have also experienced decreasing control over common lands and their resources. This process has been documented throughout South Asia (Agarwal 1991, Bajracharya, et al 1990, Shiva 1988) The nationalization of forest lands, and the competitive privatization of other lands, has reduced women's ability to control the ways in which common resources are used and maintained.

Women have experienced the production of new spaces in Chitwan through deforestation, road-building, the emergence of bazaars, and the establishment of public institutions such as schools, government offices, agricultural banks, etc. However, these new spaces have primarily been produced and dominated by men. While some women have benefited indirectly from men's claims on private and common lands, they have not directly controlled the production of either private or common spaces.

Women do produce some common spaces. For generations, Hindu women have been planting sacred species of trees (*swammi, bir, pipal*) along pathways and in village commons to create *chautara*: resting places for travelers and meeting places for local women and men.

Representations of Space

Representations of space are perceptions, understandings, and knowledge that make sense out of material spatial practices (Harvey 1989: 218). Women perceive their difficulties in managing domestic economies, especially collection of fodder and firewood as resulting from deforestation and encroachment on common lands. While women who formerly lived and worked in the hills express relief at having to spend less time traveling to and from agricultural fields, they lament the disappearance of forest and pasture lands in Chitwan.

In addition, women use their movement across and within common spaces to seek companionship, solace and aid for domestic conflicts, and to produce creative and political expressions. In literacy classes, while learning to spell the word for firewood (*daurā*), women nostalgically remembered their ventures into forests and pastures in the hills. Despite the hardships of traveling up and down steep hills, women recalled the opportunities such travels gave them for gossip, singing and for escaping the scrutiny of mothers-in-law. They complained that in Chitwan, they could not easily mix the arduous work of collecting fodder for animals with the pleasures of socializing and sharing stories. Women in Gunjanagar would visit one another while cutting grass. They would spend hours socializing with relatives and friends and then collect a basket (*doko*) of fodder on their way back home. However, women could not appropriate such opportunities frequently. A basket of grass collected on the way home from socializing could not satisfy hungry buffaloes and cows. Women productive in feeding livestock could spare little time for socializing in Chitwan.

Many women also have more difficulty escaping from domestic surveillance and seeking solace with companions when they work on the commons. In Chitwan, women in landed families usually work in fields directly adjacent to their homes and are rarely out of earshot or the eyesight of their in-laws. When they go to cut grass, they must usually go alone since there is not enough fodder in any one place to enable a group of women to concentrate heir work spatially. Women also perceive and fear increasing male harassment when they move within and through common areas, such as pathways, temples, bazaars, and *chautara*. Actual or imagined assaults on women in public areas have historically legitimized the control of female mobility throughout South Asia. Women's current fears in Gunjanagar are justified by reports of rape in bazaar areas and male intrusions into women's rituals.

If space is a source of social power for women, then women must necessarily gain control over strategic spaces and/or produce new spaces in order to build their power. In Gunjanagar, women produced the space of the literacy classes and eventually the women's movement in order to analyze their situation. This enabled them to produce new material bases of social power. Their demand for a place to meet is rooted in their understanding of diminishing access to and control over common spaces. For example, women in literacy classes recognized a decline in their production of the common spaces of *chautara*. My mother-in-law said that while her mother had planted more than twenty such trees in her lifetime, she herself had planted no more than ten. They had produced these resting places partially to gain religious merit. Such trees signaled goodwill and welcome to weary travelers.

In producing new spaces, women built on their traditions of gathering in common spaces during public festivals, such as *Tīj*.[9] *Tīj* is one of the most dramatic examples of women taking control over a common space. Although it is limited to one day out of each year, *Tīj* has become a central forum for women's political and cultural expression.

