



# **TRANSFIGURATION OF THE POLITICAL: NEPALI STUDENT ACTIVISM AND THE POLITICS OF ACCULTURATION**

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TRANSFIGURATION OF THE POLITICAL:  
NEPALI STUDENT ACTIVISM AND THE POLITICS OF ACCULTURATION

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TRANSFIGURATION OF THE POLITICAL:  
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Cornell University, 2010

This dissertation is an ethnographic investigation into the process of political socialization as a means to understand Nepali political culture. It focuses on the activities of Nepali student organizations as sister organizations to the Nepali political parties. It is within the student organizations that individuals receive both their social training and ideological indoctrination into Nepali party politics. Moreover, student activism in Nepal has played a central role in how national politics unfolds. Politics at the university level has had a powerful impact on statewide politics and social change through the mobilization of the masses, the entrenchment of political party ideology, and the production of career politicians. Therefore, just as the student organizations' politics are the gateway into Nepali mainstream politics, analysis of their practices and political attitudes can provide a view into more pervasive conceptions and processes in the larger political landscape. In this dissertation I conceive of the student organizations as a mini-public that provides a view on how political culture plays out in general forums.

This dissertation is the culmination of a five-year research project during which I observed Nepali student activists become national politicians. I tracked the process whereby university students become involved in national political life by emphasizing emergent needs while simultaneously becoming socialized into the politics that they are trying to change. Students continue to

be at the fore of making radical political demands, standing on the political ground gained by the generations before them. Analysis of the experience of political activism as it changes across generations has served as an effective tool to track less easily delineated political and cultural change. Furthermore, focusing on interaction between activists of different generations allows me to understand how people personally orient themselves in the political field.

A culturally focused study of Nepali politics is particularly relevant in the current context while Nepal remains on the radar of international monitoring groups. This dissertation analyzes how Nepali student actors' discursively negotiate international political values into their repertoire. I argue that the ways in which universal principles are reconciled with local, cultural values elucidates how these activists perceive international democratic values' place in their own local context. My analysis focuses on how Nepali political actors interpretations' of global democratic norms are calculated with the recognition that they are speaking to a larger audience beyond Nepali citizens. The manner in which they do this is intended to insert themselves and their politics into a larger scope. This is an interpretative process that highlights both the local and the global and an interaction between them.

## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Amanda Thérèse Snellinger was born in Middletown, NY, 1977. She is the third daughter of seven children born to John and Mary Snellinger. With support from an EEC four-year scholarship she completed her BA at Bard College in 1999, with dual major in Anthropology and Religion. She first visited Nepal in 1998 during an abroad semester with the School for International Training. After two years working for the Asia Society's Education Department, she began her graduate studies at Cornell in 2002. She received her masters in South Asian Studies in 2003. Her master's thesis focused on Maoist political ideology. She then returned to Nepal from 2003-2004 to pursue research on Nepali students' political consciousness with the support of a Fulbright USEF-Nepal grant. She began her Ph.D. coursework at Cornell in 2005. Funded by the Fulbright Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Grant and the Wenner-Gren Foundation, her dissertation research occurred in Nepal and India between 2006-2008.

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Different sections of this dissertation were presented at the 2005 and 2008 Madison South Asia conferences on panels respectively entitled “Contentious Politics in Nepal” (chapter 3), and “An Exploration into Nepali Cultural Conceptions of the Category of Youth” (chapter 4), and at the 2008 and 2009 American Anthropological Association meetings on panels respectively entitled, “The slippery space of analytic interface: Paradigms of

knowledge in ethnography” (introduction), and “Living with Anticipation and Uncertainty: Anthropology of the Actual and Unknowable” (chapter 2). Some sections’ earlier incarnations were published as articles in the *Indian Sociological Bulletin* (chapter 7) and *Studies in Nepali History and Society* (chapter 3), and as a book chapter in *Maoists in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (chapter 6). I thank all those who have organized these conference panels and edited these publications, particularly Dr. Mahendra Lawoti and Dr. Vibha Arora. The value of the feedback I received as a result has been immeasurable.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- ANNFSU (Akhil)** All Nepal National Free Student Union (United)
- ANNFSU (Ekikrit)** All Nepal National Free Student Union (Unified)
- ANNFSU (ML)** All Nepal National Free Student Union (Marxist Leninist)
- ANNISU (R)** All Nepal National Independent Student Union (Revolutionary)
- CPN-ML** Communist Party of Nepal – Marxist Leninist
- CPN-UML (Maoist)** Communist Party of Nepal–United Marxist Leninist (Maoist)
- CPN-UML** Communist Party of Nepal – United Marxist Leninist
- FSU** Free Student Union
- NC** Nepali Congress
- NC (D)** Nepali Congress (Democratic)
- NC (K)** Nepali Congress (Koirala)
- NCP-ML** Nepal Communist Party - Marxist Leninist
- NPU** Nepal Progressive Union
- NSU (D)** Nepal Student Union (Democratic)
- NSU (K)** Nepal Student Union (Koirala)
- UNMIN** United Nations Mission In Nepal

## LIST OF PARTICIPATING POLITICAL PARTIES<sup>1</sup>

Parties	FSU Affiliate Sister Organization
NC (K) Nepali Congress (Koirala) <sup>2</sup>	NSU (K) Nepal Student Union (Koirala)
NC (D) Nepali Congress (Democratic)	NSU (D) Nepal Student Union (Democratic)
CPN-UML Communist Party of Nepal – United Marxist Leninist	ANNFSU ( <i>Akhil</i> ) All Nepal National Free Student Union (United)
People’s Front ( <i>Janamorcha</i> ) Nepal	ANNFSU ( <i>Ekikrit</i> ) All Nepal National Free Student Union (Unified)
CPN-UML (Maoist) Communist Party of Nepal – United Marxist Leninist (Maoist)	ANNISU (R) All Nepal National Independent Student Union (Revolutionary)
CPN-ML (ML) Communist Party of Nepal – Marxist Leninist	ANNFSU (ML) All Nepal National Free Student Union – Marxist Leninist
NCP-ML Nepal Communist Party (Marxist Leninist)	NPU Nepal Progressive Union
Sadbhavana	Nepal Student Front ( <i>Nepal Bidhyarthi Manch</i> )
Nepal Peasants and Workers Party ( <i>Nepal Majdur Kisan Party</i> )	Nepal Revolutionary Student Union ( <i>Nepal Krantikari Bidhyarthi Sangathan</i> )
National Democratic Party ( <i>Rastriya Prajatantra Dal</i> )	National Democratic Student Union ( <i>Rastriya Prajatantrik Bidhyarthi Sangathan</i> )
Tarai-Madhesh Democratic Party	No affiliate Free Student Union

<sup>1</sup> This list does not include all of the political parties that exist in Nepal; rather it is a compiled list of political parties that were a part of my study, which comprises the top dozen political parties. It should be noted that Sixty-one political parties registered with the Election Commission for the 2008 Constituent Assembly Elections.

<sup>2</sup> NC split in 2001 and, by default, so did their sister organization, NSU. It was reunited in October 2007 in order to maximize its advantage in the Constituent Assembly elections. However for much of my fieldwork they were discreet organizations. Although it should be noted that neither NSU distinguished itself, each claimed that it was the “true” NSU and denied the validity of the other. For clarity, I will use the distinction NSU (K) and NSU (D), which were the common references used for their mother organizations.

Madhesi People's Rights Forum  
(*Madhesi Jana Adhika Manch*)

Organization

No affiliate Free Student Union  
Organization

## INTRODUCTION



Figure 1: Eight Party Rally, Basantapur Square, Kathmandu 2004

She looked at me impressed as she heard about my research. I was introduced to this central committee member of the CPN-UML at Basantapur Square. She was about to give a speech to a crowd of over a thousand cadres of the parties participating in the Movement Against Regression. Before ascending to the podium she explained to me,

Student politics is the *first learning place* [italicized spoken in English]. It really matters to what extent one maintains what he learns in this stage. It is the first place you become educated. The firm understanding that is developed in this stage never gets erased. It is the basis for life.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Translation of an interaction with a Communist Party of Nepal -United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) Party central committee member, 4.3.04.

A week later I observed a student cadre throw a rock at a police officer, striking him in the helmet. I recognized him as the student volunteer who had gingerly guided this central committee member up onto the stage as she had explained the nature of student politics to me. Our eyes met and he yelled to me on the sideline, “This is the basis of our life.”<sup>4</sup>



Figure 2: Eight student union cadres lobbing rocks at police, Baag Bazaar, Kathmandu 2004

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of Nepali student politics as “the first learning place” of Nepali political culture. The practices of Nepali student organizations serve as a useful lens to understanding political culture in Nepal. The student organizations are subsidiary organizations, or sister organizations,<sup>5</sup> within which individuals receive both their social training and

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<sup>4</sup> Translation of an interaction with a Nepal Student Union cadre, affiliated with the Nepali Congress Koirala, 4.9.04

<sup>5</sup> The student organizations are not the only sister organizations of political parties: the Tarun Dal (‘youth wing’), the professional unions and the women’s organizations have become institutionalized in the last 40 years and are mobilized when the parties need them

ideological indoctrination into Nepali party politics. Therefore, just as the student organizations' politics serve as socialization into Nepali mainstream politics, analysis of their processes and political attitudes can provide a view into more pervasive conceptions and processes in the larger political landscape. I use the student organizations as a "mini-public" that informs us of what people's notions of the political are in Nepal (Fung 2003).<sup>6</sup>

I pursued this research at a pivotal period in Nepali political history (2003-2008). I conducted my research during the seizure of democracy by the King, the end of a ten-year civil war between the state and the CPN-UML (Maoist) party, and the transition from constitutional monarchy to democratic republic. The span of my research period allowed me to observe student activists in every phase they have historically experienced since the first democratic movement in 1950. I followed student politicians in a protest phase during the Movement Against Regression (2001-2005) through to the Second People's Movement (2006), which ousted the King; I tracked them as their protests shifted underground and they were jailed during the 2005 state of emergency; I observed them in an internal reorganization phase during the peace talks and interim government, during which time I witnessed their

---

(Hachhethu 2002a). The students differ from the rest of these organizations because of their position in society. Often it is at university that citizens forge their political alliances. Indoctrination and recruitment are legitimately sanctioned duties of all the student organizations, and there are set processes of clientalism and coercion within the universities in order to recruit students not only onto party rosters but also on to the streets during protests. Politics on the campuses are an inevitable reality for all students. They must rely on it to negotiate the university bureaucratic process and negotiate it in their formal and informal networks.

<sup>6</sup> I conceive of the student organizations as a "mini-public" that provides a view into how deliberative processes and political culture play out in larger forums. Nonetheless, the student organizations are not the ideal type that a "mini-public" is meant to represent, in the sense that they do not accurately represent the cross section of demographic variation in society (Davies *et al.* 2005: 603). Instead, they provide a good perspective of who is interested and can find opportunity in politics. Despite this fact, I think the "mini-public" serves as a useful heuristic device to understand the political reality.

tense joint efforts to run their campuses in accordance with their political parties' national level policies while trying to position their organizations in a new political landscape; and I monitored their campaigning for the constituent assembly elections and their Free Student Union elections. In short, I observed a generation of student activists become politicians.

### **Framing Arguments**

Politics has four aspects. The first is power: this means to extend one's influence over others in the most far-reaching way possible. The second is conspiracy: this means that everything is fogged; there is a belief that one loses the extent of their influence if they were to be transparent in their action or engage in discussion; since they are not, this breeds distrust. The third is thought; which really means ideology. And the fourth is credit, which in Nepal comes out of our patriarchal patronage system.

—President of Nepal Revolutionary Student Forum, the sister organization to the *Majdūr Kisan* Party (Workers and Farmers), 2006

I begin with this quote to show the complex ambivalence that people associate with Nepali politics. As much as student politics is known to be the first learning place for political actors, politics is equally considered to be a dirty game. Considering this, why do people get involved and invested in politics? How do they justify this investment as a contribution to society? In this dissertation I take seriously that for my interlocutors, politics is not merely personal but also that the personal is political. Through the eyes of the students and other political actors, I assess their categories, their actions, and their explanations for their actions in order to examine the personal within politics and how people build their identities and their social world around political participation. In other words, I examine how people living within the political system engage with it, interpret it, and create their reality from it.

This approach aims to contribute to an anthropology of “the political” in the sense that Jonathan Spencer has laid out:

The anthropology of the political is, then, the anthropology of 'the political,' that compelling but morally unsettling space in which friend is differentiated from foe. It gives us an enduring object, the working of agonism in social life, and a wonderfully rich set of problems to grapple with. (2007: 180)<sup>7</sup>

I approach the complications inherent in establishing representative democratic practice and consider questions that emerge from that struggle: How is it affecting the relations Nepali citizens have with one another? What types of being does it offer Nepali citizens? What productive or problematic possibilities can result from the reconstruction of the Nepali nation-state? (Spencer 2007: 73, 180).

I address these questions through ethnographic accounts that provide a view into the "way of doing politics" in Nepali political organizations (Lichterman 1996). My analysis aims to explain how Nepali student organizations' internal political processes and attitudes toward them are shaped by traditional and contemporary political values and anxieties. I use the method of political ethnography in order to "access the processes, causes, and effects" of broader political attitudes (Tilly 2006: 410). I will demonstrate how political attitudes, values, and anxieties inform the ways in which students map claims of democratic practice onto their political processes. I

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<sup>7</sup> In the chapter entitled "For an Agonistic Model of Democracy," Chantal Mouffe proposes to "re-describe" liberal democracy in terms of "agonistic pluralism" in order to acknowledge the tension between the constitutive dimensions of the political, which she argues is a result of the social contingencies that comprise the political (2000: 80-107). She distinguishes between varying social contingencies in order to define the necessary ground for democratic interaction. She explains, "[T]his is why I propose to distinguish between two forms of antagonism, antagonism proper—which takes place between enemies, that is persons who have no common symbolic space—and what I call 'agonism', which is a different mode of manifestation of antagonism because it involves a relation not between enemies but between 'adversaries', adversaries being defined in a paradoxical way as 'friendly enemies', that is, persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way" (2000: 13).

approach this analysis with the consideration that political culture is a relationally based set of evolving norms. Similar to E.E. Evans-Pritchard's analysis in his famous ethnography of the Nuer (1940: 265), I conceive of political behavior as a distinct type of social behavior, which is informed by the relational context that one is in. He focused on kinship and territorial systems as the factors that affect the range of political behavior. In the Nepali context, political ideals and shared history create a locative terrain reminiscent of Evans-Pritchard's territorial systems, and shared practices and networks are superimposed onto relational distinctions, which are often expressed in filial terms.

But I must emphasize that although I rely on Evans-Pritchard's analysis of political behavior vis-à-vis territorial systems, I depart from his emphasis on political abstraction. My analysis resists the classical political anthropological sensibility to abstract to a level in which social processes are stripped of cultural specificity and distilled to functional explanations that focus on calculated instrumentality (Bailey 1963; Fortes and Evans-Pritchard's 1940; Turner 1957). Rather, I embrace the cultural idioms that put the ethical dimensions of the political front and center. In this regard, I am taking a cue from Jonathan Spencer and incorporating the "politics of semiotic excess, of transgression, of occasional violence, of humor and entertainment, love and fear" (2007: 15). It is not my intention to contain the political in the way traditional political anthropology has done, but rather to map out Nepali student activists' logic of their own politics, as messy as it might seem to others. For me this involves deconstructing the local, regional, and international, as well as cultural, religious, ideological, and philosophical influences that shape their politics. I see these influences working in a

dynamic form that involves domination and subordination, persuasion and coercion, collaboration and resistance, acculturation and interpretation, and obedience and creative play (Guha 1982, 1989).<sup>8</sup>

The role of political movements (*āndolan*) as a political and personal process emerges as a defining theme in this dissertation. As a focus of analysis, social movements have allowed social scientists to understand various types of subversive communal action that challenge the dominant order of things. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985) define social movements as an articulatory process; they are an intervention that expresses what Alain Touraine (1988) refers to as individuals' deliberate self-production of society. They fall under the domain of social action that constructs what counts as political (Assies 2000: 290). But in the context of Nepal, I argue that individuals do not produce social movements so much as the *āndolan* produces the political individual and places him or her in the larger social sphere of politics. For this reason, my focus on social movements is not meant to highlight the spectacle of contentious politics, but rather to contextualize it in the everyday lives of the student activists. I focus on how social movements allow them to craft their personal narrative out of a larger shared political narrative.

Furthermore, this dissertation highlights how the position of student activism in Nepali political history reveals the struggle of varying claims. This is not merely a political struggle but one more common to general society: the one between institutional culture and group autonomy. It is for this reason that political movements play such an important role in shaping the identity

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<sup>8</sup> Ranajit Guha conceptualizes the practice of politics as discursively "braiding, collapsing, echoing and blending" idioms, which he contrasts to the western social science attempt to order these idioms in a way that reveals the relationship between dynamic modernity and inert tradition (1989:270).

of each activist generations. The student organizations are the tool of political agitation deployed by the parties. Yet it is through their action and their struggle in the movement that they gain some sense of autonomy and are able to articulate their voice on the streets. The party influences this voice but the students do inflect with their own sense of what should be accomplished in the space of the streets that is cordoned off for them (Snellinger 2007). In other words, the public forum of the streets allows the students to emphasize what the political demands ought to be. Although they may have the ability to affect the public's expectation of what politics is and should be, they don't have the luxury to affect policy once they have secured power for their parties (Snellinger 2005 and 2007). I analyze how the *āndolan* provides student activists entrée into contentious politics. It is an inviting forum of revolutionary effect but ultimately if they want to have a substantial impact, the students must embrace the political system that they want to change. I demonstrate how this occurs in small mundane ways more often than on a grand scale.

I extend this analysis to illustrate the circulation of investment in which Nepali student activists participate. I examine how their investment in the party system and universal political ideals motivates their activism, and how, as public actors, they encourage the public as well as international analysts and diplomats to invest in them, and by extension the political party system. I consider the ways their tactics allow them to find space within the political limitations they encounter and how their creativity encourages others to expand their notions of the possible within the confines of political uncertainty.

Indeed the circulation of investment spans a scope larger than Nepal. The international presence in Nepal has incorporated a vast array of international actors into Nepal's political situation, which has affected Nepali citizens' relationship with one another, with foreigners, and with the political. This dissertation analyzes how Nepali student actors' discursively negotiate international political values into their repertoire. I argue that the ways in which universal principles are reconciled with local, cultural values elucidates how these activists perceive international democratic values' place in their own political context. My analysis focuses on how Nepali political actors' interpretations' of global democratic norms are calculated with the recognition that they are speaking to a larger audience beyond Nepali citizens. The manner in which they do this is calculated to insert themselves and their politics into a larger scope. This is an interpretative process that highlights both the local and the global and an interaction between them, or what Spencer calls "translation and translatability" (2007: 10).

My analysis of this discursive practice is guided by Spencer's assertion that the presence of liberal political institutions has not necessarily produced liberal political subjects (2007: 176). Rather, the effects of the political create unexpected outcomes that push the limits of social and political imaginary, as well as political theory. My analysis works from the basis that universal norms are not inert, but are comprised by the dynamism of interaction, which involves interpretation, translation, and the negotiation of concepts between actors. In this regard, the interpretive process of universal political norms into Nepali politics mirrors the radical indeterminacy that is inherent in Claude Lefort's description of democracy (1988). The translation of universal political ideals into the local context or the attempt to map local political happenings

onto universal norms of democratic rule of law and governance engenders a ubiquitous contingency the way that democracy itself does. I particularly address this in my analysis of the political conception of youth in chapter four, my analysis of inclusion in chapter five, and my analysis of internal political practice in chapter seven.

Given that politics is an ongoing discursive process based on multiple contingencies, I embrace a traditional anthropological method in order to capture the import of the political: I listen to what people say they do and watch what they actually do; my analysis engages the discrepancy between the two and treats it as a relevant aspect of the political (Spencer 2007: 116). It is for this reason that this dissertation takes the position that politics is as much a performance as an ideological construct. As a performance, politics plays out the hopes of what could be as a way to establish authoritative norms. Politics is a discursive exercise between diverse groups' perspective of what is "traditional" and what they push society to aspire for. In this regard, I analyze what is culturally at stake in the performance of politics. As Alexei Yurchak has noted, "The performative dimension of this act did not describe reality and could not be analyzed as true or false; instead it produced effects and created facts in that reality" (2006: 76). I pursue this position as an attempt to understand the cacophony of political assertions in order to bring me closer to different people's understandings of what was, what should have been, what is, and what ought to be.

The final underlying tenet this dissertation relies on is the analytic frame of youth and intergenerational interaction in order to understand political actors' main performance, the ongoing crafting of a non-linear narrative of Nepali politics, one that involves a merging of past, present, and

future. I focus my analysis on student activists' relationships with their party leaders on a personal level and in the institutional dynamic of mother and sister organizations, how students orient themselves in the political landscape, people's conceptions of student politics' role in various political eras, and both public and personal political memory (chapter three). I analyze not only the performance and accompanying rhetoric but also question how political hopes have manifested in the particular forms that they have.

The Nepali student activists' claim to represent the youth generation serves as a particular assertion in their political performance. This dissertation's focus on the students' claims to a particular age demographic is meant to explore the kinds of social dynamics that are at play as people circulate between different contexts of recognition. My aim is to examine what it means to make generational claims of representation and whether such claims can truly transcend other recognized demographics, particularly class, caste, and ethnicity. Yet I must note, this is not a stagnant demographic that one inhabits for life. Rather, it changes alongside the unfolding of Nepali political history. Johan Fornäs has argued that young people serve as a canvas on which society casts its hopes and fears (1995:1). In this regard, Nepali student activists serve as cultivators of political hope, encouraging the public to invest in the political possibility that is to come. Within the limited scope of the streets, campuses, and in media coverage, they embody the possibilities that the political can encompass. By emphasizing the combination of their current experiences of political marginalization and future potential, they present themselves as a source in which their peers and the public can invest their hopes. This dynamic obviates the reality that they are the ones who will hold power tomorrow as elite politicians. This dissertation argues that the

reason the youth demographic has been capable of transcending all other demographic categories is because of its fleeting nature as an aesthetic community; people pass through it, but they do not remain blank canvases forever. With this in mind, I will consider what these students' claims tell us about the political. This analytic perspective allows me to demonstrate the dynamic force of the political, which is as much expressive, performative, and relational as it is instrumental.

### **The Historical Context<sup>9</sup>**

Nepali students have long had an integral role in Nepal's political development. Nepal's formalized struggle for democracy is marked by the revolution of 1950, a political maneuver coordinated between the Nepali Congress and King Tribhuvan to overthrow the Rana regime, which had monopolized political power since 1846. Multi-party democracy with a constitutional monarch was established after the King fled to India for refuge and the Nepali Congress conducted a military assault on the Rana state infrastructure. Many of the participants in this rebellion were students who had been exiled to India in 1947 for participating in the student movement *Jayatu Sanksritam* ('Victory to Sanskrit'). This student movement was the first recorded organized protest by students against the Rana regime. At the time, Sanskrit was the only subject offered at Nepal's only post-secondary institution, Trichandra College (known at the time as Rani Pokhari Pathshala). It was surprising to students that the Rana regime submitted to their demand for an expanded curriculum, which encouraged them to continue their struggle to include the humanities as well. But the authority of the Rana

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<sup>9</sup> A more detailed account of Nepali student political history is outlined in Snellinger, 2005, "A Crisis in Nepali Student Politics?: Analyzing the Gap between Politically Active and Non-Active Students." *Peace and Democracy in South Asia Journal* 2 (Fall): 14-30.

regime had tolerated enough; they ordered raids on the campuses, imprisoned students while others were exiled to India. Many of these exiles were the founders of the Nepali Congress and later the Communist Party of Nepal. They participated in Mahatma Gandhi's Quit India movement, which greatly influenced these future politicians' struggle for democracy in Nepal (Hoftun, et al 1999: 5).<sup>10</sup>

The students' role in politics was shaped by key historical events. The one that has most definitively framed their political character is the Panchayat era when multi-party politics were banned. During that time student politics came to represent the struggle for democracy. On the campuses the student organizations were legally allowed to engage in the open democratic exercise of election competition. These elections served as a proxy for multi-party democratic political processes lacking at the state level. Due to the political space afforded to students on the campuses, they became the hands and mouths that disseminated political ideology for the underground parties. Due to this position, they proved amongst the most capable in organizing the mass protests of the 1990 People's Movement that led to the reinstatement of multi-party democracy.

Since multi-party democracy in 1990, student organizations have taken on a very different role. They are still utilized by the parties but the dynamic in which the parties were purely dependent on them has changed. They have quickly fallen into the role they serve today as subsidiary organizations, and they have become the gateway to national party politics. Norm-oriented student movements have become an institutionalized way to put pressure on

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<sup>10</sup> Many Nepali students studying in exile in Varanasi and Patna during the mid-seventies also participated in J.P. Narayan's movement (*Sampurna Kranti Andolan*).

the campus administrations, parliament, and government-sponsored industries to prioritize educational and economic issues. Because these movements are often disruptive to public life and their benefits are disputable, the Nepali public considers these movements an entrenched political tactic of the students as party appendages. Another aspect of the students' role as subsidiary organizations is political indoctrination. During the decade of the Maoist People's War (1996-2006), the Maoist student organization actively indoctrinated students and teachers in their stronghold areas. But this process not only occurred at the underground level; indoctrination and recruitment are legitimately sanctioned duties of all student organizations affiliated with national political parties. Furthermore, the student organizations' form and roles have changed dramatically in the 1990 post-democratic era; their new ability to pursue careers in party politics has undermined their role of being at the forefront of democratic and social activism. This dissertation analyzes the process in which the students negotiate this tension in order to be granted a place as legitimate leaders by the public, while also navigating the prescribed hierarchy of their party.

The more recent political situation from 2001 to 2008 could be conceptualized in simple terms as a tripartite struggle for power between the Maoists, the King, and the political parties. Since 1996, the Maoists had been actively involved in a rebel insurgency that gained significant power in many of the remote districts outside Kathmandu valley. With the claim that he will restore peace and security, the King twice—in 2002 and 2005—seized the reins of democracy by dismissing parliament and instating royalist bureaucrats to run the government and oversee the Royal Nepal Army's protracted armed conflict with the Maoists. The political parties and their student organizations

spent over five years on the streets protesting the King's actions, which they argued disregarded the democratic constitution. Since February 2005, the King's dismissal of parliament and the closure of democratic space have jeopardized the foundation of student political organizations and mainstream political parties. As a result the parties chose to negotiate with the Maoists and they were able to successfully organize nationwide mass-protests in 2006, which deposed the King's government. In November 2006, the Maoists and the political parties successfully negotiated peace talks and led an interim government that prepared the country for constituent assembly elections. In March 2008, Nepal held peaceful constituent assembly elections; all parties accepted the outcome of the Maoist majority government. During the first session of the constituent assembly in May 2008, Nepal was officially declared a republic. Since then the Maoists have been trying to establish themselves as a valid political party in a multi-party system in order to create consensus on the constitutional, administrative, and economic restructuring of the state.

Through the turbulent times of the last decade, Nepali student activists have had to adapt their approach in order to place themselves in the larger regional and international political discourses, as well as reclaim support from the Nepali masses as being a viable alternative for Nepal's political future. It is at this juncture that I focus my dissertation in order to understand how students make meaning of their political struggle and the process through which they become politicians.



Figure 3: Eight Student Unions cadres igniting an effigy of the King Baag Bazaar, Kathmandu 2004

### **The Politics of State and Societal Structuring**

I provide this brief sketch of the formation of the Nepali state in order to demonstrate what student activists are referencing when they conjure notions like Nepal, Nepali citizens, democracy, and justice as the motivating factors for their activism. Nepal has been considered to varying degrees a failed state during the time of my dissertation research. Nonetheless political parties, citizens, governments, and international organizations have invested in the codification process of the state of Nepal either by supporting or challenging it. This section provides context for the investment in the category of the Nepali nation in the way that Brubaker defines,

‘Nation’ is a category of practice, not (in the first instance) a category of analysis. To understand nationalism, we have to understand the practical uses of the category ‘nation,’ the ways it can come to structure perception, to inform thought and

experience, to organize discourse and political action (1996: 7).

Here I will outline how the state project has informed the perceptions of the Nepali political actors with whom I worked.

The state project is an act of ideology, one that is incomplete and must be continually enforced or inculcated. One of the leading tasks of the state project is to fog its incompleteness so the state appears to be a legitimate power (Abrams 1977). In order to understand the dynamic form the state takes—to grasp it as a continual process of dissidence, cooptation, and compromise—one must look not only at the elites' project but also for the loose ends and slippages (Sayer 1994); to uncover the “mask, which prevents our seeing political practice as it is.” (Abrams 1977: 58). In the case of Nepal, this involves tracking the negotiations and machinations that structured the nation-state as the only Hindu kingdom in the world (Bista: 1991; Hufton, Reaper and Whelpton: 1999; Gellner: 2001, 2002). Some are more familiar with the Nepali state from the viewpoint of ethnic dispossession, which has been a mobilizing issue of the Maoists and *Janaajati* (ethnic minorities) communities to question the basis of the state of Nepal (Dahal, 2006; Des Chene 1996; Forbes 1999; Gaenzle 2000; Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka & Whelpton, eds. 1997; Gellner ed. 2003; Gellner 2003; Guneratne, 2002; Hangen 2000 & 2007; Holmberg 2000; Lecomte-Tilouine & Dolfus, eds. 2003; Levine 1987; Onta 1996; Shneiderman 2009; Sharma 2007; Tamang 2008; Turin, M. 2000). However, I am more familiar with elite contestations for power to run the state. In this dissertation I will not try to debunk the legitimacy of the Nepali state but rather track different aspects of how it is manufactured and how all sides have participated in it through the contestation for resources, power, and

representation.<sup>11</sup> This method of analysis underscores how the state-making enterprise has had to co-opt resistance through compromise and repression in order to shape the assumptions and attitudes of the nation as a state.<sup>12</sup> In sum, this dissertation is based on the supposition that the construction of the nation-state of Nepal has involved balancing elite power interests with alternative, albeit majority, marginal minority, and international notions of what Nepal as a state should be.

Prithvi Narayan Shaha described his newly consolidated kingdom of Nepal as the “true Hindustan, a garden where four *varnas* and thirty-six *jāts* bloom” (Sharma 2002: 25). This maxim has come to glorify the acceptance of diversity in Nepal, diversity that is contained within the “true Hindustan.” Whether Prithvi Narayan Shaha’s intentions for tolerance in 1769 were genuine,<sup>13</sup> one can track the agenda to make Nepal a Hindu territory, from a kingdom to a nation to a nation-state.<sup>14</sup> This process has come to be known as sanskritization.

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<sup>11</sup> Although Nepal has not been colonized by foreign powers, its construction could be likened to that of colonial states because it was the project of a small group of elites not representative of the larger citizenry, with influence from the international world, mainly Britain and India (Burghart 1984). Therefore the approach post-colonial studies has taken to track the establishment of colonies and the post-colonial nation-state is conducive to demonstrating the power consolidation process in Nepal that pushed the nation to become a nation-state (Chatterjee; Cohn; Corrigan and Sayer; Guha; Memmi; Metha; Mitchell).

<sup>12</sup> The distinction I am making here between nation and nation-state involves the process of taking national “unity” (what is contained within the borders) and organizing it through government, administration, infrastructure, education, and a precarious balance of consensus. This allows nations to define themselves within the representative frame of the nation-state, which has been the way that countries have interacted and negotiated with each other in the modern era (Burghart 1984: 101).

<sup>13</sup> Dr. Mark Turin informed me that while researching the Regmi archives he discovered the little-propagated fact that this famous quote of Prithvi Narayan Shaha’s was a response to his failed attempt to contain all of his conquered territory’s diversity within the four varna caste system.

<sup>14</sup> For detailed account of the intercultural and intracultural contexts in which the idea of the Nepali nation-state was formed please consult, Richard Burghart article “The Formation of the Concept of Nation-State in Nepal” (1984).

In 1854, the *Muluki Ain* (law of the country) was established in order to codify the law and the traditional social conditions nationwide (Höfer: 1979). It outlined the behavioral sanctions of groups according to their assigned caste classification and delineated the interactions between citizens according to Hindu law (e.g., from whom one can receive water, with whom one can eat, marry, copulate, etc.). Throughout the Rana rule, the local leaders of the diverse groups of Nepal had to negotiate expectations of the regime in order to maintain varying degrees of local autonomy.<sup>15</sup> In 1964 many of these legal statutes were adjusted to follow the first constitution of King Mahendra's democratic partyless system, known as the Panchayat (Höfer 1979). But neither during that time nor in the democratic constitution of 1990 was the caste system abolished (Hufton, Reaper and Whelpton: 1999; Sharma 2002). Nonetheless, many ethnographic studies have demonstrated that despite the distance of the central government, its practices insidiously penetrated local tradition because the government administration had incorporated leaders at every level, allowing them to profit if the governing system was ensured (Holmberg 1989; Gellner (ed.) 1999; Guneratne 2002; Levine 1989; Ortner 1989; Whelpton 1997).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> There are many works of scholarship that illustrate how ethnic groups' terms of surrender to Prithi Narayan Shaha, and their subsequent relationships with the central government, determined how these groups' identities as citizens of the nation-state developed (Adams 1995; Burghart 1984; Des Chene 1996; Fisher, W. 2001; Fürer-Haimendorf 1964; Gellner 1997; Guneratne 2002; Höfer 1979; Holmberg 1989; Levine 1987; Ortner 1978 & 1989; Parish 1994; Pignède 1993 [1966]; Schneiderman 2009; Whelpton 1997). For example: David Holmberg's work on the corvée labor system agreements between the central government and the Tamang communities demonstrates the classification process the Tamang underwent in order to be citizen-subjects of Nepal (1989: 23-47, for more general explanation see Burghart 1984). Arjun Guneratne documents the process by which the Tharus became bonded labors, when high-caste *Parbatiya* (middle hills) cheated them out of their land with the support of the government, after the eradication of malaria made the Terai region more hospitable to cultivation (2002). Sherry Ortner's work establishes that due to their remoteness and connection with Lhasa's religious ruling class, Sherpas had much less interaction with the Nepali government (1978; 1989).

<sup>16</sup> Much like the attempts by the Shaha dynasty and the Rana regime to classify Nepal's diversity, anthropology began as a cartographic enterprise that attempted to understand and

Nepal has used moral order to collapse the gap between what is and what should be.<sup>17</sup> The King of Nepal is believed to be an incarnate of Vishnu, the sustainer of order. The country is his property and with every successive generation, this myth has ensured him the right to rule.<sup>18</sup> During the Rana regime (1846-1951), Rana leaders further entrenched the moral order by establishing themselves as the vessel through which Vishnu ruled; they became protectors of Vishnu's order and the King became a figurehead. It was during the Rana regime that state festivals and religious ceremonies left the confines of the royal temple and became an obligation of all citizens.<sup>19</sup> Dasain is the largest ceremony and is still practiced today as an official state holiday for which six days of leave are granted. This festival is a nationwide celebration of the triumph of good over evil.<sup>20</sup> Essentially, Dasain was meant to ensure the Rana and subsequent governments' governing hierarchy, because people in every stratum need to sacrifice on behalf of their superiors and they receive alms in exchange. It is an annual ritual that is meant to reinforce the social and political order of the entire country (Krauskopff & Lecomte-Tilouine, eds. 1996).

In 1990 the multi-party democratic constitution outlawed discrimination on the basis of religion, yet it still identified Nepal as a Hindu kingdom under the jurisdiction of a democratic constitutional monarchy. Even

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place Nepal's diversity within its remote geography and relation to the state. This occurred despite the fact that close study of political subjects was strongly discouraged by the Panchayat government (Gellner 2003b: 12).

<sup>17</sup> "States can be defined in terms of economics, politics, or morality" (Gellner 2003b:1).

<sup>18</sup> The 2001 royal massacre, which resulted in what some call strategic deaths to shift the line of succession to Gyanendra and his progeny, has been considered a conspiracy that reveals the logical fallacies of the King's divine right to rule.

<sup>19</sup> Until 2008, Thirteen of the nineteen state holidays were Hindu. (Sharma 2002: 29).

<sup>20</sup> Dasain commemorates a great victory of the gods over the wicked demons. The main celebration honors goddess Durga's slaying of the terrible demon Mahisasur, who terrorized the earth in the guise of a brutal water buffalo. In the *Ramayana* lord Ram's success in slaughtering Ravana is attributed to the evocation of goddess Durga.

those politicians who have challenged the right of the King's absolute rule have gone to receive *tika* (blessing) from the King in an official capacity. The *tika* blessing is commonplace in political ritual across party lines. Even the Maoists adorned their soldiers' foreheads with the red rice paste and draped them with marigold garlands as they went off to the battlefields. And still today, even after the abolishment of the monarchy and the Hindu nation-state, politicians draw on Hindu religious metaphors in their speeches and political rituals. These metaphors envelop references to the nation and land in order to create a shared sense of solidarity, a sense of responsibility to act for the good of the nation. The Hindu references are used seamlessly alongside liberal democratic discourse. I am not arguing that this rhetorical device is a direct grab for the monarchy's traditional foothold on power but their use suggests the currency these metaphors are perceived to have. All of these issues I have cited highlight either the agenda or acts of complicity of Nepali statesmen in maintaining a social order that was originally inspired by a Hindu worldview, whether it be a guise for absolute monarchy, Rana rule, Panchayat monarchy, representative democracy, or democratic republic. Framing Nepal as a Hindu nation was the official agenda for two hundred and thirty-eight years. Therefore every entity that has either supported or challenged the Nepali state has had to do so on those terms.

Just as Nepal had particular cultural and religious ways of internally dealing with the construction of its citizenry, its particular geographic position influenced how it dealt externally with the construction of itself as a nation-state. The Panchayat government (1960-1990) marked the end of isolationism. It was thirteen years after the Cold War's beginning and India's independence. Nepal's geographic position between India and China became

a geopolitical position of interest to both sides during the Cold War. Nepal opted for a policy of non-alignment, which allowed it to court India, China, and the U.S.A. for foreign investment to develop national infrastructure and governance. Nepal entered into geopolitics in the era of the nation-state, and it needed to become one in order to negotiate with foreign powers. The development discourse of India certainly made an impact on Nepal. Like the newly independent India, Nepal was struggling to contain all that was within its borders. As Chatterjee has explained,

All politics is now sought to be subsumed under the overwhelming requirements of the state-representing-the-nation. The state now acts as the rational allocator and arbitrator for the nation. Any movement which questions this presumed identity between the people-nation and the state-representing-the-nation is denied the status of legitimate politics. (Chatterjee 1986: 168)

This presented a challenge to King Mahendra who had recently usurped control from the squabbling ineffective political parties, who were subsequently banned. Not only did he need to establish order within Nepal, but also he needed to present the state of Nepal to the international world, as one of consensus that was on the road to rational state governance and administration. The Panchayat government recognized the potential power and wealth that could be consolidated through the process of modernization (Panday 1999). Development pushed Nepal to become dependent on external powers in order to foster the citizens' reliance on the state as the provider of basic necessities.<sup>21</sup> But since maintaining Panchayat power took precedence

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<sup>21</sup> Krishna Hachhethu contrasts peoples' refusal to accept state aid after the 1934 earthquake because it was a sin to take the King's property (*rājyvas*) with the growing dependence on the state through the Panchayat era to show the impact of development and social services on peoples' conceptions of the state's responsibility (2002: 165).

over the welfare of the citizenry, development ultimately produced little more than institutionalized corruption; it served the old and the new proprietary classes rather than the larger public (Panday 1999: 254).

Development served not only as a means for government officials to amass wealth or a carrot to invest Nepal's diverse citizenry in being citizens, but foreign investment protected Nepal's borders. The possibility of being usurped into India has always been a grave concern for Nepal.<sup>22</sup> The investment from other foreign nations was an investment in Nepal as an independent nation-state.<sup>23</sup> King Birendra's 1976 diplomatic initiative to establish Nepal as a "Zone of Peace" is most often described as a plan to attract investors, to pitch Nepal as the Switzerland of South Asia (Shaha 1982). But it also served another purpose. It juxtaposed Nepal's peace with India's communal violence to advertise Nepal as a successful nation-state. Such manufacturing of image encouraged international treatment of Nepal as a nation-state, which protected it from Indian encroachment and citizens' doubts.<sup>24</sup>

Although the post-1990 democratic government categorically abandoned the use of Panchayat governmental organizational infrastructure

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<sup>22</sup> Much of Nepal's nationalism has been constructed based on this fear of Indian imperialism. Since there is so much dependence on India for economic support, port access, and political legitimacy (by all political actors), Nepali politicians must carefully balance courting India to their advantage without seeming like lackeys serving Indian interests.

<sup>23</sup> One could argue that the maintenance of Nepal as a Hindu nation also ensured Nepal's autonomy. India is a secular nation with many influential orthodox Hindus who have engaged in both political and violent struggle to establish their influence. They revered Nepal as a Hindu nation, an ambition they have for India. If it were to be annexed, then Nepal would have become secular. Something even moderate Hindus have mourned since the dethroning of the King in 2008.

<sup>24</sup> This policy created the notion of Nepal as a Himalayan Shangri-La that many western tourists found comfort in as Nepal began slowly opening up to tourism in the late seventies. Since the Maoist People's War, the end of Nepal as a Shangri-la has been lamented by scholars of tourism (Thapa 2003), diplomats (Chang-Bloch 2005), and mainstream journalists (Dubin 2004), whereas some public intellectuals and political scientists have debunked the myth of Nepal as a Shangri-la in the first place (Bohara et al. 2006, Dixit 2005).

and policies, it was not going to forego the aid game for development dollars. With the deregulation of non-governmental agencies and many other services, Nepal went from being a socialized system to one of free-market competition with minimal regulation. Every sector was opened to foreign investment as both governmental and private endeavors negotiated the remaking of Nepal as a democratic, free-market, civil society. At first the NGO and INGO discourse contributed to the image that things were changing in Nepal, and democracy was the major contributing factor. But ultimately “NGO-ization” made Nepal vulnerable to all of the typical downfalls of poorly guided investment, reliance on transnational expertise, and the re-entrenchment of local power due to the need for middlemen (Pigg 1997: 265). Local elites quickly mastered the discourse of democratization, civil society, and empowerment in order to maintain their positions of power while funneling money into their areas to do with as they saw fit (Tarnowsky and Harper 2002).

International non-governmental organizations (INGO) and non-governmental organizations (NGO) in Nepal have served as an alternative bureaucracy to the state that makes knowledge claims based on its transnational networks and material resources (Shaha 2002). Development projects were no longer five-year plans implemented by the Panchayat government. Rather, the donors came to the fore, people started to understand that USAID, DFID, the IMF, and the World Bank, as well as private donors, were the ones who were responsible. Implementation was left to INGOs and NGOs and the government became peripheral. Since the democratically elected government was doing little for local municipalities, let alone running parliament smoothly, this factor seriously undermined the democratic parties’

claims to state power that is meant to represent and provide for its citizenry. It was the realization that both democratic government and development aid contributed less to improvement of peoples' lives and more to corruption and maintenance of traditional power structure that fueled the Maoist People's War (Thapa and Sijapati 2004). This was the turning point from developing state to soft state, which after ten years of armed conflict was considered closer to a failed state. In this sense, Nepal had fallen victim to the new imperialism, development (Harvey 2003).

The reality that the international world is an influential legitimating power for the various political factions is underscored by the fact that the United Nations became the mediator in the 2006 peace talks, there were a number of external monitors present in Nepal during the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections, and the United Nations' Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) has since been an ongoing mediating force. This dissertation focuses on Nepali political articulations of international values as they couch them in local historical and cultural references. I demonstrate how Nepali politicians' simultaneous pandering to the international forces and local masses creates a rhetorical fog that has perpetuated traditional elite strangleholds over state power and resources. My ethnographic data demonstrates that the student political actors have become acculturated into this environment and have become even more adept at this double speak than their political leaders.

Furthermore, in the context of this dissertation, it is important to understand the role of education in the state project. Public education is a tool of the modern state apparatus to inculcate or socialize citizens. The modern social sciences have established that schools are places where socialization, rationalization, productivity, and efficiency are taught in the desired formula

to subjugate the masses (Adler and Adler 1998; Bourdieu and Passeron 1979 [1964]; Bryant 2004; Faiman Silva 2002; Ferguson 2000; Hall K. 2002; Holland and Skinner 1996; Lesko 2001; Levinson, Foley, and Holland (eds.) 1996; Moffatt 1989; Stambach 2000; Willis 1977). In this regard, education is similar to other governmental institutional organizations; its agenda provides a view into the state idea (Mitchell 1991).

There were barely a dozen schools and only one college in Nepal before the Panchayat era; by the end there were over 25,000 schools throughout the country.<sup>25</sup> A USAID-sponsored grant for education was the first development project in the post-Rana regime. It built schools, trained teachers, and created curriculum (Dixit 2002: 193). The Panchayat government used education as a means to generate patriotism among the younger generations. The official rationale was to train the diverse citizenry to think of themselves first as Nepali citizens and secondly as their *jāt*. The curricula were designed at the central government level to ensure that every student was receiving a uniform education. This was done by teaching Nepali and Sanskrit, and teaching a history that glorified the King's dynasty and disparaged the suppressive Rana regime. Hinduism served as a pedagogic tool; the imagery and mythology often found its way into textbooks (Ahearn: 2003; Dixit 2002, Onta 1996b; Sharma: 2002). Furthermore, most of the teachers were high class Brahmans who had the best access to education. This established a bifurcation between the children's private lives and public lives; at home they spoke their mother

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<sup>25</sup> The number of secondary school students in 1950 was 1,680, in 1991 it was 421,709, and in 2004 it was 543,764. The number of university students at the Masters' and Ph.D. levels in 1950 was 250, in 1991 it was 110,329, and in 2004 it was 207,211. (*Spotlight*, May 1st, 1996 in Hoftun, et al 1999: 95, also see, Nepal Education Ministry: [http://www.moe.gov.np/stats/stat\\_ugc.php](http://www.moe.gov.np/stats/stat_ugc.php)).

tongue but at school they needed to be Nepali citizens conversing in the state language and learning state sanctioned materials (Holland and Skinner 1996).

At the university level state claims were more openly contentious. Those who were fortunate enough to advance to such a high level were often urban middle and upper-class, and the upper-caste from villages outside Kathmandu valley. Since the royal takeover of the democratic government in 1960 the university has been one of the main places where the state has been challenged (Snellinger 2005). But the Panchayat government countered dissent by establishing its own student organization, the *Rāstrabādi Bidhyārthi Mandāl* (National Student Forum). It was justified as a forum for ambitious individuals to align themselves with the Panchayat administration to secure future jobs. But it also enabled pro-Panchayat students to compete in the Free Student Union elections; this allowed the government line to be propagated in the only open environment of political contestation.

After the Panchayat government's attempt to ban student organizations was overruled by the Supreme Court (1973), the new education policy was implemented with sponsorship from USAID (1975-1979). One of its official statutes was the abolishment of student politics in order to ensure the progress of the policy's implementation (Snellinger 2005). At an objective level, the new educational policy was a step toward western education; it introduced a semester system with regular exams, which left little time for politics, whether underground or overtly. Many still regard this education policy with suspicion as a Panchayat machination that did not address the needs of the students, but rather implemented policy that eliminated dissent under the justification of foreign aid pressure.

