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Mobility and Nostalgia in Contemporary Kathmandu

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Introduction | Mobility and Nostalgia in Contemporary Kathmandu

Mark Liechty

That Nepalis today experience their own time as one of unusual sociocultural flux probably goes without saying. What Heather Hindman (cited in Nelson, this issue) has noted as a deep sense of “provisionality”—of life as conditional, make-shift, and unpredictable—surely does capture some essential feature of Nepal’s current national ethos. But even if we acknowledge that perhaps every generation experiences their time as one of unsettling change, crisis, or even catastrophe, then the articles in this special issue of *HIMALAYA* document many of the specific forms in which this dis-ease is manifest in early 21st century Kathmandu.

In a (sometimes literally) twisting landscape, people long for stability and predictability. They long for an idealized past, with nostalgia serving as a potent vehicle for politically-motivated re-visioning of Nepali history. Like all national histories, Nepal’s is punctuated by dates (1846, 1934, and 1951 to list a few) that people experience as abrupt turning points, historical moments that mark bewildering beginnings. Notably in these articles people repeatedly invoke certain dates as before-and-after pivots: the 1990 *Janandolan I*; the 1996 beginning and 2006 end of the People’s War; the 2008 dissolution of the monarchy; the almost decade-long constitutional stalemate; the 2015 earthquakes. With so many social disruptions following one upon the other it’s not surprising that people long for an “authentic” past of imagined permanence. But these articles remind us that the past is always a battleground onto which different interests fight to project specific ideal presents, or to establish specific ideological narratives linking past to present. What perhaps sets these nostalgic

longings apart from earlier experiences is the degree to which Nepalis are themselves mobile (nationally and internationally) and how these mobilities shape the current politics of authenticity.

The articles by Khanal, Gurung, and Chand, and by Dennis form a complementary pair by first documenting Kathmandu’s urban transportation woes and then examining the situation ethnographically from the perspective of urban middle-class consumers. Khanal et al. provide a detailed account of how Kathmandu’s out-of-control urban development has privileged mainly private motor vehicles at the expense of other more sustainable mobilities: public transit, cyclists, pedestrians. They argue that the government’s response to traffic congestion (building and expanding roads) only encourages more middle-class “motorization” while diminishing the possibilities for an equitable solution to Kathmandu’s problems, one that would emphasize green space and non-polluting transit options.

In her article on the sorry state of Kathmandu’s urban infrastructure, Dannah Dennis notes how the suburban middle class uses the city’s perpetually torn-up roads as a metaphor not only for a feeling of constant flux, but also for the endlessly dissolving illusion of progress and the Nepali state’s inability to deliver tangible improvements in quality of life—not to mention a constitution. Yet the miserable muddy/dusty roads that people experience as “inertia”—evidence of the state’s endless failures—are the products of change: huge population increases, new water mains, and post-war Maoist road-widening schemes.

Dennis also notes how middle-class urbanites conflate freedom with freedom-of-movement to such an extent that they sought to claim good roads as a constitutional right. Others went so far as to point to the city's repeatedly torn-up roads as evidence of corrupt collusion between politicians and construction businesses. Overall, Dennis's account of how middle class urbanites experience the post-1990 era as an unnerving period of change, inaction, and exhaustion illustrates how people use their own class interests as a lens through which to view past and present.

If Dennis's article suggests a whiff of nostalgia for the pre-1990 Panchayat past (when things at least got done...), that revisionist sensibility comes through loud and clear in Bryony Whitmarsh's article on the formation and management of the Narayanhiti Palace Museum following the 2008 dissolution of the monarchy. Whitmarsh shows how former palace officials and workers, now reassigned as museum employees, actively work to counter the monarchy's ill-repute (that led to its overwhelming popular rejection) with a thoroughly white-washed version of Nepal's royal past—and past royals. Established in 2009 by Maoist PM Pushpa Kamal Dahal (a.k.a. Prachanda) as a monument to the evils of feudalism, employees quickly set about re-visioning the museum and the past it represented, playing on public sympathy for the “good” King Birendra and his tragic murder in 2001. Now a symbol of the nation (rather than just of the monarchy), the palace became ground-zero for contests over what role the Shah kings would play in Nepal's national memory. In the face of post-1990 political instability and division, royalists sought to make the monarchy a nostalgic symbol of legitimate political power and a once-unified past. As such, the palace becomes a site for struggle over historical meaning and a monument to the politics of remembering and forgetting.