Spaces of Representation

Spaces of representation involve the realm of imagination. They are the mental inventions, discourses, plans, and symbolic spaces that imagine new meanings or possibilities for spatial practices (Harvey 1989: 218-219). While this might appear to be an esoteric category for women confronted with material crises, I believe that imagination is a crucial dimension of women's practice. It is a cultural space in which women can reminisce about the past and construct visions of the future. In considering their use of space, women discuss their desire for female companionship in work and rituals, personal independence, creative expression and

escape from domestic surveillance. In expressing concerns for moving in public spaces, women share their fears of harassment and physical violence in bazaar areas. Many, especially Parbatiya Hindu women, also recall the pleasures of *Tīj*, of dancing and singing in the company of other women. They express desires for controlling their mobility in space.

The clearest example of a "space of representation" in Nepal is women's poetry. Women of various ethnicities and castes have developed a poetics of space. They express some of their most profound imaginings, desires and fears in poetry and storytelling. Honor Ford-Smith of the Sistren theatre collective in Jamaica captures the importance of "tale-telling" for women who have historically been excluded from dominant forms of political expression.

> The tale-telling tradition contains what is most poetically true about our struggles. The tales are one of the places where the most subversive elements of our history can be safely lodged, for over the years tale-tellers convert fact into images which are funny, vulgar, amazing and magically real. These tales encode what is overtly threatening to the powerful into covert images of resistance so that they can live on in times when overt struggles are impossible or build courage in moments when it is (Sistren 1987: 3).

"Tale-telling" through poetry is an arena in which women in Gunjanagar have been envisioning new ways of organizing social relations and their spatial basis. One example of this is a poem composed by women in the first literacy class in 1987.

> We are sweating a lot.
> It has become so hot.
> Oh sister! Let us all listen.
> We can no longer find fodder and firewood.
> Let us plant trees. Oh sister!
>
> Where there are no trees,
> It is not cool. Oh, sister!
> The water springs cannot emerge.
> Oh sister, we cannot find fodder and firewood.
> Let us plant trees, Oh sister!
>
> There is no forest left in Chitwan anymore.
> We have to go to Palpali hill.
> Oh sister! It is impossible to find fodder and firewood.
> Let us plant trees, Oh sister!
>
> Let us plant trees.
> Let us not suffer for fodder and firewood.
> Listen, sister, all of us are suffering.[10]

Women imagine producing a new landscape, rich with fodder and firewood trees. This imagined landscape bridges the gap between material reality and fantasy. In fact, women composed this poem several months before organizing to claim their meeting place. When they did eventually win control over common spaces, they made planting trees their first priority, as I will show below.

Reclaiming the Temple-*Pañc'yat* Compound

Women's need to recover common spaces became the central focus of discussions in literacy classes, informal meetings and eventually the women's movement. The women of various ethnic groups and castes who attended meetings unanimously agreed on the importance of having a women's center. They also gave priority to recovering new spaces and making existing common spaces, such as pathways, schools, temples, village offices, bazaars and buses safer. However, women often disagreed over the means for claiming land for their center and over what additional common spaces they should reclaim in the process. They also disagreed about what the spaces should be used for once they were reclaimed. These disagreements reflected

class and ethnic tensions. "Low caste," *sukumbāsi* women eagerly attended meetings in *chautara* but expressed anger when Brahmin women planned to hold meetings in the temple-*pañcāyat* compound, from which they had often been excluded. In general, "high-caste" women in landowning families initially favored a legalistic approach and filed petitions through the village *pañcāyat*. Some Sārki, Kāmi, Damai and Tamang women from the *sukumbāsi* settlement favored militant action in claiming a plot of the *gauchar*. Claiming special expertise from their participation in a squatters' movement in 1980, they argued for taking the land by force.[11]

In planning for *Mahila Jagaran Kendra*, all women gave priority to establishing tree nurseries and planting trees on both private and common lands. However, they disagreed about the relative importance of other programs in income-generation, maternal and child health care, and legal aid.