Although education was used as a way to establish the state, the institutionalizing of education also served as a gateway to, as well as a foundation for, the democratic movement. A little-known factor that contributed to the Panchayat government's demise is the National Development Service (1975-1978). This program was implemented as part of the new education policy of 1975. It required master's students at Tribhuvan University to perform a year of service involving a training program in practical implementation of first aid, agriculture, teaching, and local development, ten months on a village stay to work with local Panchayat officials, and the submission of a village report to the central government. Over ninety percent of the districts were involved. This program was the Panchayat's answer to sustainable development that also provided surveillance of local administrators. But in reality the students took advantage of this process in order to politicize village leaders and locals. The program did serve to unify the country but in a way unforeseen by the Panchayat government. It set the stage for the nationwide referendum that allowed banned political parties to campaign nationwide, which resulted from the intense agitation and strong demands of the 1979 student movement (Rana 1995: 422-425). Although the parties lost the referendum, it was the second step in mobilizing the country against the government; on their next try a decade later they were able to rally enough support to win multi-party democracy (Snellinger 2006).<sup>26</sup>

According to the 1990 constitution the King remained the chancellor of Tribhuvan University and Mahendra Sanskrit University, but as a figurehead

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<sup>26</sup> Of the 7,111,000 registered voters, 2.4 million voted for the Panchayat system and 2 million voted for the multi-party system (Hoftun, et al 1999: 93).

who merely rubber-stamped all official activity, including appointments and curriculum on all Tribhuvan-affiliated campuses. Although the position of chancellor was meant to be purely symbolic, so was the position of constitutional monarchy, yet the monarchy's role has been easily manipulated to actively govern twice since 2001, with the justification of Article 127 of the constitution. During the royal takeover of 2005, the proposal to make the King the chancellor of all other Nepali universities, including the nation's only private university, Kathmandu University, had been of concern to some university professors and students. They perceived this to be an attempt to reestablish the King's influence over the universities. The 2005 New National Education Act<sup>27</sup> of the *rājparishād* (the governing counsel appointed by the King) had also raised eyebrows among those suspicious that the King desired to refill the vacuum of patriotic influence that was inserted into Panchayat curriculum. This was an agenda that the political parties never took advantage of, they did little to shape curriculum to inform students on what it means to be a democratic citizen (Snellinger 2005). These maneuvers testify to the vulnerable position of educational institutions, which continue to be a battleground for nationalist, monarchist, Maoist, and international influence.

The 1990 *Jana Āndolan* (People's Movement) that brought multiparty democracy was hoped to transform the nation-state of Nepal. But it has since been critiqued as a high-caste grab for power in urban areas that had been

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<sup>27</sup> One of the more contentious steps of the 2005 new education policy was the insertion of a picture of King Gyanendra, the Queen, and the Crowned Prince Paras (who has little public support to inherit the throne) on the first page of all textbooks. It was around this issue that the student organizations and the political parties framed the new education policy as a means for Gyanendra to maintain his illegitimate rule. I tracked the cases of five students who had publicly burned new textbooks in defiance of the order. They were arrested and remained in jail under the Public Securities Act for three months. The day they were released they again repeated the act in the courthouse and were detained for another month.

generating for thirty years.<sup>28</sup> Although there are different views of who participated in the *Jana Āndolan*, it must be conceded that it was an ideological struggle over different visions of what life ought to be in Nepal, how the state should be run, what society should look like, and who should participate in making these decisions. It is understandable that it took thirty years to get people to the streets since the first period of democracy; thirty years was about the span of time in which shared memory no longer included experiences of democracy in the 1950s. People could be swayed by how the political parties framed democracy in the possibilities of the future with no direct memory or experience of the inefficiency and power politics that it entailed during the 1950s.

For many it was just a regime change that did not centrally impact their lives. Particularly in the countryside people were vulnerable to the same hardships that has plagued them for generations: poverty, feudal conditions, and marginalization. But nonetheless the rhetoric had changed. Many received democracy by way of radio, magazines, and teachers emphasizing individual choice, progress, and success (Ahearn 2003: 16, Fujikura 2003). Moreover, the landscape of the urban areas was altered in various ways. Deregulation allowed the private market to pick up where the government had slacked: media, education,<sup>29</sup> and telecommunications. Liberal free market philosophy is based on the premise that in order to have a thriving economy, a stable state must be established, and in order to maintain a stable state a strong civil society must be created. This was the job of development. The presence of donor agencies, NGOs, and INGOs fueled the desire to create a

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<sup>28</sup> The governments during both Panchayat rule and after the 2005 coup have been more diverse than at any time during multi-party democracy.

<sup>29</sup> The Education Statistics of Nepal Education Ministry of 1999 reported that of the 25,599 schools in the country, 8,547 of them were private.

civil society in which everyone could participate and from which everyone could benefit. Protection of free speech enabled people to speak out, and Nepal had entered the protest era where most anything was open for contestation (Lakier 2007). Student groups and unions regularly protested government policy. The *Janajāti* movement (ethnic minorities movement) developed where minority ethnic groups embraced their identity as a basis for equal access and representation (Lawoti 2005). And the ultimate protest was a ten-year civil war that polarized people in the civil war between the ideologies of Maoism, democracy, and monarchy.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, the masses spoke out in favor of a democratic republic in the 2006 People's Movement and the Constituent Assembly elections of 2008. The last fifteen years have highlighted that liberal democratic values and communist ideals have contributed to undermining the Hindu rule.

Nepal is now in the process of state restructuring in order to undo the structural and symbolic violence caused by the construction of the Hindu nation. An era called "new Nepal." Will Nepal ever truly belong to its people, so that the state represents and provides for all of its diversity? Throughout my research I have witnessed UN advisors, American politicians, international journalists, and other international agents seek out student politicians to provide alternatives to the political impasse. These individuals were

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<sup>30</sup> The citizenry was torn over this King's 2001 and 2005 take over; many thought that the parties failed at their project of democracy and that peace and security are more important than the right to vote for ineffective, corrupt politicians. In February 2005 a fair sector of the population was hopeful; they felt the King's move was decisive and perhaps could bring stability to the country. But over a year later, people became less tolerant of the increased restrictions on civil liberties, the dwindling economy, and the continued violence. The reason being, the King did not capitalize on the Maoists' four-month ceasefire in order to negotiate peace. From September 2005 the parties and the Maoists had been in a series of talks to establish a united agenda in which to regain power in the name of the people, which culminated in the People's Movement II in April 2006. At that point the demand for republic became as audible as the call for complete democracy was two years before.

consulting all sides to get a balanced overview, and meeting with the younger generation of leaders was meant to provide them a necessary perspective. Yet only about five students have been relied upon in this capacity, four of whom are upper caste men from one of the two Nepali Congress parties, the other a female *janajāti* from the mainstream communist party (UML (*Akhil*)). It is this group of students with a few dozen other student political and civil activists who attend the INGO or diplomatic workshops on governance, transparency, and civil society. Often the students are picked for their proficiency in English. When these students are asked to cite the problems that have led to the political crisis, they cite exclusivity and even have solutions to address it. Yet they never refuse an invitation to speak nor have they been successful in implementing their suggested changes in their own organizations. Therefore what this dissertation attempts to capture is that reform is only ever partial, even from political generation to generation.

In closing, I would like to emphasize Nepali political actors' investment in the Nepali state. The greeting amongst politicians and student activists, particularly the Nepali Congress members, is "*jaya Nepal*" (victory to Nepal). As an articulation, it is an investment in a political state in which they believe. Among one another this greeting may be routinized but when they engage outsiders in it, they are symbolically forcing them to participate in the act of confirming the longevity of Nepal. What I have tried to demonstrate here is that very few are disputing the borders of Nepal; rather they are disputing how what is inside those borders should be organized. I attribute Nepal's status as a state to the geopolitical situation. The elites (who begin as student activists) who have historically vied for power are the ones who continue to

capitalize on this situation in order to maintain their status and construct Nepal, as they deem appropriate.

### **Paternalism and the Role of (Fictive) Kin Networks**

Since the Nepali state has come out of a patriarchal, caste-based paradigm, paternalism and insular networks are not merely themes but serve as social norms in which people must operate. Understanding this has been an important part of analyzing my ethnographic data, specifically how relations, community, and family serve as important themes that affect political behavior and interaction. In his book *Fatalism and Development*, Dor Bahadur Bista discusses group behavior and the own person (*āphno mānchhe*) cultural phenomenon that is prevalent in Nepali society, particularly in politics and government bureaucracy. He argues that there is a compulsion to create an inner circle where a sense of safety and security can be derived. He asserts that “The distinction between the group ‘us’ and the rest as ‘them’ manifests itself in every walk of social, cultural, political and economic life. Everything inside the circle of ‘us’ is predictable and the rest is external and unpredictable. Therefore, there is a constant need to maintain the boundary” (1991: 97). In a place as diverse as Nepal, differentiating between people is culturally endemic. Historically it was done on the legal level through the caste system strictures set out in the *Muluki Ain*, which were imposed on the social level in public and private interaction. By maintaining spheres of influence, people are able to feel a sense of control and enforce some order into what is otherwise a very diverse place comprised of different religions, languages, traditions, and bloodlines.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> According to the 2001 census there are fifty-nine ethnic groups and thirty-eight caste groups, a dozen major religions observed, and over one hundred native languages spoken in Nepal (See Lawoti 2005: 88)

There are also a multitude of political parties that span the ideological spectrum.<sup>32</sup> They all have their own rich histories, ideologies, and practices, which people define as institutional culture. The institutional cultures operate as social guides that allow political actors to identify themselves and others in the larger political culture. They provide the parameters in which participants create their own group identities, which as I demonstrate in chapter six, are influenced by what they understand their internal culture to be and how they understand others to identify it. They allow political actors a way to distinguish their place and the place of their group in the larger politics. Mutual recognition between actors of political institutions is a necessary part of national politics. The *āphno mānchhe* phenomenon encompasses the process of social self-invention in Nepali politics through the process of differentiating who is on the in and who is on the out.

Just as establishing insular networks is an entrenched custom of Nepali political culture, the opposite—mapping kin relations onto social interaction—is common as well. The common Nepali practice of creating fictive kin relations not only establishes the social hierarchy within every interaction, but it is a symbolic act of connecting people. The pervasiveness of family metaphors in political rhetoric allows for this as well. Politicians often make filial references in speeches to draw the crowd into unity. It is commonplace to hear the opening sentence of a speech contain the words “brothers and sisters and friends of Nepal.” Furthermore, females draw on family metaphors to claim a place in politics. I often heard female activists assert that a family cannot run a household without women, so how can political parties run the

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<sup>32</sup> Sixty-one political parties registered with the Election Commission for the 2008 Constituent Assembly Elections.

country without women. For this reason, I interpret people's filial metaphors as an endeavor to make social connection and to appeal to people's sense of social duty. Moreover, even though there is an inherent hierarchy to kinship, people perceive it as less divisive than a client-patron relationship. A family works toward a common goal, the maintenance and betterment of the shared lineage; similarly a party works to enact a shared ideology into practice. Therefore, emphasizing kin relations is meant to deny the tradition of patronage, which is pervasive in politics but the existence of which causes anxiety.

In this dissertation I examine the predominance of insular networks as well as the impulse to create fictive kin relations in order to understand how the students make social connection as well as place themselves and others in the political landscape.

### **Theoretical Frame: The Pendulum between Democracy and Post-Democracy**

Much has happened since I first began focusing on Nepal's political situation. As I have done this research I have come to realize that political struggle, intrigue, violence, and repression have had a consistently prominent place in Nepal's political history. Yet what has struck me most about the political situation in Nepal is its monotony. People's lives go on as they experience all the turmoil; arrests, tear gas, lāthi charges, disappearances, and banishments from parties and the nation are as much a part of life as weddings, births, and natural deaths, which people often celebrate or mourn alongside with arresting officers, political opponents, or the King's appointees.<sup>33</sup> Yet it must be emphasized that this is a privileged experience

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<sup>33</sup> Since the army officers, police officers, politicians, and bureaucrats tend to be of high-caste status, they find themselves interacting with each other in varying situations. Their social dynamics range from obligatory mingling in filial and social situations to violent opposition.

and perspective. Common citizens' lives have been torn apart because of the activities in which these elites engage. My focus on the normality that political turmoil plays in Nepali politically elite experience directly addresses what Geertz claimed has always been troublesome for our discipline: "[H]ow can we bring the articulations of power and the conditions of it into some comprehensible relationship?" (2000: 130). In this dissertation I attempt to do this by explaining Nepali political culture through analysis of what comprises the political and how politics is conducted.

In order for my analysis to capture the nature of politics and the political as I have observed it in Nepal, I have chosen to use Jacques Rancière's political philosophy, laid out in his book *Disagreement*. I argue that due to the consistency of political struggle in Nepali political history—which some have called a way of life—people recognize the constructed nature of politics. Politics is an act of constant negotiation over meaning, agenda, and direction, and it aims to order social relations. Rancière's political philosophy has allowed me to frame my analysis to highlight the ebbs and flows of Nepali politics in the unfolding of life, a mundane stream of events, which is fueled by ruptures, that may be either positive or negative and rarely leads to resolution but through ongoing contestation brings possibility.

Rancière argues in a lecture entitled *Eleven theses on Politics* that "the essential work of politics is the configuration of its own space. It is to get the world of its subjects and its operations to be seen" (1996). In his book *Disagreement* he distinguishes between the social and the political. He describes the social as a complex domain in which the "policing logics,"

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The range of interactions creates flexibility to give political favors or assert threats when it is deemed beneficial.

dictate the way things are structurally distributed among social groups; it defines the ways in which it is possible to configure public space<sup>34</sup> and who has a voice in it. Politics questions the hegemony (“policing logics”) and how goods and privileges are distributed within it. For Rancière this makes politics a contentious act that calls into question the order of things. In a post-Marxian style, Rancière contends that political action unveils the social, because it highlights the controversial distribution of places and roles that comprise the social (Rancière 1999: 18). Politics constantly emerges from questions traditionally thought of as social because it renders apparent who is qualified to say what a particular place is and what is to be done in it. It is for this reason that I am using his theoretic frame, to better understand what comprises the social and its relationship to the political. As I conceptualize it, politics can serve a similar analytic role as social movements have. Politics unearths contradictions in the social that render the constructive processes of culture, and individuals more transparent (Escobar 1992).<sup>35</sup>

In this dissertation I demonstrate that politics in Nepal is revered for being the act that Rancière describes, an unveiling of the unjust aspects of social interaction, but it is also dictated by a predominant social, or “policing logic” that defines what is political.<sup>36</sup> I approach student politics from the view that since students are new to the practice of politics, then the simultaneity of their experience of being socialized and defining their own subjectivity is more obvious. Therefore, a focus on student politics makes apparent Rancière’s claim in regard to democratic politics: “[I]n politics, subjects do not

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<sup>34</sup> Politics is an inquiry into the distribution of spaces. It asks, “What are these places? How do they function? Why are they here? Who can occupy them?” (Rancière 2003: 201)

<sup>35</sup> In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* Ernst Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue that since any social order is a specific pattern of power relations, then politics needs to be seen as constituting the identities of those who engage it (1985).

<sup>36</sup> Laclau and Mouffe define the policing logic phenomenon as hegemony (1985).

have consistent bodies; they are fluctuating performers who have their moments, places, occurrences, and the peculiar role of inventing arguments and demonstrations—in the double, logical and aesthetic, sense of the terms—to bring the non-relationship into relationship and give place to the non-place” (1999: 89). My ethnographic examples reveal that through their own intervention into politics, Nepali student activists’ claims to democracy as a practice for and by the people not only highlights the need to recognize the political rights of all citizens but also the frequency with which they are covertly denied. In other words, their fumbling for a place in politics reveals a situation in which “non-places” continue to go unacknowledged.

Yet politics is not simply the unveiling of social distribution of recognized and unrecognized subjectivities; it is also an investment in the act of unveiling and reconstructing. A central argument in this dissertation is that the historical experience for Nepali political actors has been a pendulum that has swung between the poles of political activism and parliamentary politics, with stints underground or in exile during repressive regimes. Many people view the elites’ claimed democratic struggle as a cynical move for power. This dissertation complicates that perspective. The actions of some political leaders resonate with Rancière’s contention that “[D]emocrats themselves have always remained suspicious of democracy. Those who have fought strenuously for democratic rights have often been the first to suspect that these rights were only theoretical, still a mere shadow of true democracy” (1999:96). In this dissertation, particularly in my focus of organizational form in chapter six and democratic practice in chapter seven, I analyze the ambivalence that people experience in putting their ideals into practice.

The basis of Rancière's whole argument in *Disagreement* is that the commonly accepted ideal of "democracy" is really "post-democracy." He differentiates the two by arguing that democracy, often violently, reveals the difference between those who are counted and those who are not, whereas post-democracy obfuscates subjectivities and erases politics by claiming that all are citizens and all have an equal, albeit unrecognized, voice. Rancière describes post-democracy thus:

Post-democracy is the government practice and conceptual legitimization of a democracy after the demos, a democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the interplay of the state mechanisms and combinations of social energies. (1999: 102)

Rancière would consider the establishment of "new Nepal" and its goal to restructure Nepal into a more inclusive state as "post-democracy." Whereas most Nepali citizens welcomed "new Nepal" because it has meant peace, security, and the promise of a more just state-structure, yet its basis is comprised of the same political elites who rely on consensus in order to establish political policy. In this dissertation I demonstrate that the emphasis on consensus in Nepal's politics inevitably leads to further conflict because it involves political erasure and the usurpation of subjectivities. The only way to regain a distinctive identity is to return to *āndolan* protest in order to reveal one's lack of place in the "police logic" of "post-democracy." In this regard, Nepali political history has mirrored Rancière's political paradigm, which argues that post-democratic consensus can only result in eventual disagreement, which leads again to democracy. Politics encapsulate this entire process; it is the continual contestation over distribution and meaning.

In order to grapple with the political contradictions that my interlocutors encounter, I analyze the attitudes and practices of deliberation, consensus, vote casting, and inter- and intra-party splits and mergers through the frame of Rancière's political paradox: in their attempts to create equality and inclusion political endeavors end up erasing distinct identities.<sup>37</sup> I also analyze political sensibilities in regards to ideology, organization, and working style in order to grasp the concept commonly held by Nepali political actors of "freedom within control" and how it simultaneously fuels people's sense of political being while limiting their ability to achieve their political ideals.

Furthermore, an underlying argument of Rancière's political theory is that politics is the act of establishing subjectivities. He argues that in order for the unheard to be heard, they must use the predominant discourse, thus becoming eclipsed by "police logic."<sup>38</sup> I use this assertion as my basis for analyzing elite political culture. I argue that anyone who wants to establish inclusion in the Nepali state will have to articulate it in a way that resonates with the sensibilities of the dominant discourse. This is particularly true since consensus is the ideal form of negotiation propagated by all the influential powers, including the democratic parties, the Maoists, and the United Nations' Mission in Nepal.

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<sup>37</sup> In *Disagreement*, Rancière claims that "Political philosophies, at least those worthy of the name, the name of this particular paradox, are philosophies that offer a solution to the paradox on the part of those who have no part, either by substituting an equivalent role for it, or by creating a simulacrum of it, by performing an imitation of politics in negating it" (1999: 65). In his analysis he refers to the achievement-elimination of politics in the following terms: archipolitics (Platonic), parapolitics (enlightenment liberalism), and metapolitics (Marxism to deconstructionism).

<sup>38</sup> "They (plebians) execute a series of speech acts that mimic those of the patricians: they pronounce imprecations and apotheoses; they delegate one of their number to go and consult their oracles; they give themselves representatives by rebaptizing them. In a word they conduct themselves like being with names" (Rancière 1999: 27).

The necessity for familiar language is also my impetus for taking political rhetoric seriously. As I have established, there are a number of influential voices in the establishment of the Nepali state's dominant discourse that are beyond local historical and cultural actors, including international humanitarian and aid organizations. For this reason, I discursively analyze political rhetoric in order to understand the speakers' underlying references. Such analysis reveals the tactic of double speak, whereby political actors deploy rhetoric that resonates simultaneously for a number of different communities as a means to fog their intentions. In much of my observation, I found rhetoric to replace action. Everyone engages in rhetoric as if it is action but often it is a deferral of action. When people are frustrated they will accuse others of talk (*bhanai*) and no action (*garai*), rhetoric defers implementation. Action is an ideal end point but many find that they receive resistance for moving toward action, for that reason talk continues to remain the safe stance, an abeyance of action postpones closure. I analyze catch phrases like "new Nepal" and "inclusion" that people from different political perspectives have latched onto without ever defining. These phrases became amorphous signifiers rather than specific references, which create an appearance of consensus but again only in words, not in action. I argue that this may not be a merely duplicitous approach, but rather that it provides politicians freedom within the limits that appealing and seeking approval from so many varying interests necessitates.

### **Chapter Outline**

In the following chapters I examine the meaning and place of politics in various transactions, contexts, and themes, with particular attention to the struggle and aspiration that people invest in their political lives.

The first chapter places me in the field. My field site was a place of contentious politics, in which my interlocutors experienced heavy surveillance, especially during the street protests and state of emergency from 2001 through 2006. In this chapter I describe my methods as well as my successes and challenges in navigating a heightened political environment. My approach allowed me to gain access to many political actors' perspectives and lives, as well as their organizations' programs and internal practices, all while keeping my interlocutors, research assistant, and myself safe. I also look at the limits of participant observation in the context of studying politics. Anthropologists have long held this technique as a key approach to penetrating people's representations of themselves. Yet I quickly realized that full participation (giving speeches, shouting slogans, or throwing rocks) would limit my abilities to do an in depth study of student organizations. I consider how doing research from the sidelines serves as a benefit in polarizing environments, and also how it requires one to maximize data gathered from the margins, particularly political rhetoric.

The second chapter focuses on how Nepali students embrace the political as a personal endeavor. I consider how Nepali political actors reconcile their political ideals with the mundane of politics. I explore why people emphasize politics as a pure form of public service. I demonstrate how self-imposed discipline allows student politicians to substantiate larger forms of Nepali political imaginary as a real part of everyday life. I particularly focus on the narrative of suffering and struggle in order to show how it contributes to the construction of political identity. In the third section I analyze politics as a mode of being that provides opportunity and social connection. I establish that politics is a mode of being in which actors deploy different coping

mechanisms, such as speculation and ambiguity in order to participate socially in a larger political process over which they have very little control. In the last section, I explore the attitudes that students emphasize as the proper orientation within which to engage in politics, namely optimism as opposed to cynicism. These attitudes do not merely insinuate a positive frame; rather, they indicate the living of one's daily life in a way that exemplifies how society should be restructured. I argue that this rhetorical strategy indexes what the mode of politics, as political actors see it, should be couched in discipline and sacrifice. I analyze how people talk about these categories of being in Nepali politics as a means to manifest what they feel politics ought to be.

The third chapter focuses on the role of political history. It is not a historical overview but rather it provides the relevant political background by analyzing the rhetorical patterns that the activists employ to tell the story of Nepali political history. I will consider how this orients student activists toward potential political horizons by referencing the struggle of political movements. I focus on political movements and protest not only to demonstrate how people situate history but also to reveal how history is conceptualized and experienced. Political movements are not only historical designations; they also shape people's individual experiences and their place in the social and political landscape. I argue that political movements are key events that are historically referenced while they are concurrently reenacted as an opportunity to mark student activists' place in politics. In other words, in the experience of protest there is a simultaneous sense of rapid newness and of nothing new at all, which I link theoretically to the tension between political and social change and cultural transmission.

Chapter four problematizes youth as an entrenched social category, one that is a complex dynamic between a traditional age-set structure and the process of political becoming defined by global, rights-based discourse. I consider the idea of youth as a discursive practice within Nepali politics, examining how the trope of generation (and related themes of kinship and family) fits into the internal cultures and power dynamics of political parties and their student organizations. This chapter draws on interview material and ethnographic accounts of how youth and generation are employed by actors in the Nepali political contexts, in order to explore the role of “youth” as a concept in mediating power relations within political parties. I demonstrate how the manipulation of the category of youth reveals how politics has become a holding pattern, as opportunities for political positions have diminished, yet still serves as a socializing designator.

The five chapter focuses on elitism. I argue that whatever Nepali politics is to become, it will become so in response to its foundations as an elite, high-caste male culture. I analyze historical and ethnographic data to demonstrate the degree to which politics has traditionally been an elite, high-caste male enterprise favored in a nation-state that developed out of a caste paradigm. I then analyze the influencing factors that have caused a shift in discourse to a globally elite enterprise that favors a rhetoric of inclusiveness. I consider the degree to which this new discourse can truly impact politics when it continues to reference the traditional party system. I analyze how both minorities and women have been limited in the party system and demonstrate that in order to find a place they must either cultivate their voice in a way that resonates with dominant political norms or rely on real and fictive kin networks.

The sixth chapter attempts to complicate organizational theory. I analyze the aesthetics of organization in order to understand the perpetuation of political party mythos and how it fuels the political imaginary. I argue that people are invested in links between ideology and organizational form, as well as between working styles and lifestyles, which highlights the contradictory nature of the larger political mythos on which their parties thrive. They attribute these connections to institutional culture, which not only provides them an identity but also allows them to identify other actors in the political field. In this chapter I closely examine the organizational structures into which the Nepali student politicians are being acculturated. This focus allows me to analyze how these students' aspirations are framed by the political order within which they operate. I also explore the degree to which the discrepancies between ideology and internal practice unintentionally serve as feedback loops that create unanticipated downfalls for the participants, which are perceived by others as negative political culture. I also examine the underlying anxiety that political actors feel from this trend as another obstacle in the streamlining of theory and practice.

The seventh chapter focuses on the internal governing practices of the student organizations in order to understand what is at stake in the political restructuring of Nepal. In reality, people have very different conceptions of democracy, which are based on varying ideology, practices, processes, and traditions that are not necessarily informed by liberal democratic values. What type of democracy works best? There are many varying forms that are currently being contested—multiparty democracy or people's democratic republic, proportional or first past the post system, consensus or majority vote. In this chapter I analytically compare Nepali political activists' various

notions of what democracy is and what processes it entails, with how Nepali student organizations engage democracy on an internal, institutional level. Using firsthand ethnographic data from the national conventions of the student organizations, I analyze how these student organizations are demonstrating their democratic capacities in light of making the “new Nepal.”

In sum, this dissertation describes politics as a process of human action that is entrenched in a particular place but influenced by varying histories, ideologies, personalities, and sensibilities in a way that establishes it as a culture in and of itself. Through the ethnographic study of student activists, I provide textural understanding into the way they do politics. Rancière described politics as “...the art of warped deductions and mixed identities. It is the art of the local and singular construction of cases of universality” (1999: 139). Anthropology prides itself on studying the local. Here I take Nepali political culture as my analytic. Mine is a case study of the incongruity that lies between democratic theory and practice. I do this to reveal the terrain of politics in the Nepali context in order to push the theoretical bounds of democracy. This entire endeavor is meant to align our abstract ideals more closely with the form they take as human action.

#### **Note on the Text and Terminological Choices**

I have based my transliteration on the standard diacritic practice for transliterating Devangari script according to the International Standardization Organization (ISO 15919), except when it comes to the letters च and छ. For these letters I follow the standard Nepali transliteration practice, I write ch for च (c in the ISO system), and chh for छ (ch in the ISO system). I use diacritics and italicize transliterated terms throughout the text. I do not use diacritics or

italicize proper names and terms that are commonly used in English (for example, Panchayat).

There is a debate in academic and ethnic activists circles regarding the designator “Nepali” versus “Nepalese.”<sup>39</sup> This debate highlights the politics of recognition in post-colonial South Asia. During their colonial rule, the British used the term “Nepalese” to refer to people who were citizens of the nation-state of Nepal. In English, “Nepalese” was the accepted term until the last few decades during which time the term “Nepali” gained currency. This shift was an attempt to move away from colonial prescribed terminology to a term that more accurately reflects the ethnonym as it is spoken in the Nepali language (Nepali are the speakers of the Nepali language). Since the 1990’s there has been debate around these terms in ethnic activists circles, the contention is that “Nepalese” is more inclusive because the British colonial administration used it designate all the people of Nepal, whereas “Nepali” implicitly excludes people whose mother language is not Nepali. Furthermore, the term Nepali can be confusing since it is a language; a designator for people of Nepali origin in Nepal, India and abroad; as well as a descriptor for all things culturally, bureaucratically, and politically connected with Nepal.

Nonetheless, I have chosen to use the term “Nepali” because it is the term that my interlocutors use. To make things clearer, I do not use Nepali as the noun referring to people but as a descriptor that details who or what I am specifically referencing. For example, I refer to the citizens of Nepal as “Nepali citizens,” political actors as “Nepali political actors,” and the state of Nepal as

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<sup>39</sup> For a more detailed overview and the history of this debate please see Chalmers 2003 chapter five; Gellner 2003 introduction; Hutt 1997 113-116; and Shneiderman 2009: 13-21.

the “Nepali state.” I only use the noun form of Nepali to reference the state language.

**CHAPTER ONE:  
FIELD METHODS: CONTENTIOUS POLITICS AS AN ETHNOGRAPHIC  
SITE**

My analysis of my interlocutors' internal knowledge production process dovetails with how I made sense of the knowledge production process of the social sciences before I went to the field. I have used the questions that I asked of social science literatures as a framework to apprehend the meaning my interlocutors make from their own categories, namely: What do the categories that they work with stand for? What is the extent of those categories' instrumentality? How does their usage of those categories connect them to their peers in politics and their interlocutors in their everyday lives and the international world? And what purpose does that connection serve? In this chapter I outline my approach to these questions in the field. I describe how the field situation set the parameters for my study, and how my methodology affected the data I collected and the way I chose to analyze that data.

My interlocutors are informed intellectuals who often think about the issues on which I engaged them in a more "reflexive fashion" than I did myself. There are discrete negotiations in research that "studies up" (Marcus 1998; Holmes and Marcus 2005; Nader 1972).<sup>40</sup> Annelise Riles (2006) and Sally Engle-Merry (2005) posit that the new focus on professional process such as human rights circulation, development work, and activism poses a challenge to the ethnographic method. Iris Jean-Klein has cited this as well in the realm of working with activists. She posits that our interlocutors are "new subjects"

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<sup>40</sup> In "Commitment as an Analytic: Reflections on Nepali Student Activists Protracted Struggle." *PoLAR (Political and Legal Anthropology Review)* 29(2): 351-364, I argue that focusing on the categories that students' use to engage their own context is not studying up or down but horizontally (p353).

in the sense that they have adopted the representational and analytical tools that we have traditionally privileged as our own (2003: 557). This is not merely an issue of “democratizing anthropology” by teaching grassroots activists the tools of ethnography (Paley 2001, 2002). Rather, we must recognize that our subjects are intellectual peers who perhaps have different ends, but are nonetheless engaged in similar means of knowledge production, interacting with similar global categories and negotiating them in their own way. What Jean-Klein makes explicit is the process of a global knowledge production and our position within it, and she offers an innovative way for us to continue contributing to this process, especially since we can no longer have a proprietary attitude concerning our methodologies. They serve others’ ends—including those of transnational organizations, activists, and even state powers—in ways that we may have never considered. In order to move our analysis to the next level we need to engage others’ usages of anthropological methodologies as means to push our own discipline’s boundaries.

One of the main issues in these debates is the question of how to achieve theoretical balance between the larger systems of political economy and the representations of heterogeneity, ambiguity, and emergence, and our own field observations without giving readers a sense of vertigo (Assies 2000: 305). Rather than scramble to keep up with rapidly evolving forms<sup>41</sup> of contentious politics (Jean-Klein 2003: 311), I have accepted the ever-changing political situation as the basis from which I analyze how my interlocutors navigate the ambiguity and uncertainty of their daily lives. Therefore in my approach I have tried to take my interlocutors’ experiences as a process that

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<sup>41</sup> I address this more in chapters three and four when I analyze the process of tracking emergence and its limitations.

ran parallel to my own navigation with knowledge's indeterminacy, and interpreted the aesthetic form of their actions as a potential that can challenge the limits of our knowledge. Riles suggests the method of circling back, "engaging intellectual and ethical origins from the point of view of problems that now begin elsewhere. In other words, fieldwork entails self-consciously reencountering the subjects...as a source of intellectual surprises and as point of engagement for anthropological problems" (2006: 63). I have endeavored to do this not only with my interlocutors in the field but also with anthropological archives as an artifact. Particularly focusing on temporality, youth, and intergenerational interaction, this dissertation is an endeavor of circling back onto key anthropological problems in order to incorporate my forefathers into my analysis in a way that "commits to standing in two temporal places at once—past and present—and hence to the pull of the past into the present" (2006: 63). This has been my attempt to surpass the limitations of tracking emergence while still demonstrating the forward orientation of my interlocutors.

These questions and my approach to them became more salient after I received the Wenner-Gren Foundation's request for a "risk assessment report." One issue I was asked to address was how I would deal with "becoming involved or giving the appearance of becoming involved in underground political movements...[and attracting the attention of] Indian and Nepalese officials who might see your research as foreign involvement in politically sensitive issues." The concern is a valid one with which I am familiar; the maintenance of neutrality has been a continual issue of negotiation for me in the field (with students, party members, government officials, and the American embassy). The Wenner-Gren Foundation's

inquiries were useful because they forced me to articulate not only my field approach but also my own personal position in my field site. Furthermore, it allowed me to articulate my vision of anthropology because the review committee's concerns were partially an inquiry into what anthropologists *should* be doing. My research has never been advocacy. I had chosen to research student politics in Nepal because there has never been an in-depth study of the topic that has been nonpartisan; I wanted to offer both anthropology and Nepalese studies a nonbiased ethnography of Nepali student politics. Therefore, I have taken the Wenner-Gren foundation's concern as a challenge to redefine (both for us and for host governments or institutions) what anthropological fieldwork *could* be doing in politically tumultuous field sites. This dissertation is the product of my attempts.

### **Methodology**

My research was a top down project. I worked at the political center in Kathmandu with the central committees of the student organizations and political parties, from which I followed the students' political activities on campuses and in districts throughout the country. I worked across party and student organization lines with the major political parties and their student organizations.<sup>42</sup> I was fortunate to have established rapport with the student politicians in 2003 during the ongoing political protest campaign, which provided me a first hand view of their life as activists, on the streets, underground, and in the hospitals, courts, and jail. Tracking the students during this tumultuous period allowed me access to their internal organizational processes as well as their inter-organizational collaborations

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<sup>42</sup> Due to splits and mergers this number has varied at different phases of my research but ranged from seven to ten student organizations.

and competitions, and students' interactions with their political party leaders. It also allowed me access into students' and politicians' homes and their personal lives, which provided me with a view of how they incorporate the politics into their personal life and the personal life into their politics.

On a day-to-day level I followed students on the streets during their protest rallies and observed political programs of the student unions and political parties on campuses, at Town Hall and other public gathering places, during which time I listened to political speeches or just passed the time with students who passively participate in the activities by being present but really used these gatherings as an opportunity to socialize amongst themselves or rub elbows with party leaders. I visited the student central committee offices and campus offices to observe the students' daily planning activities and how they spent their down time. I attended official and clandestine meetings between cadres, student and party leaders whenever I was invited along. I also followed student activists to their party leaders' houses or offices, which usually occurred in the morning before the day's activities began. During the Free Student Union Elections, I travelled to multiple campuses and observed the campaigning, voting, and vote counting in order to get comparative data on how the student unions competed against one another. During the student unions' internal elections I travelled throughout the country with central committee leaders to observe the campaigning, voting, and vote counting of the central committee elections, the district level elections, and campus level elections. I also travelled with central committee student leaders during the constituent assembly elections campaigns; during the campaigning process I travelled to over thirty districts to observe the students' role in the campaign. I also conducted formal and informal interviews with a number of student and

party cadres, student leaders, ex-student leaders, politicians, ministers, campus chiefs and professors, policy makers, political analysts, and journalists, as well as international actors who were active in the political process. I also befriended a number of journalists and analysts with whom I would regularly meet in order to gather informal analysis and receive feedback on my own analysis. Although my research activities may sound rigorous, I have to admit that much of my time was spent having tea with my interlocutors either waiting for something to happen or processing what had happened after the fact. It was during tea that I became familiar with the sociality of politics, which included moments of honesty but more often diplomacy, patience, and uncertainty idling away the time between the big political moments.

The issues of method and representation were continually at the forefront of my mind during my fieldwork. I have felt palpable pressure from many different sectors concerning the focus, scope, approach, and conclusion of this study. The contributions that anthropologists have offered to the ongoing challenge to craft the ethnographic method and the ethics of representation have impacted how I conceived these negotiations. For instance, Riles relies on a conceptual exercise of defining negative space as a way to push beyond the obvious in her data in her book *Network Inside Out* (2001: 22). Iris Jean-Klein echoes this approach in her study of Palestinian activism. She uses Roy Wagner's observation strategy of figure-ground reversal (privileging what lies beneath the more explicit explanations that are presented) in order to focus on form rather than the more obvious evidence of what seems political to us in the context of "global categories" (2003: 570). I have focused on people's conceptions and categories, physical artifacts,

relational interactions, political ritual, and the rhetorical and physical forms that political imaginary takes, in order to apprehend what the political is to my subjects outside the “global categories” and what in turn informs their own and, hopefully, our conceptions of “global categories.”

This epistemic endeavor is further substantiated by Julia Paley’s declaration that the anthropological focus on democracy and social action is not only ethnography of political process but ethnography as political process, in the sense that we are exploring competing constructions of what is political, the contested meanings, and the forms of power and resistance (2001).

Ethnography needs to be a flexible practice that does not itself get caught up in the crafting of an irreversible, distinct pathway toward final analysis. I understand Paley as saying that when ethnography is crafted as open-ended analysis it is a political process, one of ongoing contestation. But as Ruth Benedict proved, talking about culture’s dynamism does not replicate it in ethnographic narrative form (1934). In my analysis I have tried to use ethnography as a way to capture the dynamism and stagnation of Nepali political life, as well as the reasons and anxieties that political actors mask or deny these aspects.

One of the major components of my field methodology is what I call sideline observation. It differs from the traditional ethnographic method of participant observation because it barred participation. When studying politics, participant observation is not possible, particularly if I wanted to respect the Wenner-Gren’s concerns and the stern warnings of the American embassy. Participant observation in my field site would have involved shouting slogans, throwing rocks, burning effigies of the King, vandalism, giving speeches, spreading rumor, conspiracy theorizing, and much more. I

was not prepared to engage in such activity in order to come to better know my interlocutors' experience. Viewing these processes from the sidelines provided me the critical distance to understand how these acts were informed by their ideology and political history, and in turn cemented these things in Nepali political imaginary and shaped their identity. But I was strategic; I did not resist complete participation. For instance, I did engage in the process of fictive kin relations as a measure of protection and entrée into different political networks. This sort of engagement allowed me to experience the nuance of social circulation that fuels Nepali political culture.

My field observations that I gathered from the sidelines were substantiated by interviews I had with various people who either have experience in or with Nepali politics. I found interviews to be a fruitful part of my research because they not only cleared up uncertain data and misinterpretations, but they provided me with taped records of people's rhetoric, how they make meaning of different political processes, and how they represent politics to me. In order to respect the guidelines put forward by Cornell's IRB, I always received verbal consent, informing the interviewee that their responses were confidential and they could refuse to answer questions if they so chose. I would also show them the questions before the interview began in order to prepare them for what I expected and allow them to relax and focus on the direction of the interview.

Through my experience of trial and error I was able to streamline the interview process. I came to understand when I should ask closed or open questions depending on what information I was pursuing. When it came to theoretical and conceptual issues, I found it productive to inform the interviewee what my focus was and how I had been conceptualizing the issue

before asking them for their own analysis. This provided them with a framework in which to respond. I discovered this was necessary because if people did not understand the larger reasoning for my inquiry they would not ask me to clarify but rather talk about whatever issue they thought was relevant, usually resorting to political talking points.<sup>43</sup>

I used people's responses in interviews and interactions, as well as the issues that arose at political programs and in media, as a means to hone my own analytic themes. From 2004 onward, I had established rapport with a few interlocutors to the degree that our conversations were reciprocal, in the sense that our conversations allowed us both to wrap our heads around contemporary political issues both mundane and abstract. For them it allowed them to process what their strategy should be, and for me it was an opportunity to connect it to larger trends in my ongoing analysis. During my research period of 2006 through 2008, I took full advantage of our dynamic. I had a few key informants with whom I would draft my interview questions in order to word them in a way that other interviewees knew what I was seeking. This was particularly useful for the more abstract, theoretical, and conceptual questions I was trying to craft. Furthermore, the process of collaboratively drafting questions provided me a view into how my interlocutors apprehended knowledge and what categories they used in order to do so.

The scope of my project became a lot larger in 2006 after the student activists were no longer on the streets together. I had already realized that my

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<sup>43</sup> For example, after asking a number of questions about a specific policy, *Bāl Akhil* (children united), I would then inform my interviewees that I was asking so many specific questions concerning this topic because I was thinking about the impact of intergenerational interaction in Nepali politics. I would then ask them what they thought about intergenerational interaction in Nepali culture and how it translates into politics. This allowed me to get some very interesting answers that informed my theoretical approach.

project needed to be a top down project, focusing on the central committees of the student organizations in Kathmandu in order to grasp the makeup, history, and ideology of all the organizations in a way that would allow me to pursue a comprehensive analysis of student politics. But it was not until 2006 that I had to come to terms with the reality that the amount of time I spent with each organization and the access I received from them was unbalanced. My research is more informed by some organizations than others. A major factor for this is that the four largest organizations (NSU (K), NSU (D), ANNFSU (*Akhil*), and ANNISU (R)) are larger political machines that conduct more activities, have a greater number of cadres, and get more exposure in the press—their parties have a larger influence on the public sector. Another factor is that I established some very close contacts in the NSU (K), NSU (D), and ANNFSU (*Akhil*) during the years of street agitation. I had built rapport with their students and their party leaders and therefore had more access and contact with them. Furthermore, as I establish in chapter six, the student organizations' working styles and approaches differ. The degree of exposure that the student organizations were willing to subject themselves to varied. The ANNISU (R) specifically was not willing to let me observe them unless they were on cue.<sup>44</sup>

I have tried to reconcile this by gaining enough of an understanding of all nine organizations in order to make distinctions between them or make disclaimers from the generalities upon which I base my analysis. This limitation has also required me to take their rhetoric and ideology seriously. A number of the people whom I interviewed would not get past talking points.

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<sup>44</sup> A volleyball game with a few ANNISU (R) cadres at Padma Kenya campus was the closest I got to an informal interaction.

Therefore I needed to engage discursive analysis on what they were willing to focus. In some chapters, specifically chapters three, four, and five, I fully engage people's representations as they have provided them to me, while in other chapters, specifically chapters two, six, and seven, I use ethnographic observations to complicate those representations and contextualize them in day-to-day political practice. This encompasses my approach to provide a view of how Nepali political actors make meaning of the rhetoric and ideology as the basis of their political and personal identities.

Ultimately, this dissertation endeavors to reveal the inversion of Nepali political culture in the sense that Roy Wagner describes (1975). Inversion is the process whereby one inverts the invention/convention dynamic in order to maintain a status of ever flowing invention and have it accepted as convention (Culture) (ibid. 100-101, 122). What I have tried to emphasize through my analysis is Nepali political actors' role in making the convention that they invert in order to resonate on local, national, and international levels. This inquiry is a circling back to an early anthropological focus on the relationship between parts and wholes, which has informed how I analyze Nepali political culture (Bateson 1935; Benedict 1934; Fortes 1958; Leach 1961; Malinowski 1984 [1922]; Radcliffe-Brown 1952 [1935]; Wagner 1975).

### **Ethnographic Moments**

In this section I consider some obstacles as I navigated my way through my research. A number of these obstacles came from my attempt to grapple with both pragmatic and ethical issues that arose in my research. Here I demonstrate how I came to find opportunity in these obstacles or at least signposts that not only steered my direction but also became "aha" scenarios as I analyzed my field notes. These experiences were "ethnographic

moment[s]” in the way that Marilyn Strathern describes: “We could say that the ethnographic moment works as an example of a relation that joins the understood (what is analyzed at the moment of observation) to the need to understand (what is observed at the moment of analysis)” (1999: 6). These experiences made me realize the central role that circulations of influence play in Nepali politics, and that they do not fall directly along ideological lines—rather, people have seemingly conflicting loyalties that they strategically use to their advantage when they can. Furthermore, these scenarios affected how I have come to understand the role of Nepali political history and ideology as rhetorical tools and tactics of communal indoctrination.

Even though I was not interested in doing advocacy, I found a non-bias approach to be more complicated than I had originally expected. I soon came to realize I had little control in the way others saw my research. James Henslin made the key observation that people almost instinctively associate the researcher with the research that he or she is doing, as if the topic says something implicit about the researcher (1972: 55 in Sluka 1995: 287). For me to be studying Nepali political culture in the midst of an ongoing political movement and civil war made me, in the eyes of Nepali citizens, a supporter of the political cause. Even though I observed from the sidelines, the students referred to me as the “observer activist” (*avalokan garne āndolankāri*) or the “sideline activist” (*sīdmā basne āndolankāri*). At first I took this seriously, trying to explain that I was a non-biased observer that took no sides. But when a couple of students pushed me on this, asking, “You don’t care what happens in Nepal?” I responded that I did care; I supported what the citizens want. They became very self-satisfied because they interpreted my response to mean

that I did support them because they were fighting for the people's right to decide the future of Nepal; therefore I was an *āndolankāri*.<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, I quickly recognized that during the agitation my attempts at non-biasness were in vain. Even if I myself wanted to maintain a non-bias position, people were going to place me whether I liked it or not. I quickly came to experience June Nash's observation that "in a revolutionary situation, no neutrals are allowed" (1976: 150). Nonetheless, I wanted to try to balance my sympathies, so it did not appear that I was partial to one party or another. I soon came to realize that was a much more complex endeavor than I had originally thought. Avoiding such appearances meant knowing the nuances of my field that I was in the process of sorting out—specifically, the recognition that people across all sectors are connected to one another in ways that are often predicated on political lines. For my interlocutors there were no neutrals either.

I learned this the hard way in the spring of 2004. I was familiar with the concept of *mukh patra* (mouth piece), politically affiliated news journals, but I did not know how endemic they were. Risha had suggested to me that I should give an interview. She said it would give me exposure so people would know me before I approached them. She pitched this as an advantage because my reputation would precede me. Her friend was a journalist at a political weekly, and she could arrange for him to interview me. I was hesitant. I did not want to be asked political questions. She said she could arrange this. Then I asked if it was a *mukh patra* and she admitted that they had more access to Nepali Congress politicians and so they tended to rely on them for analysis. But she assured me that it was a respectable political

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<sup>45</sup> Based on an interaction I had with students from Shankar Dev campus on 2.6.04.

weekly, known for its strong analysis. She insisted that people of “all political stripes” read it, especially to know what the NC were thinking. I agreed to the interview but said that I may refuse to answer questions. The interview was tame. It was comprised of questions regarding my research, why I chose Nepal, what my background in Nepal was, and what I would like to get accomplished while I was here on this research visit. The reporter was very cooperative and even sent me a proof of the article before it was published.<sup>46</sup>

The week the article was published I received an email from Mike Gill, the director of the USEF-Nepal Fulbright Program, asking me if I knew anything regarding the article written about me. I emailed back that I had given an interview to *Deshantār* that was arranged by my friend. He emailed me back asking me about the one in *Pratispardha*. The embassy press attaché had discovered the article and sent it to the director of the American Mission. The embassy was very upset and demanded that Mike take action to refute the article’s claims.<sup>47</sup> The article was attached to the email. I opened it up and it was a brief biography of me stating that I claimed to be a Fulbright student studying student political consciousness but really I was an anti-Hindu CIA agent who was giving tactical support to the Maoists. They cited my trips to the Maoist heartland, Rukum, Rolpa and Dolpa—which I took in 1999 during my study abroad program with the School for International Training—as proof of my nefarious activities. I was shocked and felt violated; they took factual information about me and turned it on its head. I was about to meet with Akash so I immediately called him to ask what I should do. He described *Pratispardha* as a small royalist *mukh patra* that is not taken seriously; they are

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<sup>46</sup> Based on an interaction that occurred on 3.4.04.

<sup>47</sup> Mike Gill wrote a letter on behalf of the embassy to *Pratispardha* insisting that the article was slander and that they must refute it or the embassy would take action. They published his letter in their next edition.

viewed as more of a tabloid than an analysis journal. He explained that they always came out on Sunday instead of Friday like the other weeklies. Their tactic was to peruse all the other political weeklies, choose articles, and rewrite them from a royalist viewpoint that, Akash said, “was based not on fact but manufactured lies. Hence the name, *Pratispardha*, which means competition.” He said that I was probably targeted because of the *Deshantār* article, and then he inquired why I interviewed with *Deshantār* in the first place. I explained that Risha had convinced me it was good exposure. He laughed and said, “Well you have received exposure for sure. Now everyone knows you are a threat to the monarchy, which is a good thing. The *āndolankāri*[s] will respect you.”<sup>4849</sup>

It was then that I understood that I had little control over what side people thought I was on. I had inadvertently convinced the students that I was “on their side” (Huizer 1973: 21 in Sluka 1995: 287) and other people were going to place me either where it suited them or where it made obvious sense to them, depending on their agenda. I slowly realized that there was nothing particular about me or my actions that compelled people to place me. They were making sense of me the way they made sense of everyone around them. In Nepali culture people have attachments and loyalties on which their spheres of influence are based. Every act is part of the give and take of social exchange. Therefore they interpret everyone else’s actions as an indicator of what spheres they operate within. For them the notion of non-biasness is self-

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<sup>48</sup> Based on an interaction that took place on 3.11.04.