This issue's articles by Ninglekhu, Nelson, and Linder continue many of these themes of nostalgia and longing, but with a more overt spatial dynamic. In his article on communities of landless urban poor in Kathmandu, Sabin Ninglekhu explores the cultural politics of “authentic” *sukumbasi* (squatter/settlers on public lands) as long-term settlers seek to follow legal avenues to permanent ownership at the expense of more recent arrivals. But even while these landless working poor argue over legitimacy and who among them is to blame for overcrowding and degradation, Kathmandu's middle class and elite “bourgeois environmentalists” imagine a timeless “civilization” in which the urban poor did not encroach on riparian landscapes. Environmentalists work to reclaim not just the river and its banks but an imagined “religious and cultural heritage” in which the urban poor don't exist and can, therefore, be expunged.

Andrew Nelson continues this consideration of Kathmandu's out-of-control population growth, its impact on the (sub)urban landscape, and the affective fallout of residential mobility. A combination of displacements due to the People's War and a surge in international labor migration and remittances (also due, in part, to the People's War) turned the Kathmandu Valley into a land of opportunity and a magnet for mobile populations and capital. But along with mobility comes a sense of emotional displacement, social stress, and moral uncertainty that Nelson neatly encapsulates in the affective distinction between home and house, or between one's nurturing ancestral village *ghar* home and the anxiety-inducing, money-eating, prestige-generating *pakki* houses of suburban Kathmandu. Nelson captures the tension between a longing to participate in Kathmandu's class-based consumerist prestige economy, and an equally powerful nostalgia for the village home that is imagined as not only rustic and simple but which naturally preserves caste hierarchies. Kathmandu's mixed-caste suburbs are a distinct threat to the social privilege that Bahun and Chettri migrants experience in their village *ghars*. Once derided as the antithesis of *bikas* or development, now the *gaon ghar* (village home) is nostalgically re-imagined as a haven free from predatory market forces and their immoral consequences.

Ben Linder also engages the discourse of authenticity to ask just what kind of Nepali place Kathmandu's Thamel district really is. Long derided as “inauthentic” by academics, travel writers, and even most Nepalis, Thamel is easy to write off as a tourist space, a kind of foreign excrescence on the face of Kathmandu. But what happens when we reconsider Thamel as any number of Nepali places—through which tourists also move? A Nepali consumer place, a Nepali business place, a Nepali youth culture place, a Nepali criminal place: Thamel is, as Linder describes, “authentically” all of these and more. Dismissing Thamel as “foreign” obscures the Nepali agency that created, maintains, and increasingly consumes Thamel's glitzy delights. Linder's work points to ways in which the politics of nostalgia colors landscapes and mistakes dynamic new forms of Nepali life for in-authentic foreignness. An authentically Nepali Thamel threatens nostalgic, imagined Nepaliness.

One vignette from Linder's article seems to encapsulate the dynamics of change and nostalgia at work in Kathmandu today. Linder describes observing a Western tourist in Thamel, dressed as a Hindu *sadhu*, who knowingly asks a Nepali falafel vendor, “Where can I find real yak cheese? Like, *real* yak cheese?” As Linder suggests, in this encounter the layers of nostalgia, the cultural dislocations brought about by mobile populations and cultural forms,

and the longing for the real and authentic born of transnational displacement, are almost mind-boggling. You have the foreign native (the European *sadhu*) buying Middle Eastern food from a Nepali, and in search of an “authentic” local product that was, in fact, introduced into Nepal by the Swiss in the 1960s. The foreigner longs for the “real” non-tourist version of a product that was introduced by foreigners mainly for tourist consumption.

In an era of perhaps unprecedented displacement—of mobile people, goods, and ideas—Nepali spaces become bewilderingly overlain with competing narratives and meanings. In these settings, people long for fixity or truth but they do so in a hall of mobile mirrors where it becomes impossible to elevate one claim of authenticity above any of its distorted reflections. In these articles, we find Nepalis grappling with their worlds of mobility through projects that seek to freeze change into nostalgic renderings of permanence ranging from a de-politicized royal past, to idealized rural life, to “authentic” Kathmandu, to bourgeois “urban civilization,” to “good” governance. These articles also remind us that whenever authenticity is invoked, political agendas are lurking around the corner.

Mark Liechty is a professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago with a joint appointment in the departments of Anthropology and History. His first three books deal with aspects of the emergence of a middle-class consumer culture in Kathmandu. He recently published a book on the history of tourism in Nepal and is now writing on the history of hydropower development in Nepal.