Village *pañcāyat* leaders gave little response to women's demands. Their indifference coupled with growing opposition from conservative Brahmin men eventually motivated women to reconcile some of their differences and to build a more united front. While filing a petition in the village *pañcāyat* requesting land for a women's center, women leaders discovered that officials had been considering allocating a plot of the *gauchar* for a police station. Women and many men who illegally belonged to opposition parties refused to support this plan. After the events of the pro-democracy movement in early 1990, where many women and men died or suffered injuries in police firings, beatings and rapes, peoples' opposition to the local police station appears well-justified. By galvanizing support against the *pañcāyat*'s plan to establish a police station, the women's movement in Gunjanagar may have averted the state-sponsored brutality which neighboring villages suffered during the pro-democracy movement. However, in 1988 women were particularly angry that *pañcāyat* officials could even discuss giving land for a police station and not seriously consider their demands for a women's center.

After almost two months of holding meetings and rallies demanding land with minimal response, women confronted the clearest expression of male opposition. They planned to meet in the compound, which encloses the Śiva temple, the village *pañcāyat* office and a meeting area sheltered by an aluminum roof. Several hundred women from Gunjanagar and neighboring villages began gathering outside the compound on the appointed day. However, they found the gate to the compound padlocked. The Brahmin priest refused to give them the key. As the scorching midday sun forced women to cluster in the scant shade of small trees and bushes on the pathway, women grew angry. Some women recommended smashing the lock with a rock or cutting through the barbed wire fence. After some discussion, however, women decided that rather than displaying violence they should gather in whatever shade they could find and give testimony to the injustice being committed against them. By further dramatizing this event they could also prove their need for a women's center, a place to meet.

Women sat for several hours, shifting positions as the sun's movement cast shade in different places. Some gave speeches emphasizing the injustice of denying entry to the temple and *pañcāyat* compound to members of the Gunjanagar community. Elderly male supporters, who because of their high caste and recognized wisdom could claim religious legitimacy, argued that the action was a fundamental violation of Hinduism. They said a public temple and community meeting area should be open to the public. Like the *chautara* built by women along public pathways and in the centers of villages, the compound represented a common place. It should be a place for all to use and enjoy, not a place of exclusion.

The next day women and men who had been angered by the exclusion from the compound gathered to regain control over the temple-*pañcāyat* compound. About seventy-five women and men proceeded through the village on the way to the *pañcāyat*. More women and a few men came out of their houses and joined along the way.

The gate had been left unlocked, so demonstrators streamed into the temple compound and gathered under the aluminum roof of the meeting area. More supporters who had just heard about the spontaneous event arrived, swelling the crowd to over a hundred and fifty. Two elderly Brahmin women gave speeches about the need for women not only to continue demanding land for *Mahila Jagaran Kendra*, but also to regain control over the Śiva temple and community meeting place to which they had contributed funds. They encouraged

women to make new interpretations of religious texts and demanded a new temple committee that would be more representative of women and "low caste" community members. After many more speeches recalling the injustices of the day before, women ended their meeting triumphantly.

Finally, they gathered at one edge of the compound and symbolically claimed their control over the center of politics and culture in the village. With hoes brought by some of the *sukumbāsi* women, they prepared the ground for planting trees just before the monsoon rains. Each woman took a turn digging the holes, symbolically claiming their participation in recovering their common, community space.

Conclusion

Harvey states that "under processes of capitalist development, there is a tension between the free appropriation of space for individual and communal purposes, and the domination of space through private property, the state, and other forms of class and social power" (1989: 254). This tension appears not only in material spatial practices but also in perceptions and imaginings of space. In literacy classes, women feared intrusions into their space and had to make elaborate plans about where to meet and how to maintain control over their meeting places. Out of the literacy classes grew a movement to recover various common spaces and to establish a women's center.

Women's re-appropriation of the temple-*pañcāyat* compound —a central political and religious space— represented a climax and a small, but important triumph in women's campaign for a meeting place. The event symbolized women's need for more control over ritual and political common spaces, especially their need to establish their own meeting place. Women in Gunjanagar had never before been so blatantly excluded from a community center. However, in deciding to meet at the temple-*pañcāyat* compound rather than in the less contested *chautara*, which they had produced, they asserted their right to common space. Their ultimate lack of control over what they had always considered to be common, community space underscored for them their need to produce their own meeting place.