<sup>49</sup> One thing I learned the hard way was no interviews. I also learned to avoid the television cameras at political programs and at protests because when I was captured on film it often ended up on the evening news. Then I would then receive calls from people asking me why I did not attend their program that day, or worse I would attract the attention of the U.S. embassy. On a few occasions when meeting new people, they would recognize me as the foreign *āndolankāri* shown on the evening news.

defeating, it gets one nowhere. What I saw as a necessary orientation to access my desired broad view of politics, my interlocutors saw as a limiting act that eliminated the prospect of social opportunity and indebtedness.

My only defense against people's tendency to socially and politically categorize me was to be as transparent as possible. A friend of mine, who was the planning chief of Tribhuvan University when we first met, once told me that my business card had become ubiquitous. He had seen it in the wallets of so many people—students, party leaders, professors, journalists, police officers, and security forces. He said, "They all know who you are." I said, "I am not sure they know who I am, but at least my card marks my institutional affiliation." I explained to him what I have explained to all my interlocutors: I need to know the perspective of all sides in order to get an objective, rounded view to analyze. I did my best by telling every side the same thing about my research and trying to appear as non-biased as possible.

Transparency was particularly important when I began interacting with the state authorities. I knew they could threaten the safety of my project and the students with whom I worked. I was also aware that they would probably avoid my questions either through defensiveness or seduction.<sup>50</sup> These officers surprised me because they were cordial, often friendly. They appeared to engage me in an earnest fashion on the more general and abstract questions that I asked and were quite adept at not answering questions that had to do with the current events. More often than not these interactions and interviews were insubstantial. But it was my attempt to get everyone's view of student politics. Plus I saw the officers on the streets arresting students, firing tear gas

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<sup>50</sup> Antonius C.G.M. Robben describes seduction in a politically contentious field site as a social strategy whose literal purpose is "to be led astray from an intended course" (1995: 83).

at them, or dodging their rocks. I knew they saw me, but introducing myself to them on the streets never seemed appropriate—because there was too much tension. Furthermore, I wanted to meet them in this capacity before I had to ask them favors like visiting detained students.<sup>51</sup>

I never established what I would call rapport with army or police officials, but being familiar with them and coming to understand their relationships with the students and party members was useful. I had an “ethnographic moment” during my research stint in 2005, as I was collecting people’s experiences about being underground after the King’s February 1<sup>st</sup> 2005 takeover and trying to visit the people who were still in jail. It was during an interaction with a police captain who was overseeing the security at Āshkhal, Shankar Dev, Biswabhāsā, and the law campus. A student activist friend who has close ties with this captain introduced us. On this captain’s day off he allowed me to come into the barracks so that we could talk in a private setting. During our conversation, he said to me,

You know this is all a drama, right? Tomorrow we might be on the streets under the order of G.P. Koirala or maybe even Prachanda arresting royalist protestors. Our job is to stop the havoc and maintain security for Nepali citizens. We have no investment in suppressing any particular group. Our superiors decide that.<sup>52</sup>

At the time his justification seemed like a complicit attitude to me. I did not press him on it, but I immediately thought of all the disappearances that the Royal Nepal Army and security forces were responsible for during the civil

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<sup>51</sup> My attempts to make connections with the security and police officers in 2004 were particularly useful, because after the King’s takeover in 2005 the situation became more restrictive. I was relieved that that many police officers and security forces recognized me because they were more suspicious of everyone’s actions and inquiries, especially since the Red Cross, Human Rights Watch, and other international monitors were then observing them.

<sup>52</sup> Translation of an interaction with a police captain on 7.2.05.

war. But later I realized it was something that I needed to hear in order to get beyond the “sides” of politics that were being entrenched both on the streets and in the jungle, particularly through the media representations and international assessment of the political situation. It made me realize that the political terrain is ever shifting and I needed to be as flexible in my perception as political actors are in their collaborations, cooperation, and competition.



Figure 4: Police storming Ashkal campus  
Bikritimandap, Kathmandu 2004

A few nights later I went to a wedding of a party leader’s daughter with a couple of the student activists. I was surprised to see a number of security forces, police, and army officers there. Pawan was explaining how they were all connected to the party leader. Some of them were blood relatives, some related through marriage, others were school friends, and others he said were just opportunistic. Then he pointed at a police commander

and said, "That is the one you should meet if you want to visit Akash in jail." He looked around to see if Akash's mother was present. He said it would be best if she introduced me. She was not there so Pawan marched me right up to this commander as he was shaking hands with the bride and her father and introduced me, explaining that I wanted to see Akash and asked when would be a good time. The introduction was awkward timing for the commander but perfect for us. His eyes quickly glanced at the party leader, who was looking on, then he looked at us and said, "You should come tomorrow when Akash's mother comes. We have orders that only family can see him, so that is the best way."<sup>53</sup> It was at that time that I grasped how insidious yet effective nepotism is. It was serving me in my research as much as it serves my interlocutors' political agendas.

It is not my intention to minimize the violence and trauma that was experienced during the last decade and a half in Nepal. When I was following the students on the streets from 2003 to 2005, I recognized that they were relatively safe; they were on the streets, fighting the police in public with the media and international organizations tracking it minute by minute. After the King's takeover in 2005 there was serious concern that the mainstream politicians and student activists would be vulnerable to disappearances and torture. But they were fortunate because local and international human rights activists mobilized efficiently to ensure the state forces knew that their actions were being watched. In this sense, my interlocutors before 2005 remained relatively safe because of their elite status and connections with influential people and organizations both domestically and abroad.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Translation of an interaction on 7.11.05.

<sup>54</sup> For instance, a friend of mine agreed to check up on some of the student leaders who were arrested during the King's takeover in 2005. He was an established journalist who went on to do political analyst work in 2003 with The International Crisis Group and later became the

When I returned in 2006, I was hit with the reality that Nepal was a nation suffering from the aftermath of war. I quickly had to come to terms with it in the purview of my field as I incorporated the ANNISU (R) and the CPN-Maoists into my study. The very first time my research assistant and I went to the ANNISU (R) office we had an experience that made me realize the gravity of the situation. During our meeting with the ANNISU (R) president, the conversation eventually came around to the inevitable, where people are from, specifically their village. I asked the president where he grew up. Then he asked my companion where he was from. My companion told him Duradanda, Lamjung. Then the president asked him if his last name was Adhikari. My companion said, "No." This leader's serious, distant expression broke into what seemed to be a relieved smirk. After the meeting my companion told me why he was relieved. The Maoists killed a teacher by the name of Muktinath Adhikari from his village in 2001. They hung him from a tree in the town square. He had refused to pay the Maoist tax when nobody was protesting the Maoists. It was an awful trauma for the village. They have since cut down the tree because the villagers could not stand to look at it. Due to the widespread negative publicity that the killing received, Baburam Bhattarai, a CPN-UML (Maoist) central committee leader, eventually made a public apology, saying it was a mistake, an overt act of force that would be avoided in the future. The ANNISU (R) leader was relieved that my companion was not an Adhikari, but nonetheless he was a neighbor and

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national advisor to Ian Martin, the head of the United States Mission in Nepal (UNMIN). I was in America at the time and very worried that these students would be disappeared. I communicated with him on email after he made the rounds to the detainment locations. He told me he had located where a number of the students were being held but was not able to see them. He told me that he warned the commanding officers, "I am watching you and so are others. If you do anything to these detainees the international world will know." He then told me about all the international organizations that were monitoring the situation, including visiting the detention centers to locate arrested activists. Conversation occurred on 4.23.05.

family friend of this man.<sup>55</sup> These situations concretized the reality of ten years of violent warfare and the degree to which it was a part of my research. The violence of both the state and the Maoists was an inevitable factor in social interaction.

The ANNISU (R) president, who had himself lost family during the war, gave me a book he had written. I interpreted it as a Maoist cadre's attempt to deal with the aftermath of their decade-long war. The book, *You Have Become Immortal; It Has Been My Yearning* (*Timi Amār Bayo, Mero Mutu Chudiyo*), establishes that as a Maoist this ANNISU (R) president is the reader's brother, the party is the family to the people, and he and his cadres have fought for the reader's freedom and betterment. The book addresses the atrocities of the People's War, and why the violence was necessary: to raise the consciousness of the society in order to achieve justice for everyone. The book gave me perspective on how the ANNISU (R) students were processing their experiences of the war and coming out of it. I realized that every interaction would be seeped in their ideology. There was no way around it; their ideology was their way of expressing their worldview and it is what they used to justify inconsistencies that did not match up with their political ideals. I came to understand that their ideology would need to be my basis for understanding how they made meaning of their struggle and what it meant to be a student activist.

### **Field Experience Snapshot: *Āndolan* and Post-*Āndolan* Experience**

It is important to address the differences in my field experience in 2003 to 2005 during the street agitation and in 2006 to 2008 when the students had left the streets. I was fortunate to have established rapport with the students

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<sup>55</sup> Based on an interaction with the ANNISU (R) president on 11.9.06.

during their political protests in 2003, which provided me a first-hand view into their life as activists, on the streets, underground, and in the hospitals, courts, and jail. I became a consistent presence in their lives at a time of intensity and danger. As a result I gained recognition amongst the student activists and established some close relationships. Tracking the students during this tumultuous period allowed me access to their internal organizational processes as well as their inter-organizational collaborations and competitions, and students' interactions with their political parties. When I returned in 2006 to pursue my Ph.D. dissertation field research, I was able to rely on these established relationships to continue my study in more depth, focusing on student politics beyond street activism. The distinctions in my own experiences between *āndolan* and post-*āndolan* are relevant because they reflect the larger observations that I make about political life on the streets, during campaigns, and in everyday political life.

One major challenge that I faced when I returned in 2006 was the simple one of time management. During my previous research stints I worked with all the student organizations except the Maoists, who were underground. After 2006 I had nine student organizations that I needed to juggle, and they were no longer united on the streets. Previously, I would go to the streets to meet whomever I wanted. Particularly in 2004, the students' protest programs had become routine; I knew what time and where I had to go in order to meet with dozens of students from all the different organizations. I had the added benefit of being seen by hundreds of student activists on a daily basis; I was with them, interested in their activities. After 2006, I had to adjust to arranging separate meetings with students at their organization offices, going to campus, and juggling political programs throughout Kathmandu, invariably missing

key events because I had to choose between political programs. Furthermore, none of my regular contacts felt I was not giving them enough time; I was constantly hearing complaints that “I had gone missing.” In the past I may not have spent any more time with them, but they saw me every day on the streets, and I was a consistent part of their lives. Moreover, the street agitation provided more urgent matters than having tea with me, which after 2006 seemed to become a highlight for the students.<sup>56</sup>

Another difference that came to the fore in 2006 was the increased competition amongst the student organizations. I had begun my study at one of the most opportune times in Nepali political history, while the students were on the streets together during a necessary alliance. I was studying their movement, so of course I would need to work with all of them to understand it. The students accepted this, and in the past I found it simple going from one organization to another when they were on the street. They were working together for a single goal; they needed each other, and their power came through the strength in numbers gained by their union. Yet I was aware that there was a deep mistrust between the student organizations that varied in severity from campus to campus, where these mistrusts played out personally often in the forms of extreme violence. In 2006 I saw the students slowly reverting to inter-party competition, and with it came political machinations.

One of the reasons I felt so sensitive to the students’ resistance to me working with all organizations was that I sensed that they were keeping score. Before I was studying the student movement, but after 2006 I was studying the student organizations. My study became something else over which they

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<sup>56</sup> A number of people referred to politics as a protracted tea drinking activity. Sometimes I would hear it described as “men drinking tea,” at other times politicians were referred to as “tea drinkers.” After 2006 I faced the problem that the student politicians were drinking tea in too many places for me to keep up with them.

could compete. I came to recognize this when the students were frustrated because I was no longer a daily part of their lives. This frustration was not simply because I was too busy to visit, but it was rooted in the fact that I didn't have time specifically for them.

Unfortunately this pressure pulled me in tiresome directions, but I also tried to make an opportunity of it. For instance, if it was not for my willingness to be strung along, while continually insisting that I was pursuing a non-bias study of student politics, I would not have had such an opportune meeting with the ANNISU (R) president. The new president of ANNFSU (*Akhil*), whom I had known now for three years, had attempted on a few occasions to undercut my claimed neutrality. One day during the 2006 peace talks he called me in the morning to inform me that his organization was planning a demonstration to demand that the peace talks be successful. He told me to come to the office at eleven. I went because I was free at that time and I had not been to one of their programs in over a week. When I arrived I discovered that no demonstration was planned, but rather there was a nine student-organization meeting to draft a joint statement demanding the success of the peace talks. It soon became apparent that he strategically arranged for me to be sitting in his office as the other student organization leaders arrived. A couple of the student leaders that I did not know (including the ANNISU (R) president) would not come into the office after they saw me, presuming we were having a meeting. A few of the other student leaders with whom I had longstanding contact came right in and chatted with me. One was particularly excited because we had not met since I had returned to Kathmandu. The ANNFSU (*Akhil*) president had not expected this camaraderie because he seemed surprised when a few of the other leaders

suggested we go have tea to catch up before they began their meeting. The ANNFSU (*Akhil*) president quickly declined this suggestion; the meeting began without tea and without me. He instructed me to wait outside; we would continue after their meeting was over.

Although I felt inconvenienced and was not keen on the idea of being a pawn, I was able to turn the situation into an opportunity for myself. As the meeting broke up and the leaders were waiting for the press release to be typed for them to sign, I introduced myself to the ANNISU (R) president, who kept averting eye contact. I knew most everyone in the room, so it was quite natural when I said, "I have worked with all these gentlemen and their organizations for the last three years. I have not had a chance to work with your organization because you have been underground. You are the missing link in my research. I hope I can work with you."<sup>57</sup> This turned out to be the perfect context to meet him. I was able to establish that I worked with all the other organizations and convinced him that the other student leaders were taking my research seriously. After that day he answered my calls, and within a week we scheduled our first meeting.

In closing, I would like to emphasize that my research was as protracted as the students' political movements or their conventions. The breadth of time and scenarios in which I observed the students allowed me to focus on discrete aspects of student politics as the students were pursuing them. I saw the student organizations work together in unity to bring down the monarchy; I saw them retrench their leadership and internal order during the peace talks in order to distinguish themselves from the other student

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<sup>57</sup> Interaction with the ANNISU (R) president at the ANNFSU office, nine organization joint meeting, 10.9.06.

organizations and political parties during the constituent assembly elections. Observing them in such varying scenarios allowed me to have a nuanced perspective on a generation of student politicians' experience becoming national politicians. All of this has informed my analysis of Nepali political culture and their place in it as political actors.

## CHAPTER 2 THE MUNDANE AND THE IDEAL: POLITICS AS A PARADOXICAL ASPIRATION

A common philosophical premise asserts that politics entails the preservation of established values or the pursuit of a better life (Strauss 1959: 9-10). A main ambition of politics for some is to maintain the dominant societal values, but for many others it is an assertion of what is possible. Richard Rorty deemed the political project of democracy as a form of social hope (1999). Conversely, Hannah Arendt reminded us that politics is imperfect (1958). My fieldwork reveals both of these two aspects work in unison. I have regularly observed the reality that as quickly as politicians fuel public hope, they disappoint. Since they hover between the politically ideal aspirations of societal perfection and the corporeal reality that weighs them on this earth, politicians disappoint the public's expectations and hopes of what ought to be.

In this chapter I push back against the ambivalence that Jonathan Spencer says is inherent in studying the state, "to engage the state is to engage with the world of 'dirty politics'; to be aware of its 'sublime' qualities, of rationality and justice, is to be reminded by its profane failings in the world of dirty politics..." (2007: 142). Rather than focus on the state, I focus on actors who have aspirations to cultivate the state in a particular way. I engage their own ambivalences regarding the "sublime qualities" and "profane failings" by considering their politics in its ideal sense, the way Nepali political actors would most frequently present it to me, and I also explore how people reconcile the existence of its opposite, the politically mundane or the typical dismissal that politics is a dirty game. I refer to the existence of both poles and

people's rhetorical and performative attempts to reconcile them as a paradox of politics.

In analyzing how Nepali political actors reconcile the ideal and mundane of politics, I will explore why people emphasize politics as the pure form of public service. In the second section I will analyze the narrative of suffering in order to see how it contributes to the construction of political identity. In the third section I focus on politics as a mode of being that provides opportunity and social connection. Within this analysis I will consider how student cadres deploy different coping mechanisms and disciplines to substantiate larger forms of Nepali political imaginary as a real part of their everyday lives. In the last section, I will explore the attitudes that are emphasized as the proper orientation in which to engage in politics, namely optimism as opposed to cynicism. I argue that is a framework for living in the way one wants to restructure society. The students' discursive strategies index what the mode of politics ought be, as they see it couched in discipline and sacrifice. I will analyze how people talk about these categories of being in Nepali politics as a means to manifest their political aspirations.

### **Politics as Social Service or Profession?**

In Nepal, when someone is asked why he or she has chosen to be a politician, they usually begin by discussing politics as a public service to improve the society. What follows varies. Sometimes it is a more refined articulation of what public service should be; at other times it segues into the secondary reasons of why the person has chosen such a path. The current public sentiment holds that those secondary reasons are what truly motivate politicians and that calling politics "public service" is duplicitous. But this claim must matter to political actors because I consistently heard it articulated

by politicians and students. In order to understand this more fully, I asked my informants if they thought politics should be considered a profession or if those who engage in politics should have other professions in which they are invested. In this section I will outline people's varying views in order to explore the two contradictory sides of politics, politics as social service and politics as opportunity. This analysis is meant to illustrate what inspires people to insert themselves into both the ideal and the mundane that politics entails and how that act of insertion helps people make sense of their place in the social landscape.

Tatsuro Fujikuro argued that one should not merely consider the economic or structural explanations for why people joined the Maoist movement, but rather one needs to understand that the national development schemes that cropped up in varying forms since the 1950s created new forms of collective imagination. Enrolling in or supporting the Maoist war "was not simply a mechanical response to an economic problem or an expression of frustration in the face of individual deprivation.... It entailed rather, a commitment to, and participation in, a particular—revolutionary—way of envisioning the world..." (2003: 24). The commitment to a way of envisioning the world is not solely the domain of the Maoist movement. I argue that any form of political participation is a collective expression of how people not only envision the world but how they want to assert that vision in order to ensure their political ideal becomes political reality.<sup>58</sup> It is this idea that fuels the sensibility that politics is a form of social service; one is giving oneself to a cause to make one's nation a better place.

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<sup>58</sup> Sudipta Kaviraj argued in his essay on representative democracy in India that the "culture of representative democracy is a way of imagining the world." (1998: 148)



Figure 5: Student volunteers on crowd control duty, Ratna Park, Kathmandu 2004

Nonetheless, politics is also linked with power and access to resources. For this reason, there are two sides of politics, the assertion of a better life for all and the distinct opportunity to enforce how and who benefits from a better life. This quote from a leftist student leader from a small student organization captures this paradox of politics:

Naturally, the people who have come to politics cannot work in both the private and public sectors...Our society perceives political participation as twofold, on the one hand there is the negative perception that one who becomes a political leader becomes spoiled. On the other hand it is perceived as a social responsibility. For that reason, a person who desires to be involved in politics should have a clean image; he should not have greed and vested interest. He has to think about the future of the society and the country. He could not be a politician if he thinks only about himself, his family, or his region. The politician has to be able to represent the society as a whole. I

suppose in this sense, the ones who do pure politics are useless in the eyes of the contemporary society since they could not give the proper attention to their household... One who does politics for the people is always running for the sake of others. Those who put politics second, after managing their family life, are the opportunists...<sup>59</sup>

As his words demonstrate politics is meant to serve something higher than you or your family, it is meant to serve the country and the citizens. I have heard people describe it as devotion, one similar to religion. Marie Lecomte-Tilouine focuses on the religious notion of sacrifice in her article on Maoist conceptions of martyrdom. She cites the Maoists' ascetic-like renunciations as "the Brahmanic and ascetic self-sacrifice to the fire" (2006: 68). Yet political devotion does not guarantee otherworldly results the way Hindu practice or filial devotion does. Rather, it secures the betterment for the generations to come in this world, within the nation. This may explain why filial metaphors are so commonly mapped onto political relationships. In the ideal form, it is expected that one will put one's party and politics first rather than the family. But in order to convey that, the political actors need to draw on common sensibilities that emphasize the esteem they should have for one another and the party. The loyal sensibility of filial ties resonates and is used to affect political actors.

In my interlocutors' articulations of politics as public service, they have likened politicians to ascetics. Yet they must also be statesmen, a position through which they must translate their political ideals into material form

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<sup>59</sup> Translation from an interview with ANNFSU (Ekikrit) student union of Jana Morcha ML (Ekikrit), 5.19.04.

within the institutional and state structures. A UML fallen leader<sup>60</sup> described the transgression from ascetic to corrupt in the following anecdote:

Our society has inevitably changed just like other societies. In the feudal era, there used to be landed gentry and the peasants. Some used to grow crops whereas the others could afford to put their time toward politics in the name of social service, which was fine, right? You see, that was the time when only the landed gentry would be involved in politics. It was an upper class pursuit. Society gradually underwent change; yesterday's feudal mode of production no longer exists. The capitalist mode of production was introduced and the people tended to migrate to the towns from the villages... During this process, society developed a great extent. After all, the middle class is the clever class... The class that has come into modern politics is neither from the landed gentry nor is it of the *sanyasi* [renunciate]. The leadership has come from the middle class. The middle class people rarely rise to the upper class, except one or two. One who goes to the upper class is the one who has linkage with power; one who has been successful at balancing resources and opportunities...

What has happened here is an interesting picture of the statesman. His image is that of the *sadhu* [holy man] and *santa* [hermit]. He is the one who claims to be devoted wholeheartedly to serve the people and the nation. He is the *yogi* [ascetic] who is determined to perform what Mahatma Gandhi had not been able to successfully accomplish. But he has the monthly expenditure of more than sixty thousand rupees. This is the amount he spends in his lodging and food. He travels in a Pajero<sup>61</sup> that costs more than 4 or 5 million rupees. Ten years ago, he was not a leader. But now, he lives in a

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<sup>60</sup> This leader was at his political peak during his student years and has since been deemed an "intellectual" (a position with little policy influence) in the UML ranks because his actions during his tenure as a student leader actively challenged party leadership and their commitment to internal democracy.

<sup>61</sup> Pajeros are Indian sports utility vehicles that are associated with the corrupt political culture that transpired in the mid-1990s, known as the Pajero era. During Sher Bahadur Deuba's tenure as Prime Minister beginning in 1995, he increased the pensions of all parliamentarians by tenfold and repealed import taxes on Pajeros and Prados vehicles for all parliamentarians.

grand building, which he owes to his links to power and resources. My contemporary friends have grand buildings, the boys who were junior to me. They are neither landed gentry, producers, service holders, peasants nor farmers. In addition to this, they are not laborers, managers; nor do they have any firms. They are only politicians. But where does their money come from?<sup>62</sup>

Indeed, the allure of politics mirrors the paradox of politics. The historical trend to centralize the state's power regularized the distribution of power from the state to the local level in the Panchayat system. The Panchayat system relied on village elites to enforce their mandate, which reinforced the positions of tribal leaders and state bureaucrats. After 1990, those who had been considered fighters for democracy and freedom took the reigns of state power. They not only became the ones who made decisions on all matters pertaining to the state but they gained access to the resources. It is for this reason that the 1990 democratic movement marks the transition of politics from being an ascetic endeavor of the landed gentry to a corrupt endeavor of opportunity seekers. After 1990, those who fought and sacrificed underground found themselves in the position of being the state caretakers. More recently the Maoists are experiencing the transition from the war in the jungle to politics in parliament (Hachhethu 2009).

What the Nepali case makes clear is that politicians successfully embody the two poles of the ideal and the mundane when they convince the populace to put faith in them to control the external world through their knowledge. Yet people often have a hard time collapsing the two poles in order to make sense of the politicians' actions. On the one hand, they charismatically represent all of the possibilities of removing the mundane

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<sup>62</sup> Translation from an interview with a UML central committee member, 5.13.04.



Figure 6: Political homage to party leaders and political martyrs on the NSU(K) district convention stage, Badrapur, Jhapa 2007

from public life; on the other hand, they are people who are limited by institutions and human shortcomings. A Nepal Student Union cadre indicated this conundrum in the following explanation:

Politicians have to make the people be more inclined towards them than towards God. God never tells you to take your life for him, but a leader may even tell you to die for the political cause. A leader has to be able to make his cadre follow an ideology or an ideal. For all this to happen one has to be qualified and well-rounded, one has to be able to manage everything, even supporting his cadres in order to enable the success of the political cause. This is why money is essential to politics. It's so worldwide. Leaders must have command of money. This is a must.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Translation from an interview with an NSU (K) campus president, 5.17.04.

Another student leader affiliated with NSU (D) nicely emphasized this point when he said that, “politics is glamour.” He clarified this claim by focusing on political leadership. He said, “It is difficult to become a leader, once you arrive to power there is prestige [*ijāt*].<sup>64</sup> People will follow he who has power. And this is the reason people are attracted to politics.”<sup>65</sup> These students’ explanations reveal that there are actual mundane necessities that politicians must embrace in order to successfully institute their ideals. This is why Nepali political actors have built a narrative that highlights their ideals and ideology as their motivation to serve, to underplay the role that power, leadership and wealth play in their politics.

It is for this reason that some people found my question about needing to maintain an alternate profession outside of politics to be crass. These individuals felt that inevitably, people will use their political position to the advantage of their secondary profession; they are contradictory ambitions.<sup>66</sup> Those who made such a point felt that politics should not be considered within the professional realm at all because it leaves it vulnerable to corruption, hence the emphasis on service. One student explained to me that the aim of a profession is social standing and monetary gain. Such ambitions are impure in politics, where one is required to work for the sake of the nation and absolve the suffering of its people. Politicians are expected to sacrifice themselves and their social comforts for something higher, although not

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<sup>64</sup> Mark Liechty analyzes the meaning of *ijāt* for the modern Kathmandu middle class in a different way. In his book *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society* (2003), he translates *ijāt* as respectability and status. For middle-class Nepali citizens it has less to do with impressing people through gaining prestige as this student leader describes and more to do with making sure that one’s actions do not jeopardize one’s family’s status or image of respectability.

<sup>65</sup> Translation from an interview with an NSU (D) central committee leader, 11.15.2003.

<sup>66</sup> Statement based on assertions from interviews with ANNFSU (ML) president, 6.18.04, ANNFSU (UML) central committee member, 5.3.04, and *Pragitishil* treasurer, 6.2.04.

otherworldly, but of this world. Professionals, on the other hand, have a responsibility to their professions and their families, on which they must focus.<sup>67</sup> For this reason, there is an anxiety in the accusation that politicians look after their own self-interest (*āphno swārtha herne*). Such behavior is the opposite of what people espouse when they describe politics as a selfless endeavor (*niswārtha dhāngale*). This is particularly important because as one student argued, “It is through politics that one can best move society forward because politics impacts every sphere of society.”<sup>68</sup> A self-interested politician is a common phenomenon, but it still makes people uncomfortable because it reveals the mundane imperfections that are inevitably a part of politics.

A major issue that underpins the politics as social service sensibility is class and, historically, caste. In order to selflessly give themselves to politics, politicians need to be able to sustain themselves and perhaps their families. When I asked the question concerning politics and professions, one student cited B.P. Koirala, the father of Nepal’s democratic movement. He said that Koirala had written that if one cannot afford to fill his own stomach or that of his family, he should not go ahead in politics. One can find ways to become politically aware and help the cause but ultimately his attempts to be pure will be undermined if his everyday necessities are not taken care of. But on the other hand, Koirala urged those who have the time and the means to give to the organization. This student reasoned that a politician needs to survive just like anyone else, but corruption must never be a temptation. Therefore it helps if one has a little property to support oneself, then one can be dedicated to politics.<sup>69</sup> This student’s explanation expands on the previously quoted UML

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<sup>67</sup> Statement based on assertion from interview with ANNFSU (ML) president, 6.18.04.

<sup>68</sup> Translation from an interview with ANNFSU (*Akhil*) central committee member, 5.3.04.

<sup>69</sup> Interview with Pashupati Campus VP NSU, 12.8.03.

leader's reference to the landed gentry pursuing social work. It is expected and respectable for people who have means to give back, and it is suspect for people who do not have means to attempt to do so because they are unable to give in a selfless way.

Another UML central committee pointed out that politics was undeniably an aspect of labor production because those who do it are connected to their families' business. That is the nature of joint families; they are linked to one another, including each other's professions and businesses. The patriarchal property supports political endeavors. If the endeavors are successful they will ensure the legacy of that property or business because it was the source that supported politics as social work. In this sense, he said, it brings goodwill to the family, which has donated to a pursuit other than the family deity. He argued, politics cannot be disconnected from labor production. He was very adamant that I not forget this point because, he said, for politics to impact labor production and strive for class equality, its connection to the process must be clear. To his dialectical mind, he felt that labor, family, property, and politics are interconnected, and it is to the detriment of all these aspects to give politics some disconnected, transcendent aura. By doing so, class equality would never be achieved.<sup>70</sup> This leader's pragmatic explanation may be more grounded than most people's I heard, but it is still riddled with implicit assumptions that undermine equality for all.

A campus leader from this party leader's sister organization made this clear when he lamented to me that politics is only for the educated. Those who are educated come from families who were able to invest in them. He said,

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<sup>70</sup> Interview with UML (Akhil) central committee member, 6.1.04.

If your family cannot invest in you, you will not be able to invest in the country, at least not at the prestigious level of full-time politics. If you cannot do it full-time, people do not consider you selfless, rather you are looked upon as an opportunistic dabbler. You can see how that keeps those who must earn their food through labor away from politics.<sup>71</sup>

This is yet another aspect of how people conceive politics. For the most part, those who believe it is crass to professionalize politics are leftists that believe in a complete restructuring of society in order to bring class equality. Yet it is undeniable that in order to do “pure” politics, one must have some financial security, which in the context of Nepal puts one’s family in the position of exploiters. Therefore only the landed gentry have been the vanguard of pure class struggle. This is similar to the impasse that Lenin came to when he realized that the poor could not overcome their own situation but rather needed to be lead by the vanguard class through the Bolshevik party (Arendt 1963: 66). For Gramsci the organic intellectual fulfilled this role, the local with the wherewithal to pursue a better life for all (1971).

It is perhaps for this reason that in Nepal those outside politics spurn those who do it. I gained a view into these perspectives when meeting families whose sons and daughters were involved in the street agitations since 2001. If politics was a family affair, then the family usually embraced their child. But if they were not previously involved in politics they would refer to their child as broken (*bigreko*) because they chose to connect themselves to a seemingly corrupt, nepotistic system that was not seen to produce competent individuals. The general public did not believe that politics was social service but rather an opportunity for the mediocre to rely on the entrenched power

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<sup>71</sup> Interview with Pashupati Campus ANNFSU President, 12.4.03.

structure to get under the wing of leaders who are in the business of reinforcing their own power. During the Movement against Regression, I met one student's mother outside a prison as she delivered food to her son. I said to her, "You must be so scared, this must be hard for you." She retorted,

What is hard is worrying about my son's exams that he has no opportunity to study for. Who knows if he will take it. He would rather throw rocks on the streets. The leaders say it is for the good of the country but what good is it for the country to have a bunch of leaders who can't even pass their exams? We need doctors, lawyers, teachers, and engineers, not leaders. How can everyone be a leader? My son, he may have had some potential for an occupation [*jagir*] but now he is as broken as our country.<sup>72</sup>

Her frustration resonates with an older Panchayat and later Nepali Congress leader that I interviewed. He went on a tirade when I asked him the question regarding politics and professions. He said that the corruption of democratic politics had ruined the country. He asserted that this notion of politics being the sole profession encouraged students to drop out of life. He noted that this was to the advantage of the leaders because their cadres did not even have skills to protest their orders or the financial independence to defy them. He said, "This idea of politics as public service has created a nation of beggars. Rather than politics being for the good of the country, it has bankrupted the country."<sup>73</sup>

It is for this reason that political movements are embraced as the underpinning of political service. They are palpable scenarios of political sacrifice. They provide urgency to the cause that justifies the existence of

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<sup>72</sup> Interaction with NSU student protestor's mother, 6.31.05.

<sup>73</sup> Interview with Panchayat Party and Nepali Congress ex-minister, 5.24.04.

politics. But even within political movements, the façade of the purity of politics crumbles. A number of established politicians who were key players in historic democratic movements lost the constituent assembly elections in their districts because they were perceived as corrupt. During the constituent assembly election campaigns, a shopkeeper from Tanahun district told me, “We are through with corrupt leaders, we have suffered too much and now we will only vote for people who know sacrifice. The Maoists have proven themselves in their political struggle.”<sup>74</sup> The Maoist candidates won a number of seats for this reason, causing an unexpected upset in the constituent assembly election results. The results serves as a prime example of an NC (D) party leader’s lament; that corruption caused “leaders who had struggled for thirty to forty years to collapse within a year. Their sacrifices had proven they could be ministers that could do good by the people and because of their corrupt ways, within a year they were deemed incapable.”<sup>75</sup> Such demise represents the unraveling of the ideal of pure politics and also underscores the necessity for a shared investment in politics as social service that allows political actors to further themselves and their political agendas. I will now analyze how people enact this narrative in their everyday life in ways that emphasize their political action as service that is couched within suffering and sacrifice.

### **The Identity of Suffering**

The narrative of suffering and sacrifice underpins the notion that politics is public service. Sacrifice and suffering substantiate political identity across ideological lines. The experiences of suffering unite individuals in

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<sup>74</sup> Translation of an interaction with a Tanuha shopkeeper, 4.2.08.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Nepali Congress (D) leader, 6.19.04.

political organizations, and their individual experience expands and reinforces the historical weight of party politics in Nepal. In this section I will demonstrate that indexing histories of sacrifice and suffering is a key political tactic used to corral or mobilize student activists within the party's agenda.

During the Panchayat era (1960-1990), all party politics were banned. Most major party politicians have spent time underground, jailed, or exiled. These experiences became a de facto rite of passage into Nepali politics. But these experiences also galvanized activists in their struggle for democracy and political justice. The most recent example of this is the Maoist students' experience during the People's War. Due to their history, ANNISU (R) was not able to lay a convincing organizational claim to the democratic and class struggle that came out of the Free Student Union during the Panchayat years. Despite homage to the early communist leaders,<sup>76</sup> their organizational narrative begins with their underground experience during the People's War (1996).<sup>77</sup> Their orientation is based on a shared experience of being

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<sup>76</sup> The communist parties of Nepal have one of the most sordid, complicated histories of splits and mergers that I have seen in all of my studies of political parties. For a comprehensive visual of this please see Thapa and Shivapati 2005: 44.

<sup>77</sup> The ANNISU (R) is not considered an old student organization. Despite the fact that Maoist sympathizers have been active as students in the communist movement since the 1930s, there had not been an official Maoist student wing until the organization of the CPN (M) in 1995. Even at the beginning, there was only a loose student following of the Maoist party. They served as a support extension into the campuses during the Maoists' time in parliament. Yet they never participated in Free Student Union elections on campuses nor had they established themselves as an entrenched sister organization (Dangi 2007). Really, their official formation began after the Maoists put out their forty-point demand to parliament. From 1996 to 1998 they served as proselytizers for this political manifesto. As the Maoists went to the jungle to begin their revolution, the students of ANNISU (R) stayed on the campuses and informed their fellow students of the progression of the People's War, impressing upon them the need to support the Maoists. It was not until the Maoists were tagged as terrorists during Operation Romeo that the ANNISU (R) focused on providing physical support for the war in an official organizational form. After the declaration the students had to forgo their overt indoctrination practices and go underground. ANNISU (R) chose to go underground and into the jungle with the Maoists. It was at this time that its responsibilities broadened and encompassed roles not traditional to Nepali student organizations. The ANNISU (R) students still worked on the campuses to spread Maoist influence, brokered educational demands, and enforced school closures nationwide, but they also worked as journalists and analysts covering the war, soldiers, local educational overseers, judges in the people's courts, campaigners, and

underground. This common experience of hardship unites the Maoist students, buttressing the strength of their individual and organizational discipline. Jeffery Alexander describes the experience of cultural traumas as a way to relate and form common identities; he writes, "Insofar as they identify the cause of trauma, and thereby assume such moral responsibility, members of collectivities define their solidary relationships in ways that, in principle, allow them to share the sufferings of others" (Alexander 2004:1). The ANNISU (R) students formed their personal identities, their organizational identity, and their internal culture based upon their experiences of shared sacrifice and struggle during the People's War, which they claim has connected them to the public.

ANNISU (R) students argue that the students' perspective allows them to easily grasp Maoist ideology and that they were well positioned to implement that ideology into an action plan during the war. Their rationale was that they could recognize the problems but were young and not yet invested in the feudal traditions that reinforced the societal inequalities. Their generational orientation allows them a new repertoire in which to frame political progress and the means for achieving it (Tilly 1995). They recognized that there was opportunity in a changed society and were therefore devoted to societal transformation. Many ANNISU (R) students have described the experience of being underground during the war as formative; some even claimed it as their coming of age.

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recruiters. During their time underground the ANNISU (R) was most prevalently known for the closures of schools, particularly private schools, and for forcing them to pay a tax that would go toward "people's education" in order to create an equitable education system for all. This tax was not used to fund education but to fund indoctrination and the furthering of the Maoists' propaganda campaign. But overall, they filled the roles that needed to be filled in order to make the war a success and address what they saw as the fundamental needs of the people in the parallel government that the Maoists had set up in their stronghold areas.

All of the ANNISU (R) students I spoke with about their experiences underground recalled them nostalgically. Even those who lost their partners, relatives, or friends, those who spent time in jail or experienced torture, still count being underground as one of the most productive experiences of their life. They believe that it allowed them to witness the everyday realities of Nepali suffering. The students explained that the common people's experience informs and reinforces their political philosophy. As one student phrased it, they came to "see what our political ideology and struggle are based on."<sup>78</sup> They not only were able to observe the reality that inspired their philosophy, but they experienced it as well. They attributed their deep connection to the public to these experiences while they were underground. As one student explained,

I think that had I not gotten involved in this political movement for change, I would have been born and died like any insect in the world. I have been able to win many people's hearts and read many people's minds. I would never have got the chance to know about the people in their real-life situations. We obtained knowledge about the diversity of suffering as well as joy within the Nepalese society.<sup>79</sup>

The experience of being underground enabled them to transcend their individual traditional identities and social backgrounds. They believe that their relations with all sectors of Nepalese society allowed them to break from those past identities and study Nepal purely from a class perspective. Furthermore, many students claimed that it was when they were underground that they learned about their own capacity to endure suffering

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<sup>78</sup> Translation of an ANNISU (R) central committee member's interview, taken on 10.12.07.

<sup>79</sup> Translation of an ANNISU (R) central committee member's interview, taken on 11.12.07.

and they have built their identities around it. They came to know they could sacrifice anything for their political ideals because they had sacrificed everything and saw progress from it.<sup>80</sup> The Maoist student president looked me directly in the eye after describing how they had dug a hole and buried ninety-two of their cadres in Magdi, and said, “We now know what we need to do to make our ideal real.”<sup>81</sup> The Maoist students attribute their conviction to follow through on their political agenda to these experiences. They pride themselves on knowing better than other student cadres what is at risk and they believe it is worth it to achieve their ends.

Nonetheless, the other student organizations have had a longer history of suffering and sacrifice to reference. It goes back to the repressive times of the Rana regime (1846-1950) and includes the underground years of the Panchayat era and every student and political movement since that time, including the most recent that led to the downfall of the King. It has become commonplace for political leaders to repurpose this history for their own intentions. A striking example of this was during the NSU (D)’s national convention. The thing that registered for me as I observed these student cadres coping with the hardship that resulted from their leaders’ disorganization, was the way in which the leaders justified it. During their closed session,<sup>82</sup> which happened three days later than planned, the student

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<sup>80</sup> In the article “Commitment as an Analytic: Reflections on Nepali Student Activists’ Protracted Struggle” I analyze the rhetorical use of continual struggle in order to understand how student activists affiliated with the democratic parties make meaning from their political activity. (Snellinger 2006)

<sup>81</sup> ANNISU (R) central committee member’s interview, taken on 10.12.07.

<sup>82</sup> The closed session is the second event of the convention after the open session and the release of the delegate list. During the closed session the political, educational, fiscal, and social reports are presented. Following the closed session the students must approve the new constitutional amendments. Then the candidates are officially nominated, followed by campaigning, the casting of votes, the counting of votes, and, finally, the announcement and victory rally. Therefore the closed session should ideally take place on the second day first thing in the morning. At both NSU conventions they did not take place until at least the third

leaders uncomfortably acknowledged the physical and logistical inconveniences. The then-current president sympathized with the students, admitting it was difficult to endure the heat and mediocre food and accommodations in Nepalganj. He then reframed the uncertainty of their political process in order to mobilize the students. He said,

I want to remind you that we too, your leaders, are suffering. We are not sleeping until we complete this convention in a healthy and successful manner. We are willing to suffer because we are dedicated to the norms of democracy and providing you with your rights, just as we know you are dedicated to the struggle to not only fight for, but maintain democracy in Nepal. Your experience at this convention strengthens your conviction and dedication to struggle for your country.<sup>83</sup>

The student leaders often couch their inefficiency in the larger rhetoric of political struggle. Rather than admit that their inability undermines the future stability of their organization, they framed the results of their disorganization in way that fueled the students' sense of struggle for their rights.

In general, the students' response to this approach is dismissive. They said the leaders had become full of themselves (as they say in Nepali: "*thulo manchhe bae sakyō*", trans: "he has become a big person") and no longer consider the impact of their actions on those who brought them to their position of leadership. This response, I think, captures the general public's attitude as well, yet these students tolerate it for other reasons, because they have an ideological and social attachment to politics, upon which they base

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or fourth day. In the case of the NSU (D) closed session they did not even have all the reports planned.

<sup>83</sup> Translation from a speech of an NSU (D) central committee member at the Nepalganj national convention, 7.13.07.

their identity. They justify their investment through their activism as well as the rhetoric, both of which encapsulate the larger political narrative of democracy and justice.



Figure 7: Nepali Congress (D) party leaders on the NSU (D) national convention stage, Nepalganj, Banke 2007

### **Politics as a Mode of Being**

Before I continue to explore politics in its ideal form, it is important to understand the students' position for perceiving it as an opportunity. The mundane aspect of politics engenders opportunity for Nepali student activists and in turn, their participation creates a public that is both invested in and socially legitimates Nepali party politics. For them political causes resonate for a reason, so it is important to understand how politics guides students' actions and crafts their lives. Most people do not see themselves as pursuing a self-interested career; they see possibility to effect change where others have

failed. For this reason, I consider Mary Zournazi's assertion that we should not focus on what is "meant to be" in terms of a better life, but rather we must understand what sustains people, the link between people's desire and their motivation that embeds them in the world (2000: 15). She does not suggest that we forego the forwardness of utopian temporal orientation but that we focus on its momentum, which is in the everyday. Indeed, much of the students' political life is getting through the everyday, whether it is protesting on the streets, campaigning for their party, hiding underground, being detained in jail, or showing up at the party office so people won't forget their faces. These everyday acts sustain the larger shared meanings of ideology, sacrifice, and politics as service that comprise the political narrative that in turn gives weight to these everyday acts. Here I will focus on the students' everyday act of speculation in order to understand how it sustains them and gives them a place in the political sphere.

When I was at the NSU (D) national convention in 2007, I heard a particular theory as to why students become active in politics. Many had explained the appeal of politics as a conundrum of their middle class position. These young men were from high-caste, middle-class homes where they were expected to achieve beyond what their parents had; yet they said there was no opportunity for them. It was inappropriate for them to do "small work" like agricultural or physical labor because it was below their family status. They were raised to aspire for something that was out of their reach, opportunities that they conceptualize as only truly available to people of the higher class with better connections, education, and monetary access. One student said to me, "In my father's day, securing an occupation [*jagir*] was what was

expected, but for us, we must find a profession [*peshha*].”<sup>84</sup> He explained that often men are trained to take over their father’s occupations or a family business. But in the last generation they have become more broadly educated; they must pass the School Leaving Certificate and then go to college. So of course they are expected to put their training to use, to find prestigious work that will improve themselves and their family’s class status.<sup>85</sup>

What these students indicated to me was that since uplifting modern opportunities were not available, they did politics. This is particularly true in times of political instability, when standing up for one’s rights contributes to the fight for political justice. For the students, politics is not necessarily doing anything but a way to fill their time with something that seems respectable. Within politics they found a cause and at the very least they will gain connections or an opportunity to carve out a profession. If not, then they will serve as a support network to their friends who might be able to secure a political position, and then at least they are connected to someone of influence. What this sentiment indicates is that, for these students, doing politics is not only about investing in an opportunity but grasping for an orientation and identity in life that is respectable within a traditional context where other traditionally accepted or modernly conceived opportunities are not readily available.

These are not students who have to work for their family to survive. They are not expected to necessarily do something but rather expected to be

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<sup>84</sup> Translation of an interaction with an NSU (D) student cadre, 7.12.07.

<sup>85</sup> Many western and Nepali academics have researched how development and education have affected people’s career aspirations and how the lack of opportunity has led to social and political instability as well as outmigration. (Ahern 2001, Fujikura 2003 & 2001, Pigg 1992, Tamang 2002.)

something. Politics for them is a mode of being.<sup>86</sup> The reason people can be so tolerant of the uncertainty within the political parties and student unions is that for them it is not about an effective agenda of productivity, it is a social lifestyle that is justified by their activism. Their political participation connects them to other elites who can reinforce their social position. Some of them will rise to the top and dictate the policy and future path of the country, and the rest will be connected to them through networks of obligation, traditionally known as the *chakari* (sycophantic) or *aphno mānchhe* (own person) system in Nepal (Bista 1991). Both the networks and the investment in them justify everyone's energies, which are substantiated by the ideological underpinnings of their politics.

It is for this reason that speculation is such a common pastime for the students. I realized this while sitting on the middle of a bridge over the Naranghad river at 11:30 at night hearing a group of six NSU (K) male cadres guess whether their leader would run for president. They had been playing this guessing game for over three hours, their beer bottles now empty and they were smoking the last of their cigarettes. The only way this conversation differed from the one we had the previous night was that they had come up with new possible outcomes and how these might affect them. As I grew impatient with mentally noting their passive verbal constructions, I asked them, "Why don't you think Akash will run? Everyone loves him and thinks of him as a leader." They shook their heads and looked at me as if I were

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<sup>86</sup> I am not referring to being here in a phenomenological sense but rather being in the sense that Ghassan Hage lays out in *Against Paranoid Nationalism*. He bases his notion of being on Pierre Bourdieu's sociological frame, in which society is the mechanism for people to create socially significant lives for themselves (2000). Here I conceive of being similar to the way Hage conceptualizes social hope: as "social routes by which individuals can define a meaning in their life" (2003: 15). Political modes of being allow student cadres to sustain themselves and their political aspirations during uncertainty and situations beyond their control.

naïve. Prabal said, “You always ask why. If someone asked me what anthropology (*manabshastra*) is, I would say the science of why.” He continued, “You know why, the party leaders is why.” I replied, “Then why are you still discussing possibilities that won’t transpire?” Samrat interjected, “We have to be prepared for every possibility, let’s see what will be (*heraun ke hunchha*).”<sup>87</sup>

Indeed, the students’ capacity for speculation went beyond my own. They can go on for hours guessing what outcomes might be and how they would be affected, without once analyzing why things have occurred as they have. At first I found this lack of analysis surprising. Yet I soon realized that they are not interested in the why because if they engaged these questions, then they would have to confront the fact that they have little control in the process. Rather, they are wrapped up in a suspended state of uncertainty and powerlessness. Speculation allows them to maintain an investment in the process, to feel they are involved even though they cannot directly affect it. This is part of the larger dynamic of doing politics for general cadres, especially in less ideologically driven parties. They need something to grasp onto in the political process, a process in which they invest time and energy but upon which they have little impact other than crowding streets, shouting slogans, and throwing rocks at the police, casting a vote in an often undemocratic process, campaigning and spreading the party’s political influence, attending political programs and speeches, or contributing to various levels of patronage.

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<sup>87</sup> Translation of an interaction with NSU (K) cadres, 5.25.07.