Women not only reclaimed the temple-*pañcāyat* compound, they also reshaped it based on their perceptions and imaginings of spatial practices. They laid the foundation for their tree-planting campaign by digging holes along the edge of the compound. The trees they planted there in 1988 are growing to create a new kind of *chautara* around the concrete buildings of the temple and *pañcāyat* office. Women have also established tree-nurseries in various parts of the village and plan to distribute trees for planting on both private and common lands.

Women also successfully dissolved the former temple committee and reconstituted it with a majority of women, progressive men and low-caste Hindus. They eventually won the right to establish their center on a small plot of land next to the *pañcāyat*-temple compound.

In taking over the temple women challenged the spatial basis of men's control over religious interpretation. They called for more progressive interpretations of Hindu texts in the Śiva temple. They demanded a temple and a priest who could include and empower them, rather than exclude and demean them. Women gained increasing collective power by gaining control over various spaces. By recovering the common spaces, such as the temple-*pañcāyat* compound and investing them with new practices and meanings, women may pave the way for disrupting the spatial basis of other sorts of power.

As suggested earlier the links between imagined spaces and their material basis become particularly clear in women's poetry, especially *Tīj* poetry. In *Tīj* women use common spaces to forge new meanings and relationships. Women celebrate *Tīj* in the common spaces of temples, rivers, bazaars, and schools. They dominate these spaces for one day out of every year and fill them with their dancing and singing. *Tīj* poetry published by women's groups suggests that, at least in some locations, *Tīj* is becoming increasingly politicized.[12]

The following poem composed by a middle-aged Brahmin woman, Sanumaya, who was a student in the first women's literacy class and an active participant in the women's campaign for community space, brings

us full circle, from imagination to material reality; from the recovery of common spaces to fantasies of appropriating private lands. This circle testifies to the importance of space, as a multidimensional and dialectical source of power.

> Why daughters don't study, I now understand.
> Every father's work must be done.
> A son can go to school in the morning
> While a daughter goes to the fields.
> A son goes to college for a B.A. pass.
> Of the same womb, a daughter collects wood and grass.
>
> By fate's play I'm tied in chains.
> Let the Gandaki flood and take me away.
> I wish a wild tiger had eaten me
> But death never comes so easily.
>
> Oh father! Brothers drift away...
> Like white tufts of cotton on the river bank.
> They enjoy going on many cars and trains
> While the benefits of a daughter you gain.
>
> Working for you, no time to comb my hair
> I won't leave without half the estate.
> If not half, then at least give me some land.
> Who else will give me my birthright?
>
> Father says, "I can't afford to give you good land.
> Daughter, I'll give you dry land"
>
> Brother says, "Giving her dry land will also bring trouble.
> Why give land to a worthless daughter?"[13]

This poem encapsulates the complex dialectics of gender, space and power. Composing the poem while actively working with other women to reclaim common spaces, Sanumaya also challenges women's lack of control over the contemporary basis of agricultural production — private property. Sanumaya composed this poem for the *Tīj* festival in 1988 after women had won several victories in their campaign for a meeting place. During the celebrations of 1988, *Tīj* poems of women like Sanumaya who participated in the movement reflected the achievements and visions of the ongoing movement.

Sanumaya's poem challenges women to at least imagine what they have little hope of achieving in the near future. She suggests an arena of struggle for the future by challenging exclusive male birth rights in ancestral property. Experiences and perceptions of social relations and their material basis discourage women from organizing collectively to claim rights to landed property. However, their historical access to and control over various common spaces allow them to constitute new sources of social power. Poetry is a creative space in which women can conceptualize daring ideas and radical changes. The political context of Sanumaya's poem suggests that the gap between imagined space and spatial practices might be narrowed as women constitute their collective power by recovering common spaces. The development of women's collective power in the new common space of the women's center may at some future point in time enable women to challenge more directly the material basis of their subordination.