Figure 8: NSU (D) student cadres at constituent assembly campaign program, Bharatpur, Chitwan, 2007

It is important to emphasize that the way in which these students embrace speculation differs from the “culture of speculation” that Edward LiPuma and Benjamin Lee describe in financial markets (2004: 43). The Nepali students are not assessing the risk involved to maximize their mobility or opportunity; they are not asserting any agency by “playing the field” (ibid: 43). Rather, for them, speculation is a coping measure; it is how the students sustain themselves in situations where the outcome is beyond their control. It is not only the abeyance of power but an active denial of agency.

In this sense they not only embrace the ambiguity but continue to produce it through their speculative habits. Ira Sharkansky argues that when end points are hard to quantify, ambiguity can be a useful measure of active coping in order to avoid a closure that would disappoint. Active coping includes:

[E]fforts to salvage something from a difficult situation; to keep a process going in the expectation of greater opportunities or holding off greater loss; surveying options and recruiting support; changing expectations in the face of conditions that are not likely to change in the short range; and ranking priorities in order to achieve the more important things at the expense of less important things. (1999: 5)

Similar to ambiguity, speculation highlights indeterminacy that is central to democratic politics (Lefort 1988). How student activists take advantage of ambiguity is part of their repertoire of progression in their political ambitions and survival on a personal level. Speculation allows the Nepali students to continue on in times of personal and political ambiguity.

Yet the students' habit for political speculation also signifies ambiguating agency in the way that Debora Battaglia defines when she argues that Trobrianders strategically conceal or reveal their agency in order to cast a doubt on Malinowski's classification of Trobriand social hierarchy (1997). While the students' speculation may be an abeyance of agency, it also conceals their potent potential. As an act, speculation simultaneously invests in the political process while deferring frustration in a way that obfuscates the power dynamics within the political landscape. I have been surprised by how acquiescent student cadres generally are. They have to be put in extreme situations of discomfort or be explicitly denied what they consider to be their right before they become infuriated. But the tipping point provokes them to extremes, and they protest in forms of vandalism and violence. The specter of the students' rage is their political potential. The political leaders try to harness it by directing their frustration at the monarchy, the state, or other political parties in the form of public protest. But history has proven that the

students are quite capable of making their own party and student union leaders the focus of their destructive protests.



Figure 9: NSU (D) cadres protesting during the closed session of their national convention, Nepalganj, Banke 2007

Indeed, it is a delicate balance for the party and student leaders to maintain the general student population's patience as they continue to try it. I observed this at a few student union national conferences in 2007. They were disorganized to the degree that the student cadres were left to wait days for a process that was only supposed to take three days. Each day was full of the unknown. The students would wait on the streets outside the halls for hours; only to receive directives immediately before a program began. Many of them became sick with heatstroke and dysentery. The poor conditions were tolerated until voter lists were released and the students saw that the lists had been manipulated to influence election results. In two of the conventions this incited violence against the leaders, vandalism of both party and public

property, and clashes with the police. These students had traveled from all corners of the country merely to find out that they had been cut from the voter list. At this point these students had gone from patient tolerance maintained by political speculation to extremism as a means of asserting themselves.

I interpret the students' mode of political being and their habits of speculation in the context of a phrase they often use, *heraun ke hunchha*, "let's see what will be." In the introduction, chapter three, and chapter four I argue that the students' political approach is an aesthetic orientation, which I base on Jacques Rancière's assertion that politics is an aesthetic act because it is a willful disassembling of representation; in his words, it constitutes "a kind of community of sense experience that works on the world of assumptions, of the as if that includes those who are not included by revealing a mode of existence of sense experience that has eluded the allocation of part and lots" (1999: 58). The notion of "as-if" is a familiar one to anthropology, although in anthropology it references possibility rather than assumption (see Riles 2010). Leach employs it in his book *Political Systems of Highland Burma* to demonstrate that ritual acts are more a supposition of an ideal state rather than an assertion of political reality (1954: 281). He argued that ethnographers focus on the ideal rather than the empirical as much as do the rituals they study (ibid: 283). These two perspectives of "as-if" capture the two poles of the student cadres' mode of political being; possibility is part of their ambiguating agency, which they exercise through speculation, and assumption occurs when they assert their agency to reveal the hypocrisy of their political process.

In his book *Habits of Hope*, Patrick Shade purports a pragmatic orientation that is open to the possibilities that are to come in one's life (2001: 135). He clarifies that embracing faith is "acting as-if" with no pursuit of an

end but rather a focus on the process of testing one's beliefs by reconstructing the means for the desired effect. "Faith is conviction not about how things are, but rather about how they may be" (ibid. 76). Shade's pragmatic approach to hope is the process by which one draws connections between ends and means in light of the different possibilities or contexts in which they can occur. Hope is the open-ended process of revelation that allows one to conceive of possibilities beyond the present. In chapters three and four, I have used Ernst Bloch's famous metaphor of "not-yet" to demonstrate how Nepali student activism dynamically captures political aspirations of the past and present, and reframes it with a future orientation in order to direct the public toward tomorrow, when they will be in power. They do this by emphasizing what has not been accomplished and the possibilities that they envision. "Not-yet" consciousness is not merely an orientation toward assessing what has not been accomplished and accomplishing it, but rather it is a continual perspective of openness "where every end again and again becomes a means to serve the still utterly opaque...final goal" (1986 [1959]: 1375). In politics that opaque goal is political ideology, the envisioning the world in a particular form. There may be a focus on discrete ends but there is no preference for closure. Nepali student politicians are flexible in their rhetoric, narrative, and action in order to work toward their goals. Similarly, the student cadres exercise coping mechanisms to defer closure but keep the process within the bounds of their political values by holding their leaders accountable.

### **Personalization of Politics**

Jacque Rancière claimed that democracy had a profound effect on political philosophy not because democracy is a set of institutions or a particular formation of a regime, but rather it is a "way for politics to be"

(1999: 99). But as I have established, politics also allows a way for people to be. Student actors identify their party and its ideology as the best way toward a better life for themselves and society. It is in a sense a personalization of politics. Yet people very often deemphasize the personal aspect of politics and focus on their political affiliation and ideology. In this regard, the ideal and the mundane of politics are contingent upon one another, two sides of the same coin, yet people prefer to focus on the ideal. The mundane serves as an underbelly that not only reveals the imperfections of politics but could also jeopardize the entire enterprise.

When interviewing someone new, the first thing I ask is, "Could you please shed light on your personal political history?" I started to notice that the more leftist the individual was the more they eschewed their personal life.<sup>88</sup> The ANNISU (R) president response to this question sums up this trend:

Our history lies within the history of the organization where we work and the movements done by the organization. We are different in the sense that bourgeoisie first think about "I" and "My" and then only go to [think about] "Ours" [*Hamro*]. In our case the foremost thing is "Our Organization," "Our History," and "Our Movement"; "I" is a secondary factor. You have to understand us and our organization in this light. In spite of all this, I would like to tell you [what you want to know] since "we" are public figures.<sup>89</sup>

He then went into detailing his own background. After I noticed the trend I removed the word personal and just asked them to shed light on their political

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<sup>88</sup> Point made by ANNISU (R) student leaders and activists in conversations and interviews taken on 10.12.07, 12.4.07, 11.12.07, 1.8.07, 7.7.07.

<sup>89</sup> Translation of an ANNISU (R) central committee member's interview, taken on 10.12.07.

background. Even then I received responses such as, “ my political background is the history of the party.”<sup>90</sup>

This particular attitude begs the question, how do these cadres consistently forgo their personal identity to uphold their party ideology? One way that I observed was in the sensibility of optimism (*āshabādi*). I kept hearing from the mouths of Maoist students that you “must be optimistic, that you must cast aside cynicism [*nirashabādi*].”<sup>91</sup> As they expounded upon their points, it became obvious that they were referencing a deeper sentiment. After hearing this repeatedly, I stopped one student and said, “I have heard Maoist students make this distinction between yourselves and other student activists. What does the word *āshabādi* encompass for you?” He said,

We locate our life within our political struggle. We believe that we have to be optimistic to achieve our aim; we have to be optimistic in our work and struggle. We need to be determined and undeviated. Not just in our lives but also our lifestyle. In our smallest action we must live up to our ideals. If we do not live up to our aim through our daily lives, then how do we expect it to manifest in society? This is the difference between us and others. This is the difference between an optimist and a cynic. It’s not about our personal gain but that of the society.<sup>92</sup>

The Maoist students’ emphasis on optimism captures Gramsci’s maxim “pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.” The original maxim of Gramsci’s was the masthead for the weekly journal he edited called *Ordine Nuovo: Rassegna Settimanale di Cultura Socialista*. Gramsci was trying to

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<sup>90</sup> Translation of an ANNISU (R) central committee member’s interview, taken on 10.12.07, 12.4.07.

<sup>91</sup> These two words technically translate as hopeful and hopeless respectively, but optimism and cynicism capture their meaning more closely in this context.

<sup>92</sup> Translation taken from an interaction with an ANNISU (R) student cadres, at the Sita Paila commune, 11.30.07.

emphasize that the foundation for our logic must be based on critical theory, whose premise is opposition. Without a pessimistic intellect one will not observe the opposition that is inherent in dialectical epistemology. But in order to avoid despair, this must be coupled with the conviction that positive change can occur: not an intellectual deduction from observed facts, but a determined decision, an act of will, regardless of the conflicts of reality that one faces. A pessimistic intellect without optimism will merely create a stagnant cynic.

The context in which I had pressed this student may have invited this tone. We spoke at a Maoist student co-op that I was visiting specifically to get a sense of how they lived their everyday lives and how the organization was inserted into their lives. Nonetheless, his explanation captured what other students insinuated through their use of the words “optimism” and “cynicism.” He further explained that this was regularly impressed upon students in their trainings and discussions, so it is a deliberately shared ideal. Nonetheless, this sensibility goes beyond the Maoists’ indoctrination. This is also a general political value, as illuminated by the concept of organization as expressed by an ex-student leader from NSU (K). He explained to me that the most important matter for a political organization is not their ideology but their activists’ commitment to it. This commitment must be directed toward a mission over and above the students’ private affairs.<sup>93</sup>

So why, as admitted by most everyone, do the Maoist students have more ability to meld their theory (or political ideals) into practice than other students affiliated with other organizations? One reason is that the Maoists’ mission is a complete restructuring of society, politics, culture, family, and

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<sup>93</sup> Translation of a former NSU (K) central committee member’s interview, taken on 11.16.07.

individual lives, whereas other student organizations' missions are more narrowly defined, a struggle for democracy, republic, and/or a socialist state structure. Other activists' struggle, especially in latent periods, does not encompass every facet of their lives. They can disconnect their family or private lives from their political lives, which they can cordon off to the street or party office. Yet, when one is in the middle of struggle, conviction makes sense. It is for this reason that all the political parties are oriented toward the incompleteness of their political movements, because it provides them with a metaphorical frame that emphasizes commitment and discipline to the parties' ambitions.<sup>94</sup> One student from a smaller leftist party highlighted this when he was describing how leadership in his party was determined. He said that since their cadres are taught the notion of sacrifice and devotion, only those who fully incorporate this into their behavioral pattern prove their leadership capabilities.<sup>95</sup>

Regardless, most student activists contextualize their activities as serving the larger good of their party and it is hard for them to separate their politics from their lifestyle. This became apparent to me after I interviewed a female student from the ANNFSU at my apartment. On the bus to her office she told me she had hepatitis A and this was her first outing in a month. As we were waiting for our separate appointments in the party office, she began to yawn. I asked her if she was tired. She shrugged as she continued yawning and pointed to a poster behind the president's desk. It was a picture of Krishna Bhatarai, one of the formidable leaders of UML who was active

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<sup>94</sup> This is a point that I discuss in chapter three and is accurately depicted in this quote: "Our character has been that none of our movements have been complete; it means it has yet to be completed." –Current minister on the difference between student movements of today and of his day

<sup>95</sup> Translation of an ANNFSU (*Ekrikrit*) central committee member's interview, taken on 11.10.07.

underground for much of Panchayat rule. Below his portrait there was a quote that said, “In politics there is no such thing as exhaustion.” I had just heard this activist’s background and I knew that she had experienced a tenth of the hardship of this leader, but she still identified with him because she chose to carry on the mission he began. She had created an identity through living up to those ideals.<sup>96</sup> Her ability to commit to her leader’s political mission indicated that for these students the personal is political as much as the reverse, politics is personal. They embrace this by enacting their political aspiration on an individual scale as much as on a societal scale.



Figure 10: NSU (K) campus leader, Padma Kenya Campus, Kathmandu 2004

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<sup>96</sup> Translation taken from an interaction with an ANNFSU (*Akhil*) student cadres, at the central committee office, 11.25.07.

## **Conclusion**

As I demonstrated here, the aesthetics of politics as public service can serve as a net for what political aspirations are and how they drive societal change or maintain tradition. The way in which people articulate it through the notions of suffering and sacrifice serves as a fine example of capturing political imaginary in the sense that we can understand people's political actions and motivations through the categories they employ. Here I have contextualized the historical anxiety and uncertainty that Nepali politics has come to represent. The analysis that I put forward is meant to provide a nuanced view of how political power and its conditions are accepted with ambivalence, how people focus on their ideals in order to justify their political investment (even turning their ambivalence into complicity), and how people cope with the outcomes. I have attempted to do this by analyzing Nepali student political actors' categories through their actions and their explanations thereof in order to understand how for them the personal is political, something upon which they build their identities and their social world, which is encompassed by political participation in their everyday lives.

### CHAPTER 3 *ĀNDOLAN JARINCHHA!:* THE MOVEMENT CONTINUES

Our view has been that none of our movements have been complete. This means it has yet to be completed. –Current minister on the difference between student movements of the different generations, 2.4.07

History is a constructive, discursive process (Foucault 1972; Rancière 1994; Touraine 1998). Those that frame the discourse of history are the ones who dictate what is possible in the past, present, and future. For Nepali political actors, this process is the basis of their political imaginary, because they tell and retell the facts of their history in order to establish their sense of self, agenda, and aspiration. In this chapter I heed Malinowski's assertion that what is of interest to fieldworkers is not a past as it actually was but rather as it is remembered (1938: xxv-xxixii in Spencer 2007: 58). For this reason, I focus on political movements and protest not only to demonstrate how people mark or reference history but also to reveal how history is conceptualized and experienced and the socio-cultural weight that recollected themes like political movements have in the present. With this as my basis, I argue that political movements are key events that are historically referenced while they are concurrently reenacted as an opportunity to mark one's place. Political movements are concurrently novel and ritual because they signify both political change and the generational transmission of politics. Throughout this chapter I will also analyze people's sense of the unfinished in order to demonstrate the central role the *āndolan* (movement) plays in Nepali political imaginary and its perpetual forward momentum.

This chapter focuses on the mythos of Nepali political history as artifacts for their political imaginary. Political imaginary as a category

encompasses collective notions of the contemporary. It may be informed by myth but it is molded by people's sense of history in a dynamic way; it is a result of the collective dialectic with the social and physical surroundings. I consider the artifacts that comprise the Nepali historical narrative of politics as an expression of hope rather than one of myth. Myth has been commonly analyzed to grasp collective understandings of societal and cultural form but its transcendental position keeps it from being a comprehensive heuristic to understand what motivates people. As social change occurs, myths in large part remain static; for that reason myth can only provide a partial explanation for people's orientations and aspirations. Myth's boundaries are not contingent upon temporal limitations. It transcends time and often represents people's notions of themselves as individuals or as a collective regardless of time or circumstance. Therefore, myth is a symbolic analytic that may inform hermeneutic analysis but cannot provide empirical data that can be placed within a time frame. Rather, the temporal orientation of hope has provided theorists a paradigmatic alternative to the limits of synchronic and diachronic bearings.

Hope is an "intellectual emotion," the act of postponing desire (Averill 1996: 24). It is both imaginative and grounded; it perceives the possibilities from what already is. Ernst Bloch warns that hope must be grounded in "*docta spes*" or reality principle (Kauffman 1997: 49).<sup>97</sup> As I will demonstrate through my data, hope has the unique ability to obviate the conceived

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<sup>97</sup> In his essay "On the Present State of Philosophy" (1950) Bloch argues that the three categories, "Front," "Novum," and "Matter," that are central to the dialectic process presuppose hope. "Front" is the most advanced phase in which the next phase is not decided. "Novum" is the possibility of "'not-yet'-consciousness," or "'not-yet'-become." And "Matter" is "What-Is-according-to-possibility, i.e. that which is defined in terms of conditions by what in each case is capable of appearing historically, and What-Is-in-possibility, i.e. the real substratum of possibility in the dialectical process." He describes matter as the "substance in which our future, which is also its own future, is delivered." (1986 [1959]: 1371).

endpoint. It is the process of deferring what cannot be attained in the present (Mar 2005: 365). In a sense it is an act of one placing one's agency in abeyance (Crapanzano 2004:100). Despite long-term uncertainties, hope has the ability to temporalize potential, giving it a sense of future. Furthermore, the open-ended quality of hope allows it to be a shared objective fueled by the alternatives that individual perspectives can bring to it.

This chapter demonstrates how the Nepali political actors, particularly the students, are continually enacting hope by sustaining a sense of the unfinished. Since they thrive during contentious political action, they will put political foreclosure in abeyance in order to become cultivated in a political system that cannot currently offer them any opportunity other than being an activist. I will use the analytic of hope to track how the students' "not-yet" orientation is the means by which the collective base envisions the possibilities.

### **Ritualized Novelty: A Historical Narrative of Political Movements**

As a focus of analysis, social movements have allowed social scientists to understand various types of subversive communal action that challenge the dominant order of things. Social movements were given special precedent because they seemed to be directly accessible to the masses in ways that legislative, political, and policy processes of the state were not. As political action, social movements are often considered the anti-system way to impact the system. But their impact is broader than that, because they affect social discourse and values. They claim to disseminate ideas to the larger public, which has the potential to impact the mainstream political process by affecting voting trends and public opinion. In other words, they are meant to shift public priorities concerning political and social issues. They serve as

contemporary collective action that can “announce to society that a fundamental problem exists in a given area. They have a growing symbolic function; one can probably speak of a *prophetic function*. They are a kind of *new media*” (Melucci 1985: 797 in Escobar 1992b: 407).

The study of social movements springs from modern social and political theories concerning social and economic (Marxist) revolution. Touraine was the first to describe the emergence of new social movements (NSM), which emphasized identity and cultural autonomy rather than state-centered political power (1988). But others have been skeptical of the bifurcating effect of marking a new era of social movements (Escobar 1992a; Gledhill 2000). They argue that the emphasis should not lie upon an essential difference between what has become termed the new social movement and traditional political action. There has not necessarily been a shift in the way people conduct protest; rather, one should conceptualize the difference as a new analytic orientation to how political action is assessed. Following critiques that modern social theory generalizes and homogenizes individual experience, traditional social movement theory has also been dismissed as flattening the diverse dimensions of social action and actors’ agendas. Cast in this light, NSM theory tried to focus on the more molecular struggles over identities, ideas, and traditions in order to complicate the tendency to set social movements within the larger structural parameters of state and global political and economic power. Nevertheless, there has been an implicit tension in how social science balances the more macro-level, political-economy approach and the focus on specific strategies of everyday resistance (Ableman 1996; Assies 2000; Chuang 2004; Edelman 2001; Escobar 1992; Giri 1992; Inoue 2004; Skylair 1998).

This tension does not only exist in the social sciences. It is also a tension in how activists derive meaning from their actions, how they deem their political action should be assessed. In Nepali politics, they manipulate the “prophetic function” of the movement in order to justify their political agendas, ideology, identities, and everyday lives. Political movements are not only a way to show how people mark or reference history but also serve as a metaphor for how political history is conceptualized and experienced. In this section I will put the *āndolan* in “political time” and “political space” in order to demonstrate that it may be considered a heightened and intensified event but it has an entrenched place in the Nepali political norm (Spencer 2007: 120).

It is the *āndolan* that frames their political goals within larger societal definitions of rights and responsibilities in order to highlight the wrongs of the current social order and the possibility for the change that the activists want to bring. And for the political actors themselves, it is the *āndolan* that serves as a metaphor for things happening, political history unfolding at extreme paces. Nonetheless, much of the political action is historically repetitive. On an abstract level, the *āndolan* can be interpreted as a reenactment of key political events. There is a simultaneous sense of rapid newness and nothing new at all. Here I will demonstrate why the *āndolan* is so central to the Nepali political culture and how, through strategic framing, political actors have generalized it to justify all their political action.

The crux of the student and political actors’ emphasis on the *āndolan* lies within the conceptual category of framing processes. Mayer N. Zald’s (1996: 262) definition of frames is worth noting:

Frames are the specific metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues used to render

or cast behavior and events in an evaluative mode and to suggest alternative modes of action.

Focusing on framing processes highlights how movements strategically articulate themselves in order to appeal to the masses. A movement must define the implications of success and failure from within the cultural system that can identify the agenda that they support. In other words, the demand for change and the means of change must exist within one common social framework that must be familiar to people yet also suggest the possibility for change. Nepali political actors have nurtured the importance of the *āndolan* through the mobilization of culture, ideology, and discourse in similar ways, not only to gain the attraction of the public but for themselves. They have done this to such a degree that now it is a referential composite of their entire endeavor as well as justification for it.

The *āndolan* (movement) in Nepali political culture has come to represent the social movement in the sense that social movements serve as a democratic alternative that can confront issues of justice and representation despite the structural limits of the system (Hachhethu 2002b; Krämer 2002; Lawoti 2005; Pradhan 2002; Thapa 2004). The *āndolan* refers to political struggle. It is a somewhat nebulous concept because there are historically discrete movements that take form from different issues—political, social, ethnic diversity, or gender rights. Yet in Nepali politics the word alone indicates the entirety of a person’s experience in politics.<sup>98</sup> When Nepali political actors talk about “the movement continuing,” they mean that they

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<sup>98</sup> For example, the students that I was on the streets with in 2003-2006 use the word *āndolan* to refer to their action since the Movement Against Regression through The People’s Movement part two. An older political activist will include the first People’s Movement and perhaps the student movement of 2036 (1978) in his reference to the *āndolan*, depending on what he has experienced. For the ANNISU (R) students, *āndolan* also refers to the Maoist movement. If they want to specifically cite the contribution of their party, they will discuss the Maoist War the *Jana Yuddha* (People’s War).

will continue their struggle, which began in 1950 with the first rebellion supporting multi-party democracy. Over the years the concept of *āndolan* has come to incorporate and represent different agendas. For that reason one must consider a person's background and political affiliation in order to understand what they mean when they use the term *āndolan*. Furthermore, Nepali political actors assign meaning to or claim the description of "*āndolan*" for most of their political action. This tendency particularly reveals the gap between the hyper-idealized category that student movements are social movements and the public opinion that student movements are an entrenched political tactic of the students who serve as party appendages.



Figure 11: Eight Student Unions cadres protesting during the Movement Against Regression, Baag Bazaar, Kathmandu 2004

Nonetheless, Nepali political actors don't see any discrepancy in their definition of the *āndolan* because as a broader concept it provides effectiveness not only to student movements but to all their actions. The Nepali student

activists and politicians have a firm grounding in political and sociological theory and therefore know what defines a social movement. They make these academic definitions meaningful through their own culturally prescribed notions of what is political. The way in which Nepali politicians and students employ the *āndolan* as an ideal type is what gives their political being weight within the context of Nepali political culture and history.

The student movements are very important to the political parties because they have caused historic leaps in their accomplishments. In short, they have regularly changed the political tide. It was the students who were exiled in India who helped King Tribhuvan overthrow the Rana regime in 2007 (1950). It was the student movement of 2036 (1978) that caused King Birendra to allow the national referendum of 2038 (1980). The joint students' movement of 2004 was another example of seizing an opportunity to push forward their political agenda. After the government was unable to charge arrested students with sedition, the students had the political advantage to transgress the normative political demands and call for a republic. They radicalized the discourse of the political parties' Movement Against Regression. In all these cases,<sup>99</sup> the student movements' impact on the state was that they forced the state to react and reform in order to rebuild itself (Tarrow 1996).

Traditionally speaking the students have wavered between educational and political movements.<sup>100</sup> When the government is an active democracy,

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<sup>99</sup> For a more detailed account of these movements and a more complete history of student movements please see my article "A Crisis in Nepali Student Politics?: Analyzing the Gap between Politically Active and Non-Active Students" (2005).

<sup>100</sup> In the article "Student Movements in Nepal: Their Parameters and Their Idealized Forms" I analyze the student activists' shift between education movements and political movements as shifting involvements in student movements from norm-oriented agendas to value-oriented agendas (2007: 276). Philip Altbach distinguished between the "norm-oriented" movement, one concerned with pragmatic goals and generally the product of a specific limited issue, and

whereby their mother organizations are in power, they focus on the educational sector as the place to press their agenda for change. The educational movement is done on the downtime, to fill in the gaps between political uprisings. Nonetheless, these two types of movements are collapsed both historically and rhetorically. It is true that many political uprisings came out of the suppression of educational demands during the Panchayat rule. More recently, however, the students have claimed to be on the streets fighting for students' rights and roles, yet they bar general students from going to school by calling strikes or compelling them to engage in street agitation rather than attending classes.

Jonathan Grossman's analysis of the slogan of South African youth activists, "liberation before education," in the last years of apartheid is a useful perspective on the convergence of political issues and educational access (2004: 61). One must consider, "Whose liberation? Whose education?" In Nepal both the parties and the student activists derail the country's education system in the name of justice often without considering if this is something the public wishes them to do on their behalf. The emphasis on the *āndolan* itself highlights the discrepancies between the students' and the parties' sense of end point and the public's threshold for political struggle at the expense of a secure life. Particularly the student activists' orientation over the last few years reconfirms the entrenched political process of getting ahead in politics through struggle, which extends people's sense of what is left to be achieved.

The Maoists are the most straightforward about this discrepancy because they don't hold the pretension that education comes before politics in

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the "value-oriented" movement, which is concerned with broad, ideological issues (Altbach 1967: 87).

any scenario. Their interpretation is more holistic; basically they feel that everything is political. As one Maoist student explained to me,

If we are only seeing the branches of a mango tree and expect that it will bear mangoes, our thinking will not be holistic since a mango tree has its roots—if they are rotten then the branches cannot bear fruit. In the same way, if we say that we are concerned with [the] educational sector and don't care about other sectors like politics, we will never be able to obtain our objective.<sup>101</sup>

For them, education is a right, therefore fighting for that right on behalf of the citizens makes it a political issue. Weaknesses in society inform their educational agenda, which they feel only a political approach can solve. One Maoist student said to me, “If education is not strong the society will be weak, therefore we need to focus on education, we need to restructure it in order to prepare people to properly live in society, have the proper ambitions to serve society, not themselves.”<sup>102</sup> He also commented that it is through education that people learn political ideology and the ability to engage in politics.

Nonetheless, the Maoists' sensibility captures the reasoning of other politically affiliated students even if they don't articulate it in the same ideological terms. For instance, in May 2003, it was not until Devi Lal Poudel, a student in the district of Palpa, was shot dead that the student movement over the rising price of petrol took a new turn to assist their mother parties in the Movement Against Regression. The students immediately demanded the resignation of the King's appointed prime minister and the reinstatement of the Parliament. A student leader said to me, “It was at this time that we realized what was at risk. The issue was no longer about our right to

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<sup>101</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) central committee member's interview, 12.4.07.

<sup>102</sup> Translation of an interaction with an ANNISU (R) Lalitpur district leader on 11.24.06.

education or the price of petrol but the principle of protesting the price of petrol. Our democratic rights were at stake and that changed the nature of the movement. It had to change. There was so much more at risk, including the honor of a martyr.”<sup>103</sup> After this, the students stepped up their support for the five-party joint movement as sister organizations. The basis of all the student movements is their right to protest. It becomes an overt political issue when they feel that right is being compromised, but all of their *āndolan* activity is an expression of their political agenda. They use the political movement to substantiate their other movements in a larger historical narrative of just action for the people.



Figure 12: Political program commemorating the first anniversary of Devi Lal Poudel's death, 2004.

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<sup>103</sup> Translation of an interview with an NSU (K) central committee member on 12.4.04.

In his analysis of the Y2K frenzy Jean Baudrillard wrote, “[t]he only thing we try to imagine is how to get rid of our history which weighs so much and then start all over again” (1998). The emphasis of the *āndolan* does this and also the opposite. Rhetorically it gives weight to the historical accomplishments of the political and student movements in order to justify all of politics. But it also provides a categorical openness; every *āndolan* allows the possibility to start all over again. This aspect is a tacit denial of the ritualized entrenchment of the *āndolan* in Nepali political history. There is necessity for this denial because it is through the *āndolan* that each generation becomes politicians. I now turn my focus to how individual political actors locate themselves in Nepali political history through their own experience of *āndolan*.

### **Locating Oneself in Political History**

Students and politicians incessantly utilize historical events as buzzwords in order to highlight a particular role the students have played. This allows them to insert themselves into the political terrain and establish an identity within it. By continually referencing these events, they become vague enough that they are abstracted and then become the substantial underpinnings for political imaginary. They create an ideal that allows them to have a shared sense of what politics has been, should be, and what is possible. It is at the same time amorphous and limited because it is self-referencing on both an abstract and a tangible level. For instance, political history is referenced in speeches through metaphors of land, country, or religion in ways that point to tangible facts and definable boundaries but insinuate an abstract sense of the possible.

This tactic also places people in their proper position within the political structure. To be in politics one must be an activist. It is how one

begins one's political career. All students, regardless of their political affiliations, continually refer to themselves as *āndolankāri* (activists) or, more surprisingly, *krantikāri* (revolutionaries). One would expect the Maoists and leftists to feel comfortable with claiming the *krantikāri* title, but all the student organizations use it to designate themselves as active agents for change. I even heard the term *krantikāri* used to greet the students at the NSU (D) 2007 national convention. They claimed the title regardless of the fact that the NSU (D) did not participate in the eight-joint-student-union movement in 2004 and their party leader had served as the prime minister appointed by the King during the Movement Against Regression.<sup>104</sup> Still, they referred to themselves



Figure 13: Eight Student Unions' cadres vandalizing a government vehicle, Baag Bazaar, Kathmandu 2004

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<sup>104</sup> In 2004 Sher Bahadur Deuba accepted the position of King appointed prime minister and was then ousted again in 2005 when the King led a military coup. The CPN-UML party also decided to join the 2004 government that the King asked the parties to put together. Their student organization, ANNFSU (*Akhil*), was actively against the move, yet they did not have enough control or influence and as a result had to withdraw from the eight-joint-student-union movement in 2004.

as such because they had participated in the People's Movement part two. Just like all the other student organizations they highlight the history of movements and link themselves to it. By doing this they confirm their place as contentious political actors.

The action of the state identifying people as *āndolankāris* further reinforces their place in the political realm. It is both an individual feat and a public display of accomplishment. During the height of the Movement Against Regression, I observed a number of people negotiating with the police to let them reach Ratna Park before they were arrested. The police would thwart their protests in Jamal, Putali Sadak, or Bir Hospital, dragging people toward the police vans. I asked a student why everyone was only willing to be arrested after they reached Ratna Park. He responded, "Ratna Park was the heart of the 1990 People's Movement. It was where thousands from the general public (*amjanatā*) joined hands with the activists and marched toward the palace to make the King surrender. We are *āndolankāri*, we expect arrest but it means more to get arrested at democracy wall."<sup>105</sup><sup>106</sup> People needed to get arrested to mark their participation in the movement. But this action is obviously glorified because being arrested in particular places that have symbolic meaning for the history of the movement means more than being

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<sup>105</sup> Democracy wall was at Ratna Park intersection and commemorated the protest of the 1990 People's Movement and the ongoing Movement Against Regression. The ANNFSU (*Akhil*)'s office, known as the red house (*rato ghar*), was at that intersection since the 1970s. Their office served as a logistical hub for both the 1990 People's Movement and the Movement Against Regression from 2001 to 2004. From 2004, after the Movement Against Regression protests intensified, there was a ban on public gathering in particular areas. Ratna Park was one of them. Anyone found protesting in these designated spots was immediately arrested. After the King's takeover in 2005, the ANNFSU (*Akhil*) was evicted from *rato ghar* and the building was torn down. The King's government destroyed democracy wall and built a pedestrian bridge in order to curb protest. After 2006, democracy wall was rebuilt, and the ANNFSU (*Akhil*) erected a garden dedicated to the political struggle called Republican park containing a statue of one of their fallen leaders. In 2006, the ANNISU (R) opened their first central committee office since they went underground during the People's War in the Ratna Park intersection.

<sup>106</sup> Translation of an interaction with an ANNFSU (*Akhil*) student cadre on 5.13.05.

arrested in an anonymous gully. In this sense the activists act out what has come before in order to feel they are truly a part of the movement.



Figure 14: Eight Party activists being arrested, Ratna Park, Kathmandu 2004

The students not only gain recognition from their leaders by being arrested but it is through this process that they join the annals of *āndolan* history. In 2005, I joined a few Nepali Congress central committee members in order to visit some student leaders who had been detained at the central jail. I had independently tried to get access to these students but the security forces denied my request. When they saw me with the political leaders they apologized to me, saying they were not aware of my connections. We were all lead to the police chief's office. It was a large office with couches surrounding the perimeter, enough for our entire entourage of over a dozen to sit comfortably. The police chief sat at his desk and chatted with the leaders while we had tea and waited for them to produce the students. As the students entered, everyone was very friendly with one another. There was no

tension. The main NC leader asked the students if they were ok, if they were being treated fairly and getting what they needed. They silently nodded as the police chief looked on. The leader then said, "I remember all the times I stayed here. What years? It was definitely in 2017 (1960) and then a couple times during the Panchayat era. It was less crowded then and you could not bribe the officers for cigarettes." He then turned to the police chief and said, "You were not here then, were you? You were too young. I think you must have been a schoolboy *mandale*<sup>107</sup> when I was here." Everyone laughed. The police chief shook his head and said that he had not been working at that time but that he was in 2036 (1978). Then, pointing to a second-tier leader, he said, "You were jailed here then, weren't you?" The other NC leader said yes and started recalling his experience in 2036. The leaders and police proceeded to reminisce about their experiences in jail together for over twenty minutes. During this time the students sat silently and listened.<sup>108</sup> Later one of the arrested students told me that he will know that he has achieved the status of party leader when he is "sitting in their seats" telling his experience to other arrested students in the police chief's office.<sup>109</sup> The experience of jail makes one a part of the political club. By jointly claiming the title of *āndolankāri*, political actors are able to transfer their own experience across the generations, mapping the glory of the ongoing political movement onto those to come. This not only gives credence to the students' experiences of hardship, but it also reinforces the party leaders' identity, which comes from their activist experience. It allows them to lay claim to the space that the students have

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<sup>107</sup> *Mandale* is the term for someone who is considered a lackey of the King. Its etymology stems from the pro-Panchayat student organization the *rāstriya bidyārthi mandal* (national student council). For a more detailed history of the organization and the term *mandale*, see Snellinger 2005.

<sup>108</sup> This interaction took place on 6.03.05.

<sup>109</sup> Based on an interaction with an NSU (K) student leader on 8.15.05.

historically occupied despite the fact that they occupy roles that dictate the political mainstream.

The whole process is mutually reaffirming. The students' reputation as *āndolankāri* not only enables them to make their mark in politics but also provides them with a false sense of autonomy. Ultimately they are sister organizations to the political parties. They may be a part of the Free Student Union but everything they do is for their party. It is on the streets during their public protest that they are able to critique the political system that their mother organizations are a part of. The political parties allow them this space because they know that if the public supports the students, then the public will support them. The streets are the space that the parties cordon off for the students to be the forefront of their *āndolan*. Nonetheless the student activists feel true freedom during the *āndolan*. A student activist explained the realization that the *āndolan* provided for the students in the following way:

Yesterday, the student organization's role was only to powerfully assist the parties. They were treated as nurseries, which used to supply plants for the parties. In the nursery the seeds used to be watered and fertilized. The role of the student organizations was limited to this... and to produce cadres for Nepali Congress. But now because of the students' movement and the faith that we have obtained (from the public), our role is not that ...We have come to realize through the movement that we are the force with the most potential. We are interfering to be able to point a finger at the parties, saying that you cannot compromise with the King in an inappropriate way. This means we are also in the mainstream of politics.<sup>110</sup>

The students are eager to highlight any progress they make because in reality their ability to influence politics is very limited. They must rely on relations of

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<sup>110</sup> Translation of an interview with an NSU (K) central committee leader on 1.24.04.

patronage in order to rise in the ranks of the parties (Hachhethu 2002a; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2004; Upadhyaya 2002), while simultaneously convincing the public that they can be effective politicians who can provide alternatives to their mother organizations' policies. These idealistic articulations of autonomy are meant to both contest and conceal the underbelly of political constraint. Such perceived autonomy gives purpose to the students' struggles, which allows them to have the conviction they need to sustain the dedication and passion for their protracted *āndolan*. Regardless ideals hover over reality and sometimes they fail to coalesce within the structural limitations of the political system that the students are entrenched in.

Furthermore, the compulsion to do the *āndolan* has molded Nepali political culture because it has created a social orientation of opportunity within incompleteness. A president of a campus union admitted to me that he had been studying at that campus for twelve years. I asked him why, observing that he is either very studious or very lazy. He said it was not about that, he said it was his political platform. It had taken him that long to get up in student politics and he wanted to continue with it, so he will stay at the campus and continue being active in student politics until the opportunities come that allow him to work his way up the political hierarchy.<sup>111</sup> This is not an abnormal experience. All the student organizations' presidents are between the age of thirty and forty. What it highlights is that those who want to gain from politics outnumber available political opportunities. It is for this reason that students hold so tightly to the opportunity to engage in protest through political and educational movements. Their identity is wrapped up in movements because that has been

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<sup>111</sup> Based on an interaction with ANNFSU (*Akhil*) president, 10.2.06.

the way they have historically effected reform and gained notoriety. One student highly critiqued the impulse of protest as a means to promote oneself in politics. He explained that the way people have become known and politically groomed has been through the *āndolan*, not through dedication to their party's ideology or palpable leadership abilities. He said that the tradition of politics based on rock throwing and vandalism, rather than political ideology, policymaking, or governance, is hurting Nepal.<sup>112</sup>

The students' traditional role of being at the forefront of political struggle has successfully brought political change. Nonetheless, the post-peace talks period from 2006 through 2008, which everyone has heralded as a hopeful time, had been marked with a sense of stagnation and uncertainty for the students. They had to wait to see how their parties would negotiate their position on the new political frontier. It was a defining moment because the students not only had to live up to the role they established for themselves during their protest phase, but they needed to create relevant a forum for themselves, one that will provide them an active role in a situation in which their parties are in the government. It was difficult for the students to come to terms with the limits of their subjectivity but they also tried to exercise their agency in order to overcome those limits. They struggle for a fixture that reinforces rather than crushes their sense of what they have accomplished, what influence they have, and how they can continue to affect change that fulfills their own ideas of what the political scenario ought to be. Nonetheless, what has become apparent is that they don't know how to operate without protest and political unrest. The younger students in particular have never

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<sup>112</sup> Account based on an interaction with an ANNFUSU (*Ekikrit*) central committee leader on 8.7.05.

experienced anything else in their political careers. They had been fighting for something they don't know how to exist within. It is within political instability that they have come to find meaning, autonomy, and a sense of agenda. Political instability has been the opportunity in which they made a personal investment. Perpetual struggle is not only people's political orientation but their social orientation as well. It is how they have positioned themselves and made meaning of their actions in society, as well as created a strong community of cadres who jointly engage this struggle.

### **Temporal Bracketing: Collapsing the Past, Present, and Future**

When Herbert Kitchelt posited that political systems are able to cope with substantive complexity but not temporal complexity (1993: 25), he was referring to social movements' orientation to the past and the future, from which activists are trying to impact change in the present. A policy may claim to be future-oriented, but it is always grounded in the present and must be executed within contemporary constraints, whereas social-movement processes are based directly in a relationship between time and transgression (Jordan 2002: 40). Social movements seek to affect degrees of structural change on the basis of which the future can be constructed. This approach could be past-oriented, future-oriented, or both simultaneously, but either temporal location can be used to criticize and transform the present. The *āndolan* has been an ongoing demand to secure political, economic, and social justice. The Nepali political actors have three fixed points, the establishment of multi-party democracy in 1950, 1990, and 2006, which allow them to frame the possibilities for the future in ways that people recognize, while providing room for the imagined changes they want to bring (Roka 2004; Upadhyaya 2002). The movements' grammar of politics is not structurally confined to the tropes

of the present, which can make it difficult for institutions to react to it without adopting the social movement's language, which some argue can cause subtle changes in the political order itself (Jordan 2002; McCarthy 1996). For the Nepali political order, the gradual changes that occur from the *āndolan* are what sustain it and entrench it as an order.

Nepali political actors make meaning of the past as a means not only to motivate and justify their political struggle but also to provide forward momentum to a destination in front of them. Nepali political history, particularly framed by the *āndolan*, is an important tool that grounds people's sense of what has happened, what has been accomplished, what is unfinished, and what role they can and should play in the continual process of struggle. The process of citing these events is what makes them historical. The continual referencing of them mythologizes them, and their unintended consequences are collapsed into the purpose of the current event in order to mobilize people to some possible future.

Indeed, discourse plays an important role in the process of framing each *āndolan*. This is most prevalent in political speeches and the media. Politicians and student politicians employ rhetoric for change to convince people of the possibilities that would open up if they were to mobilize. Urgency, agency, and possibility are highlighted in political speeches in order to inspire people to mobilize against the state. Urgency is framed as temporality in this way: "If you act against injustice today, you can ensure the necessary change for tomorrow." In Nepal, the metaphors in the speeches tend to be religious, relying on Hindu metaphors that incite people's sense of agency and responsibility. Such metaphors imply not only that citizens should have rights, but also that it is their responsibility to fight for those rights.

These metaphors are also commonly known references that people are familiar with, which can create a feeling of solidarity (Hachhethu 2002). Metaphors of the nation and land are also meant to do this, a sense of responsibility to act and support is insinuated by referencing shared notions of solidarity, like family, religion, and country. In all these strategies, possibility is set in the past, present, future, and in metaphors that transcend temporality.

Ritualized political events are another major aspect of framing discourse. Political events are not only ritualized because they are reenacted but they are also referenced in a way that raised them to mythic status in political history. An example of mythologizing events through repetition was how people cited the 2004 nationwide mini-referendum campaign on campuses and their impact on the public's sentiment toward the monarch. In 2006 during the peace talks, I continually heard party leaders and student activists mention this campaign as an example of how the students play a central role in politics; students organize awareness programs such as these to inform the student population as well as represent this population's voice in ways that compel the general public to support them. A number of people I interviewed after the People's Movement part two claimed that their organization had spearheaded this campaign.<sup>113</sup> The way they described it, I at first doubted they were discussing the mini-referendum campaign that I

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<sup>113</sup> The following people claimed responsibility for their party spearheading this campaign: CPN-UML central committee member in an interview on 10.12.06, CPN-UML foreign department member in an interview on 10.13.06, ANNFSU (*Akhil*) central committee member in an interview on 10.18.06, NSU (D) central committee leader in an interaction on 10.30.06, ANNFSU (*Akhil*) general student cadre in an interview on 11.1.06, CPN-UML central committee member and head of the ideology department in an interview on 11.2.06, CPN-UML central committee member in an interview on 11.3.06, ANNFSU (*Akhil*) central committee member in an interview on 11.10.06, CPN-UML central committee member in an interview on 11.12.06, ANNISU (R) campus leader in an interaction during the national education referendum, 11.23.06.

had closely observed in 2004. They were describing it as if it were a systematic campaign that had been carried out on every campus by their organization. The various mini-referendums that I had observed were ad hoc programs of symbolic protest. The mini-referendum had been first carried out by a campus president of NSU (K) who was adept at organizing satirical, symbolic protests.<sup>114</sup> Since it had become an immediate media attraction, other campuses began carrying out this type of referendum. But it was never an organized campaign. In fact, there were news articles at the time raising doubts as to whether the referendum results were indicative of public sentiment because they were not being executed in a systematic fashion.<sup>115</sup>

In one interview while a student was carrying on about the impact of this program and how his organization had been key organizers, I asked him which year it occurred. When he told me 2004, I said, “Oh yeah, I was here for that. Prabal started that trend on Pashupathi campus, correct?” He was a bit disoriented and taken aback that I had a perspective that countered his. He said, “I don’t remember who had the original inspiration for the program, but since we had a stronghold at most of the campuses at the time, we oversaw it as an organized campaign.”<sup>116</sup> Everyone wanted to claim responsibility for the 2004 mini-referendum because they wanted to ascribe it with historic importance. The reason being is that the referendum plays a central role in the imaginary of political struggle. It began with the 1981 nationwide people’s

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<sup>114</sup> In 2006 this student was an NSU (K) central committee member. When he organized the first mini-referendum he was the NSU (K) campus president of Pashupati Campus. In 2005 he was also jailed for organizing a dog felicitation, whereby the students felicitated five dogs in the manner that the King is felicitated when he goes to villages. Each one of the dogs represented each level of holiness (or authority) the King holds. The King’s title is *shri panch*, which roughly translates to majesty of the fifth realm. The prime minister holds the title of *shri tin*, majesty of the third realm.

<sup>115</sup> Himalayan Times May 13, 2004, Kathmandu Post May 11, 2004.

<sup>116</sup> Translation from an interview with an ANNFSU (*Akhil*) central committee member on 10.18.06.

referendum that determined whether the Panchayat government would remain in power or multi-party democracy would be established. Since then it has become a political tactic to prove one's party agenda has public support. It allows political actors to capture the public sentiment of what should be based on what the current system is.

During a 2007 ANNISU (R) mini-referendum over the issue of nationalized education, the central committee president explained to me that the mini-referendum was a good way to gather the opinion of the students and organize it into a political agenda. He also mentioned the 2004 mini-referendum over the monarchy but did not claim responsibility for it because his organization was underground at that time. Yet there was a performative dimension to the referendum that he was not willing to admit. This became apparent when my research assistant commented that there should be a third option on the ballots for an educational tier system. He said, "I am sure you know that it is a more complicated issue than if the national education is necessary or not." The president chastised him, incredulously saying, "What? In referendums there are only two choices, yes or no. Is there a middle state between having a King and not having a King? You know that is not how it runs." I then asked him to reconfirm whether that was the proper way to conduct a referendum because in the 2004 mini-referendum the students provided three choices, active monarch, constitutional monarch, or republic. He replied, "I don't know what they did in 2004 because I was underground, but if that is how they did it, it was not in the historical spirit of the referendum. In 2036 (1981) there were two choices, the Panchayat system or

multiparty."<sup>117</sup> His narrow approach to gathering public opinion was informed by the “spirit of history,” but it also set the parameters of the possible from which people are expected to choose, in this case in a way that fits within the Maoist political agenda. This is just one example of how I observed political actors use history to inform and justify what “new Nepal” should be.

I must emphasize that the students not only want insert themselves into history but also they affect the direction of political history. For example, Akash—an ex-student leader who has been sidelined by his party despite being very charismatic and popular—has come to different conclusions concerning the potential future of parties based on their history. He asked me what I thought of him starting his own party. He explained that on the streets during the Peoples’ Movement part two in April he discovered that a number of the students and uneducated youth who were the driving force behind the agitation did not support NC, UML, or the Maoists. They were fed up and disgruntled. They were on the streets because as disposed male Nepali youth they welcomed an opportunity to fuel their frustrations. They fought because they wanted change in the system. That was about all they could articulate. These youth do not feel that any of the parties represented them, their needs, or their desires for how change could happen. He said,

There is a large untapped constituency of youth out there. They want to support something that resembles what they want for Nepal. Establishing a party with a platform of change for the young generation could gain support for a long time. With every coming new generation there will be appeal to work for what they see is necessary.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Interaction with the ANNISU (R) president during the national education referendum on 11.23.06.

<sup>118</sup> Translation based on an interaction with an NSU (K) ex-central committee member, 10.30.06.



Figure 15: Student cadres' evening torch rally, Maitidevi, Kathmandu 2005

At first I was a bit surprised because it seemed as if he was intuitively taking my theoretical musings on the students' future-orientation toward change and its lineage throughout Nepali political history, and capitalizing on it in order to make a palpable political agenda. As we continued discussing this, I realized that he was not picking any cue up from me, but rather he was following the traditional process of doing politics in Nepal.<sup>119</sup> What he was seeing as a niche political market is no different than any other political party's ambitions at the time of their genesis. His motivating buzzwords—youth, fulfillment and empowerment—were different. Of course they would be, he is part of the generation who has been seeped in international governance and civics trainings. He talks about politics in a way that may

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<sup>119</sup> In the article "Commitment as an Analytic: Reflections on Nepali Student Activists' Protracted Struggle," I argue that by looking at Nepali politicians' generational perspectives on events and their place in those events, I am able to analyze, within brackets, the {past, present, and future} process of politics in a multidimensional way (2006: 357).

differ from his elders, but what he sees as a new approach is a perpetuation of the political system, struggle for the unattained. When I realized this, I wondered, how would he be able to pitch the platform of doing the work of the new generation, which would require a willingness to efficiently cycle through leadership so that it will be representing the youth demographic? It is not only an issue of willingness but overcoming the structural challenge of the lack of opportunity in the larger Nepali political system. I speculated out loud, “The risk of party collapse due to the unsuccessful transfer of power to the younger generation seems too high. Are you sure that the party will last for more than one youth generation?”<sup>120</sup> He said this was the very reason why he was considering starting this type of party; change in leadership is what would distinguish them from the other parties and identify them as novel, countering the stagnancy of the other parties.

Akash never started his party. Instead he took an NC-appointed seat in the constituent assembly. When I asked him about it he said, “My work is in the party now; I’ll try to influence things in the party and in the constituent assembly. Therefore I don’t think I can convince people I am a youth. I suppose that party will have to wait for someone of the youth generation to pick up the torch and light it.”<sup>121</sup> As Akash’s aspirations demonstrate, Nepali students’ discourse and action is best understood as a strategic deployment of Ernst Bloch’s “not-yet” consciousness. Bloch locates the fresh strength of the new in youth, who are the voice of tomorrow that consists chiefly of “not-yet” consciousness. He argues, “If youth occurs in revolutionary times, that is, during a *time of change*, and if it is not duped into screwing its head

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<sup>120</sup> Translation based on an interaction with an NSU (K) ex-central committee member, 10.30.06.

<sup>121</sup> Translation of an interaction with an NC constituent assembly member, 10.2.09.

back...then it really does know what the forward dream is all about" (author's emphasis, 1986: 117). Bloch's engagement with the concept of youth is rudimentary, but his in-depth analysis of hope and utopian thought as a "not-yet" orientation of possibility serves as a useful frame in which to understand the expanse that the category of youth engenders in Nepali politics, which I will analyze in more detail in chapter four. As I have observed, the students reference history as their basis for what is unfinished in order to define their future orientation. They claim their position as youth who are not "screwing their heads back," in order to convince the public that their agenda is a viable alternative for the future. In this sense, Nepali students' method is a pragmatic approach of employing contingencies. They identify historic contingencies in order to shape the Nepali public's understanding of what should be. In other words, they engage in temporal improvisation in order to politically legitimize their position (Greenhouse 1996, in Miyazaki 2004: 146). This allows them to collapse the past, present, and future into the brackets that fit their own aspirations. And as the frontrunners of the *āndolan*, this temporal orientation has dominated Nepali political imaginary.

### **Conclusion: History as Rhetoric**

I was at a friend's house and the television was set to the Kantipur news channel. It was merely background noise to me; I focused on becoming acquainted with her newborn son. But then some melodramatic music blared and I became distracted. I glanced at the television and saw a montage of film clips of the April *āndolan*.<sup>122</sup> I was transfixed as I watched these images that substantiated three years of my life as a researcher. A male narrator's voice sensationally announced, "They fought on the streets against regression," as

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<sup>122</sup> The height of the People's Movement part two is often referred to as the April *āndolan*.

an image of a student activist's bloody head flashed onto the screen. He then said, "They fought in the jungle," with a display of an image of Maoists toting guns through a Himalayan rice paddy. He continued, "They fought throughout the country," and an image of the Madheshi movement in the south panned across the screen. The announcer proceeded, "The Nepali people came together to claim their nation," and images of the April *āndolan* rapidly flipped on the screen. He proceeded, "They decided..." with the display of a picture of party leaders shaking hands after they brokered the 2006 peace talks. "And you voted" was declared as an image of a woman casting a ballot was shown. He culminated by saying, "This glorious process has brought us into unity to create a 'new Nepal.'" As he declared this, the words *Sambidhan Sabhā* (constituent assembly) glided onto the screen in three-dimensional devanagari. The introductory clip ended and the camera fuzzily panned the constituent assembly hall to show the day's proceedings in C-SPAN style live footage. I was shocked to see that over three quarters of the seats in the hall were empty. I said to my friend, "All that [referring to the clip] for this?" She clarified, "All of the last eight years for this."<sup>123</sup>

This experience summed up my return visit in 2009. I was saddened to observe the general disgruntlement of my contacts from all sectors. Everyone was so hopeful when I left after the 2008 constituent assembly elections. But after a year and a half of the constituent assembly, with the attempted firing of Nepal Army commanders, which led to the resignation of the Maoist prime minister, everyone was pessimistic. There were six months left to write the constitution and little had been decided, everyone was fatalistic about the reality of an extension. I knew the students had been eager for the People's

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<sup>123</sup> This scenario took place on 9.18.09.

Movement part three since the completion of the second People's Movement. I heard them pining for it during the peace talks and throughout the constituent assembly election campaign. But I dismissed their longing for the streets as them stuck in a routine, ideologically enmeshed in what Hannah Arendt referred to as "permanent revolution" (1963: 51). But it was not until 2009 that I realized that the *āndolan* orientation cannot be solely designated to political actors because I heard my even-tempered drinking buddies who analyze politics as journalists and with the United Nations Mission in Nepal say that what is needed for a way out of the current political impasse is "low-level conflict" that will "reveal what side everyone was on."<sup>124</sup> It was then that I fully grasped the weight of the historical narrative of Nepali politics. The *āndolan* is the process of clarification that fuels people as it unfolds, which people later cling to during times of stagnation. In a word, Nepali political history has become more than effective rhetoric.

In *The Names of History*, Rancière establishes that what counts as historical facts is indicative of what has been misnamed, unnamed, obscured, or altogether ignored. For this reason, he asserts that the discursive process of writing history is a "poetics of knowledge" from which the discipline of history was invented out of a western sensibility of the scientific, political, and literary. He implores historians not to misrecognize these elements as the basis of their discipline, which is a constructive process (1994: 101). In this chapter I have tried to articulate the "facts" that comprise the narrative of Nepali political history and the mythologizing process by which these facts are substantiated. It is indeed an invention but an invention with a purpose. The *āndolan* as a frame gives purpose to their narrative and the *āndolankāri*

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<sup>124</sup> This conversation took place on 10.2.09.

provides a role for people to play. A student leader defined their role to me in this way:

Of course the struggle for democracy has become more real. Without struggle change has not occurred anywhere. Where there is struggle, there is change. The principle has been accepted [made] where there is conflict there is change. In other words we can talk about historical dialectical materialism. Marx says the hitherto history of human civilization is the history of class struggle. It means where the struggle happened, change took place. Change does not happen where injustice and exploitation are accepted. We have to follow the principle that no change comes without struggle. It is for this principle the student organizations are formed. When the need comes we must fight.<sup>125</sup>

This is a very palpable reality for the students; they are fighting a struggle that has been fought for generations. The students as *āndolankāri* are oriented toward Rancière's notion of "democracy," subjectifying what has been left out, in order to ensure their leaders have an opportunity at "post-democracy" or restructuring the order of things. But as I will demonstrate in chapter seven, the leaders are rarely able to substantiate the students' vision in their political reforms, let alone broker consensus amongst the adjoining parties in order to create reform. This perpetuates the sense of the unfinished and reenergizes the students just as the political parties are losing the support of the public. To some this process may seem like an inefficient, self-serving cycle, but as I have demonstrated here, political actors have cultivated a historical narrative that emphasizes this process as a struggle for a higher awareness. This was substantiated for me during a discussion with an ANNISU (R) student leader about their proposed education movement. Near us there was a group of

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<sup>125</sup> Translation of an interview with the Nepal Revolutionary Students Forum on 6.10.05.

rowdy young men who were taking up more than their share of public space. At one point in our conversation this student said to me, “If I did not understand the historical struggle of the Nepali people, then I would be like them, with nothing to do, no opportunity, no direction, merely adding to the problems.”<sup>126</sup>



Figure 16: Student cadres lighting up torches for an evening rally, Maitidevi, Kathmandu 2005

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<sup>126</sup> Translation of an interaction with an ANNISU (R) district leader on 11.24.06.

## CHAPTER 4 IMPERFECT REPLICATION: THE POLITICAL CONSTRUCT OF YOUTH

How does Chandra get introduced at political rallies as a youth student activist when he is a 45-year-old, ex-student activist who is now a Nepali Congress member? The first time I heard this introduction I dismissed it as a mistake. The second time I heard it I asked the student sitting next to me, “Why do they call him a youth? Plus he is no longer a student leader, why do they not introduce him as a party member who was a former student leader?” The cadre was only half-listening to the speech program, while simultaneously texting on his phone and chatting with a few other students. He responded, “Well, he is younger than Shyam ji [the master of ceremonies] and maybe the organizers think he will be more attractive to people if he is introduced as a student leader.” Then he scanned the crowd and said, “There are a lot of students here. They must take joy in listening to student leaders. After all Chandra ji fought for the nation for a long time. He was active in both the movements of 2036 BS [1979] and 2046 BS [1990]. He can inspire others. ” During the third event I attended where Chandra was introduced as a student leader, I needed to know what he thought about this misnomer, so I waited to ask him. Chandra explained to me with a sigh of resignation, “I am still a youth because my aspirations remain unfulfilled. What I have fought for has yet to be attained. What I fought for as a student is what students are still fighting for. We fight together. Maybe after the constituent assembly elections it will be attained. Maybe then I will become a central committee member of Nepali Congress and be introduced as a former student leader. Maybe.”<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> This description is based on conversations I had with Nepali Congress and NSU activists in March 2006 before the NSU convention of 2006.

In Chandra's words, youth is a state of deferment. It is common knowledge that something is amiss in Nepali student politics: participants (especially the student leaders) are often beyond the age of traditional university student. In this chapter, I consider why the category of youth in Nepali politics expands beyond its traditional definition in both Nepali and western cultural frames. From Bloch's "not-yet" orientation that I outline in chapter three, I will analyze the varying contingencies that are employed in order to understand the categorical resonance of youth in Nepali political culture. I will focus on a number of factors including the influence of international definitions of youth that have shaped donor policy and universal rights based sensibilities, the role of students in Nepali political history as activists in street and revolutionary movements, and the system of politics itself, which has become a holding pattern as opportunities for political positions have diminished. I argue that these various factors have led to the manipulation of the category of youth, which illuminates the internal power dynamics in Nepali politics. I will place this analysis in the literature on youth that concentrates on social reproduction in order to demonstrate how the social science focus on youth highlights the tension between the social desire for perfect replication and the inevitable result of imperfect replication (or social reproduction).

In the first section, I will provide a review of the relevant literature in order to demonstrate the analytic potential of the category of youth in understanding societal reproduction and change. In the second section, I will focus on how global conceptions—more generally western—of youth have impacted the Nepali cultural category of youth. More specifically, I will demonstrate the discrepancies between the ways in which the category of

youth is deployed in Nepali politics versus how it is conceived in general Nepali society.<sup>128</sup> I argue that this has been directly impacted by the currency that donor and international policy makers give the youth demographic. In the third section, I will address specific anthropological theories of youth and intergenerational interaction. From them I will provide a view of how youth becomes a deployed category through interactions in the Nepali generational hierarchy; this analysis demonstrates that youth is an “entity with relationship integrally implied” (Wagner 1991: 163). I will show how the related themes of kinship, family, and the Hindu life cycle metaphorically index notions of hierarchy, as well as reveal the internal power dynamics of the political parties. I will analytically employ these three themes in order to demonstrate how people place their personal experience in the larger history of shared political struggle.

### **Youth as an Analytic Frame**

Youth serves as an interesting frame of analysis because the category is meant to define people who are more acutely negotiating what Terry Turner calls the “problem of reconciling the sociocentric and egocentric perspectives in society” (Turner 1985: 91). The term that Turner coins to describe the act of cultural preservation among the Kayapó, “replicating,” captures the tensions that the category of youth embodies. In analyzing the structure of Kayapó myth, he draws parallels between the constitution of society and the transformation of the mythic hero, which serves as the pretext for the general self-replication of fire in ritual practice. In Turner’s analysis, fire is a metaphor for the Kayapó cultural system. Within ritual, the gaining of control over the

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<sup>128</sup> For analysis that focuses on the conception of youth in other forums of Nepali society, see Evans 2009; Korht & Maharjan 2009; Liechty 2009; Zharkevich 2009.

pattern of transformation coincides with the process of social transformation. This is the act of becoming socialized. The ability to replicate that pattern is the ability to socialize others. The act of perfect replication puts one in a position of power. Society becomes, in Turner's words, "a process of reflexive self-replication of the process of (re)producing a socialized individual and the social group within which this occurs" (ibid: 97). This ritualistic tradition is not universally pervasive but the ideals implicit in this cultural dynamic echo the hopes of transmission for which many cultures strive.<sup>129</sup> To study youth is to foreground the tension between individuals' agency and the structural power of social institutions that are meant to acculturate them. The notion that social actors must negotiate between pressures to conform and the desire to be creative—to have an individual identity and agency—has been common throughout Euro-American anthropological theory.<sup>130</sup> Individuals within the social category of youth make strategic choices in order to navigate these opposing tensions. It is for this reason that the category of youth is a valuable mode of analysis for anthropology to track change in processes of social reproduction (Cole and Durham 2007).

In the last decade the study of youth has been rediscovered as a mainstream anthropological inquiry. In 2002, Erika Friedl asked in an *Anthropology News* article, "Why are children missing from textbooks?" (2002:

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<sup>129</sup> The notion that one is an incarnate of one's ancestors is well documented (Malinowski 1929; Mauss 1967; Stathern 1996). Otherwise, the individual has been defined as a person by the set of social relations, of which kinship is the basis (Fortes 1958; Leach 1959; Radcliffe-Brown 1952[1939]).

<sup>130</sup> Marilyn Strathern has critiqued this postcultural conception of "human beings as ontologically prior to the cultural milieu they create" (Rapport 1998: 111) in order to debunk the human rights model based on a liberal form of personhood (Strathern 2004). She reminds us that the individual is a compilation of many subjectivities, and in many cultural contexts those predicated upon social relations of kin, class, and caste are given higher priority than the individual that the Euro-American model has come to represent. As this chapter demonstrates, these very subjectivities are the markers from which people navigate the youth category, particularly kinship and generation.

19 in Durham 2004:590). The same year Tobias Hecht published an edited volume on children in Latin America entitled *Minor Omissions* (2002) (also see Amit-Talia 2001 and Hirschfeld 2002). There had been a disciplinary lapse in this topical focus, ever since Margaret Mead documented coming of age (1928), Evans-Prichard classified age-set systems (1940), and Victor Turner coined the term “liminality” to describe the ritual space that is embodied between childhood and adulthood (1969). More recently, youth has served as an insightful conduit for anthropology to track the impacts of modernity, free-market systems, development and globalization on local culture (Amit-Talai 1995; Berliner 2005; Bryant 2004; Cole 2004; Cole & Durham 2007; Durham 2004; Fong 2004; Kürti, 2002; Liechty 1995 and 2003; Marr 1998; Marr and Rosen 1998; Pilkington 1994; Rigi 2003; Sharp 2003).

The renewed attention to youth has also coincided with a general shift in youth culture studies. The previous approach studied the stages of either childhood or adolescence. Now analysis focuses on youth agency and how the youth generation interacts with normative social practices that are meant to socialize them. Furthermore, the category of youth allows us to track social change. These contemporary inquiries have been more suited to current anthropology’s theoretical sensibilities. Deborah Durham captures this new turn when she writes,

But the sense that youth have been missing comes as much from the failure of previous paradigms that did study youth—a structural functionalism that emphasized social control over creativity, a psychological anthropology that has not tangled with new ideas of biopolitics, and a cultural anthropology whose main problematic has been enculturation into local traditional practice—to say anything interesting to today’s theoretical developments (2004: 591).

Social science has been encouraged to look more seriously at the nature of individuals and groups of individuals in society due to shifting social configurations, political reorganization, cultural politics, and social movements (Wohl 1979). The current study of youth is just one of many studies concerned with the process of social reproduction and transformation that fuels anthropological study. Moreover, similar to social movements, the study of youth unearths contradictions in the social that render the constructive processes of culture, the social, and the individuals within them more transparent.

It is commonly accepted that society has a particular investment in youth, as does youth in society. However, the way in which this relationship has been defined is still a point of discussion for anthropology. As a social category it varies in cultural form. Yet the term “adolescence,” which most commonly marks youth, has become the codified psychological and biological category within the life process that designates a period of individuation and crisis (Lesko 2001; Rice 1990). It is a modern product whose origins can be traced to the rationalization process of science and societies. Mary Bucholtz posits that adolescence, as a universal stage, has been useful because it highlights selfhood and process rather than a state, yet it confines the category to a teleological structure that frames youth as incomplete; there are more stages to finish (2002: 528). This approach to youth is problematic on a number of levels. First, it serves as a universal category that is not contingent upon cultural context. Furthermore, it approaches youth from the perspective of adulthood.<sup>131</sup> Rather, Bucholtz observes that the shift to the broadly

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<sup>131</sup> Margaret Mead’s book *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) is commonly thought to have set this adult-centric approach in ethnographic studies but she did not begin this trend. Malinowski (1922), Radcliffe-Brown (1952 [1932]), and then Benedict (1934) and Bateson (1958 [1936]) all studied initiation rituals as part of the life processes.

conceived marker of youth is located in the present; it is based on individuals' situatedness. The category of youth does not assume that childhood or adolescence is a bracketed classification that serves as a rehearsal to become an adult. Furthermore, this category allows for the possibility that individuals' subjectivity may not even be oriented to adults (ibid. 527). Rather, it "imparts to youths as to adults a degree of consciousness that goes beyond any one situation—an awareness that each moment is part of a range of cultural possibilities" (Amit-Talia 1995: 231, see also Hirschfeld 2002). As the focus on youth increases in both scholarly and policy realms, we are finding that it is becoming a more flexible category of the social that is continually being contested and renegotiated by a number of individuals both within and between societies and cultures.

### **Global Currency and Variable Conceptions of Youth**

On the surface, youth in Nepali politics could be understood in the positivist, modern social scientific approach. It is based on the South Asian cultural conception of life stages, which cordons youth as a stage in the larger life process. Yet Mary Bucholtz's post-modern supposition, that the category of youth is a descriptor that brackets an individual's situatedness, has allowed me to analyze the implications of the category beyond the obvious Hindu strictures. In this section, I will demonstrate that in the context of Nepali politics, youth is instrumentally employed as a categorical tool. I argue that both these analytical approaches contribute to how people make meaning and deploy the category of youth. In other words, for the very reason that youth is now accorded its own autonomy outside the strictures of "adults to come," the category is contested and manipulated by both adults and young people. They recognize the potential of these claims that autonomy belongs to those

who are expected to hold power in the future. The accepted “awareness that each moment is part of a range of cultural possibilities” (Amit-Talia 1995: 231) is the very reason why youth has the political currency it has; this socially acknowledged category allows flexibility. In politics, flexibility means malleability to the advantage of oneself and one’s group. In fact, the process by which youth is contested and manipulated in Nepali politics is a collapse of the modern and post-modern analytical orientations that have been used to deconstruct the category of youth in the social sciences. This point is further elucidated by the fact that youth, as a social category, is relationally determined within each interaction and is therefore ripe with all the socio-cultural possibilities that interaction can entail, including but extending beyond youth as a manipulated category of the “not-yet.”

Global notions of youth and “donor speak” impact the possibility of what youth, as a Nepali category, should entail. Politicians, student leaders, and non-governmental agencies feel they must speak to these notions in order to appeal to the donor community as well as align local attitudes with larger notions of what the place of youth is in a “just” nation-state. It is important to emphasize the degree to which cultural conceptions of youth are affected by external or global notions of youth, especially in a donor recipient country like Nepal (Boyden 1997).

It is now universally acknowledged that youth is a demographic that is both affected by and brings about change.<sup>132</sup> Based on a report the United Nations put out in 1981, Braungart and Braungart argue,

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<sup>132</sup> The two most comprehensive review articles are Boyden 1997 and Ackerman, Feeny, Hart, and Newman 1997, which provide numerous citations on development reports and the role of children and youth as a targeted demographic as well as critiques of universal notions of youth.

[I]n many societies some of the traditional explanations for political behavior, such as social class, political party, and personality are losing their potency, while age may become increasingly important in understanding politics, especially with rising youth populations in developing nations and rapidly expanding aged populations in advanced societies. (Braungart & Braungart 1986: 208)

The international community (specifically donor and development agencies) has an influential voice regarding what notions of justice, democracy, representation, and governance should be in Nepal (Fujikura 2001; Pigg 1992; Tamang 2002). For all these reasons, youth is one of the main target groups in the participation, empowerment, consciousness, and capacity building programs of the international donor and aid agencies. This in turn makes youth a powerful register for non-governmental agencies that are seeking external funds to run their programs.

Therefore, the manner in which the concept of youth is defined in broader international conversations often gets deployed in Nepali political culture so that it fits within those general international conceptions. This allows the category to become more flexible while seemingly suiting universally “consensual” notions of youth. The following quote from a Maoist minister captures this quite well:

If you see the history of the world what we find is that the drastic change comes because of the students and the youths... In some countries the big movements and revolution occurred because of the contribution of the students. ... In this process, the energetic youths and students have a big role to play. ...The role of the student organization is significant in holding the Constituent Assembly polls, which has become a part of the peaceful solution to the continual armed struggle in Nepal. It [the Maoist student organization] has a great role

in holding the Constituent Assembly polls in a free and fair manner. Furthermore, youth have a central role in spreading the awareness about the importance of the republican set up in the villages.<sup>133</sup>

The way this leader describes youth would perfectly fit a mission statement that an international donor could read while checking off the key components of the formula that would turn Nepal into a successful, modern nation-state: peace, ballots, participation, awareness, republicanism, and fair elections. The statement is also in line with the peace accord signed by the Maoists and political parties in November 2007. The United Nations' Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) mediated the negotiation of this peace accord and all of the participating parties have sanctioned it.

This minister also highlights youth's historic role in revolution through societal and political change, which references the relevance of the youth demographic to international donors and policy makers. Yet despite the fact that it suits these politically correct registers, it also articulates the spirit of the Maoist agenda for a republic. He may have measured his words in light of the fact that I am an international researcher but this type of language is consistently used in political speeches given by students and politicians in order to define the role and importance of youth in Nepali politics. I have observed this in action since the 2006 peace talk and constituent assembly election period, the defining phase of "new Nepal." The student activists have endeavored to include the larger youth population beyond their talking points in political programs. They are trying to make their voice relevant by representing the needs of those who have been left behind by the era of

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<sup>133</sup> Quote translated from an interview with a central committee member and minister of the CPN-UML (Maoist) party taken on 1.18.07.

democracy and development. Such attempts are meant to create an environment of inclusivity in which they demonstrate the ideals of democracy at work. A student leader explained to me at a union sponsored youth football match, "It is up to us, the youth, to show the world what Nepal's democratic potential is. We will begin amongst our own sector and eventually it will become institutionalized."<sup>134</sup> This student leader emphasized that such programs can serve as an example of inclusivity to the generations before and after them. But his explanation also reveals, as does the Maoist leader's, that "donor speak" fuels the students' sense of who they are in Nepali politics, which runs parallel to Nepali political notions of what political freedom should ideally be.

Moreover, the concept of youth in general Nepali society has been influenced by global consumer markets as well as by western notions of the development of an individual through the process of schooling and career making.<sup>135</sup> For this reason, I asked people of varying social spheres what the difference is between notions of youth and generation in Nepali politics versus the larger society. Their responses have made it apparent that, historically, Nepali politics has had a more segmented definition of youth compared to the larger society because it is the domain of the educated elite. Indeed, student politics is a product of the university system. It became particularly entrenched during the Panchayat era when multi-party politics was banned. At that time, student politics came to represent the struggle for democracy. On the campuses the student organizations were legally allowed to engage in the open democratic exercise of election competition. These

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<sup>134</sup> Quote translated from an interaction with ANNFUSU (*Akhil*) central committee leader 4.28.07.

<sup>135</sup> Mark Liechty addresses this in his work on the burgeoning middle class in Kathmandu (1995 and 2003).

elections served as a proxy for multi-party democratic political processes lacking at the state level. The space afforded to students on the campuses shaped their role as the hands and mouths that disseminated political ideology for the underground parties (Snellinger 2005). The structural set-up on the campuses may not have revealed anything that was hidden but their actions articulated what was possible, particularly for coming generations.

The very experience of the university environment out of which Nepali politics comes cordons off a section of one's life that is passed over in other, more traditional, subsistence lifestyles wherein people go from being children to parents within the same household. On this basis, I have argued that the Hindu life cycle is one of the defining influences of what youth means in the Nepali political contexts (Snellinger 2006). As a cultural metaphor it sets expectations on life, a general societal sense of where one should be and what one should be doing at the various stages of life, in other words, what experiences individuals should be gaining at different times. This supports the notion of a period in life wherein one should cultivate oneself and be cultivated by society through education, which aligns more closely with western notions of youth. Furthermore, it provides an ideal way for society to run in order to be continually replicated. The life cycle can be conceptualized as a boundary imposed in order to insure perfect replication.

Yet it should be noted that the orthodox view of the Hindu life cycle<sup>136</sup> comes out of the elite, high-caste, male culture that assumes an opportunity for education and training in a profession. This may be a common cultural

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<sup>136</sup> The Hindu life cycle is a traditional path that high-caste men must roughly follow in their lives in order to fulfill all the functions that a man should traditionally undertake, taking first from parents and then from society (mainly through education), giving to society through work and raising a family, and finally giving to god by retracting from society and focusing on spirituality.

concept, yet I argue that the Hindu life cycle is not very relevant to the lives of farmers and others living subsistence lifestyles that are traditionally common in South Asia, nor to those who are not of the higher echelons of the caste system, who have not had the traditional privilege of educational access. Youth, in the modern sense, has only become a more defined life stage for the general Nepali population in the last few decades as access to education has become more egalitarian. This trend has allowed education to be an opportunity for alternative professions other than ones inherited from one's father and grandfather (Dixit 2002; Holland and Skinner 1996; Liechty 1995; Sharp 2003; Snellinger 2005; Stambach 2002).

The Hindu life cycle may be a native paradigm in which to understand the cultural category of youth but it is necessary to deconstruct all the definitive facets of this concept because I have found that in Nepali politics the age range that encompasses youth is often larger than is defined in general Nepali society. According to the Association of Youth Organizations Nepal (AYON), youth comprise the age range of sixteen to thirty-five,<sup>137</sup> whereas in politics it is claimed to be fifteen to forty. Yet in actuality, political references to the youth generation often incorporate those who are sixty-five and below. A Maoist female student told me the reason for this variance is because they "define youth as the people who can take risk even in the challenging situations and progress along the line of their political ideology."<sup>138</sup> Those who do not have anything tangible to lose are mainly the ones who take risk for ideals, and those who take political risks are considered youth. Her

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<sup>137</sup> This is a liberal age definition of youth. Most of my informants stated that the youth generation comprises the age range of 16 to 30. The two most prominent civic youth organizations, Youth Action Nepal and Youth Initiative cap the age range at 30 and have an organizational statute that no one older than 30 can serve in a leadership position.

<sup>138</sup> Quote translated from an interview with a female student leader of ANNISU (Maoist) taken on 7.7.07.

explanation signifies belief in the powerful claims attached to the concept of youth.

When I inquire about the distinctions between youth in Nepali politics and general society, people first cite the age differences but then they go into further detail. Their explanations point to a range of issues. They say that in actuality the second tier of leaders, some of whom are as old as sixty-five, are also considered youth. The reason being is that too many people are invested in the opportunity of politics and the top leadership is unwilling to forego their positions of power. Furthermore, it is common to see people older than forty who are student leaders. The entire hierarchy of politics has become a holding pattern.<sup>139</sup> Those who must wait (having nothing tangible to risk) are defined as the youth because they are the ones to come, oriented to the “not-yet.” I heard it explained in this way:

In [the context of] Nepali politics, Girija Prasad Koirala views Ram Chandra Paudel as youth.<sup>140</sup> One day, after I put my son and daughter on the bus, the conductor said to me, “please grandfather, quickly get off or stay on.” My daughter after returning home expressed surprise that the conductor used the word grandpa for me. But in politics, I am still a youth [laughs]... You may be seeking this meaning, no? ...[laughs] ...I think our life expectancy is 55 years, no? In this sense, how many people can really be in the youth stage? It may be natural to say youth to a person who is up to 30, perhaps 35. I think the word was invented by those in power in order to minimize the challenges

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<sup>139</sup> Mark Liechty described the prevalence of youth as a cultural category, which is “always already” a problem, in his comments as discussant on the panel entitled, “An Exploration into Nepali Cultural Conceptions of the Category of Youth.” He proposed that we consider that “the social constitution of youth as a category in a way signals the presence of a “problem population.”” Once that category is entrenched, there is the societal task to contend with those within it. (South Asian Conference, Madison WI 10.18.08.)

<sup>140</sup> Gijira Prasad Koirala served four terms as prime minister between 1990 and 2008 and was the most influential leader in Nepali Congress until his death in March 2010. He was in his mid-eighties. Ram Chandra Paudel is a central committee member of the Nepali Congress, and is currently serving as the peace and reconciliation minister. He is about sixty-five.

from those who are their juniors. This is so in the context of politics. It is a derogative term to sideline the juniors from power in the pretext that they are not mature and experienced enough. Thus, this is a word invented to exclude some people from power.<sup>141</sup>

In this sense youth is negatively dismissed as being immature or inexperienced. I have observed party committees interfering with student organizations' internal democratic processes on the basis that the students were too immature and inexperienced to be able to conduct an election in a "spirit of healthy competition," as a Nepali Congress district vice-president phrased it.<sup>142</sup> The leaders who gave me this excuse were the same age as the



Figure 17: Police maintaining the peace at the Free Student Union Election Day, Trichandra College, Kathmandu 2004

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<sup>141</sup> Quote translated from an interview with a central committee member of the CPN-UML party taken on 1.14.07.

<sup>142</sup> Quote based on conversations with Nepali Congress (Koirala) Jhapa district leaders during NSU (K) Jhapa district convention on 2.10.07.

UML party leader I have just quoted. This is a negative fallout of the manipulation of the youth category. Any generation can dismiss those below them as youth in order to keep them from reaching their full potential. At other times this same potential is claimed during positive deployments of the term youth, which is exploited by the party leaders to mobilize students for the parties' benefit.

Ultimately, those who have more experience feel they need to guide those who have less experience. The relational description of the party or party leaders as guardians of the students and their organizations is commonplace. This causes tension, particularly for parties in which there is no explicit hierarchical party structure but the party's practices contradict their rhetoric of autonomy and advancement through a democratic process. A student leader of a smaller party, the Laborers' and Farmers' party, claimed to have solved this tension by having a set structure in the party,

In our party cell we have three types of members. Those who have gathered the experience above fifty years comprise the first group. The second one is the group that is between thirty and fifty. And the third one is ours, the students. This is how we have tried to integrate our party. This is the system of the Chinese Communist Party. It is a natural process. Immature leadership needs time so three levels are needed for good leadership. It is the process of handing down responsibility. It should not be a set grasp of power by leaders where they never give it up.<sup>143</sup>

In this party structure there is no uncertainty as to what people's roles are, which allows the party to run more as a unit than as a factional process. Yet it is much easier for this dynamic to exist within a party that has a more rigid

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<sup>143</sup> Quote translated from a conversation with a student leader from the Nepal Revolutionary Student Front on 1.9.07.

ideological base than one that is more populist. For cadre-based parties, ideology transcends generations. They recognize that, as one student explained, “What we believe in is Marxism, Leninism and Maoism. This is a theoretical matter. Though the generations may change, the binding force is the principle. This is our way of bridging the gap.”<sup>144</sup> Student organizations like the ANNISU (R) and the Nepal Revolutionary Student Forum, are not deluded that they are autonomous from their mother organizations. Rather, they see themselves as wings that represent a particular set of the population. This may be the reason why they can maintain more party cohesion; there is no sense that their mother parties are interfering in their affairs because their affairs are not separate from those of their party. From what I have observed, it is the democratic parties whose ideological party lines are not as rigid wherein intergenerational struggles for power are most common. Interestingly enough, these struggles take shape as ideological struggles over what the party’s stance and direction should be.

The students recognize that youth claims resonate on the local and global level. They strategically use their position as youth, with an alternative voice and a source of new vision, as a rallying point to gain a more central role in politics. When asking what “new Nepal” should be, many students insert the role of youth into the process. One student leader proposed that there should be a youth parliament. His logic was simple: “new Nepal” equals new rules and policies, which have to come from new leadership, which only the new generation can provide.<sup>145</sup> Students usually claim that they are the new generation and those before them belong to the old generation. I was told that

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<sup>144</sup> Quote translated from an interview with an ANNISU (R) central committee leader on 11.11.07.

<sup>145</sup> Quote taken based on a political speech given by a NSU (P) student leader at the TriChandra campus convention, Kathmandu on 3.22.07.

every generation has a similar orientation to the previous one. As one leader remarked,

I used to say that my father was an orthodox, old and conservative person. It was so because my father was not able perceive the change of the times. In the same way, my son labels me as an orthodox because he uses the Internet, whereas I belonged to the age of plough and spade.<sup>146</sup>

In other words, what youth can offer is based on the accomplishments of the previous generation but pushes the boundaries of what their parents conceive is possible. This dynamic is the process of social reproduction rather than social replication. There may be only a subtle difference between these two concepts, but reproduction is less mimetic than replication; it allows room for variation and external influences through the transmission process.

### **Intergenerational Effect and Social Shifting**

As I demonstrated in chapter three, I have observed politician and student leaders' techniques that collapse the past, present and future in order to create particular political imaginaries. My analysis of youth and intergenerational interaction is meant to capture how the historical processes of Nepali politics manifest in non-linear fashion as deployed political narratives with a future orientation. For the most part my focus has been on student activists' relationships with the party leaders both personally and through the mother organization and sister organization dynamic and people's conceptions of student politics' role in various eras, which affect people's sense of their personal political experience and how they personally

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<sup>146</sup> Quote translated from an interview with a central committee member of the CPN-UML party taken on 1.14.07.

orient themselves in the political landscape. This focus has been my attempt to understand the extent of social change in Nepali politics.

Tracking social processes has been a preoccupation of anthropology for many years (Turner V. 1969). Franz Boaz was the first anthropologist to propose that history must be central to our anthropological analysis (1928). This provided the primitive with a history, a temporal dimension, which involved change in the primitives' lives. As colonialism's impact increased, anthropologists became aware of marked changes in our interlocutors' lives; we needed to reorient our analyses to those changes. But the theoretical era of globalization has brought the sense that things are ever-changing, and our acts of reorientation cannot keep up. One of the challenges in crafting social theory is how to capture ever-emerging social dynamics within the cultures that we observe. Anthropology has been challenged with the question: will my analyses and observations be relevant by the time they become public knowledge? Or could anthropology be nothing more than a snapshot of a particular time/space frame? Hiro Miyazaki notes that in order to avoid this limitation, anthropology has adopted the larger social scientific aesthetic of emergence. Rather than foreclosing our observations with conclusive analysis, the aesthetic of emergence allows our knowledge to be "provisional, contingent, and ongoing" (2004: 138). Yet Miyazaki observes that the trend of this aesthetic has not allowed for a reorientation, rather it is tracking the world as it emerges. He warns that this puts our discipline's knowledge in jeopardy of merely mirroring how we see the world emerging, which does not avoid the "belatedness in relation to the *now* of the world" (author's emphasis, 2004: 136). The process causes our knowledge to be prospective; it limits the possibility of representing forward momentum. Miyazaki feels that "Where

knowledge does not seek its own radical reorientation, hope ceases to be the engine of knowledge" (ibid. 139).

What Miyazaki is referring to as hope is not an object of study but a method of orientation, specifically temporal orientation. Miyazaki's approach relies on Bloch and Benjamin to make sense of his interlocutors' strategic use of the past in a "not-yet" orientation (or in Benjamin's term "past hope" (1992[1973])) in order to conceptualize and sustain the future possibilities. Michael Taussig's analysis in *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* elucidates a similar point. His reliance on Bloch's concept of "nonsynchronous contradiction" serves as a useful tool to understand the nuance of the discursive strategies of the Putumayo Indians in their employment of magical realism. They subvert the myths of the sacred and secular in colonial narratives of conquest and redemption by reworking them into expressions of resistance and revolution. The images (or what Bloch calls archetypes 1986[1959], 1998, 2000[1964], Benjamin refers to as montages (1992[1973])) of the past are repurposed to serve the hope of a better future (1987: 166). Both Miyazaki and Taussig use this method to link our interlocutors' employment of the past with the analysis of our own knowledge practices and the possible directions they can take.

Deconstructing the category of youth in Nepali politics is my attempt to track social processes within a temporal context that situates anthropological knowledge. Youth is an analytical category that highlights social change as a process of imperfect replication (or reproduction), while emphasizing what cultural strictures attempt to perfect social replication. Jennifer Cole posits that in order to understand social change one must observe how relations are transformed in the interactions between generations (2004). She employs Karl

Mannheim's theory of "fresh contact" as a means to understand how youthful practices impact generational relations. This theory sketches the obvious point that generations are formed by different historical experiences.<sup>147</sup> These experiences shape a generation's way of life and can consequentially transform social and cultural norms. This may happen on a mundane level such as consumption practices and the like, but it can bring about massive social change when generation gaps are presented with a perspective clash.

This potential leads to the manipulation of the category of youth by various parties to serve personal, social, or political agendas. Deborah Durham has observed the varying deployment and dismissal of the category of youth as a space of social contestation in Botswana (2004). Her observations of who constituted the youth and how the category continually shifted did not fit into analytic definitions of youth. Durham relies on Evans-Pritchard's age-set systems from his book *Nuer* as her theoretical basis. Age-set systems allowed Evans-Pritchard to conceptually capture the relative nature of social positions that only derive their relevance in relation to other groups; the nature of one's position shifts with every relational interaction (1940). She extends this idea to incorporate the linguistic term "shifter," in order to establish youth as socially deictic, or a social shifter (2000 and 2004). The flexibility that Durham inserts into Evans-Pritchard's original theoretical frame allows her to understand strategic deployment of the category "youth" as political action. It can give actors who position themselves as representing youth a currency to voice their "new" agendas or allow people to dismiss

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<sup>147</sup> To Karl Mannheim's defense, this was quite an innovative observation for his contemporary period. He was using a historical materialist approach to support his argument that generations must be socio-historically differentiated at a time when they were considered biologically and psychologically different. This move away from a physical science explanation allowed him to account for change as a sociological process.

youth-claimed actions on the logic that the actors are not youth (2004: 592). A modern usage of age-set systems demonstrates how social categories are mobilized as agentive acts.

Durham's field observations concerning youth and how she has theoretically conceptualized them is similar to the way I have in my own research, yet I have focused it more from the view of intergenerational relations as Cole engages in her work, in order to demonstrate the "not yet" orientation that Nepali student activists take. In Nepal the position of youth is indexical as it shifts from one relational interaction to another incorporating the necessary discourse (Durham 2004:253). In my research I have tracked the indexical variations of youth in the relations students have with their party leaders, political patrons, families, peers (constituents), the public, the media, international forces, and the state. From my observations, which I layout in chapters three, six, and seven, I conclude that these variances reveal multi-layered struggles for autonomy, loyalty, legitimacy, subservience, cooperation, compromise, and political power. Elitism further explains these dynamics as I demonstrate in chapter five. As I will demonstrate, the cultural notion of small and big person (*sano manchhe/thulo manchhe*) is another indexical construction that plays out in similar fashion to generational interaction within Nepali politics (Bista 1991).

Within sociology the notion of generational interaction has been much debated (Braungart and Braungart 1986; Kertzer 1983; Lipset & Ladd 1971; Marias 1968; Markides 1978; Ryder 1965). Ryder argued that there should be a distinction between cohort and generation because what many sociologists were analyzing was more like age-set systems in the Evans-Prichardian sense than a kinship, descent concept. Therefore the term generation "is a relational

concept bound to the realm of kinship and descent; it is not an appropriate tool for dividing societies into segments or populations into aggregates” (Kertzer: 128). Yet within anthropology, the relational aspect of the term generation is what draws us to it as an analytic frame. It becomes situational, shifting within interaction, but it still references a topical stronghold of our discipline, kinship (Fortes 1958, 1959, 1969; Leach 1959; Lévi-Strauss 1969 [1949]; Radcliffe-Brown A.R. 1952[1939]).

In the Nepali context, it is clear that I must use the term generation (*pusta*) because that is the word used to refer to this sort of interaction. As I will demonstrate, it is very much a filial reference because politics is referentially based in a kinship orientation. This is important to understand because it highlights that the significance of youth in Nepali political culture is not based on the Eurocentric dichotomy of individual versus society. But rather it identifies the social aggregates that define youth as a cultural category. Roy Wagner cogently captures this phenomenon in his definition of the fractal person. He writes, “People exist reproductively by being ‘carried’ as part of another, and “carry” or engender others by making themselves genealogical or ‘reproductive’ factors of the others.” (1991: 163). Similarly, youth is an inherently relational assemblage comprised of socially constructed filial connections and shared political histories.

I specifically asked some informants about intergenerational interaction in Nepali culture and in the political context. Not surprisingly, a number of people focused on family in their responses. Some talked about generations through the metaphor of family. An ANNISU (K) student explained this predominance in the following explanation,

As the proverb goes 'Family is the first school of a human being.' First of all he spends his life at home and then he goes out into society. Therefore, the first political impact comes from the family and then the teachers and friends. But people treat the party as if it is primordial and that is why they refer to the party as a family.<sup>148</sup>

Others spoke about it in the context of politics being a family business; whether or not people actively get involved in it, they know about it from a young age and it affects and inspires them. Furthermore, simulated family relations are a part of all aspects of Nepali culture; one is quickly placed in a web of fictive kin relations that are not blood but have social significances that are strategically advantageous to some and disadvantageous to others, depending on how one ranks in the interaction.<sup>149</sup> This is an obvious aspect of social interaction that no one can avoid. Therefore, the fact that the family is raised as a metaphor in the context of political generational interaction alludes not only to a sense of duty, but to a social hierarchy that is ever shifting within interaction.

Nonetheless, I have also heard contradicting references to the metaphor of family. The Laborers and Farmers party student, whom I previously quoted describing ideology as the bridge between generational gaps, followed his explanation by saying, "This is not a thing like father and son in a family, where often principle cannot bridge the generation gap" (See Snellinger 2006).<sup>150</sup> This references how the party structure is set up and the internal political culture of the party. In the more ideological parties it is through

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<sup>148</sup> Translation of an interaction with an ANNISU (K) Padma Kenya campus leader. 7.7.07.

<sup>149</sup> The kinship term applied in social interactions is not determined merely by age but rather by one's notoriety and social influence. In other words, I may be referred to as older sister by someone who is older than me because I rank higher in the social realm of things and he may have to depend upon me for assistance since he lacks the same amount of influence.

<sup>150</sup> Quote translated from a conversation with a student leader from the Nepal Revolutionary Student Front, which is affiliated with the Laborers' and Farmers' party on 1.9.07.

knowledge and commitment to the political philosophy that one proves one's ideological dedication to the party's goals. In less ideologically based parties, one proves one's dedication to a leader who has risen through political strategy, coalitions and connections within the party. A CPN-UML leader explained this to me while lamenting the CPN-UML's change in character after democracy.

We used to think that our only objective was to make the movement a success. We did not have the feelings of big and small. Neither would we consider who would be the parliamentarian, minister, or party leader. There was the culture of collective decisions based on shared ideology. There was not much hierarchy in the organizational structure. It was not the relationship like that of a patron and a client and leader and a cadre but instead, it was more like a family. After all, it is a relationship of comrades that we must establish. Moreover, it is the matter of collective decisions. This is not a matter of compulsion but of collective commitment.<sup>151</sup>

It is clear from this quote that there are different conceptions of the family and the party as a family. One is based on a collective commitment whereby things are run in an egalitarian way. But there is also the metaphor of the family as hierarchy, which can involve struggle. People's use of the metaphor of family is tied to the sense of what binds a party. There are two things that unite a party and make it distinctive from others, one is ideology and the other is the social connecting of networks and individual personalities. All of the parties in Nepal consist of a varying combination of both of these aspects.

To understand the resonance that the category of youth entails in Nepali politics, it is important to recognize that the use of the metaphor of

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<sup>151</sup> Quote translated from an interview with a central committee member of the CPN-UML party taken on 1.14.07.

family in all its various forms indicates a sense of stewardship and responsibility. One student leader described a critique he received that surprised him and pushed him to think about what the parties' ultimate responsibilities are. He said that someone asked him, if you can't run your hostels how do you expect to manage a republic? The student leader admitted this individual had a very good point. He said "The hostel is our house [domain] and we need to prove we can take care of it just as we can take care of our own Nepal."<sup>152</sup> This type of metaphor captures the responsibility of running the country in a style that harks back to a two hundred and thirty-seven year history of monarchy. In a monarchy, the ruler must take care of the subjects that occupy his land. The very tradition of patronage and paternalism that has been the basis for Nepali politics comes out of this history. Rather than a King taking care of his subjects, the responsibility has been transferred to the political parties, who must now prove that they are able to take care of the general public in a way that best serves Nepali citizens, while also maintaining the support of their cadres by balancing political ideals and patronage.

Furthermore, the metaphor of family is rhetorically used in Nepali politics. As I demonstrate in chapter five, female politicians use references to family in their speeches in order to claim a legitimate place in party politics. They argue that if it takes a family to run a household, then all the filial sectors are necessary to run the country. A female student informed me that these references are common because they resonate. She said "Even the party

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<sup>152</sup> Quote taken based on a political speech given by a NSU (P) student leader at the Trichandra campus convention, Kathmandu 3.22.07.

structure mimics the family, we are the sister organization and our party is the mother organization.”<sup>153</sup>

Indeed, the Nepali cultural metaphor of the joint-family nicely mirrors the relationships within the political parties. The family is idealized as an egalitarian unit that works together for a common good. The CPN-UML leader articulated this sensibility in the quote I previously provided regarding the felt need that his party reorient its internal interactions on the basis of a collective commitment, more like a family than a hierarchy of leaders and cadres. Yet it is known that the joint family unit is one of tension (Bennett 1983). There is an apprehensive inter-reliance between the relations of old (patriarchs) and young (sons), or between those who are currently in power and those who will take the reins in the future; each depends on the other to carry on a lineage that is prosperous and productive. The unit benefits from remaining together rather than splitting into smaller groups but it “is one of interdependency fraught with tensions between competition and solidarity” (Snellinger 2006: 357).

This tension extends through the filial metaphor into politics. It represents a struggle between institutional culture and the autonomy that students find implicit in the “not-yet” orientation. It is for this reason that the political movements play such an important role in shaping the identity of each generation. The student organizations are the tool of political agitation deployed by the parties. Yet it is through their action and their struggle in the movement that they gain some sense of autonomy and are able to articulate their voice on the streets. The parties influence this voice but the students can inflect their own sense of what should come in the space cordoned off for

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<sup>153</sup> Translation based on a conversation with an NSU (K) female student leader on 2.15.07.

them on the streets (Snellinger 2007). In other words, the public forum of the streets allows the students to emphasize what the political demands should be. But even though they may have the ability to affect the public's expectation of what politics is and should be, they do not have the luxury to affect policy once they have secured government power for their parties (Snellinger 2005 and 2007).

A party's cohesiveness, or for that matter its very existence, relies on the past, the present, and the future. It is for this reason that in Nepali politics, generations are often referenced according to political movements. Just as political memory is conceptualized within the different political movements, the political movements differentiate the political generations. It is acknowledged that from each political movement, the participants therein gained a set of experiences that not only made them activists and future politicians, but also distinguished them from the activists and politicians before them and those who will come after. This is a cycle of tense reliance, because they are fighting for a common cause but through each movement the experience of struggle and the progress that results are the very things that differentiate the current activists from those before. Not only does each movement's young activists gain experience, they also gain experience in making their own claims, which may refine or completely differ from those of the previous movement. A Maoist leader explained this as a dialectical law of development, or as he said, "negation of the negation."<sup>154</sup> The new (or young) will challenge the old order, the very people who brought them to the position in which they could be a challenge, because the old order challenged those

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<sup>154</sup> Quote translated from an interview with a central committee member of the CPN-Maoist party taken on 1.18.07.

before them. He understands this process of progress in the Marxist dialectic of negation within the larger trope of historical materialism.