Acknowledgments

Notes

[1]   Pramod Parajuli, a popular educator from Gunjanagar, established the literacy classes not only to teach reading and writing skills but also to enable participants to discuss their social reality and develop confidence in their abilities to know and change the world. Inspired by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), Pramod has been developing literacy programs for women and men in Nepal over the last 15 years. For more detailed discussions of women's literacy classes in Gunjanagar, see Pramod Parajuli and Elizabeth Enslin (1990). For critical discussions of popular education, literacy and the relevance of Freire's work for grassroots movements in South Asia, see Parajuli (1990, 1986, 1982).

[2]   My mother-in-law along with other women activists had been encouraging her son to begin adult education programs for women in Gunjanagar for many years. She was a student in the first literacy class and has been an active participant since 1987. My brother-in-law, a local activist and secondary school teacher, has been advisor to the literacy classes since 1987. My (then) 16-year-old niece became one of the first literacy teachers and is currently secretary of *Mahila Jagaran Kendra*.

[3]   For critiques of universal explanations of gender inequality, especially the public/private dichotomy, in feminist anthropology, see Rosaldo (1980), Collier and Yanagisako (1987). For a similar critiques in other disciplines, see Fraser (1990) and Scott (1988).

[4]   For critical discussions of how a public/private dichotomy obscures the political experiences and struggles of third world women, see Hurtado (1989) and Amadiume (1987).

[5]   For written and visual documentation of the Movement for the Restoration of Democracy, which led to the dissolution of the Pa c yat System and the establishment of a multiparty, democratic system in 1990, see *Forum for Protection of Human Rights* (1990). The restoration of "free" speech in April 1990 made way for publications of political literature. See for example, Mahila Prerana Parivar (1990).

[6]   I use the term "village" to refer to the village *pañcāyat* (gaun pa c yat), an administrative division which serves little social or cultural purpose, but has been important for the sake of local elections, the distribution of development funds, and the use and control of common spaces, such as irrigation canals, pathways, bridges and pasture lands. See Pigg (1992) for a discussion of the problems of defining "village" in Nepal.

[7]   Paraphrasing Harvey, I define use, control and production of space as follows. The use of space refers to the ways in which space is occupied by objects, activities, individuals, and various social groupings. Domination and control of space refers to the ways in which individuals or groups dominate the organization and production of space in order to exercise greater control over the ways in which space is appropriated by themselves or others. Production of space refers to how new systems of land use, transport, communication and territorial organization are produced and new ways of representing them arise (Harvey 1989: 222).

[8]   See Parajuli and Enslin (1990) for further discussion of women's literacy classes in Gunjanagar Men's harassment of women in these classes legitimized women's recovery of common space.

⁹ *Tīj* is an annual festival exclusively for women. As shown by Bennett (1983), the rituals are imbued with gender symbolism. Women bathe communally in sacred rivers, such as the Narayani (Sapta Gandaki) in Chitwan, fast, sing and dance in order to purify themselves and receive powers of personality and fertility from Śiva. *Tīj* is a Hindu festival and thus practiced primarily (although not exclusively) by Parbatiya Hindus -Brahmins, Chetris, Kāmis, Sārkis, Damais. I focus on it here only as one example of women's use of ritual space. Women in other *jāti* participate in and give meaning to other ritual events and spaces.

¹⁰ Poem by Pramila Parajuli, Radhika Pariyar, Sanumaya Ghimire, Nirmaya Thapa and other members of 1987-88 literacy class. Translated by Pramod Parajuli.

¹¹ *Sukumbāsi* women and men had clashed several times with local landowners and police during 1980 while attempting to claim living spaces on the *gauchar*. The village *pañcāyat* eventually awarded squatters permanent rights to the lands they had claimed. This movement of 300 *sukumbāsi* in Gunjanagar was part of a much larger squatters' movement that took place throughout Chitwan District during the same time (Kaplan and Shrestha 1982, Shrestha 1990).

¹² For example, *Tīj* poems published by Mahila Prerana Parivar (1990) celebrated multiparty democracy, denounced police brutality during the movement, and criticized various tendencies within the interim, coalition government.

¹³ Poem by Sanumaya Ghimire. Translated by Elizabeth Enslin, Shashi Nembang, and Pramod Parajuli.

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