When I have asked frustrated people how to minimize generation gaps they reply that interaction is important. Interaction between political generations makes things smooth; it creates a harmonious dynamic that is devoid of interruptions or jolts in perspective. Whereas gaps are described as causing contradictions because if, as a CPN-UML leader stressed, “there can be no adjustment between the higher and lower level of the party, [then] there exists the possibility of the top disregarding the voices of the grassroots, those below, and therefore disregarding the ground realities.”<sup>155</sup> This may not only impact the ruling order today but it will impact their successors tomorrow, as well as jeopardize the survival of the party. It is for this reason that I have used the theme of intergenerational interaction to deepen our understanding of what the concept of youth entails in Nepali politics.

Youth is not merely a category in which a group of similarly aged people is lumped together. Within it there is also a hierarchy by which one wields one’s influence and higher position over those who are younger (or less influential). The influence over those who are younger further entrenches one’s position, which is relational; in some scenarios one’s position is as a leader and in others as youth (or the coming generation). For this reason, youth is a malleable position based on the social dynamics of the interaction. Evans-Prichard argued that an actor’s position is determined in the relational context of social interaction (1940: 263). This is similar to the concepts of big and small person (*sano manchhe/thulo manchhe*) in Nepali culture. Most people

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<sup>155</sup> Quote translated from an interview with a central committee member of the CPN-UML party taken on 1.14.07.

are both big and small people in different aspects of their lives. These are modes of being that one simultaneously embodies. To achieve big person status in all interaction is the ultimate goal. The same is true of youth. In politics one only leaves this category when one is in the top leadership. Until then, youth can be looked at as a classification of those who are waiting for what is to come; youth is varying degrees of emergence.

As I have demonstrated, the potential value of youth as an analytic has a different power than the Kayapó value of perfect replication of a ritual. Rather, it tracks the social and political imaginary through interactions of sociality and struggle. In my focus on generational interactions, I endeavor to go beyond Cole and Durhams' work by conceptualizing how people's positions motivate them to bring about political and social change through their actions and discourse. I also analytically arrange the categories as such to grasp temporality in a way that contextualizes history without circumventing the non-linear dimensions of the procedure of politics. In approaching generations' different perceptions and experiences, I focus on the preoccupation with certain pasts in the Nepali political imaginary, ones that are forward-oriented yet based on the unfinished (Snellinger 2006). In analyzing this, it is not appropriate to take a Marxist historical materialist perspective, because of its linear orientation. Nor is a utopian analytic approach suitable, because the Nepali sense of political temporality is not devoid of the past and present, which are constantly referenced in their future "not-yet" orientation. Rather, the Nepali sense of political temporality collapses the three in order to create particular political imaginaries that are vague enough to manipulate in ways that make them shared. In other words, like intergenerational interaction and the concept of youth, temporality is

relational and malleable in ways that allow flexibility in how people conceive the past, present and future in various interactions.

### **Conclusion: Delayed Transmission**

In Nepali politics the very gravity of the category of youth highlights the fact that something has to be done with a surplus of adults. One can see that the traditional life stages are askew. The octogenarian leaders, those who are in the Hindu life cycle of *sanyasi*, should be withdrawing from society, yet they are refusing to retire from politics (Snellinger 2006: 257). When asking about the concept of generations in Nepali politics and how they are defined, a democratic leader explained to me that this has changed since multi-party democracy. He said that before, there used to be the new generation and the old generation. The leaders were the old generation. The new generation consisted of those who had not had the opportunity to hold power within the party; they were junior, still learning and of course they differed in their conceptions of what was possible. But since the leaders are refusing to retire, this simple distinction between old and young no longer represents the reality. Now, he claims, there are over four generations in politics, all at different ranks or “period[s] of waiting. They make meaning of this waiting through their attempts to impact the political system.”<sup>156</sup> In other words, politics becomes the process whereby people of all ages attempt to initiate change and establish their own influence over others in abeyance for actual power. Similar to the continuing struggle for democracy, opportunity for political leadership is being postponed; it does not line up with the Hindu life cycle. Therefore, categories such as youth are being extended to incorporate

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<sup>156</sup> Quote translated from a conversation with Nepali Congress (P) central committee member and minister on 9.16.07

people of additional generations into micro-categories of emergence and waiting.

Chandra's experience that I describe in the introduction illuminates the multi-valence of the category of youth in Nepali politics. On a practical level, putting him in the youth classification is meant to inspire young people so that they will relate to his words. The term registers him in the same social space as them, one that indefinitely delays leadership power. To him, it indicates his unfulfilled aspirations. Both on a personal level and a political level there is still more to be accomplished, which provides a forward momentum. It also reveals the fact that the party establishment has sidelined him and many of his colleagues. Rather than rewarding him for his dedication by promoting him, party leaders continue to applaud him for a position that is no longer relevant to his circumstance. Yet misidentifying him does not put him outside the group. It instead places him in the loop of being socialized by leadership, while allowing him the opportunity to socialize others that are younger than him. People are continually experiencing varying roles within the process of being socialized or socializing. Consistent political participation is the only way for people to spread their influence; it is the guarantee for advancement. Therefore, many people like Chandra continue to invest in politics.

**CHAPTER 5**  
**SPEAKING IN ORDER TO BE HEARD: ELITE ENTRENCHMENT IN**  
**POLITICAL CULTURE**

The act of claim-making is political in Nepal. Political struggle, particularly democracy, is done in the name of the “people” as if the people are common citizens on equal footing. Yet the very act of democratic struggle for the people obscures the fact that those who are fighting have historically had many more rights and opportunities than the people they claim to be fighting for. The activists, particularly the students, make claims of public unity under the guise of political suppression. This denies the reality that there are multiple experiences within the realm of political suppression. The collapsing of identities into one identity in order to challenge authority eclipses the multiplicity of experiences, which are invested in securing recognition within the state system. This takes on a particularly precarious form when the people who have historically challenged the state are the ones at the top of the social order. In Nepal this has limited minorities by conscripting them to a voice that resonates with the speech acts of high-caste activists.

In this chapter I will analyze how Nepali politics has simultaneously been a dispute for a place of influence over the law as well as a reinforcement of the spirit of the law, high-caste male domination. My main premise is framed by Rancière’s argument that in order for people to do politics (question the policing logics) they must articulate their points in a language that will be understood. “In a word they conduct themselves like being with names” (1999: 24). In this chapter I establish that many of those who do politics claim to be fighting for justice of the unnamed even though they themselves have always had names. This analysis demonstrates the nature in

which identity claims are conscripted in Nepali politics, the trend of activists fighting for position in the policing logic but claiming to be doing politics on behalf of the unnamed. Ultimately, my endeavor in this chapter is to capture the subtleties of this cultural reality that one must fit oneself within in order to be heard in the Nepali mainstream political sphere. This attempt is based on the premise that

Political subjectification redefines the field of experience that gave to each their identity with their lot. It decomposes and recomposes the relationships between the ways of doing, of being, and of saying that define the perceptible organization of the community, the relationship between the places where one does one thing and those where one does something else, the capacities associated with this particular doing of those required for another. (ibid: 40)

Here I consider how the Nepali political struggle has been a particular process of subjectification that has attempted to restructure communal relations within the state but has also substantiated the social structure that ensures political activists' position. Rather than look at how marginal groups (women, lower caste, ethnic groups) are excluded from politics, I am choosing to focus on the dominant culture that they must acculturate into in order to fit within or they will discover there is no space for them within the state structure.<sup>157</sup>

This is a particularly poignant time to analyze elite entrenchment in political culture since the social order of the state and dominant politics has collapsed with the abolishment of the monarchy and current restructuring of

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<sup>157</sup>There is a lot of ethnic activism in Nepal that does not attempt to fit into mainstream politics, but this will not be my focus in this chapter. My reasoning for this echoes that of these ethnic activists. They are separate from dominant party politics because they are not willing to curb their efforts to correspond with high-caste male values. I feel until this gap can be reconciled, there will not be a genuine place for ethnic activists in mainstream politics, which has huge implications for the reconstruction of the state through the constituent assembly process.

the state through the constituent assembly. Ever since the success of the 2006 April uprising (The People's Movement Part Two), the three main talking points have been: "new Nepal," "inclusion," and "secular republic." Ten years of Maoist war were responsible for bringing these issues to the forefront of both the political and social arenas. The Maoists wanted to contextualize all inequalities—caste, ethnic, and gender inequality—under the rubric of class. Yet the poor have been living with inequality and suppression for generations, which they have defined through the particular historical and cultural experiences of their community. Some minorities are not willing to flatten their experiences into the one category of marginalized class. For this reason, there has been tension in these differing conceptions of exclusion and how they should be addressed in "new Nepal." A prominent example is the Madheshi movement of 2007 that not only defines unique class, caste, and linguistic exclusion but also regional exclusion.

In this chapter I will probe both the intimate spaces and formal self-representations (Herzfeld 2002: 27) of high-caste male students as well as female and ethnic minority student activists in order to understand how they conceive of the social order in politics and what space it affords them. I argue that in order to understand what comprises the political, it is just as important for one to focus on people's self-representations because it is within those representations that you come to understand how people make meaning of their experience and social surroundings. I do this by first considering what the entrenched nature of politics is and how political actors have naturalized their position in political struggle in order to maintain their status as elite stakeholders of the nation. In the second section I address the limits that female activists experience in politics. In the third section I demonstrate that

there are hegemonic political behaviors that encourage men to thrive in politics, and women who embrace such behaviors to be judged. This dynamic encourages women to rely on familial and social ties in order to advance in politics, which reinforce the nepotism that is endemic in Nepali politics. In the fourth section I complicate the demand for a secular republic by demonstrating how a Hindu orientation as a political stronghold that Nepali political actors embrace despite their attempts to remove the monarchy from the state paradigm. The larger theme of this analysis is to demonstrate the political tendency to collapse multiple identities into a singular entity in a way that limits how citizens can be politically effective.

#### **Elites of the State: High-Caste Political Dominance**

By the last year of my field research, I had a pretty sound grounding in the construction of the Nepali state but wanted to understand how the student activists understood it and how it impacted their sense of what exclusion and inclusion have been in Nepali politics. In this section I will analyze the different responses I received in order to portray the entrenched nature of identity in political struggle. This focus is meant to understand elite “means of orientation,” which dictate the dominant norms (Elias 1978 in Shore 2002: 4).

It is not that people of minority status have not been a part of Nepali political history. There have been many who have contributed and even reached positions of notoriety. Yet regardless they have not been able to impact the normalization of high-caste domination in the parties. When I discussed the extent of space for alternative voices in the parties, the most prevalent response I received was that people must accept dominant traditions in order to make it in the parties. There was very little space for

alternative voice beyond rhetoric. A Maoist-appointed ambassador explained it in this way,

Our party organizations are such that nothing beyond the interest of the party leaders can take place. If you want to remain in the party you have to abide by this. Otherwise where can you go? If you give up the party you will suffer more, you have no influence on the outside. Outwardly, the party leaders talk about democracy, but inside their party they favor submissive characters. They create slaves of their cadres and make policy barriers. Of course this would discourage the minority people from participating in the politics. But where else do they have to go?<sup>158</sup>

This final query was a question I was often posed with: is it more effective to work outside the party system or to be curtailed within it? Most political actors did not think it was useful to work outside the party system. They felt that there is a lot that must be accomplished on behalf of minorities and women but they can't be expected to fight the battle on every front alone. If people want to get to a place of influence they must work within the established political system, and the fallout to that is compromise in order to last within that system. One student leader admitted,

Women and the minorities in the parties are under a lot of pressure. They are well habituated in limiting their voice in order to advance in the party system. But now they are facing external pressure from their communities to speak out. They face two options, either to slowly in a low and non-confrontational way raise the voice of minorities within the party, which is a place of influence throughout the country and in the state apparatus,

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<sup>158</sup> Translation of an interview with a Maoist-appointed ambassador, Madheshi activist, 4.15.08.

or to form a new party, which may not be influential in policy making.<sup>159</sup>

Ultimately people are faced with the choice to work within the system to make incremental but perhaps substantial change or they can abandon the system and try to work from the outside. Most people I spoke with believed that working outside the political system had little impact because it was only through the parties that people are able to affect the state system and governing apparatus. It makes obvious sense that the students thought it was more useful to work within the party system; they have invested in it and it is where they have found meaning. Furthermore, students pointed out to me that Nepal has been marred by multiple forces struggling for equality and opportunity. Many of my informants felt that the party system was a civilized venue for these various struggles. They saw no other alternative than for minorities to accept conscription from the system in order to have a mere presence in a sphere of influence. Because the party system is their means of orientation to apprehend politics; their perspective on its necessity enforces a particular norm of political participation.

What these activists don't realize is that there is little incentive for minorities to participate in party politics, especially on the individual level. The explanation I received from an ethnic minority student activist captures minority resistance to participating in mainstream politics. He explained to me that historically minorities have not felt encouraged to participate because there is no guarantee but to lose oneself in the parties. He explained that everyone knows that only the high-caste rise to the top; they dominate and that causes a "psychological hesitation." As a minority activist, one becomes a

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<sup>159</sup> Translation of an interview with an ex-NSU (K) central committee member, 11.16.07.

token of ethnic diversity within the party, a mere veneer of inclusion. He asked me, “Who wants to participate in such a system? It is not very inviting.”<sup>160</sup>

A Madheshi leader referenced M.N. Srinivas’s “Theory of Sankritization” to explain what has traditionally happened in Nepali politics. He said,

The problem here is if you are a person belonging to [a] lower caste or religious group, you have to transform yourself as an elite in order to make it in politics. It is a big challenge. You were a Dalit leader but you became a Brahman. Then he calls the person who belongs to his own caste and religion dirty or illiterate. In mainstream society change means imitation. Therefore, in regard to caste, the leaders who come from the lower caste transform only themselves and the rest of them will be in the same low level.<sup>161</sup>

This leader summed Nepali politics up as three groups. The first and most prominent are people of elite status that speak for the downtrodden—traditionally as the party leaders through Nepali political history have done in speaking for the “people” or more recently as what has happened in the Madheshi movement when the landowning elite spoke for the peasant and labor masses. The second group contains people from minority groups who conform to the elite system to the degree that they no longer affiliate with their roots. The third sectors are those who work outside the political system. But for those who choose to work within the political system, they must assume an elite orientation that prioritizes the supremacy of their party over

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<sup>160</sup> Based on an interaction with a NSU (D) ethnic student leader, 11.28.07.

<sup>161</sup> Translation of an interview with a central committee member of TMDP (Terai Madhes Democratic Party), 4.18.08.

the people they claim to represent. He argued you must compromise in this way in order to be effective within the party system.

This leader saw the system as bigger than Nepal, and he reckoned that it could not be easily bypassed. He pointed out that the international organizations favor people who speak English as their trusted interlocutors. In his perspective this is backwards because those who need the empowerment don't have the educational background to know English because it is not necessarily relevant to their everyday lives. His critique was trenchant and expanded beyond the Nepali political system to encompass all forms of structural power. He even implicated himself in the social dynamic, as well as me. His was a serial Foucauldian analysis, which made me feel as if there is no way to be outside the system if one wants to claim existence. So why bother attempting to effectuate change? The very act of trying insinuates complicity.

It is indeed true that one who is invested in asserting change becomes implicated in the system itself. Roy Wagner reminds us, "Social form is not emergent but immanent" (1991: 172). It is one of the paradoxes of politics: people themselves are not only an issue of scale as Wagner argues in his interpretation of big men as fractal persons, but their aspirations are too. Activists represent both a part and the whole of their community as they carry out their own, their community's, their political party's, and their country's aspirations. I demonstrated this in chapter two when I discussed the personalization of politics; they embrace the entirety of their ideology from which their personal identity is manifested. But it is a common tendency to collapse both the person and their aspirations and see the totality as the surface reality, at which point it is easy to be critical of people's voice as

representatives of their community when the particulars of those voices seem to be erased. Their presence is usurped by the whole, and they no longer represent the unique part that they contribute. Similarly, Marilyn Strathern describes the concept of big person in Melanesian society as an individuals' ability to take the sentiment of the group and embody it as their individual purpose, when she writes: "The transformation of 'many minds' into 'one mind' constitutes an attempt to focus sequences of action upon the self" (1991: 210). Both Strathern's and Wagner's analysis allude to the challenges that Nepali minority activists experience. In order to become influential (or a big person) their voice needs to collapse all the voices they would like to represent into one voice that resonates within the system of which they are critical. Yet this structural reality limits minority activists' endeavor to reveal that the dominant voice does not include all those bodies present in the society, or from Rancière's perspective, their role is to name the unnamed. How can they achieve this when they continually need to figure out how to fit within the entrenched system and are then seen as the whole of that system? I will now analyze some minority student activists' experience in balancing this attempt with their own survival and success within the student organizations.

One of my main informants regarding this matter is an ethnic Magar female student leader. The first time we discussed this issue she went into a long description about how politics has been an exclusive system with little opportunity for minorities and women. She then reiterated all the talking points of political exclusion that people commonly gave me when I asked about the possibility of success for women and minorities in the party system. I then asked her what her personal experience has been. How has she managed to get ahead? She responded,

Student: I am the vice-president now... Within a year I have to compete for the position of president and for this, I have to obtain the ticket. If I spoke in favor of women, people won't like this. Therefore, I should not speak in their favor. I have to observe silence. Others can speak about this but not me. If I raised this issue it gives a bad impression that I want to stir things up. It is fine to stir things up on the street in order to point your finger at others, but you should not point your finger at the party.

Interviewer: Really, in no free form are you able to raise this issue?

Student: No, I should not address it. This is the reason why I speak less now than I did before. Even if I raised a trifle issue I would be blamed for doing it for myself, not the party. Therefore, it is really hard to accept this paradoxical coexistence. Even now, people don't easily accept my silence. When I was in the junior posts, I was not treated as competent as others so I could say what I wanted, I was not assumed to be an influential voice. But now since I am competing for the high post, people see my role as meaningful, therefore I must diminish my voice to maintain my position. It is ironic, I am finally at a place where people expect me to do something but I can't. Regardless, raising the voice of the voiceless is mere rhetoric; no one raises it in any true sense.

Interviewer: One has to observe silence in order to obtain a high post?

Student: Only those who are powerful are talked about.

Even today, women are considered as "sari" and she is not considered capable of taking the leadership position. This is a feudalistic culture, our Nepali culture. You must prove yourself to be what you are not to get a high post.<sup>162</sup>

This student leader's explanation resonates with Strathern's analysis that the agency big men are perceived to have is one of self-interest: "Political

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<sup>162</sup> Translation of an interaction with ANNFSU (*Akil*) Vice President on 11.26.07.

aggrandizement or striving for prestige is inadequately likened to possessive individualism in so far as that it misses the transformation of the big man himself" (1991: 210). In the context of Nepal, people dismiss minority intentions to bring minority voices into a prominent place in politics as a self-aggrandizing endeavor. One high-caste student cadre described it as a blackmailing tactic to secure a position that the minority might not be qualified for.<sup>163</sup> These types of attitudes insidiously suppress attempts to diversify politics in a way that is truly inclusive of the Nepali citizenry.

When I discussed this topic with the recently elected president of NSU (D) he informed me that he could not nominate more than one *janajati* to his central committee. The NC party leaders had recommended as much. It was after receiving this suggestion that he realized if he were to be too vocal about minority representation in politics, he would be looked at as an ethnic activist and he would no longer receive promotion from student and party leaders. They would consider his purview too narrow. Yet he told me,

In spite of all this, I don't stop raising the voices of the *janajatis*, women, Karnalis, and Madheshis. But I have discovered it is less risky to do so by encouraging others to join in student politics rather than actively critiquing the system. Why I do this is? ... I have changed one of the sayings of Plato. He said, "If good people don't join in politics they have to be ready to be ruled by the bad ones." What I say is, "If Janajatis, women, Madheshis, and Dalits don't join politics they have to be ready to be ruled by others." There are just two alternatives, to be active or to be ruled. In this sense, my duty is to inspire minorities to join in politics and I do this as best I can.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Based on an interaction with an NSU (D) student on 11.18.07.

<sup>164</sup> Translation from an interview with NSU (D) president on 11.28.07.

I know that this student's popularity amongst his peers is based on the attitude he explains here. On women's day he texted every female student activist he knew in all the student organizations to wish them a happy women's day and encouraged them to continue participating in politics because they were a key component in the political system that the students wish to establish. I was with a few different female student activists as they received the message and they expressed appreciation. Months afterwards various female student activists cited his gesture as a sign that things were changing when I asked them about the issue of inclusion in politics.

This student leader may have an exceptionally positive attitude, but the fact that he is not particularly marginalized may be a contributing factor. One of his fellow student activists, a high-caste male, pointed out to me that this student leader cannot be considered marginalized because his family has been in politics for four generations, since the beginning of the Nepali Congress's history. Furthermore, he does not speak his mother tongue and he grew up in the Terai region, where he was identified as a hill person as opposed to a *janajati* (ethnic) as he would have been identified if he were to have been raised in the hills. This distinction is due to regional identity politics. Hill people are more prominent in the myth of the Nepali state. Even though different communities may have been politically marginalized, they are accepted as being native to Nepal, and as nationalists since their communities surrendered to Prithi Narayan Shah and accepted his rule in the latter half of the eighteenth century, which was the basis of the modern Nepali state. Those from the Terai region, on the other hand, are met with suspicion by the state because many have blood ties to India. Their Nepali heritage is often

questioned.<sup>165</sup> Therefore, it makes sense that the most successful *janajati* student activists would be from the Terai. As they grew up their hill heritage ensured their national identity rather than differentiating them from the high-castes. It may have just been a superficial level of inclusion, but it was one that allowed them to identify enough with the political project in order to be successful within the political system. This student leader's background provided him with an elite orientation in the state of Nepal and in politics; therefore he was able to find success in that realm where others of his named ethnicity may not have.

This is true across party lines. One of the more obvious signs that these power structures are reoccurring is when one takes notice of who is in leadership roles even in the Maoist party despite their institutional effort to raise issues of exclusion. During the People's War they had organized a unified army, which was based on multi-generational frustrations of marginalized groups. But these marginalized groups were not merely interested in class justice; they wanted recognition for their communities, both local autonomy and a place in the state. Furthermore, the Maoists have been strategic in placing ethnic minorities and women in positions in the interim government and they had the most diverse constituent assembly candidate roster and ran on the platform that supported state restructuring to comprise of autonomous ethnic regions. For that reason, they won the majority during the constituent assembly election. Yet in a lot of ways they have a similar party structure as the other parties: they have the women's group, they have

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<sup>165</sup> This issue was particularly palpable during the citizenship drive in 2007. Many people were very nervous about giving so many people of Terai origin citizenship because they believed they were Indian, or if not, they assumed to be loyal to India since their natal families were Indian. People of all backgrounds, political leanings, and education levels expressed fear that Nepal would be usurped by India if they were too lax with the citizenship screening. This attitude indicates how deep regional biases run in Nepal.

the Tamang, Magar, Madheshi, and other ethnic group freedom armies (*mukti sena*) who have since become the political wings for these different ethnic and marginalized groups. And the majority of the central party leadership is still high-caste men. They cite the above efforts as their actions toward inclusion but don't see an issue with their party leadership because ultimately their main focus is class struggle. Once they achieved a place in the mainstream government, class struggle became the all-encompassing approach to exclusion, which fogs the individual ethnic and marginal discrimination that they highlighted in order to recruit these people in the first place.<sup>166</sup>

Furthermore, the political rhetoric across party lines changed once the issue of inclusion was at the political center of state restructuring. There was a slight shift from referring to the excluded in the multiple (*janajatis*, Madheshis, Dalits, and women) to a term that encompassed them all in the single: *adhivasi* (original inhabitant). This term has precedent because it is the term that is used in India in determining tribal status for minority communities. A Maoist leader explained to me that in this context, India is considered a reasonable political standard since it is a federal republic that has a history of incorporating excluded groups into the state, education, and bureaucratic ranks. Yet there is another reason why the term *adhivasi* quickly became popular during the constituent assembly elections, because it created the situation where social, religious, and ethnic background does not matter as long as one can establish that they are "original inhabitants." The term categorizes people's belonging to the land that is within the confines of Nepal and collapsing the difference between them. Use of this term was particularly

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<sup>166</sup> Analysis based on interaction with ANNISU (K) central committee member on 11/26/06, an interview with an ANNISU (K) central committee member on 1/8/07, and a Majdūr Kisan student leader on 1/9/07.

predominant during the citizenship drives when there was latent anxiety of Indian interference in Nepal through the increase of Madheshi citizens, whose heritage is doubted by many Nepali citizens from the hills.

The larger question is how do the multiple marginalized groups find a place in the state when the political history, tradition, culture, and leadership represent all that they are not and is continually attempting to collapse them into a singularity? I will now focus on how women have experienced becoming part of the singular citizenry and how it has affected their experience in politics.

### **Political Limits**

When I discuss politics with general Nepali citizens, a lot of them describe Nepali politics as a process of amassing influence, wealth, and leadership roles. One of my regular exercises when I was moving from political programs throughout the city was to ask taxi drivers how they would describe Nepali politics to a foreigner. One taxi driver who picked me up at a program commemorating the integrations of the Nepali Congress parties said to me, "Politics is so-called leaders playing the game of leading. Everyone aims to be the leader; those who are successful are leaders who actually have followers and can broker compromise. It is a major distraction; people focus too much on building their own influence and don't really do anything useful."<sup>167</sup> After he said this to me, I began to wonder, if this is such an integral aspect to being successful in politics, how does it impact who gets ahead in politics? After all, not everyone in Nepali society is bred to lead, nor does everyone yearn to spend their energy trying to be influential. That does not

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<sup>167</sup> Translation of a conversation with a Kathmandu taxi driver, 10.24.07.

necessarily mean that such individuals have no interest in making a social or political impact.

I asked Risha, an NSU central committee member, about this and she started laughing. She doubtfully quipped that I had only started noticing this dynamic in politics. She explained,

People say that women don't rise in politics because they are limited or don't have the capacity or consciousness to be politically active. They won't say that women are incapable because that makes them sound sexist. But what do they mean by limited? That they are suppressed and can't enter into politics? Perhaps, but it is more than that. As you have observed, one must be influential or connected to influence in order to be successful in politics. What does that involve? It involves either having your own people or being relentlessly cunning, better yet, both. Women's connections are usually limited to their families. Furthermore, it is considered socially inappropriate for women to be relentlessly cunning. So how do women become successful politicians? The thing that limits them most is the judgment of others.<sup>168</sup>

What Risha was tacitly telling me is that the traits that make a successful Nepali politician are traditionally acceptable for high-caste men, mainly: a superior conviction in your ideology and ability. Moreover, politicians need to be well educated and have broad social networks. These are not privileges that women traditionally had. Women are beginning to have access to education and are expanding their social networks, but they are still expected to publicly conduct themselves in particular ways. The qualities that one must assert in order to rise in politics are still not considered respectable for women to engage. I will now analyze how women describe the limits they confront in politics.

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<sup>168</sup> Translation of an interaction with an NSU central committee member on 11.02.07.

In her article “Legalizing State Patriarchy in Nepal” Sierra Tamang explores what constitutes women in the state of Nepal. She focuses on the legal structures of women’s rights in the *Muluki Ain* during the Panchayat era. She argues that it was during this era that patriarchy shifted from the domestic sphere to the legal sphere, wherein women’s rights and roles as daughters, wives, and mothers became legally sanctioned. She argues, “In Nepal, gendered citizenship must be understood in the maintenance of masculinized Hindu rule; the attempted homogenization of Nepal’s diverse population and creation of ‘the Nepal woman’ (legally and otherwise) as a chief instrument for achieving all the above” (2000:152). She demonstrates how the Brahmin and Chettri families were the models on which to define the citizen nucleus, the family. The Hindu family became the template in which to define women. Based on this the Panchayat government pursued development (*bikaas*) within which women were to be modernized, “the illiterate and ‘conscious-less’ women of Nepal had to be ‘awakened’ from their pitiful, superstition-ridden lives and move forward to help develop the nation” (2000: 133). In this section I will demonstrate how women continue to feel limited despite *bikaas*. The basis of these limitations is the Hindu filial paradigm that informed *Muluki Ain*’s construction of the Nepali female citizen.

An ANNFSU (*Akhil*) female student informed me that a woman’s ability to be influential was not only an issue of access to education but also the forms of labor that society values. She proceeded with the Marxist feminist critique that traditional women’s work is invisible in the labor scheme because it does not provide money to the household. She said you can increase women’s consciousness but someone still has to raise children and

oversee the domestic sphere. She argued that in a Hindu society, the traditional division of labor is not going to quickly change. It is for that reason, she felt, that women must assert that their labor is just as valuable as men's labor; only then will their status elevate accordingly. She said to me,

My parents are progressive in some ways but still traditional. For instance, they are very proud of me because I am actively changing our society. But I always have to remind them that my sister-in-law is just as important. Her tasks of taking care of the household, raising my cousins, contribute just as much to our family and our society. When they see her role as important, maybe then her lineage will make it into our history and her work will be respectable enough for all to do, which would free women to pursue other ways to contribute.<sup>169</sup>

Her point resonates with what the anthropological study of women has established that “the social system engenders the gender system” (Mukhopadhyay & Higgins 1988: 484). This student argued that there must be a paradigm shift in the social system in order for women to find equality. She continued to refine her point, maintaining that women's traditional labor must be valued differently. She claimed that this has provided the grist for social and political movements. But until women figure out how to make a stand without being co-opted by traditional political leaders, then there will be no large shifts in the movement paradigm.

Another consistent description I heard that keeps women not only out of politics but also from speaking out in general is the proverb “a hen should not crow” (*pothi basna hunna*). One ethnic female student leader explained,

In the Nepali culture it is said that a hen should not crow. It is taken as ominous; it is taken as a sign of bad luck. The assumption of a hen should not crow

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<sup>169</sup> Translation of an ANNFUS (*Akhil*) central committee member's interview on 11.25.07.

establishes the assumption that females—whether they are the daughter, daughter-in-law, mother, sister—then they should not speak in the presence of males. The society has never encouraged those women who came up to speak with courage. Women who speak out are not encouraged with compliments like “good girl,” “good daughter.” No, rather they are referred to as “*bad women*” and “*characterless women*” [spoken in English]. In a society like this, it is really risky to become involved in politics or to speak out. You are judged by your family and your family is judged by others.<sup>170</sup>

This student leader’s explanation of the limits that women experience in politics captures a social truth. Based on the experience of tradition, women perceive themselves as less socially flexible than men. In *The Gender of the Gift*, Marilyn Strathern argues that Melanesians are neither singular nor plural, relying on McKim Marriott’s description of “dividual” in South Asia, which he juxtaposes to the western individual<sup>171</sup> (1990: 13). As I established in chapter four, People embody multiple social forms, which they realize in different relational contexts. Based on this notion, Roy Wagner created the concept of the fractal person (1991). Both of these conceptual approaches are relevant to understanding Nepali people and how they navigate their social lives, especially within caste scriptures. As this quote demonstrates women may be “dividual,” embodying multiple social relations, but the roles they are able to embody are prescribed roles that are dictated by hegemonic expectations of how women should behave and socially interact.

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<sup>170</sup> Translation from an interview with an ANNSU (*Akhil*) central committee member on 11.26.07.

<sup>171</sup> “Persons—single actors—are not thought in South Asia to be “individual,” that is, indivisible, bounded units as they are in much of Western social and psychological theory as well as in common sense. Instead, it appears that persons are generally thought by South Asians to be “dividual” or divisible. To exist, dividual persons absorb heterogeneous material influences.” (Marriott 1976: 111, cited in Strathern 1988: 348)



Figure 18: Female activists struggling to avoid arrest, Baag Bazar, Kathmandu 2004<sup>172</sup>

Indeed, the social interactions that they pursue must have particular reference points in order to be socially acceptable. These reference points are often limited to a kinship paradigm or involve women being submissive in public. Not only are metaphors that reference nature used to describe the mandated behavior for women, but also the society has relied on religion to cordon women to particular spheres and roles. A male Maoist student explained it to me in this way:

From the perspective of women, men are the gods. For an instance, Shiva is considered as a god and women are supposed to act like his wife, Parvati. But people do not consider Parvati a god and equally worship her. Therefore, the concept was formed that males are the gods, which the females serve since they are responsible for the religious ceremonies in the households. This is one of the

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<sup>172</sup> Street protest has been a historically accepted activity for all Nepali citizens regardless of gender or caste.

factors why the women cannot go ahead; the very cultural concept, women, has prevented them from going ahead. The tradition was such that the males took the females not as the equal collaborator but just a helping hand to fulfill the male objective. On the one hand, the women are socially prevented from progressing since they are taken as a crowing hen if they try to go ahead. That is considered unnatural.<sup>173</sup>

Female students have told me that religious tradition is a huge obstacle; it is the basis for societal prejudice. A gender that is not worshipped in the orthodox religion will not be taken as seriously as one that is.

This was substantiated for me on a road trip with some NSU (K) students as we went to different district conventions. Tanuja addressed it during a pit stop when I inquired why she had been frantically singing devotional songs to Shiva for the last two hours. She was obviously frustrated with the outcome of the district convention; every time someone tried to rehash an event, she cut him off with a Shiavas devotional song. She replied, “No one has listened to me all weekend long. Now they want to discuss all that went wrong at our convention. I don’t want to hear it. They interrupted me before but they won’t interrupt my songs to Shiva (*mero Shiavas bhakti git*).” Her frustration resonated with what I had heard from other female students; they are often interrupted when they are trying to make a serious point, more so than their fellow male students. But what is worse, according to Tanuja, is that no one notices when women are interrupted, and no one demands that their voices be heard. She said, “We have a choice, to either be pushy in stating our opinion when we know no one cares to listen, or we remain silent. Do you think we like being pushy? No. But there is no way for a woman to be

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<sup>173</sup> Translation of an interview with an ANNISU (K) central committee member on 11.12.07.

graceful in politics,<sup>174</sup> we are either scrappy or non-existent.”<sup>175</sup> It is a dilemma for women; they would rather have their opinions valued, but they recognize that when they are acknowledged it is often a concession, a gesture of inclusion.

Jaya emphasized this when we met in the fall of 2009. She had achieved the most coveted role for a female student leader. She is the first female student to serve the position of president of a student organization. When I congratulated her on this feat one of the students in her entourage pointed out that she was not only the first female student president but also she was the first elected female student president. Another student proudly pointed out that she is a *janajati* as well, but then he cowered when everyone averted their eyes because it was an obvious point to make. Later, when Jaya and I were alone, I asked her about her experience as the first female student organization president. She said,

You know, I had always thought that being politically active was a compulsion. It was for us, especially during the movement. But recently people have been saying that it is volunteer work. That is the response I hear when I try to give orders to make things happen. That is frustrating. I find it really hard. I have no way to convince people to serve the organization except through conviction for our ideology and our aim to achieve justice. When people start defining their political duty as volunteer work, I don't know how to direct them.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> The direct translation of what Tanuja said was, “But there is no way for a woman to be womanlike in politics, we are either cunningly forceful or we don't exist.” I had trouble translating this so I decided to rely on the quoted translation that my research assistant helped me translate based on my field note annotation.

<sup>175</sup> Transcription of a conversation with an NSU (K) central committee member on 2.11.07.

<sup>176</sup> Translation of an interaction with the ANFSU (*Akhil*) president on 10.6.09.

Jaya is too savvy to define her cadres' resistance to obey her orders as an attempt to undermine her as a woman in a leadership role, but it fits a trend. Women are not overtly suppressed in politics; rather they are put in positions where they must act other than they were raised in order to be effective. They must either shout over interrupting voices, strictly administer orders, throw rocks at the police, or attend late-night meetings that may involve alcohol or other male indulgences—that is, if they are lucky enough to be invited, which they rarely are because it is not an appropriate atmosphere for a woman of character. It is in these ways that women experience obstacles in politics.

### **Gendered Interactions: Women's Place in Society through the Articulation of Their Place in Politics**

As I was walking with Uma to Min Bhawan campus to hear the Prime Minister's speech at the ANNFSU (*Akhil*)'s 2009 Dashain commemoration, we ran into a very high-level CPN-UML leader. I knew his face, name, and history, but we had only met once in 2005 during a street protest where he had been arrested along with many other party leaders. Uma began introducing him. She told me that he was a former student activist, who has held the position of central committee member in the CPN-UML for a long time, and at the end of the Movement of Regression he was the minister of sports and education. As she was introducing him, he was looking at her expectantly, waiting to insert himself. As she paused in her introduction he said, "Leader [*neta*], I am a CPN-UML party leader. And this is my daughter."<sup>177</sup> He pointed affectionately to Uma. "I have known her for years. She is rising quickly in ANNFSU." I said it was nice to meet him again; we had met many years ago on the streets. He stared at me a bit blankly trying to recollect. He then said,

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<sup>177</sup> This CPN-UML leader and ANNFSU (*Akhil*) activist are not related; in fact, they are not even of the same caste or ethnic background.

“Is my daughter taking care of you? Uma, please make all of our guests feel welcome.” Uma nodded and mentioned she would come to his house before she left for her village for the Dasain holiday. As he drove off toward the speech program, Uma looked at me and said, “Guest? I think you know too much about us to be our guest.”<sup>178</sup> This minister’s response captured exactly what I have observed in the social dynamic of Nepali politics. Men designate themselves as leaders, and they incorporate politically active women into their circles by assigning diminutive kinship markers.

I begin this section with this vignette because it demonstrates how women are placed in politics. When I asked student activists about the roles of minorities and women in politics, I noticed that people relied more on stereotypical descriptions of women’s traditional roles in order to describe their own or their female cadres’ experience. More often than not, women’s positions were depicted as relational; women’s identities were based on their relationships with their natal families, their husbands’ families, or their sons. A female minister who has been active in CPN-UML politics since her school days explained it in this way:

For a woman to get ahead in politics, the family environment should be conducive. Her husband, son, brothers have to be supportive. In our society the socialization process for a son and a daughter is different. A son is taken as one who earns and performs the rituals after the parents die. On the other hand, a daughter is treated as someone who will go to someone’s home after marriage. A woman has to live within the control of her father before she gets married, her husband after she gets married and son after the demise of her husband. She is never free. Women don’t have their own self-identity. She is identified as someone’s

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<sup>178</sup> Translation of a transaction with a CPN-UML central committee leader and an ANNFSU (*Akhil*) central committee member on 9.19.09.

daughter, someone's wife, and someone's  
mother.<sup>179</sup>

This party leader told me that the reason she got into politics was to fight for women's civil rights. She believed that it was she who had the opportunity for education domestically and abroad, who needed to increase awareness in Nepali society and to enable women's opportunities for more prominent, public roles in society. She felt that the plight of women and the trials of the average Nepali person were similar but that women had a double layer of servitude. She explained it in this way: at the time she entered into politics, the Nepali people were subject to the King but Nepali women were also subject to the men in their families. For her, politics was a way to eliminate both levels of suppression. In fighting for political freedom she could help Nepali people become equal citizens. And by doing it as a woman, she hoped she could create space for other women so they could carve out identities other than being a daughter, sister, or mother.

This woman's experience is not typical. Her family, which lived outside of Nepal, encouraged her not only to study but also to be politically active. Since so few women were educated, they of course would not have access to the political life that she did. She went on to marry a founder of the Nepal Communist party, which, as she described it, "attached her to politics for life."<sup>180</sup> When I asked her what she felt she has done to uplift the state of women, her response indicated that she saw no difference between her personal political ambition and her fight for women's political rights. She said her mere presence in politics was a benefit to women because it affected the culture since men have to take her seriously in a leadership role. She added

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<sup>179</sup> Translation based on an interview with a CPN-UML central committee leader on 12.3.07.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

that the increase in women's opportunity for education would automatically increase their participation in politics and this would lead to necessary societal change.

Although this minister is exceptional in her position as party leader and state minister, her experience is not out of the ordinary for influential Nepali women. When I would mention this CPN-UML leader to others, the majority of people would first ask me if I knew who her husband was. This elucidates Wagner's assertion that "...any recognition or bestowal of a name is always the fixing of a point of reference within a potentially infinite range of relations, a designation that is inherently relational" (1991: 164). She is influential because she is connected to men in political power, which secured her position of respect. As in other parts of South Asia, women who get ahead in politics are often attached to politically influential men, either their fathers, husbands, or sons. The reality that women mainly establish a place in politics through the connection to a man not only illustrates the degree to which politics is network-based but also the reality that women's public place is kin-based. This dynamic is both a benefit and a hindrance to women—a hindrance because without a male connection they may be completely invisible, but they may never be able to overcome their family connection either.

It is for this reason that according to one student, ninety-five percent of the women in politics are high-caste and the other five percent are of ethnic minorities.<sup>181</sup> Many more high-caste women can claim a male connection in the political system than ethnic minorities. How does this affect Nepali society, particularly for women in it? One Madhesi student activist told me

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<sup>181</sup> Translation of an interaction with an NSU (D) committee member on 11.28.07.

that a high-caste female leader whose father is the NC party president, no more represents his mother than her father does. He said,

What difference does it make to the life of my mother if Sujata Koirala<sup>182</sup> becomes a Minister? Please tell me; will there be any difference in her life? It does not matter whether Sujata is male or female. She is capable enough of course, because she has everything. Sujata does not need to be empowered. The very direction of the women in the name of the feminist movement is wrong in our country. Sujata does not fight to live or for recognition, but she fights to maintain her family's wealth and influence, which was established on the premise of democratic right, that is her family business. Without it, her family is jeopardized, with it she is guaranteed to have a leadership role, even if it is a minister without portfolio. How ridiculous is that?<sup>183</sup>

This is the dilemma for women in Nepali politics. The most influential women are dismissed for the very same reason that they are able to get to the place of influence: they embody nepotism. They are a physical manifestation of an inherent aspect that fuels Nepali politics, networks. People spurn Sujata Koirala because she represents the reality that she, her family, Nepali Congress, and Nepali politics in general are run by an elite few. I ask people if Sujata is any different than other Nepali Congress male leaders. People's typical response is that she is worse than them. Not different, but worse. It is because she is a reminder of what Strathern argued is the role of big men in Hagen culture. "In Hagen, the one man is likened to clan, is its homologue, showing in his transformed persons the way in which multitudinous and

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<sup>182</sup> Sujata Koirala is the daughter of G.P. Koirala, the president of the Nepali Congress. She is a contentious figure because to many she represents not only the nepotism of Nepali politics but she is harshly judged for being extremely corrupt.

<sup>183</sup> Translation of an interview with a Nepal Student Forum (Sambhavana) central committee member, 4.15.08.

diverse particular (kinship) relationships can be eclipsed in the pursuit of a single person” (1991: 212). For women of Sujata’s notoriety the reverse is also true, her pursuits are indeed eclipsed by her kinship connections and people cannot look past them to recognize her individual ambitions.

Yet Sujata Koirala is different. She is different because she is a woman who has access to the political core. She is able to attend the key unofficial meetings that decide the political fate of Nepal. It is not a problem if she is around political alcohol bartering that may keep other women at bay because she is in the protected company of her father, uncle, and nephews. In public she is a woman who commands the respect of a man by other men. She is also different because she cultivates an entourage of female politicians and students. She creates an atmosphere where they can be near the center but not be compromised. In effect she is creating her own patronage network with women in key positions of power.

Risha is one of her main disciples. And Risha has found success because she has embraced politics in this traditional way, through cultivating her own networks. Risha has also worked hard to extend her network both domestically and abroad in order to build her own political and social clout. She has been influenced by the donor rhetoric of empowering all women. The way Risha describes her own activities is extending support to women in every sector and geographic location to be active and influential in their local areas and in national politics. She is able to impressively articulate how she wants to promote and connect women both locally and para-locally in order to encourage them to reach across sectors to find support from one another. When I asked her what her ambitions are for the political sector, she said to

support established women leaders who promote her and her friends through the ranks.

Despite her good intentions, Risha has a number of naysayers amongst the student political actors, in the larger political sphere, and in the general public. Prabal's dismissal of her summarizes people's attitude toward her. I was with him and a few other former NSU student leaders at a bar. We were a bit distracted by the television as the day's news headlines were being reported. There was a segment announcing the most recent talks between the NC, CPN-UML, and CPN (Maoist) party leaders, who were trying to resolve the stalemate of the constituent assembly government. The announcer was reporting that there was speculation that they were considering Baburam Bhattarai for the prime ministership but that G.P. Koirala would only agree to this if his daughter were declared deputy prime minister. As the announcer was reading this news there were images of people exiting the meeting. Sujata Koirala was filmed walking to her motorcade and Risha was behind her. Prabal pointed toward the screen at Risha, looked at me, and said, "Shadow goddess" (*chāya devi*).<sup>184</sup> People view Risha's influence as only based on her relations. Her attempt to get beyond the limits of male-dominated politics is what limits her ability to command respect. She has not been able to transcend her own personal connections in the minds' of others.

Another reason that women rise in politics through connection is that in order for women to get ahead in politics, they are expected to maintain the status quo or at the very least respect the party leadership. If they have filial loyalties to those in power, then they can more seamlessly maintain the status quo because it is assumed they are invested in it. By challenging it, they are

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<sup>184</sup> Translation of an interaction with former NSU (K) student leaders on 9.17.09.

not only challenging the political authority but also their families. One student leader indicated this when he described the compromises women must make in order to be active in politics. He said,

I think, first of all, the women who get into politics have to agree to play the roles that have been given by the patriarchal society. Without so doing, she cannot make her space in this political male culture. On the one hand, they have to agree with the value attached to them by the society that they are weaker than males, and along with this, they have to raise their voice for something else, not themselves. For an instance, if women don't challenge the positions of the party leaders but rather use their voices to raise the agendas of these leaders, then it is not difficult for them to obtain space in the parties. They have been getting such opportunities. I am really amazed seeing women distributing the batches in course of the programs held even by Maoists. At first glance it seems progressive. But in reality the women should not raise their voices against patriarchal traditions. If they want to raise their voice at all, it must be on other issues.<sup>185</sup>

This is how the experience of women and ethnic minority men differ despite the fact that people categorically collapse them together when speaking about exclusion. As I established in section one, minority men can find partial success in politics if they are willing to act like high-caste men. Women, on the other hand, may have the advantage of caste and kin affiliations with the politically elite but they are limited in how they can act in politics. For them it is social suicide to act like one of the guys, hoisting up a glass of whiskey in order to seal a crucial deal with their fellow political cadres. It is in this way that women are limited; there is only so far they can access the inner circles of high-caste male politics.

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<sup>185</sup> Translation of an interview with an ex-NSU (K) central committee member on 11.16.07.

As I argued in the first section, inclusion means to bring one in, and in order for this to happen one must be heard. Women have their ways of being heard in politics. Often it is by relying on what is effective, what resonates in Nepali politics, the maximization of the family as a political metaphor. Female party leaders often claim in their speeches at inauguration ceremonies and other political programs that they not only represent themselves but all mothers or sisters of Nepal. Older women say that they give well-wishes to their sons as well as to their daughters in their pursuit of positions of leadership. Younger women often say that they are not only encouraged as younger sisters to gain positions of leadership so they can pave the way to a future for their daughters, but also to fulfill the aspirations of their mothers. In speeches and other forums, these young women ask all their brothers who are present “to assist them in fulfilling their own mothers’ aspirations, both for the sons and daughters of Nepal.”<sup>186</sup> This may be a move that is inspired by national as well as international pressure for politics to be more inclusive. Yet the way they use the metaphor of family reveals that they are streamlining their agenda with traditional references to kinship and power.

I asked one female student where the inspiration for these metaphors comes from. She admitted that the use of family as a metaphor is indeed a powerful tool to convince people of your cause. It is a tactic throughout Nepali politics that politically minded women have been adopting because it has been effective in other ways. As an example, she cited the terms that define the relationship between parties and student organizations, mother and sister organizations. From her perspective, this is a misnomer because women have

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<sup>186</sup> This conclusion is based on political speeches given by female student and party leaders at the Dhading NSU (K) district convention 2.19.07, NSU (P) political program 3.7.07, and NSU (P) TriChandra campus convention, Kathmandu 3.21.07.

not played a central role. She claimed this is something that female activists intend to change; they will make themselves “more prominent in the political family structure.”<sup>187</sup>

As I have established, there are a number of obstacles that women face in politics, some of which cannot be discreetly addressed without expectation for substantial change. It is for this reason that a Maoist student told me the most important thing to alter is the state of mind of the politically elite. He put it simply; they need to modify the way they do politics if they want to include women. Political practice must be made truly conducive for women’s participation. He said if women don’t feel safe doing politics in an environment where their image might be endangered, then they won’t participate. That is why the Maoists have been experimenting with separate communes for men and women.<sup>188</sup> They want to provide women a safe zone to fully focus on their politics. He continued by saying that they actively try to minimize the risk of women falling into traditional domestic roles at their co-ed communes. They must all be vigilant in order to avoid “our natural social tendency,” as he described it. They hope that by avoiding such tendencies, their cadres will become used to interacting in a different dynamic. He said, “In our case, our wives are our competitors and enjoy equality in every aspect of life, just as we should know how to do every duty of life.”<sup>189</sup> The main thing he emphasized was that in order to make politics conducive for women, men needed to start accommodating them and making sure they could participate in all political activities, official and unofficial.

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<sup>187</sup> Observation and based on a conversation with an NSU (K) female student leader on 2.15.07.

<sup>188</sup> There may be sex-segregated Maoist communes but there are also co-ed communes, which I have visited. When I inquired about division of labor at the co-ed communes, they said they had assigned duties in order to ensure that no one falls into traditional gender roles.

<sup>189</sup> Translation of an interaction with an ANNISU (Krantikari) central committee member on 11.12.07.

This student is correct in his analysis; male political actors need to change their ways of being in order to create equal space for women in politics. Creating a women's zone can be empowering, but it too has its limits. An example of this is Padma Kenya Campus, the all-female campus. It is a very politically active campus with all of the student organizations represented in the Free Student Union. Since the 1990s it has also had a prominent place in the student street movements. During the Movement Against Regression, the streets in front of Padma Kenya campus were ground zero for the rock fights between the security forces and the students. In 2005, during the height of the King's rule, the students hung a sign declaring it a republic zone (*ganatantra chetra*). The police were never able to infiltrate that campus because all the student activists so heavily guarded it. One would think this would produce some capable, prominent female student leaders. It did, but even though they made their name on the streets as activists (*andolankāri*), they still had to contend with the hierarchy of their student organizations' central committees and their mother organizations. And despite it all, even as Padma Kenya campus became known throughout Nepal as a place to defy the state, it was still referred to as the "*sāsurali*" (father-in-law's house) by the male student activists. It is where the male students saw their source for wives and relationships. The male activists were happy to have the female students fight on the streets alongside them, but ultimately their view of what they would become never changed: the female students are their eventual wives.



Figure 19: An anti-king banner declaring Padma Kenya Campus a republic zone, Baag Bazaar, Kathmandu 2004

My own experience of being placed within the social logic demonstrates the symbolic associations attached to gender in Nepali politics, even if I was designated as an outsider. Most of the student leaders would refer to me as “little sister” and the cadres would call me “big sister.” This is necessary etiquette. If a student did not use such a filial reference then it would say something about his intentions, that he has no interest in making me kin. I was fortunate not to experience such awkwardness very often. My established relationships with key student and party leaders protected me; their inferiors had to respect the fact that I was the “little sister” or “daughter” of their leaders.

During my research, I spent a lot of time in male-only political situations, some official and many unofficial. I was often the only female present or, on rare occasion, a “sister-in-law,” the wife (or otherwise) of one of

the students, accompanied me. As I became more familiar with a group of students I started realizing that the kin terminology was not sticking. They wanted to acknowledge that I was not quite one of them. The reason may have been that it is not their habit to socialize with a woman who is not permanently or temporarily involved with one of them. They had to designate me as an outsider in order to normalize what was not normal. Therefore, my default name became *latti kuirini* (dumb white girl).

That designator changed when these students realized that I was not just a dumb white girl. This happened during the 2007 NSU (K) national convention, three years after I forged a relationship with these students. It had become official that Akash was not going to contest the NSU (K) elections and his friends were very disappointed. Some of them had come down to Chitwan just to campaign for him. That day I spent a number of hours trying to explain to his various supporters why it was not wise for him to contest. He did not have the support of the party, therefore he could never run NSU (K) as the public and the students would expect. I explained that he had already gained the political capital that one hopes to earn by being the president of a student organization through the notoriety he had earned during the Movement Against Regression. And that he felt his constituents were no longer the NSU (K) students but the larger public. Most of them understood my points and admitted that my analysis would have been the inevitable fallout if he had won.

That night I was explaining my perspective to Akash's closest friends as they were drinking beer in the middle of the bridge, the coolest place in Narangad. Pawan said, "Yeah, I heard Ram say that today, but he did not seem convinced by his own argument; did you talk with him about this?" I

replied that I had but that my points were not new; I had been telling Akash this for awhile. Pawan looked at me and said, “You are not a *latti kuirini* (dumb white girl). You are a *shyal bahuni* (a foxlike (female) Brahmin).”<sup>190</sup> Everyone started laughing and from that point onward my nickname became *shyal bahuni*.

In the eyes of these students I was elevated from a clueless, politically deficient female to a cunning high-caste female as soon as I demonstrated some political acumen. For me, to be called a *shyal bahuni* was no more offensive than being called a *latti kuirini*. I had relationships with these students; they treated me like a part of their inner circle. But when I tell other Nepali people this story I am informed that both terms are insults, I should not tolerate it or the students won’t show me respect. A female student who overheard this reference said to me, “I know you just take it as a joke, but you can’t let them think of you in that way. If you do, they will never take you seriously.”<sup>191</sup> She may have been right because when a young Padma Kenya activist called me *latti kuirini* in front of Akash, he told her that I was her “older sister” and she should not think of me as anything else. Later he said to me, “We don’t want to give people the wrong idea about you.”<sup>192</sup> Answering to a name that put me outside the purview of the filial network did indeed send the wrong idea about me. Even my own gendered interactions were limited by the confines of the Nepali social system.

### **State of Elites: A New Era of Secularism**

I have established that Nepali elites are adept at employing nationalist ideology to fit their own ambitions or, more specifically, at framing nationalist

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<sup>190</sup> Translation of an interaction with NSU (K) student activists on 5.20.07.

<sup>191</sup> Translation of an interaction with an NSU (K) student on 8.12.07.

<sup>192</sup> Translation of an interaction with an NSU (K) student leader on 10.2.07.

ideology so that their ambitions are the basis of the national pursuit. There is circularity to this endeavor. The political actors reference nationalist ideology to promote democratic rule that ensures their place as leaders. The usage of this ideology and its resonating ability substantiates their historical position as the ruling elite. Yet now they want to move away from the Hindu social order, which defined the ruling structure of the Nepali nation-state in the form of a Hindu Kingdom until 2008. I conclude this chapter with a focus on a key political demand that came out of the Maoists People's War and the Second People's movement, secular republic. Establishing a secular republic is an attempt to decouple the state and the King, to reframe the Hindu kingdom as a sovereign nation-state both in law and practice. Here I demonstrate the challenges for political actors to move beyond a Hindu sensibility in their political practice because they have benefited from it as a form of cultural authority, an authority in which they have found meaning as leaders who have committed themselves to the public service of politics.

Talal Asad argued that secularism takes a particular form in modern liberal governance because it is an established system in which "neither compulsion (force) nor negotiation (consent) but the statecraft that uses 'self-discipline' and 'participation,' 'law' and 'economy' as the elements of a political strategy" (2003: 3). Nepal is in the process of trying to establish those elements of modern liberal statecraft but the inability thus far to institute secular practice of politics is an indicator that the state is not monolithic, but made of actors who maintain inconsistent views.

Even though a secular republic has been instituted in name, it has yet to change the system in practice. Rather, the President and Prime Minister have replaced the King in religious state ceremonies that are designed to maintain

the supreme leader's position as the head of state in the order of the Hindu cosmos. Furthermore, Hindu metaphors have maintained their prominence throughout the parties in political speeches, as an anchor of social interaction, and in the ceremonial procedures of political programs like the adorning of garlands and blessing of red rice paste (*tika*). Even the translation of the word secularism represents the vagueness that official language encapsulates. I have heard two terms used for secularism; one is *dharmanirpeksha*, which means without religion, the other is *darmanispaksha*, which means non-biasness of religion. The subtleties of the two may seem inconsequential to most, which is obvious since they are interchangeable within conversation. Yet in the lack of distinction between the two terms reveals an opaque layer of intention with no action to follow it through. The linguistic inconsistencies, entrenched religious traditions, and metaphors in political programs and interactions are obstacles to addressing the issue of secularism and how it should be implemented.



Figure 20: Newly elected Padma Kenya campus leaders during an NSU (K) victory rally, Baag Bazaar, Kathmandu 2004

The public even resists attempts to address necessary change in practice in order to institute a secular republic. I first started understanding how entrenched the Hindu tradition is in politics in 2006 when I observed the resistance that an ex-student leader, Akash, faced when he tried to propose what a secular republic can look like in Nepal. He is known for being contentious, so I was surprised when I heard how he broached the topic of political practice within “new Nepal” in a few of his speeches at different district conventions. He was speaking in an indirect manner that counters his typical style. He was asking what “new Nepal” was and if it included the practices of wearing *topis*<sup>193</sup> and giving blessings (*tika*), or if it included sponsoring the King to go to the Pashupathi temple. He asked if these acts should be a part of politics or did they reinforce a different project that went against the sentiment of the people. What surprised me was that he is a firebrand<sup>194</sup> not usually known to delicately tread an issue. Later I asked him about his atypical diplomacy. I added, “You usually get people fired up so they support your radical suggestions.” He acknowledged my observation and admitted that he had been struggling with this. He admitted that emphasizing secularism has been a lot more challenging and complicated than his original call for a Nepali republic.

According to Akash’s account, initially he did directly address that the political traditions, even through the democratic period, were those based on the superiority of the Hindu monarch. He stressed that it has benefited the monarch that the political culture of the Hindu state has continued. He felt

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<sup>193</sup> *Topis* are traditional hats worn by high-caste men on a regular basis, but were mainly meant to be worn by Hindu males during religious rituals. *Topis* were part of the State uniform for bureaucrats and politicians alike.

<sup>194</sup> It was his campaign for a republic that was an alternative to the Maoist demand for republic and the resulting sedition charges that were brought against him that radicalized the rhetoric of the Movement against Regression in 2003.

that if they wanted to achieve a truly secular republic, which would not be at risk of being recaptured by the monarchy, then they must remove these practices and traditions not only from their government but from their political parties as well. He recounted a recent speech of his that the crowd reacted against. He had given the example that within that particular VDC (Village Development Committee) there was a walkathon for tuberculosis and about thirty people participated and raised ten thousand rupees. Then the next week the Pashupati temple trust had a rally and over one thousand participated and they raised over three hundred thousand rupees. He asked the audience for whose benefit was this money raised, for Pashupathinath, the God that gives our King his mandate to rule us? He lamented that after giving this speech, people approached him and asked why he was anti-Hindu. This shocked him and made him understand the gravity of people's resistance. Since then he has skirted the issue, trying to challenge the traditional political practices in order to gingerly broach how they might remove the King from their politics. He shook his head, saying that he was struggling to address this without offending people or their religion.

When people heard the word secularism they felt it was a threat to their traditions. Their response was similar to what Sindre Bangstad refers to as the conceptual binary regarding secularism in western social science, that it is a complete erasing of religion. She argues that it is not accurate to think of the issue of secularism as an either or thing. Rather, "the secular is an analogue, rather than a digital concept: societies – and individuals for that matter – may be more or less secular, but cannot be either 'secular' or 'religious'" (2009:201). The conundrum that this student politician faced was that his calls for secular political practice were an attempt to integrate the Nepali people into a

different type of unity, a national citizenry. Yet those who resisted did not recognize their personal place in that unity, rather they saw it as a threat to their identity, the identity they are used to having vis-à-vis the state.

After his explanation I asked him what was the solution to his impasse. He admitted that he had been reading more Hindu texts to gather quotes and teachings to communicate the Hindu belief that god is in all creatures, in all of us. He was trying to figure out a way to convey that he did not want to make people choose between Hinduism and no Hinduism but rather trying to promote that Hinduism is about worshipping the god in all people and should be used to promote communalism and inclusiveness in a way that people will be receptive to. He admitted that people have a hard time separating the politics and government from their everyday life experience, which for many, Hinduism is their dominant orientation. He felt that he was at an impasse, that the only effective way he saw to convince people to enact inclusion was through their Hindu faith, the same sentiment the King had exploited to maintain his mandate. He queried, “How do I break the cycle and try to institute political practice of equality that does not use the King’s tactics?”<sup>195</sup>

This politician’s struggle resonates with an observation that Michael Rowlands made regarding his study of elite political dominance in Mali and the Cameroon when he wrote,

The study of elite cultures illustrates the inadequacy of making a split between civil society and tradition—a between subject and citizen—as a characteristic of the postcolonial state in Africa. The two are not so clearly separated and the continuing importance of the “traditional” in the links between rural and urban, between civil society and custom means that everyone

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<sup>195</sup> Based on an interaction with an ex-NSU (K) student leader, 11.30.06.

participates in both as a crucial part of their identification (2002: 156).

It is not merely an academic inadequacy to separate these two, but practitioners also find themselves at an impasse when they want to disassociate certain modes of identity from certain realms of practice. This politician is unable to break the political identification with Hinducentric origins that have shaped Nepali political culture and the nation-state of Nepal. In other words, in Nepali politics the “dialectics of belonging” involve a Hindu social order that is tenaciously present for many (van der Veer 1994). They may agree with the sentiment of broader inclusion in the political and bureaucratic spheres but they are not open to changing it to the degree that they cannot relate to what has been the central identifying referent, a Hindu social system.

At the end of my discussion with this ex-student leader in 2007, he said perhaps if the Maoists win the constituent assembly elections then we will see some changes in this regard. He reasoned that it was the Maoists that most advocated for the secular aspect of the secular republic state. Plus many of the Maoist party put politics over and above religion and culture. He wondered if they might be more successful in instituting secular practices that resonate with the larger public. At the time I responded, perhaps we will have to see, while visions of Maoists wearing *tika*, garlands (*mala*) and the *topi* came into my head. Two years later, I was eager to return to Nepal to see if the Maoist-led government had been able to make any substantial progress on the secular front. Returning in September 2009, I quickly realized that Dasain in the secular republic looks very similar to the Dasain during the King’s rule. The major difference is that the elected government leaders have replaced the King

in all of the Dasain rituals; the President and Deputy Prime Minister<sup>196</sup> received the flower from the Nepal Army general at the Army-sponsored *Phulpati* festival<sup>197</sup> on the fourth day of Dasain.

There was a torrential downpour the afternoon of the *Phulpati* ceremony. I had managed to convince a cab driver to let me sit in his vehicle along the army grounds so that I could observe the ceremony without getting completely drenched. As the ceremony was occurring he asked me what I thought of it. I replied that the secular republic of Nepal looks very similar to the King's rule during Dasain. He explained that Dasain was the biggest festival in Nepal and that people feel more connected to their government if the officials are part of the celebration.<sup>198</sup> As I sat in his cab, I thought of the Nepali rupee bill. After the Nepali Army and state were stripped of the royal designator in 2006, they removed the King's image from the Nepali currency

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<sup>196</sup> I was told that the Prime Minister would have attended but he was abroad at the United Nations' Council meeting in New York so the Deputy Prime Minister stood in for him.

<sup>197</sup> The Phulpati Ritual is the royal ritual that symbolically reenacts Prithi Narayan Shah's journey from his homeland of Gorkha to his appointed nation-state capital, Kathmandu. What I observed in 2009 was that the interim government leaders replaced the King and the Nepal Army served the same function as the Royal Nepal Army had during the monarchy. In 2008, the Army served the similar function, the Nepali Congress President was present but the Maoist-appointed Prime Minister did not attend. This is a description of the Phulpati Festival: "The navapatriva (the nine plants--banana, dadim, dhanko bala, haledo, manabriksha, kachuki, belpatra, ashok, and jayanti--are collectively called navapatrika) for phulpati are carried by the helpers from the royal Dashain Ghar of Gorkha via the ancient route up to Jeevanpur in Dhading district. The person carrying the phulpati dives in the raging Budhi Gandaki River instead of walking on the bridge above it or taking a boat to cross the mighty river. The person believes that he has the blessing of Goddess Shakti and no harm will come his way. A group of assistant priests from the royal Dashain Ghar of Basantapur place of Kathmandu will be waiting for this person in Dhading to carry the phulpati to Kathmandu. They bring it to Jamal and from there the phulpati receives elaborate and royal treatment. It is placed in a palanquin under a gold-tipped ornate umbrella. Here, the phulpati is welcomed by the Royal Nepalese Army, Nepal police, and government dignitaries. After this an army platoon of the royal priest leads the phulpato parade to Hanumandhola Place. While the procession is on its way to Hanumandhoka, the King witnesses the ceremonies taking place in Tundikhel, the army parade grounds. Guns and cannons are fired to honor the phulpati. By the time the functions of phulpati, also known as phulpati badai, are over, the phulpati procession will reach Hanumandhoka Palace. The King also proceeds to the courtyard of this palace and pays homage to Nava Durga, the nine shakti goddesses. With this ends the phulpati ceremonies." [www.internationalfriendsofNepal.nl/phulpati-dashain-nepal.html](http://www.internationalfriendsofNepal.nl/phulpati-dashain-nepal.html)

<sup>198</sup> Translation based on an interaction with a cab driver in Kathmandu on 9.25.09.

and replaced it with an image of Mt. Everest or a rhododendron on the different rupee notes. But if you hold the money up to the light, you can still see the watermark of the King with his crown of peacock feathers. The image may have changed but the underlying stamp is still the same. The bastions of the monarchy remain even if it is not apparent at first glance.

The referential power of Hindu tradition is not merely masked by secular images; it is also embraced as a means toward restructuring the nation. During my 2009 visit I also attended a program organized by joint youth organizations in their campaign to put pressure on the government to make progress on the constituent assembly process. An ex-student activist, Rajeev, explained to me that it was mainly civil youth organizations that participated. They had originally hoped that the student organizations would take leadership in running the campaign, but all the student organizations were hesitant to protest their mother parties as a united front. After the organizers realized their ambivalence, they decided it would be more effective if it was a non-political movement. They hoped this would make it a more legitimate endeavor in the eyes of the public. He admitted that after student organizations realized the potential benefits of this movement, they were eager to participate. He reassured me that they did not allow them to display their flags because they did not want the student organizations to usurp the spirit of the movement, which they have organized to be "*pan-yuba*," across youth lines. He explained to me that they had organized some symbolic protests to get their message across at this program. He thought they would be very effective and would like my input.

The symbolic program was in the form of a skit, which enacted the Dasain blessing whereby the eldest family member gives the juniors a blessing

and a gift. It is implied that the one receiving the blessing gives respect to the elder's authority and commits to ensuring their future well-being. The dramatization comprised of a mother giving her son the Dasain blessing (*tika*) and then trying to give the boy a gift. The boy refused to take the gift and retorted, "All I want as a Dasain gift is a constitution. How do you expect me to insure the prosperity of our family and country in the future without a constitution?" Then the same skit occurred again with a father giving his daughter a blessing and her requesting a constitution. Then everyone came on stage and sang a song that stated as the citizens of Nepal we should not only ask our leaders for their blessings but for a constitution so we have a guideline to invest in them and the state of Nepal.

Rajeev was very excited that the media had come. He explained to the television media that they should broadcast the skit instead of the speeches. He asserted that if it was broadcast into the living rooms across Nepal, perhaps it would get people thinking about what their priorities should be. He then asked me what I thought, did I think it was effective. I wondered allowed if people would perceive a logical disjuncture in having the newly restructured state symbolically assert itself as the Hindu patriarch. He retorted that it was not a big deal. He reasoned that everyone celebrates Dasain so they will identify with their sentiment. He paused and asserted, "We need to make a statement in a way that everyone understands." Then he paused and added, "People understand this, even you understand it. In that way it is effective."<sup>199</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Based on an interaction with an ex-NSU (K) student activist at a political program on September 19, 2009.

Rajeev's approach differs from that of Akash, who has struggled to get beyond the impasse of an entrenched Hindu orientation. They both come from the same party, but Rajeev embraces the "dialectics of belonging" in order to achieve his ends, youth pressure to effect progress of the constituent assembly. He is not critical of the means used towards this end, even if it involves referencing traditional forms that some view as obstructing the construction of "new Nepal." He perceives a new constitution and traditional forms that resonate with the public as mutually reinforcing; they both can mobilize people toward progress. Rajeev's reasoning was that it is better to reference what is understandable, but this sort of approach passively reinforces politics to be a particular way of life, one that further entrenches the elite political culture that has historically thrived as the main stakeholders within the state.

### **Conclusion: Erasing Identities**

Raymond Smith argued that what we as researchers see as the problem may not be what matters to the actors themselves, when he asserted that a "worker's most common claim is not that he is exploited, but that he is 'not recognized' and not 'helped' by those in power" (1984: 511). Nepali politics is about recognition. What I have demonstrated in this chapter is that in order to be recognized the citizens must speak, shout, protest, or acquiesce in a way that registers. Only then can they be helped or influential in the spheres of power. This chapter analyzes the nature of this dynamic in order to understand how high-caste elite politics is continually reinforced even as the Nepali political actors attempt to institute an inclusive state. And these political actors have sold the citizenry on the democratic principle of voting as the basis for their political freedom and expression. But voting does not guarantee equality, what it guarantees is a system; a system is vulnerable to

political savvy as much as any other. Nepali history has shown that when this system does not suit the elite, then they take to the streets to enforce an active democracy. This trend is meant to ensure their role as state brokers while obfuscating that they are the police order that dictates the predominant political logic. Rather they have the reigns of control on both stages, of democracy (during the contentious politics of the *āndolan*) and post-democracy (during the restructuring of the state). I now conclude with a vignette, which highlights that even though voting often substantiates issues of inclusion and political freedom; the action of voting cannot encompass the complexities of social inclusion.

The day had finally come. There was a ten-year civil war, five years of political opposition on the street, and finally the People's Movement Part Two, which united all the stakeholders in agreement for a constituent assembly as the way out of the political impasse. For over a year and a half, mass movements like the Madheshi movement and small terrorist cells were trying to assert their voice so they could either participate or affect the parameters of the constituent assembly campaign process. And now in April of 2008 the elections were happening. The sacrifices of every sector culminated in each citizen's one vote to determine the fate of the country. People were nervous that there would be political clashes, sectarian violence, or terrorist suppression. No one knew what the results would be or if the multiple international monitors would consider it a free and fair election.

I decided to stay in Kathmandu to observe the elections at the political center of Nepal. I thought it best to start out on foot. I began my day with my regular jog up to Pashupati temple, but that day I stopped at all the polling stations along the way. There were eight between my house and the top of

Pashupati temple. I was going through a few neighborhoods, which would allow me to get a sense of how the day might turn out. Will people come to the polls early, will they wait to see if it is safe, or will they boycott the polls altogether? All of these questions were at the forefront of my mind. I reasoned that I could assess the mood on my run and plan my day accordingly. People had indeed come to the polls early, eagerly anticipating long lines. One gentleman said to me, "It is a holiday. Our only obligation is to vote, so if we get it done early, we can play cards for the rest of the day."

As I was jogging back through Hadigaon, I practically ran into a very disgruntled older Newar man who was ranting as he weaved through the street. I asked him what was wrong and he shot back, "This is what they call democracy? This is what the fight has been for?" I looked at him blankly, waiting for an explanation. He said if he was not such a simple person, he would suspect a conspiracy, he did not know what to do. I asked what he was talking about, whether someone had barred him from the polls. He shook his head in dismay, explaining that he was not allowed into the polling station because he was not on the voter list. He showed the sector volunteers his residency card after they asked him if he was at the right constituency. He was at the correct one. Then he said they looked at another list and said, "According to our census data you died two years ago." He paused, breathing deeply, and then as he shook his residency card at me, he said, "They told me I can't vote because I am dead, but I am alive. Can't you see, I am alive. There have been many times that I was ignored by authority, they had lots of excuses but never because I was dead. What is the point of this so-called political freedom, can a vote even matter?" I was so stunned that at first I could not respond. I asked him if his family could go and vouch for him or did

he know any of the political cadres of his constituency. He replied, "I am old, I have no influence, no political connections. They told me it does not matter what my family says, I was on the deceased list, I don't even have a number." He paused and began kicking the disintegrating curb, then looked up at me and said, "If they declare this election free and fair, remember this. Things are never what they appear to be, especially in politics in this country."<sup>200</sup>

The elections were declared free and fair. This man's experience was extreme. Most political activists and media personnel with whom I spoke said that this situation was an anomaly; rather, proxy voting was a more regular occurrence. In fact it was common knowledge that the political parties, particularly the Maoists, were clever enough to figure out who was absent from their constituents so that they could arrange people to vote in their place. I recall one Maoist student saying to me, "A lot of the young men are in the Gulf, being exploited because they have no other choice. We know that they support us in sentiment. And we wanted to make sure that sentiment was realized."<sup>201</sup> I conveyed this thought to a Nepali political analyst and wondered if it was an admission of proxy voting. He replied, "All the parties did it; the fact that the Maoists did it so systematically and effectively can be attributed to their organizational abilities."<sup>202</sup>

Even though this gentleman's experience was irregular, it still sheds light on the fact that voting is a limited form of political expression, yet it has been synonymous with freedom during the years of political struggle in Nepal. It is an example of the "radical form of forgetting all about it" that

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<sup>200</sup> Translation of an interaction with a supposedly deceased citizen of Hadigaon, constituent number five, 4.10.08.

<sup>201</sup> Translation of an interaction with a Maoist campus leader at Padma Kenya Campus during my going-away tea party, 4.16.08.

<sup>202</sup> Interaction with a political analyst who monitored the constituent assembly elections for the National Democratic Institute, 4.17.08.

Rancière argues occurs when equality is manufactured as the basis that binds sovereign people.

The equality of anyone and everyone becomes the immediate effectiveness of a sovereign people, itself identical to scientific modeling and forecasting operating on an empirical population carved up exactly into its parts. The equality of anyone and everyone becomes identical to the total distribution of the people into its parts and subparts. (1999: 105)

The only thing that is not equal is being dead. Otherwise, the lists are carved up and the parties machinated to take advantage of every empirical loophole that was possible, and the elections of 2008 were declared free and fair by the international world.

## CHAPTER 6 THE AESTHETICS OF ORGANIZATION: ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICE, IDEOLOGY, AND IDENTITY

In order to understand other people's politics, I think it is not only important to analyze people's ideological categories, but also their practical categories like organization. In this regard I take a cue from the political anthropology tradition that demonstrated how the structural aspects of people's practice provide a lens into their worldview (Evans-Prichard 1940, Leach 1970 [1954]). Focusing on Nepali political actors' instrumental categories allow me to understand their larger shared sense of the political. An example of this is the ANNISU (R)'s use of the term "scientific organization," which they referred to in order to convey their sense of what their organization entails. As I began to unravel what they meant by this, I realized that it represented a larger aesthetic of organization that many of my interlocutors focused on. The phrase is a referential composite of a complicated number of interrelated factors that they use to define their political organization and frame their political identity. The aspects that comprise organization weave together the students' organizational structures and day-to-day practices, through which their identity as a political organization is articulated.

In this chapter I analyze the aesthetics of organization in order to understand the perpetuation of political party mythos and how they fuel Nepali political imaginary. I frame this analysis to address Jan Harris's question regarding the Latourian perspective of organization: "Organizations (noun) are sustained by organization (verb). But what are these modes of ordering, how are these immanent acts of organization that yield institutions, facts, and artifacts to be described?" (2005: 165). I argue that people are

invested in a link between ideology and organizational form, as well as working styles and lifestyles, which highlight the contradictory nature of the larger political myths that their parties thrive off of. They attribute these connections to institutional culture, which not only provides them an identity but also allows them to attribute an identity to others. I have chosen to focus on the aesthetics of organization,<sup>203</sup> to reveal their sense of identity by specifically focusing on how they frame their organization to me in our interactions, because it was a common theme amongst my interlocutors. I sensed that their focus on it reflected an anxious gap between how people expect things to be and how they actually are. Their obsession with organization was their way of reconciling this reality.

This analysis is meant to inform how shared collective mentalities are developed and become a force for political change or establishment of norms within and between political generations (Braungert 1986: 219). I draw on Tilly's concept of repertoire, which is meant to explain what political activists conceive of as viable options from which to choose their strategies and organization-making abilities. Tilly argues that "existing repertoires incorporate collectively learned, shared understandings concerning what forms of claim making are possible...as well as what consequences different possible forms of claim making are likely to produce. They greatly constrain the contentious claims political actors make on each other and on agents of the

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<sup>203</sup> It is not my intention to be redundant in my analysis of people's Marxist or otherwise revolutionary theoretical orientation by using a Marxist theoretical perspective as my analytic base. Rather, I will analyze the aesthetics of political actors' theoretical sensibilities and how it impacts their sense of who they are and their political orientation in the local context of Nepali politics. Put in a different light, I will look at the preferred symbolic associations that influence political actors' organizational forms—what counts as scientific organization and how they rationalize it through their everyday practices (Lounsbury and Ventresca 2003, Polletta 2005). It is for this reason that I will focus on students' internal institutional culture. I will analyze how the notions of organization impact the internal institutional culture of the student organizations and its relationship with its mother organizations.

state” (1999: 419). Braungert highlights that repertoires are not stagnant but, at the very least, generational or jointly experiential. I consider this from the perspective that student activists are in a particularly transitory position, learning the repertoires of their superiors and attempting to imbue them with contemporary values and social change that they consider necessary. This chapter is meant to elucidate the process of changing political values by analyzing the generational repertoires that inform them.

I begin this chapter with an analysis of internal culture. I will define what political institutional culture means to student activists before I begin the larger analysis of organizational form because the other aspects of organizational form are what my interlocutors have identified as the components that comprise internal culture. In the second section I will look at the components that comprise the internal structures of their organization. Political science engages internal processes and organizational structures as analytics in order to understand how political institutions go about achieving their agendas (Gunther and Diamond 2003; Hachhethu 2002; Katz 1994; Lawson 1994; Monroe 2001). Yet it must be acknowledged that the basis for all political agendas is political ideology (Panebianco 1988; Prasad 1980; Puri 1980). Ideology informs the end point. Internal processes and organizational structures reveal the means toward that end. But to what degree does the ideology inform the processes of everyday political action? In other words, how closely linked are theory and practice? In this section I will unpack the place of political ideology, how it informs notions of organization, and how the students orient themselves to it as a political and pragmatic concept within their institutions. I will also demonstrate how the transition from revolutionary group (cadre-based party) to political organization (mass-based

party) can stymie a political group. Once in the position of political organization, a group must condone tactics of political survival that serve as a recursive obstacle to its larger political ends.

In section three, I analyze why the students emphasize the necessity of consistency in their organizational practices. They maintain Nepali political organizations have become weakened because of the discrepancy between the parties' political ideological aspirations and their internal practices (working styles). Organization ultimately comes down to the age-old struggle between theory and practice (Djilas 1957; Doolin and Goolas 1964; Lenin 1920). Within the notion of organization there is an insinuation that internal culture and ideology should be recursive (Brienes 1989).<sup>204</sup> Yet in reviewing Karl Weick's contributions to organizational theory, Barbara Czarniawska connects Weick's establishment of notions like "autopoietic" (self-regulating and self-reproducing systems) to the realization that "the result of organizing is interlocked cycles which can be represented as causal loops rather than a linear change of cause and effects" (2005: 269). Section three explores the degree to which the discrepancies between ideology and internal practice may unintentionally serve as feedback loops that create unanticipated downfalls that are perceived by others as negative political culture. This analysis will also include an overview of their hierarchal structures and the degree to which hierarchy informs the place of cadre and leader not only in the student organizations but also in their institutional relationship with their mother party. The last section serves as a case study to demonstrate the potent anxiety amongst the students that their political parties have lost touch with the

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<sup>204</sup> In the Nepali context, the more left a party is, the more its practices, agendas, and internal procedures will be informed by a theoretical political ideology (Baral 1995; Borre et al 1991; Hachhethu 2002; Hoftun et al 2002; Rana 1995; Shrestha 1996).

“master frames” that are supposed to anchor their agenda and tactics in order to present organizational cohesion (Snow and Benford 1992: 146).

### **Differentiating: The Parameters of Political Culture**<sup>205</sup>

People are invested in the idea of internal culture because it allows them to orient themselves to others in different groups. In politics it is inevitable that all the participants must interact, therefore conceptions of organizational culture provide a compass that allows the participants to navigate the political terrain. As I will demonstrate, the concept of organization is as much about how individuals conduct themselves in their institutions, which is their politics, than how the group conducts itself. I will be foregrounding this as a link to the coming chapter on governance and internal political process.

Organizational culture is just one example of a social guide that serves to identify others. It also provides the parameters from which the participants can create their own identity, which is influenced by what they understand their organizational culture to be and how they understand others to identify it. In other words, institutional culture allows political actors a way to identify their place and the place of their group in the larger politics. In a sense it

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<sup>205</sup> It is important to note that I asked various student activists, as well as party cadres and political leaders, a series of questions in order to understand the different notions of organization. I began my questions by asking people about the notion of organization and the role it plays in their student unions and mother organizations, which lead into a question about the role of ideology and how ideology impacts the character of the organization. Then I inquired about their organization’s internal working styles and what impacts it, then asked them to consider the lifestyles of their members. Then I would link all of these questions, asking them to consider them in a comparison of their own political organization to others. The final question I asked was about internal culture of their organization, specifically what informs it and how it plays a role in the identity of their organization. I took the advice of some key informants who had suggested I not use the word culture until the end of my series of questions in order to avoid leading people. The analysis I make in this chapter is based on how my subjects invoked the notion of culture when talking about working styles, lifestyles, group dynamics, and organizational character. Their responses confirmed that the notion of internal culture was a useful conceptual tool that encapsulates ideology, working style and lifestyle, which manifests through the organizational character.

serves as an inner circle the way Bista described in *Fatalism and Development*, it allows people to differentiate between “us and them.” Chantal Mouffe argues that this is an essential part of democratic logic, who is a part of the demos and who is outside it must be established in order to constitute collective political identities (2000: 4, 12). Furthermore, the notion of distinguishing between “us and them” is a traditional anthropological theme. As both Marilyn Strathern (1988) and Roy Wagner (1975, 1977) have established, differentiation is an inevitable result of social interaction, “for such differentiation is the very core of their social self-invention” (Wagner 1975: 121). Another useful way to conceptualize organizational culture is as a political niche. The concept of niche has been used to describe the factors that shape and maintain boundaries between organizational forms; this is a dynamic process of segregating and blending until a unique organizational identity is ultimately formed (Hannan and Freeman 1996).

Furthermore, the larger political culture is informed by the interaction of these specific institutional cultures as well as more general cultural sensibilities and political history. This point resonates with Janet Borgenson’s argument in her essay on Judith Butler’s theoretical approach to organizing subjectivities. In this essay she postulates that within Butler’s theoretical frame, “organizational environments serve as contexts for iteration of whatever is demanded with such a space, creating and controlling subjectivities and relations among these” (2005: 71). It is the organizational environments that allow the possibility of mutual recognition. The aesthetic of internal culture that Nepali political actors use to guide themselves through the political terrain is similar to what Butler has called the tableaux of subjectivity: “Repeated representations, imposed codes of behavior, or

organizational cultures endlessly recreate normative values and identities which are made available to, constitute, and exist in tandem with the subject in contemporary culture.” (2005:71). Or as Rancière has argued about politics, “[I]t places it in the regime of the One distributed as parts and roles” (1999: 64).

Mutual recognition between actors of political institutions is a necessary part of national politics in any representative democracy. Yet it is also important to highlight that within the Nepali political institutions themselves, the ideal notion of organization is the collapsing of individual identities into one unit that serves the ultimate political aim. As I will show in this chapter, those who pride themselves on establishing a political institution that mirrors their political ideals are most likely to enact an organizational sensibility that prioritizes political ideology and aim over individual need. Renè ten Bos captures this sentiment in his essay on Agamben’s contributions to contemporary organizational theory when he argues,

Something that Nancy has referred to as “immanentism” that is, a political craving for a social identity that functions as an absolute horizon for those who are going to bear it and that can only be achieved by means of myth and sacrifice (Nancy 1991: 12; 56-7; Nancy 2002: 74) *and* if the bourgeois accepts his or her “proper being-thus” not as belonging to an identity but as a “singularity without identity,” then and only then might there be a chance that this bourgeois will “enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects” ([Agamben] 1993a: 65). (205: 22)

Therefore, the role that culture plays in organizational theory may seem like a contradictory role if one considers all that it incorporates: differentiation within the process of mutual recognition that occurs between institutions, that

on an internal level is meant to be collapsed in order to strengthen the external image and agenda of each institution. This contradiction indicates that the way in which actors understand culture as it applies to political organizations is simultaneously based on the insertion of oneself into an organization as well as the collective action of insertion into Nepali politics.

It is important to establish that culture in the context of Nepali politics is differently categorized than culture amongst ethnic groups or religious groups. Institutional political culture is a manifestation of identifiable factors like ideology, working style, individual characteristics, hierarchy, and a particular history that is shared by the group. People may consider these factors as aspects of other types of culture, yet they would not identify them in a deconstructive, critical manner; rather, they treat their own culture and, at least conceptually, other's culture with reverence for it as reified tradition. Within politics, there is more awareness that political culture is constructed within a history and is continually changing or open to change. When they identify the aspects of culture or, in Nepali, *sanskriti*, they regard those aspects as the essence of tradition, not something that can be extracted or manipulated. The aspects of political culture, on the other hand, are identified in order to be judged and restructured for the benefit of the institution—in other words, to serve a political end.

When I asked people about institutional culture, I used the Nepali word, *sanskriti*, yet more often than not people would respond using the English word “culture.” They would tack back and forth using the word *sanskriti* to describe religious and ethnic traditional ways of life, while using the English word “culture” to describe internal institutional culture. This tendency did not surprise me because many of the student politicians are

sociology or political science majors. They have a social scientific understanding of culture that they associate with the English word that differs from *sanskriti*. The social scientific explanations that they came to learn in the classroom are based on culture as a constructed concept, something that is objective, which can be studied and identified. The students' analyses of their own and other parties' institutional cultures were, in this sense, academic.

Another thing that marks the difference between *sanskriti* and institutional culture is that my interlocutors demonstrated a capacity to be critical of political culture without being fundamentally critical of those who engage it. They are able to objectify it and disassociate it from the actors in order to analyze it, whereas being critical of others' *sanskriti* is to be critical of not only the people of that culture but their lineage as well. Political actors engage in this type of assessment for both their own institutional practices and others. For instance, a leader from a smaller left student organization told me,

While our culture is exposed to the society or to other organizations, we have to assess whether others like or dislike our culture [English]. What I mean by culture is the accumulative form of our working style and interaction with each other and society. If the people outside don't like our styles we need to change them. For instance, imagine that we are presenting our culture as revolutionaries. But if the people do not like it, naturally we needed to bring changes in our styles.<sup>206</sup>

As this quote demonstrates, political actors can engage in detached reflection of their organization in ways that are rarely done when considering their own or others' ethnic or religious identities in this way. The constructedness of the organization is an obvious attribute; their very survival as an organization is

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<sup>206</sup> Excerpt from interview with ANNFUSU (*Ekikrit*) student leader, 11.10.07.

impacted by how they present themselves and how they are perceived. It is a reflexive endeavor that is constantly negotiating meaning and struggling over agenda or direction, a continual act of disagreement.

In this sense, Nepali political actors have a bifurcated view of culture similar to Roy Wagner's critique of anthropologists in *The Invention of Culture* when he wrote, "And in analyzing the phenomenon of intention from the viewpoint of the actor, it has been necessary to regard the conventions of his culture—what is understood to be 'innate' as opposed to what is seen as the 'artificial' realm of human manipulation—as relatively static" (1975: 103). To people of other sectors, political actors may not appear to be too discerning between invention and convention, but as they have demonstrated in their responses to me, there is an awareness. It is through inter-organization interaction that they are continually contesting and negotiating the meanings and assumptions about how they are perceived. In speaking about this, people are not fatalistic about organizational culture. They do not believe they are destined to be a part of a particular organization, and people recognize their free will in being participants, despite the fact that their political associations very often reflect their more general social network. In this regard, there is a paradox in the way they objectify institutional culture and how they fit into it, creating their social connections and identities to be based upon their organization.

Even though institutional culture is regarded differently than *sanskriti*, it is still informative of how people build society, make social connections, and interact with one another. In describing political culture to me, a political analyst said the following:

First of all, political culture encompasses a lot of things. It has an impact on everything. Our institutional culture plays the most significant role in our varying ideologies and perspectives in the political realm. What I do largely depends on the society in which I grew up. It depends upon the norms and culture of my society. In the context of politics, my own culture evolves depending on how, where, and with whom I become adjoined. It is similar to the more general concept of culture, it is accumulative in the long process of living, and it finally carves the character of a person. Our diverse views have to be acknowledged and respected in the realm of politics... If people approach politics with this in mind, then they can understand that accommodations should occur; give and take must be done.<sup>207</sup>

Some would argue that his explanation of culture pretty classically captures the Nepali understanding of *sanskriti* within Nepali society. Since the creation of the modern Nepali nation-state, there has been an acknowledgement of the different cultures and identities that exists within its borders. It is an unavoidable tradition to identify difference and then figure out how to relate with one another despite hierarchy and conflicting views. It makes logical sense that people would apply the same reasoning to the diverse landscape of politics and define justice as everyone compromising for inclusion that represents the diversity within Nepali society. After all, politics is the venue in which societal justice is negotiated.

As I have previously mentioned, the politically active students link ideology, working style, and lifestyle as integral to their institutional culture, although it is important to note that ideological orientation impacts how students prioritize these different aspects in the composition of their own culture and how they understand the ratio in other political institutions. For

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<sup>207</sup> Excerpt from interview with independent political analyst who was serving as a Maoist-appointed minister, 11.19.07.

instance, the leftist students with whom I spoke focus more on working style and political agenda being the most crucial aspect that shapes institutional culture, particularly when it came to their own internal culture. A Maoist student explained to me, “style and culture are more or less sides of the same coin.”<sup>208</sup> For them working style is the manifestation of the two symbiotic tenets of their institution: their ideology and their political agenda. It is for this reason that their culture is defined by their working style. On the opposite end of the spectrum, NSU does not hold their working style in high priority because they do not have a unified style; what binds them is their history of fighting for democracy, a fight that is even an internal struggle.

Yet it is important to highlight that regardless of how working style is prioritized as an aspect of institutional culture, it is not the first thing they consider when defining other student organizations’ culture. Rather, students often cite the characteristics of the cadres as what impacts other organizations’ culture. As one female ANNFSU student put it, “The internal styles and the culture are reflected in the character of its leaders and the cadres.”<sup>209</sup> The NSU students are the most likely to recognize that the character of their students and how they interact with one another as what affects their culture. After all, if your organization is dictated by personal fiefdoms, then charisma and personality are determining factors in how individuals rank in the nepotistic hierarchy. One student critically told me,

The way the cadres of an organization act determines the overall culture of the organization. We have developed such a culture that one must hold a position, serve one’s interest, and create disputes in order to achieve all this. While doing this, the activities of the organization cannot go

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<sup>208</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) central committee member’s interview, 11.12.07.

<sup>209</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNFSU (*Akhil*) central committee member’s interview, 11.25.07.

ahead smoothly. Our culture undermines us. For instance, if we passed through the Central Committee an edict that we would stop drinking alcohol or smoking, there would be a ninety percent chance we would fail in implementing what we have decided. If we decided that we would start wearing simple dress there is ninety five percent chance that we would fail to implement it. The main reason behind this is the individualistic attitude that has developed amongst us. Not implementing such measures indicates the tolerance for individual freedom in our organization. That defines us. It helps to attract many students to our organization. But the negative aspect is that since individuality is prioritized we cannot reach the students or people in a unified way. Our strength has disintegrated.<sup>210</sup>

This student's critique demonstrates the difficulty in balancing discipline and individual freedom. This begs the question, do these students smoke, drink, or prioritize fashion to exercise individual freedom or to be a part of the group? From the outside, it is aspects like these that come to characterize NSU culture as a group.

When I asked a leftist student leader from a smaller organization about the relationship between an organization's working style and its overall agenda and ideology, he responded in a way that encapsulated a lot of what people cite as the two differing values that are held by student organizations, discipline and freedom. He made this point not when I had asked about culture, but when I asked him to address working style, agenda, and ideology. But he immediately put it in the context of culture. He said,

Of course, it differs on the basis of the *culture* [English] that a cadre has come from and what has been taught to him...You might have seen that the style of the student organization affiliated to the Maoist is different than other organizations. They

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<sup>210</sup> Translated excerpt of an NSU (D) central committee president's interview, 11.28.07.

are militant. Their background is that they have taken up the arms in the past. The respective culture might have an impact in other student organizations as well. If the leaders in the high positions of the party abuse others, are not disciplined in what they consume, and inspire gangsterism, obviously it will have an impact on the lower level of the organization. These are some of the differences in the working styles of the organizations. The ideology is on one factor, but the behavior changes the ideology. An organization could not be effective if its ideology and practice don't match each other.<sup>211</sup>

The Maoists would not be insulted by the description that they are militants. In fact, they pride themselves on it. Their militarism is something that marks them and their dedication to class struggle. They see it as living according to their ideology as well as creating internal solidarity. They cherish their own consistency as a strength they have over other parties.

On the other hand, students of other organizations are very suspicious of what they call the lack of freedom that the Maoists propound. They dismiss them as militants<sup>212</sup> who have opted for violence rather than more socially acceptable ways to oppose the system—ways that are not only fighting for political justice but that allow existence of all political views. One charismatic NSU student leader had a powerful line in his speech during the constituent assembly election campaign that always drew enthusiasm from the crowd. He would say, “I do not agree with Prachanda’s politics, but I will fight to the

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<sup>211</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNFUSU (Ekikrit) student leader’s interview, 11.10.07.

<sup>212</sup> They do not describe them as revolutionaries because all student activists consider themselves revolutionaries since they all have struggled for their political existence. As I demonstrated in Chapter three, this claim is rhetorically mobilized in political speeches by all political stripes because it gives people a sense of pride that they have a history to stand up and fight against the system. It blurs the boundaries of what is considered politically left and politically right in a poor country where people tend to be attracted to radical political philosophy.

death for his right to do politics that I don't agree with."<sup>213</sup> This student's statement highlights the Nepali Congress's commitment to political freedom within the political mainstream. Yet the Nepali Congress is wary that the Maoist sense of discipline and militarism jeopardizes their claimed core value, political freedom. They were willing to let allow the Maoists into the political mainstream but they worry about the Maoists' potential to undermine democracy.

But ultimately this sense of freedom has stymied Nepali Congress. As the results of the constituent assembly elections have indicated, their freedom has become so endemic that they cannot even organize their party enough to be competitive against the Maoists in a democratic election. The general public recognizes that democracy and individual freedom are rhetoric for the democratically oriented parties. They thrive on the ethos of political freedom because that is what they see as their ability to survive. Yet the democracy that they have struggled for has never been internally instituted. An ANNFSU (*Akhil*) student leader predicted another party's downfall because they were not able to create an internal culture that realized their political rhetoric. She said,

The most important thing for us to know is how democratic a person's practice is despite the fact that he advocates in favor of democracy. For instance, if I talk loudly about democratic practice but I am despotic in the internal practices within the organization, how can that organization be democratic? Therefore, what agendas one advocates in different forums should be an integral part of his organizational and political life. For instance, in an organization like ours as well, the President assumes more power. But if the

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<sup>213</sup> Translated excerpt from constituent assembly speech given by an ex-NSU (K) student leader and current constituent assembly member, 2.23.08.

President cannot be democratic and cannot accept others' existence, the organization can't be considered democratic. An organization will obviously be good if its leaders practice a democratic exercise, listen to the views of the other members, and develop common understanding among them. It will make the organization run within a system. In comparison to other student organizations, our student organization is systematic and practices a collective decision-making process. This is our claim and this is the truth.<sup>214</sup>

Her student organization and the respective political party, the CPN-UML, are considered to be the ideological middle ground between the Maoists and Nepali Congress. They are a communist organization that has accepted and engaged in multi-party democratic politics since 1990. They are able to make critiques like this because they have the historical precedent of embracing democracy over the Maoists and are also less guilty of the democratic double speak than the Nepali Congress (although they are not as internally democratic as they claim). Regardless, her point is that a group's action must be consistent with the ideological claims they make in order to be regarded as valid by the public.<sup>215</sup> If they are not, it will ultimately weaken them in the democratic process that many national and international actors regard as the appropriate means to rebuild the state.

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<sup>214</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNFUSU (*Akhil*) central committee member's interview, 11.26.07.

<sup>215</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNFUSU (*Akhil*) central committee member's interview, 11.25.07: "If we did not follow the internal working style of our organization, we could no longer exist in that organization. If our organization is strong and we behave maintaining secrecy of the organization, the same type of culture will develop. The school and campus level students can obtain a lot of advantages. If the [student] organization has good style and culture the students in the schools and the colleges will follow it. The internal styles and the culture are reflected in the character of its leaders and the cadres. If the [student] organization has a good working style and internal culture, it helps the cadres and leaders win the election and vice versa. For instance, if groups were formed in the center, the same would happen from top to bottom and groups would arise even in the Preliminary Committee. If the center is disciplined and it can maintain secrecy, the same character will be reflected in the lower levels."

Finally, one thing that should be noted is that institutional culture is not devoid of other cultural influences. An institution is made up of like-minded individuals who have decided that the group form is a better means to accomplish their ends than an individual approach.<sup>216</sup> As the political analyst whom I previously cited argued, culture is the materialization of the norms and value of the society one has grown up within. For some the norms and values are predominantly ideological; for others it represents networks and maintaining or maximizing their place in a traditional caste-based society. Indeed, people are most often drawn to political organizations that suit their character and values. This becomes blurred because of the very existence of things like student organizations or political indoctrination of youth; if one develops into an individual within a political organization, there is a higher likelihood that their character will match that of the organization. One female ANNFSU (*Akhil*) student's explanation of why she chose ANNFSU (*Akhil*) with resonates this point:

Its activities are seen as different than the others' activities. In the school level, one can distinguish the different characteristics among students who belong to different organizations. One group has the honest and studious students, whereas the other group had the students with the reverse characteristics. This distinction lied in the thinking pattern, getting together with friends, and simple living versus the students who have a pompous lifestyle. I was raised to oppose such a lifestyle. Also, the training that I obtained from student

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<sup>216</sup> This point may seem to undermine my earlier point when I distinguished between *sanskriti* and culture. I argued that people were less fatalistic about institutional culture despite the fact that they often end up surrounded by political cadres that are of the same class and caste background as them. Herein lies a paradox: since politics is not a prescribed birthright for most, it is not treated fatalistically even though for many they don't stray too far from the political lineage of their forefathers.

leaders and my family background also helped me to choose ANNFSU (*Akhil*).<sup>217</sup>

It is for this reason that I highlight the larger connections to Nepali cultural trends and dynamics when I am analyzing the structural dimensions of institutional culture and organization form. The elements of Nepali culture that get translated into political culture end up re-entrenching the place of politics in the dominant Nepali culture, in which political culture represents a very narrow yet influential slice of the dominant cultural landscape. This dynamic is indicative of why certain aspects of political culture become part of the norm and others are left out, which is particularly important to consider at the crossroads of restructuring the Nepali state to be more inclusive.



Figure 21: Primary School Children at a Maoist Rally, Tundikhel, Kathmandu 2006

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<sup>217</sup>Translated excerpt of an ANNFSU (*Akhil*) central committee member, 11.25.07.

## **Institutional Culture: The Role of Theory in Practice**

We have the organizational life but we have very little personal life.<sup>218</sup>

-Maoist student activist

There is a distinct narrative concerning the role of organization in the Nepali political culture that at times seems contradictory, but when it is considered in the larger political context and the different informing factors are deconstructed, it can be understood as an interesting combination of political expectation and idealism that is used to place oneself and level others in the political playing field. Political ideology and the role of individual personalities are the two things that impact internal institutional culture in varying degrees in all political parties (Harmal and Janda 1995; Khanal 1995; Putnam 1976; Randall 1988). In the Nepali context, it is well understood that the degree to which parties are informed by these two elements correlates with their political orientation. The more left a party is, the more their practices, agendas, and internal procedures will be informed by a theoretical political ideology (Baral 1995; Borre et. al 1991; Hachhethu 2002; Hoftun et. al 2002; Rana 1995; Shrestha 1996). The more mass-based a party is, the more their practices, agendas, and internal procedures are informed by particular personalities as well as personal network dynamics. Nonetheless, these two aspects exist in all the parties, that play into the larger arena of inter- and intra-party competition (Hachhethu 2000; Paramanand 1982).

Party activists, students, and general citizens take both of these aspects, ideology and personal network dynamics, into consideration when they choose, claim, or reject political affiliation (Sharma & Sen 1999). In this section, I will provide a detailed description of how people talk about these two

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<sup>218</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) central committee member, 11.12.07.

different aspects of organization and how they inform each other within the student organizations' internal structures. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how the different concepts of organization are mobilized in order to exert political pressure, which leaves actors vulnerable to political anxiety based on idealistic expectations of how these two aspects should be balanced in a healthy party structure.

It is important to begin by highlighting that the aesthetic basis of organization has as much to do with clarity and consistency, as it has to do with behavioral or theoretical discipline. In her article on Karl Weick's theoretical approach to organizational studies, Barbara Czarniawska points out that in traditional organizational studies, the "notion of 'uncertainty' [is] understood as a negative state that must be eradicated for organizing to take place" (2005: 269). Weick's work, she argues, has amply proven that "[W]hereas, organizing is an effort to deal with ambiguity, it never completely succeeds. Furthermore, the ordering it involves is a complex and inherently ambiguous process of sense-making rather than that of imposing the rules of rationality on a disorderly world" (269-270). For Nepali political actors this sense-making involves creating party identities that are consistent with the party philosophy with which people can recognize and associate. A CPN-UML<sup>219</sup> leader described it to me in this way:

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<sup>219</sup> The Communist Party of Nepal - United Marxist Leninist (CPN-UML) is the largest mass-based communist party in Nepal. It is the only communist party to have gained the prime ministership during the years of multi-party democracy 1990-2001. It is considered right of the CPN (Maoists), supporting multi-party democracy with a socialist structure without the use of violence against the state. During the late nineties, the Maoists gained a lot of support from people who were previously loyal to the CPN-UML. They had become disillusioned with the CPN-UML after their government rule because they failed to impact a state structure along radical ideological lines. The Maoists offered a more radical approach for these people to adopt that CPN-UML had seemed to abandon in order to do party politics (Hachhethu 2009).

The ideological base of the party has to be predictable. Even one who is not involved in the party should be able to know what the party's ideological base is and understand the party's destination. Thus, the party should be committed to a defined ideological base. On the one hand, there should be the cultural base that is determined by that ideological base. On the other hand, it is said that this is the party of the proletariat class but the entire lifestyle [of the party leaders and cadres]—clothing, foods, and other behavior—is more similar to the capitalist class! How can these contradictions exist together?...We are trying to develop the party away from this direction. Thus it [the party] should have a defined ideological base, an ideological basis that other people can recognize, with a cultural identity that suits that ideology. They should be consistent with one another.<sup>220</sup>

A Maoist student leader articulated a similar view when he said this of the Prachanda Path:<sup>221</sup> “It is not just a slogan or a movement that we do theoretically. We live it both as an organization and as a lifestyle.”<sup>222</sup> People connect having a lifestyle that is consistent with the party ideology with party image. Image does not merely imply how the party distinguishes itself nor how it is recognized, but how the party members project their own degree of commitment to their perceived political cause. This is not only influenced by leftist sensibilities of discipline but also based in a South Asian political sensibility of piety in all action, one closely linked to the ascetic sense that I analyzed in chapter two. Since politics is a public process, those who engage it live their lives under public scrutiny. People do not assess a party merely by

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<sup>220</sup> Translated excerpt of a CPN-UML central committee member's interview, taken on 1.14.07.

<sup>221</sup> Prachanda is the chairman of the Maoist party. He came out with a declaration in 1998 called the Prachanda Path, which he claims to be the Maoist trajectory in Nepal. It is an extension of Mao's political philosophies and teachings that he has appropriated for the cultural, social, and economic conditions of Nepal.

<sup>222</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) central committee member's interview, taken on 1.8.07.

its party line but by the action, lifestyle, and consumption levels of its members.<sup>223</sup>

When I was speaking to some Maoist students about the differences between the ANNISU (R) students and students from the other student organizations, the first thing they identified was the strict discipline of their organization. One student said it was like “eating iron *churaa* (beaten rice).”<sup>224</sup> She admitted this was not merely for the betterment of the organization but also to maintain the image of their organization. Her partner expanded by saying, “If you are truly dedicated to your organization, then its image and agenda means more than your own success—this is where sacrifice comes from. We do it not merely for the organization but because we believe that it is through ANNISU (R) that we can best fulfill the needs of the country.”<sup>225</sup> After their explanations, I was reminded of people’s reaction to how the havoc at the two NSU’s.<sup>226</sup> People looked at their inability to carry out a smooth convention as indicative of the weaknesses of the political party system. This perceived anxiety has been documented in sociological studies that focus on political action groups that are classified as “organized anarchies.” Such organizations calculate their solutions and choices upon what is readily available to them within a given situation rather than long-term systematic analysis (Minkoff and McCarthy 2005: 300). This does not bode well for political organizations that must maintain a base and are expected to work for that base. In Nepal, the unease with this type of organizational anarchy is

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<sup>223</sup> This is something I explore in further detail in chapter two in my analysis of politics as social service.

<sup>224</sup> Translated excerpt of a ANNISU (R) female campus leader’s interview, taken on 6.28.07.

<sup>225</sup> ANNISU (R) Padma Kenya campus leader’s interview, taken on 7.7.07.

<sup>226</sup> NSU (Nepal Student Union) is affiliated with the largest mainstream democratic organization, the Nepali Congress. From 2001 to 2007 there was a split in Nepali Congress due to personal strife. In October 2007, this split was reconciled and the party re-emerged in order to increase its competitiveness in the Constituent Assembly Elections.

articulated not only in people's frustrations with the lack of clear-cut agendas but also the damage control measures taken by the political parties.

Even though the parties vary in terms of their agendas, they are all very clear about their party platform: to represent the people. How they do so may differ, the democratic parties claim to struggle for the people's democratic freedom whereas the leftist parties are more encompassing, but nonetheless their agendas are based on serving the people. For instance, the Prachanda Path is not understood as one man's manifesto but as a just manifesto based on the needs of the Nepali people and their situation. A Maoist student explained it to me in this way when he was trying to convince me why the Maoists would be victorious in the constituent assembly elections:

The ideology of our party is the one that is most closely related to the people. The ideological and organizational subject matters that the party has raised are of the people. Because of all this, the relationship with the party and people is like that of a nail and the flesh. The party takes the initiatives in an *organizational form* to solve the people's problems. Without the people, the party would not be formed and the people's problems will not be solved without the party. Therefore, they have a very close relationship. They are complementary to each other. That is why there exists no contradiction between the beauty of elevating justice and revolt and revolution; there is a deep and continuous relationship between them, just like the relationship between the party and people [author's emphasis].<sup>227</sup>

For the Maoists, political action is justified as a dialectic based on the people's needs. Yet that is not enough: one must be explicit, consistent, and organized on the theoretical level, but also it must unambiguously translate on the practical level. In their political motivation, they must show that they are

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<sup>227</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) central committee member's interview, 1.8.07.

organized for the people. A Maoist student described how scientific revolution is different in this way: “We don't need to pray to God, rather we believe in ourselves and have the faith that we have the support of the people because all we do is based on their needs.”<sup>228</sup> In people’s articulations there is a fine balance between being scientifically organized in their political ideology and recognizing the inspiration for those theories in the first place, the people.

Rancière has argued, “Ideology is a name for the endlessly decried gap between words and things, the conceptual connector that organizes the junctions and disjunctions between the components of the modern political apparatus” (1999: 85-86). The Maoists call this class struggle, yet Rancière has shown that the united ideological form of class struggle glosses over the nuances of the exploitation that inspired it in order to sustain the common agenda (ibid). In other words, even though the Maoists aim for a revolutionary politics that is in line with Rancière’s definition of politics—politics that question the order of things through their endeavor to unearth exploitation and inequality via class struggle and raising class consciousness—their sensibility of scientific organization suppresses internal politics and their ideological militancy glosses over the differences within their organization.

Before continuing, it is important that I elaborate on this point. Through my conversations with people, it became apparent to me that the general understanding of organization in Nepali political culture is ideology and how one balances ideology with practice, lifestyle, group dynamics, and hierarchy. One student said it quite simply: “Thoughts and theory guide people. Those who are devoid of thoughts and theory are worthless. Man is a social animal

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<sup>228</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) central committee member’s interview, 10.12.07.

and he is associated with one or another philosophy; it is how we interact in the world and with other people.”<sup>229</sup> Here I will compare two students’ thoughts on this matter in order to show how the role of ideology in organizational form translates into different notions of organization and people’s own understanding of their own organization. The first thought I will consider is the Maoist student president’s response when I asked him about the concept of organization in a political institution. He responded,

While talking about the concept of organization in a political party, we have to understand the interrelationship between ideology and practice. When ideology remains just as an ideology, without practice, it becomes raw, ideal, and hollow. If it (the ideology) is utilized as a way of life then it becomes real... On effectiveness, first of all one has to individually become competent in thinking, be creative and have discussions. Then they have to be able to progress from debate based on shared organizational commitment. Then there should be the representation of youths’ sentiments and the representation of their way of thinking and their *creative-pan* (in English) way of thinking. If this could happen in an institution then it will be an institution in its real sense and it would drive the political power in an organized way.<sup>230</sup>

It is generally acknowledged that the Nepali Congress does not have such a clear ideological basis for their organization, which is why they do not have such a tight organizational structure but rather resemble an umbrella group for many factions. An NSU student put this into context for me when he explained,

Our party [NC] was established in order to obtain a mission – to overthrow the Ranas. An ideology was adopted to obtain this mission. People got

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<sup>229</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNFSU (*Akhil*) central committee member’s interview, 11.25.07.

<sup>230</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) central committee leader’s interview, 10.12.07.

indoctrinated and invested in that ideology; it involved democratic, political freedom. But in the latter days, I don't think a person who comes to join our organization understands our organization in that sense. We don't really tell our new member of our mission and ideology while taking him in. We focus on the specific interests of a student while distributing our membership. For an instance, while giving membership to a new member in Tri- Chandra college we try to understand the issues, concerns, and interests of the students. It means we focus on local issues. The same thing happens in the case of a constituency area. The people in a particular constituency calculate their benefits and losses and leaders try to convince the people that they would be more secure if he was their patron. We don't extend our organization by giving members full introduction to the party with its principles and mission. The continued distortion of our mission for individual purpose has made it seem as if "this is the true form of the organization." Now we have forgotten why we needed to establish as a party. Slowly, it so happened and that is what we have become.<sup>231</sup>

The contrast between these two statements shows that different senses of organization come down to degrees of deliberation. The Maoists and leftist parties are more deliberative in how they organize because they have a clear-cut ideology that they believe they must base their organizational style upon. There is a historical lineage that sets the precedent for this basis: Leninism, Stalinism, and Maoism. There are mistakes that have already been made that they can learn from like that of the Sendero Luminoso or the Khmer Rouge, which the Prachanda Path claims to have taken into consideration. Rather, when an ideological basis, like that of Nepali Congress, sets political freedom as its aim, then the organization is bound to become diluted. If one defines organization on the basis of a Maoist student's definition—"Organization is a

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<sup>231</sup> Translated excerpt of an NSU (K) ex-central committee leader's interview, 11.16.07.

means of unifying individuals for a common goal...with a sense of sacrifice and devotion to solve the issues the members are facing”<sup>232</sup> —then the Nepali Congress is not an organization. Yet internally they do politics, as Rancière has established: “For politics, the fact that the people are internally divided is not, actually, a scandal to be deplored. It is the primary condition of the exercise of politics. There is politics from the moment there exists the sphere of appearance of a subject, the people, whose particular attribute is to be different from itself, internally divided” (1998:87). People say the basis of the Nepali Congress as an organization is political freedom, but over the years it has become an alternative power structure in which people could further their own ends, and that individual pursuit has been respected on the basis of individual freedom. This freedom is a core value of the Nepali Congress that keeps them at the same time united yet internally divided. They are quick to contrast themselves with the leftists, saying, “In the Communist student organization the students follow the limitation outlined by the party. Thus, their human rights are violated and their freedom of expression is curtailed. In NSU, one can enjoy the freedom of expression. NSU regards freedom and every individual’s existence.”<sup>233</sup>

If an organization is the cumulative form of the individual characters involved in it, then this is how the political organizations differ. The members understand their respective organization based on the organizational mission, how clear-cut it is and the degree to which it dictates the member’s own life. This boils down to the difference between a commonality of shared values and the commonality of a shared agenda. The Maoists have proven that a shared

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<sup>232</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) central committee member’s interview, 11.12.07.

<sup>233</sup> Translated excerpt of an NSU (D) central committee student leader’s interview, 11.28.07.

agenda or mission will define an organization more directly than shared values.

As I have demonstrated, people value sound ideology as the organizing principle of their party, and the lack there of is often cited as the explanation of why parties weaken. There is a belief that more radically leftist parties like the Maoists prioritize party agenda and that ideology is the glue that unites and sustains the party despite the different class, caste, gender, and generational perspectives that the members are coming from. Their ideology is also what erases the difference amongst them; it keeps internal politics at bay because it does not allow for disagreement. A Maoist party leader explained it to me in this way:

The UML is also heading towards disintegration. The main reason behind this is the lack of ideological development. The Communist Party has to run on the basis of ideology, the lack of which the party gets divided. Once the party becomes unable to develop its ideology, it will run according to an individual, and his prestige comes to the forefront rather than cadres giving priority to the organization and ideology. The individual interests go ahead in a non-restricted way. This is why splits take place. Political agendas get made according to personal agendas rather than according to ideology that is formed according to the needs of the people. We have seen that this is where some of the biggest social contradictions have been born.<sup>234</sup>

Most parties disparage and dismiss the solidarity of other parties based on this idea that personality often ends up dictating party agenda, which results in disputes over how loyal parties stay to their party line. In Nepali political history, vying personal agendas have created dissent that has repeatedly

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<sup>234</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) central committee member's interview, taken on 11.4.07.

factionalized parties. Many of my informants claim the role of ideology is to keep the party unified and on track, to break traditional social roles in order to unite with the masses in a common class struggle (Neupane 2005). In times when personal ambition trumped ideology, there is both factionalization but also the unraveling of a unified, clear-cut political agenda.

It is commonly admitted that the Maoists have been able to overcome personal agendas more so than other parties because of their party structure. They are not a mass-based democratic party but have been a revolutionary party that is cadre-based. Their appeal is their ideology. Their approach is not to convince people that their ideology is the best one available to suit the needs of the individual voters, but rather a truth, which is realized through raising the consciousness of the masses. Similar to the CPN-M, the CPN-UML used to be a cadre-based party, but since 1990, they too became mass-based. This transition occurred during the exercise of parliamentary democracy. The CPN-UML had to win votes. What the Maoist leader diagnosed as the CPN-UML straying from their ideological roots, democrats see as them having to appeal to the public on a broader scope. The CPN-UML serves as an interesting case study that elucidates the points I raise here. Since the CPN-UML has become a mass-based party, it has suffered from factional splits that were largely attributed to personal disputes, and their political agendas have become less clear, seeming to stray from the political ideology they claim, which has led to the fraying of their constituent base.

The correlation between mass-based parties and the prevalence of leadership personality cults and factional networks or cadres-based parties' connection to ideology, is based on how leadership receives its mandate and rises through the ranks in a party. In the CPN-Maoist and ANNISU (R) one is

promoted through proven dedication to party political ideology, not voting. The cadres don't question their leaders' ability or mandate because they trust they have progressed according to their theoretical acumen and ideological dedication. The president of the ANNISU (R) highlighted it as a difference in priority, whether an organization focuses first on leadership formation or on political discussion. The Maoist students claim to build their road map through deliberation. They know that they understand politics in a similar way when they are unanimous in how to proceed with their agenda. Other student organizations focus more on leadership formation, and the leaders are the ones who decide which agendas and how to push them forward. The ANNISU (R) president cited the student organizations' national conventions as an example of this. He said other student organizations took three to eight days to campaign and less than a half a day to discuss their political agenda and proposals. The ANNISU (R), on the other hand, spent four days on political discussion and less than half a day on choosing leadership. He claimed that this is why the Maoist students more thoroughly understand ANNISU (R)'s agendas and the proper implementation compared to other student activists. ANNISU (R) students participate in the in-depth discussion on how to craft their agenda; it is through this process that they learn party ideology and cultivate ideological dedication. These discussions do not end until there is understanding amongst everyone that their program is according to the true spirit of their political ideology.

In the mass-based parties, people progress by receiving endorsement from political networks and gaining popularity with their constituents. But in the same fashion they can also lose this popular mandate or challenge others in order to maintain it, so there is more intense competition and a lot less

stability in how one progresses in the political party structure of a mass-based organization. Nepali political actors sense the correlation between sustainable party structures and organization. An ANNISU (R) student said to me, “An election that does not establish clear ideology and an agenda, cannot lead the movement in its real sense. Our movement is not merely concerned with shouting slogans but action; we don’t only do movements but also foresee where they must end and give conclusions for how to address problems.”<sup>235</sup> In other words, if a political institution’s ultimate purpose is to serve the people, then lack of institutional organization and a clear agenda atrophies its ability to be effective.

As I observed all the student organizations’ national conventions, a recurring theme was the frustration due to the lack of organization on the part of the leaders but there was also a latent anxiety about the political uncertainty and how it impacted people’s and their institution’s ability to be organized at such a definitive political moment. Student activists’ anxiety came from the realization that if their disorganization stymies them, then the organization that the Maoist student organization is known to possess will result in successful implementation of their political agenda and the future of “new Nepal” will be determined by Maoist political ideology. A Maoist student smugly claimed, “In the absence of ideology and the proper mechanism to implement that ideology into plans of action, the big organizations cannot transform society and will continue disintegrating.”<sup>236</sup>

This section demonstrates that both scientific organization and anarchical organization serve as recursive obstacles to political parties’ and

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<sup>235</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) district committee member’s interview, 1.9.07.

<sup>236</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) central committee member’s interview, taken on 10.12.07.

student unions' larger agendas. On the one hand, the Maoists' scientific organizational approach suppresses the radical politics on an internal organizational level that they are trying to achieve through societal class struggle. And on the other hand, the internal political divisions that exist due to the value of personal freedom within the NC reveal the actual inequalities that ultimately undermine their ambition of personal and political freedom on the societal level. Furthermore, the CPN-UML's transition from a cadre-based to a mass-based party demonstrates that the center, between these poles, is no less riddled with inconsistencies. This suggests that tactics of political survival ultimately undermine larger political ends and ideals.

### **Working Style: The Pragmatics of Organizational Ritual**

In our context, what communist means may be difficult to understand. It is the manpower that has been critical of social injustice and feudalism ... it is a force that gives expression to that kind of sentiment. If you try to see the class-based communism strictly in Marxian perspective, you may not see any true Communist party in Nepal. You may find it only on an individual basis. That is because there are no Communist parties in organizational form, one strictly governed by Communist philosophy. Even the Maoists represent the middle class.  
-CPN-UML Central Committee Member 1.14.07

What my analysis thus far demonstrates is that the issue of organization ultimately comes down to the age-old struggle between theory and practice. John Law argued in *Organizing Modernity* that organizational narratives are "recursively told, embodied, and performed in a series of different materials" (Law, 1994:259). As he outlined, the recursive nature is by no means an indication of stability or predictability but rather haphazard

ordering processes that can ultimately justify unforeseen outcomes.<sup>237</sup> There is indeed a sensibility amongst Nepali political actors that internal culture should be recursive of the larger political goals and vice versa; they are expected to serve as feedback loops that reinforce one another. Yet, as I have demonstrated, internal culture often serves as a recursive obstacle that keeps parties from achieving their larger political goals and undermines their sense of purpose. This sense of purpose is the base for their identity. Rather, as Law has shown, one's identity is cultivated in a dynamic equilibrium of interaction within the larger political world.

In order to convey how this dynamic operates in the student organizations, it is important to understand the organizational setup and hierarchal system within the unions. This analysis will also demonstrate the student organizations' role in the larger political movements, including their relationship with their mother organization, and the degree of autonomy they have to carry out their agendas. The ANNISU (R) organizational sensibilities indicate that the students must put their political ideals into practice. For them, this is the definition of being organized and politically active: it allows them to proceed in a well-defined manner and to feel ownership over the political process. In this regard, the common cadres pride themselves on knowing that their political ideals are what inform the institutional culture. One ANNISU (R) leader explained, "We make the student cadres understand scientific organization and then they support our directives."<sup>238</sup> Yet the practice of instituting political ideals is valued by all the students. Students from less organized unions value it by omission. A number of political

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<sup>237</sup> In chapter two and four I demonstrate the students' ability to use unexpected outcomes to their advantage.

<sup>238</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) central committee member's interview, 12.4.07.

analysts have said that it is due to this disconnect that the students become cynical or lost. In some organizations students see no forum for personal expression of political ideals, and in others there is no opportunity to realize their political ideals. In many student organizations, political ideology comes in the performative form of sound bites from speeches or when they shout slogans, but ends there. Except during street protests, many students don't feel their actions serve the political end that they support.

The concept of hierarchy is connected to the balance of student autonomy and obedience within their organizations. The ANNISU (R) secretary best expressed this when he asked me if I saw the knives at the NSU conventions. He said, "This is the NSU culture. You would never see this in our culture because we understand the balance between freedom and control. ANNISU (R) simultaneously practices the policy of freedom and control. There must be limitations on freedom in the organization, otherwise the organization will turn into a chaotic mass."<sup>239</sup> He repeated this sentiment when I asked him if he would allow me to interview him. He did not refuse but rather indicated there were proper channels by which to gain access to the information I was seeking. In this case, it was obvious that the freedom to expose the organization was curtailed.

The NSU students also believe that working style forms institutional culture but NSU's notion of working style is different than the leftists' notion because it is not based on political ideology. Rather, it is a very traditional way for those in leadership positions to conduct themselves in Nepali high-caste society. An NSU student emphasized this to me in the following statement:

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<sup>239</sup> Interaction with ANNISU (R) activists at their main office on 7.14.07.

Our working style created hierarchy in our party and student organization. This type of hierarchy was created since we don't require our cadres to participate in the decision-making process, rather we tell our decision to them. The working style in the party "that I am superior to you" has created hierarchy and finally it became a part of our culture. Again, this culture strengthened to the culture of inferiority and superiority... Our president has never followed the constitution in the decisions he has taken so far. But he will blame G.P. Koirala for not following the party constitution. This is happening is because it has become our culture. I will do the same. I remember that I used to do the same when I was in leadership. I used to announce to the media that we would start the movement against the petroleum price hike then endorse it at our meeting. That was not the correct process, was it? Thus, our working style is slowly shaping our culture. Within us, those who obtain bigger responsibility think that we are superior to others. There is a split in our party—the split of big people and small and this has ultimately contributed to our culture.<sup>240</sup>

This student is describing a hierarchal approach that defies the democratic process laid out by the party and organization's constitution. Indeed it is this type of working style that lead others outside of the organization to view the Nepali Congress members as having a domineering, entitled character, which is seen to inform their organizational culture.

On the other side of the political spectrum, in the ANNISU (R) union, leadership is as well hierarchical. But that hierarchy is incorporated into their notion of scientific organization and political discipline. That is why everyone in the ANNISU (R) knows how to pursue promotion and everyone respects leadership because there is a protocol for ascension through the ranks. There is no doubt that the leaders are capable of achieving the overall agenda in the

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<sup>240</sup> Translated excerpt of an NSU (K) ex-central committee leader's interview, 11.16.07.

positions they fill. I had this progression described to me as a pyramid system. The central committee is at the top, below them are the regional committees, then the district committee, and finally the area or unit committees. When I asked a student leader if people are able to bypass a level or whether it similar to the Cuban style, where they are required to move up the ranks, he responded,

...There is always a system for everything. For example, some sorts of incompetence surface when a person who had worked in the organization in 2052 BS (1996) jumps into the organization again in 2058 (2002) at a higher level. It happens so because he would not know what happened in the course of the student movement in the consecutive years that followed his departure. If he lacked this experience, he would find it really difficult to motivate the people in the movement in the latter stages. Therefore, only those who have passed through all the levels accumulating the knowledge obtained in the course of the successive student movements can be effective student leaders. With this calculation in mind, our friends rise passing through the pyramid structure of the organization.<sup>241</sup>

Not only is it expected that one rises systematically through the ranks in order to acquire proper knowledge, but also one must do so to prove one's political dedication to superiors and inferiors in order to gain their confidence.

Furthermore, one's own experience is considered within the larger realm of historical materialism. When I pushed this student leader on his point he said,

That is what we mean by scientific revolution: it is not only about looking at the past as lessons in which to base our current policy in order to achieve our goals for the future, but it means being an active participant in the process. One's personal experience must be within the context of the unfolding revolution. It is only then that they can claim to have a substantial basis in which to know

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<sup>241</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) central committee member's interview, 1.8.07.

how to go forward. You must realize the personal and the public are one and the same, you must take personal responsibility and personally orient yourself to the revolution at every level, most importantly, making the public your first personal priority.<sup>242</sup>

Therefore, gaining experience in the process places people's personal experience within the revolution and allows them the ability to appropriately explain the party line to their juniors in order to direct them on how they should proceed. Only when one thoroughly understands the basis of party ideology is one able to make decisions to further the party toward its proper political end.

Not every single person that has been promoted in ANNISU (R) has progressed in the orthodox way of the pyramid structure, but when they are not, it is set in a context of what is needed for the progression of the overall revolution. In other words, people can justify the swift appointment of individuals if the leaders deem it necessary because they have faith that the leaders know what is needed and can judge people's capabilities.

Furthermore, the development of the ANNISU (R) as an organization happened during a war. During war, one does not question one's superiors. The ANNISU (R) students pride themselves on what they describe as "militant commitment"<sup>243</sup> to their ideology and their party. War is just one part of revolutionary class struggle. For that reason, even after the war is over they can justify irregularities as being necessary to further the revolution.

One ANNISU (R) student leader explained to me, "My organization believes that unity is possible through struggle. Unity achieved through

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<sup>242</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) central committee member's interview, 1.8.07.

<sup>243</sup> This term was used by an ANNISU (R) central committee member in an interview taken on 12.4.07.

struggle is durable. I am willing to compromise the superficial but won't compromise my devotion to class struggle. This is what is real to us.”<sup>244</sup> This student went on to explain to me the Maoist understanding of power. He said power is such that it will always enforce a dictatorship on others who are not in power. He claimed people are deluded if they deny that every form of state power enforces a dictatorship on the other classes. Therefore power must be just. The whole point of their class struggle is to negate the capitalists and establish a dictatorship of the proletariat. If people believe that all power takes a dictatorial form, then they are willing to suspend their own personal freedom for the form of power they would like to see installed. Therefore organizational structure for the ANNISU (R) is not about compromise or appeasing all participants through democratic contention, but rather it is about properly indoctrinating cadres with the right sense of discipline and dedication so they follow the orders of their superiors, who they see as the most capable of furthering the ultimate agenda of their shared struggle.

This is not to say that there is only one political line that people must accept. When discussing this issue, a number of ANNISU (R) students highlighted the discursive space within their organization. One student told me that space is given to various opinions and they are encouraged to debate and compete with one another in this capacity. He cited Mao's saying "Let many flowers bloom" as the basis for which opinion is disseminated. But he was quick to make a distinction between revolutionary and opportunist opinion. He explained, "...if the opinion has emerged from an opportunist line, we have to negate it. But if it has come from the revolutionary line, we

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<sup>244</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) central committee member's interview, 12.4.07.

have to accept it and institutionalize it in a new way.”<sup>245</sup> The limitations within the discursive space are not about the opinions themselves, but about the orientation of those opinions. If the students are coming from a revolutionary line, then they are encouraged to express their views in an unlimited way. In other words, they have freedom only within discipline. Where the students lack freedom is outside these revolutionary parameters. If they cannot agree with the basis of the Maoist doctrine, then there is no place for them. Other student organizations make more room for flexibility in this way so they are perceived to be organizationally more autonomous. Yet for the ANNISU (R) students, this sort of freedom of opinion runs completely counter to what they believe an organization stands for. For them the organization is a shared basis through which they will realize their ultimate political end.

When I have spoken to the Maoist students and leaders about authority within their structure, what they try to highlight is that although there may be power inherent within the hierarchal structure of the organization, they try to limit the power by making sure that everyone is equal in most contexts. I was told that division of labor is necessary in order to progress in a scientific manner. Therefore they must all be pragmatic in accepting how their hierarchal structure works. Everyone fulfills a role but they also understand how their role fits into the overall system of the organization’s action plan. They claim that there is no added privilege for a higher role because this would create schisms that would lead people to disassociate from the larger agenda.<sup>246</sup> In order to avoid political alienation, there is an emphasis that all

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<sup>245</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) central committee member’s interview, 11.12.07.

<sup>246</sup> I should note that Maoist cadres have criticized their leadership for quickly embracing lifestyles that resemble that of the other mainstream political leaders. At a campaign rally entitled “Let us study and survive”—an ANNISU (R)-sponsored campaign that demanded equal compensation to orphaned children of PLA (People’s Liberation Army) soldiers as orphaned children of soldiers of Nepal Army and national security forces have received—one

cadres must feel ownership over the larger process in their everyday activities. They do this through a cultural emphasis on equality and uniformity of lifestyle; this is just one example of how they live their politics.

Every ANNISU (R) student I asked said the lifestyle of leaders and the cadres is not much different beyond their political and military duties. They live together in communes, eat the same food, dress the same, and rotate duties to maintain the domestic sphere. One student leader told me that he would be criticized if he took a taxi when his comrades took the bus, or if he ate more expensive food or wore more expensive clothes than others. "I have to refine my thoughts and deeds in order to be a good person; a feeling of collective living should prevail in me rather than an individual one,"<sup>247</sup> he reported. He claimed that this is what has caused splits and weaknesses in other parties. Nobody struggles for anything but power, and once they have it, they use it to amass wealth and personal prestige. This has led to resentment and cynicism. He said such a political culture is based on a very different lifestyle, a bourgeoisie lifestyle that is premised on one's individual, private orientation. He pointed out that other student leaders are able to leave their offices to go to the private comfort of their homes and families. The discrepancy between their lifestyle and that of their cadres does not bother them. Furthermore, in the eyes of ANNISU (R) members, other student activists have competing loyalties. Their families and status usually come first and their politics is a means to ensure wealth and security and to further their filial influence. The Maoists, on the other hand, work and live together

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orphaned cadre gave a speech with CPN (M) Chairman Prachanda sitting in the front row, in which she railed against the "mobile and motor culture" that the Maoist leadership was embracing. She argued that her parents did not fight and die for their leadership to be indistinguishable from the other political parties (June 13, 2007).

<sup>247</sup> Translated excerpt of an ANNISU (R) central committee member's interview, 12.4.07.

communally; the party is what comes first. The party is the reason for the students' involvement; it is what they "struggle and live for."<sup>248</sup> The way this student describes the collapsing of prescribed bourgeoisie boundaries or categories of the personal and professional, or family and party, is similar to the way ten Bos summarizes Agamben's theory of organization as threshold (2005: 20). Agamben describes organization as a zone of indifference between work and non-work or culture and nature that is set up in order to skew categories. In this sense, the categories are framed in order to imbue every aspect of life with the import of the revolutionary cause. The skewing of categories is, in a sense, freedom within discipline.

Contrarily, Nepali Congress had a mission to struggle and live for in their beginning, overthrowing the Rana regime. They accomplished it. After they accomplished their mission the organization abstracted their mission to be an ethos, democratic freedom. They maintained this ethos while they were in power, but their power has diminished because of their lack of an agenda. It is at this point that the ethos again materializes, in times when they are struggling for their survival (during the Panchayat period and the Movement Against Regression). During those times they again had a mission that defined them, whereas the communist organizations have a larger mission that has not been accomplished, societal equality. This is why many Nepali politicians and activists are suspended in the unfinished that the political movements embody, as I established in chapter three. This position makes their political agendas more palpable. They focus on their political movements continuing, continual struggle, because they don't know how to reorient themselves as an organization when they are not struggling to attain a

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<sup>248</sup> Excerpt based on notes from an interaction with an ANNISU (R) student on 7.9.07.

mission. In the process they collapse their political and private lives into one zone of indifference that incorporates all action and sentiment into the category of class struggle or democratic freedom.

### **Conventions as Recursive Rituals:**

In this section I will specifically focus on student conventions as the ritualistic encapsulation of the political notion of organization. The student conventions are not only treated as a manifestation of organizational ability, but they also demonstrate my argument that organizational practices often serve as recursive obstacles to the ultimate political aim. Here I will rely on Alexi Yurchak's analysis of political acts in Perestroika Russia. He argues that while ritualized acts were meant to enforce authoritative discourse, they were ripe with possibility because they were comprised of both fixed performative and shifting constative dimensions (2006: 24-5). In the Nepali context, one cannot assume that these possibilities are always empowering to those within the organization. More often than not, the authoritative nature of the conventions creates constative meaning other than what was intended. Indeed these outcomes undermine the organization even while they are meant to reinforce the collective ideals of organization. Nonetheless, Yurchak's paradigm is conceptually useful in understanding unexpected ritual effects. Yurchak relies on Judith Butler to analyze ideological rituals and the effects they produce when he states,

It is precisely because the two elements of the performative force—sociological and semiotic—operate simultaneously that speech acts even in strictly controlled institutionalized contexts can take on meanings and produce effects for which they were not intended. This possibility of an unanticipated outcome constitutes, Judith Butler argues, “the political promise of the performative,

one that positions that performative at the center of a political hegemony.” (Butler 1997: 161 in Yurchak 2006: 21)

For Nepali student politics it is not merely speech acts that have unintended consequences but the conventions, as ideological rituals, themselves can produce effects that undermine the student unions and their mother parties as much as provide unexpected possibilities for autonomy and a place in the political spectrum.

Political culture, much like other cultural traditions, is galvanized by ritual; without it the tradition itself does not exist. The student organizations’ conventions are the ultimate ritual that fuels the tradition of student politics. Through the choosing of leadership and political agendas, the convention is the process that shapes the organization, as well as being the act that substantiates the group as a political entity. A speech given by a campus leader during the inauguration at a campus convention captured a common cynical analysis regarding why people invest in conventions. He said,

Why is it people's compulsion to give all NSU conventions well wishes? Because it moves each one's own political position forward, not only through exposure, but it becomes a changing of the guard and that involves people moving up to higher positions in the political chain. The convention process is one of the engines that push us all forward. But what about making real changes? The sentiment expressed is that we can come together and actually make a stance on how we perceive and can implement “new Nepal,” but does this really happen? Will it? Is it within our control? [There was enthusiastic applause for this statement.]<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Translated excerpt from NSU (D) campus leader’s campus convention speech at Trichandra college, 3.22.07.

This is one aspect of the student organizations' conventions but they also serve a number of other purposes that are strategic and practical. They are foremost a ritual that ensures "reproduction of the institution itself and of one's position as its member" (Yurchak 2006: 23). As this student describes, it is also a ritual of exposure: they not only serve as an exposure of individuals to others in the organization, but they are the venue where alliances, agendas, and political mandate are established or reinforced and broadcast to the larger public. For this reason, they are often described as dramas (*natak*). There is a lot at stake in the conventions so people engage them as if they are hyper-real moments that define their organization. For this reason, appearance accounts for much of the student organizations' motivation to pursue the ritual of institutional processes.

The conventions allowed the organizations (and by proxy their parties) to regroup and entrench their organizational solidarity, even if they were not interested in exhibiting their internal democratic dexterity. All the student organizations used their conventions as an opportunity to gather and create a common agenda and party platform, which they mobilized during the constituent assembly election campaigns. Not only did it allow them to establish a unified, consistent voice but also by completing their student conventions, they prove their ability to be organized. I have often heard the sentiment that the power of appearing organized is just as strong as appearing democratic.

Indeed, the two NSU conventions demonstrated this. Both organizations were pressuring their parties to allow them to have their convention to prove to the public that they are institutionally capable. Yet their inability to oversee local conventions reinforced their ineffectiveness in the

eyes of the public. The public reasoned that if they could not maintain their internal process because of external pressures,<sup>250</sup> how would their mother party maintain and run the state apparatus? The manner in which the events unfolded revealed the opposite reality than the one they intended. Rather than the conventions exhibiting their political aptitude, it revealed their political ineptitude and how much is beyond their control. They had to contend with the fact that the appearance for which they aspired was as much a risk as it was a benefit.

It could be reasoned that the manner in which the student organizations carry out their conventions actualizes what the members envision the convention to embody, which ultimately reinforces their sense of organization and the internal character of their group. Just as a ritual is carried out in a prescribed order to produce the desired outcome, the convention process is defined by each student organization's constitution. Yet the process can also perpetuate the problems that are endemic to their organization, serving as an obstacle to the organization's ultimate end. For example, the very procedure of having the district conventions before the national convention reinforces the top-down and bottom-up bargaining process that has cultivated factionalism in NSU (K). The ANNFSU (*Akhil*), on the other hand, runs their conventions in reverse, beginning with the national convention then running the district conventions. This reinforces their noncompetitive attempts at democracy, which some say has led to ineffectual leadership.

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<sup>250</sup> Both factions of NSU had a difficult time organizing certain district and campus conventions because of political instability in the south, which was in part due to street activism of the Madheshi movement and also guerilla activity of rogue Maoist offshoot organizations.

In NSU (K), those who serve or may be campaigning for central committee positions have a huge stake in how the district and campus elections turn out because the local conventions determine the constituents that will vote in the national convention. The district and campus conventions serve as the context in which deals are made between the two levels. Aspiring district candidates seek out the support of central committee members or candidates in order to secure a victory, and in return the local candidate will guarantee his or her domain's support for the central committee candidate (or the candidate that the central committee leader is supporting) during the national convention elections. This creates a bartering process, which perpetuates the patronage culture where domains of influence and social debt are cultivated norms in the Nepali Congress (K).

The ANNFSU (*Akhil*) administers their district and campus conventions after their national conventions and they don't set a deadline that requires the local-level conventions to be completed. Rather, they do it when it is appropriate for the district and campus in consultation with the newly elected ANNFSU central committee. In this respect it is a lot more relaxed an event with less emphasis on the competition and more on the process of cultivating members. The current ANNFSU (*Akhil*) central committee president and one of their vice-presidents explained to me that they conduct it in this manner because it decreases the threat of internal competition and is not presented as such a high-stake procedure. They explicitly referenced the NSU's style of holding elections as faulty because its competitive nature breeds internal factionalism; this is something ANNFSU (*Akhil*) has always tried to avoid. Furthermore, they reasoned that by the time they have their next national convention, there is no mystery as to who the delegates will be, as they had

been chosen within the year and a half before. This is meant to make the whole process more transparent. They claim this process provides a distinct advantage because the delegates come with the experience of serving their own campuses and districts for some time before the national convention. The delegates and local leaders are much more intimately involved with the day-to-day processes and know the problems that should be addressed at the national conventions. This order insures that the delegates have some maturity and experience to effectively represent their sectors at the national convention.<sup>251</sup>

This procedural style impacts the tenor of how the ANNFSU (*Akhil*) students conduct themselves and pursue their aspirations. Their progression through the hierarchy is a lot more rank-and-file, with less bargaining and intrigue. It is actually considered inappropriate to be hyper-competitive during the convention process. As a result, a lot more irregularities get covered up and people are discouraged from publicizing them. Some slighted ANNFSU (*Akhil*) leaders have told me that the UML's priority to avoid factionalization at any measure within ANNFSU (*Akhil*) not only undermines transparency and the students' desires for a democratic practice, but it also stifles innovation, which makes them less competitive amongst the student unions in the Free Student Union system.<sup>252</sup> Another downfall of this system is that they get less exposure in the media. Since they do not attract a sense of election countdown sensationalism that the NSU's process does, their leaders and contestants do not become media darlings, as tomorrow's leaders.

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<sup>251</sup> Based on interviews with ANNFSU (*Akhil*) central committee members, 1.17.07 and 1.28.07.

<sup>252</sup> Based on interviews with ANNFSU (*Akhil*) contestants and UML leaders, 10.18.06, 11.2.06, and 11.9.06.

I have discussed the different styles of running the conventions with a number of students in order to understand the reasoning for why they do it and the various entrenched dynamics that result from the procedures. A few conversations I had underscored this issue. One was with an NSU (K) ex-student leader who was lamenting that the Kathmandu convention election (the first time an election had occurred in fourteen years) was merely a drama. His response was that ANNFSU (*Akhil*) is much more democratic than NSU and cited the difference in how they run their conventions. He said they think hard about ways to run their organizational processes to avoid making the stakes so high. To his mind, this leaves them less vulnerable to inviting party interference in order to keep the student leaders and candidates from “ripping out each other’s throats. Our procedure fosters this and our leaders prefer it because it justifies their interference.”<sup>253</sup>

It may be true that the ANNFSU (*Akhil*)’s process of doing things does not encourage people to “rip each other’s throats out.” Rather, their process reinforces unification between the lower levels and upper levels that is forged through the cooperative creation of the lower levels with the authorization of the running central committee. This allows them to administer things more effectively because there is cohesion between all the levels. Furthermore, it removes the uncertainty of who will be in power, which in NSU leads to political posturing that forces people to hedge their bets. Nonetheless, it is a top-down process; one must gain the endorsement of the current running central committee to guarantee victory. The district and campus conventions are almost the process of hand-picking the lower leadership in order to guarantee cooperation from the lower levels to institutionalize the central

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<sup>253</sup> Translated excerpt of an NSU (K) ex-central committee leader’s interview, 2.18.07.

committee's policies and agenda. This can be a point of frustration because it rules out the dynamism of democratic competition and causes the organization to stagnate. As a principle, ANNFSU (*Akhil*) has a cohesive process of entrenching leadership promotion that people frustratingly abide by in order to squelch unhealthy internal competition that is common in NSU.

I have interpreted this data to demonstrate the subtleties of how organizational process either promotes or undermines the organizations. Process not only affects organizational outcomes but also reinforces institutional character. In its ritual form, it substantiates the students' endeavors; it is what provides political opportunity and reinforces their attachment to the social connections of politics. Yet political process can just as easily undermine political ideals as it can justify their investment. Furthermore, political process does not necessarily need to be inconsistent to be an obstacle to the larger political aim. What I have shown here is that the performative dimension of political process can cause unintended effects that are not easily identified. Ultimately, it is the unintended consequences that are the basis for the political anxiety that manifests as a fixation on organizational form and its relation to political ideology.

### **Conclusion: The Sustainability of Political Ideals**

What I have tried to demonstrate in this chapter is that Nepali political actors have a heightened sense of what makes an effective organization. It is a combination of discipline and consistency that elides with party ideology. Yet in order to survive in the political mainstream the parties must also be flexible enough to deal with the complexities of mass-based democratic politics. The Maoists are now experiencing the difficulties that moving into mainstream politics entails, they have been forced down to a level of imperfect politics

with which the rest of the parties have had to contend. The issue all the parties grapple with is to what degree is flexibility within the mainstream system going to serve as a revisionist impediment to their ultimate end of resolving class struggle or instituting democratic justice?

In this respect the student organizations can guide their mother organizations' transition into the mainstream political process. Polletta argues that in the context of the dynamic nature of repertoires, "people can transpose modes of interaction from one setting to another, indeed from one institutional sphere to another, modifying those interactional modes in the process" (2005: 274). The student organizations' position as sister organizations made up of tomorrow's generation of leaders may be the venue that provides them a new horizon during a time when people are transitioning from 20<sup>th</sup> century politics to the politics of "new Nepal." They can ensure their parties survival by doing exactly what they do, they suspend their agenda so that they can continually progress at the front and center in the political arena, as I have established in chapter two and four, they do this through their ability project their voice over time and space and adapt to the unexpected and frame it as possibility.

**CHAPTER 7**  
**“PURE DEMOCRACY”: CONCEPTIONS, PRACTICES, AND ANXIETIES**



Figure 22: Kathmandu Post Cartoon 9.22.07

Since the 1940s, Nepali politics has been defined by its democratic struggle. After an unsuccessful democratic period in the 1960s, the multi-party democratic activists were pushed underground. They finally reestablished democracy in 1990, but by 1996, it became apparent that democracy had not fulfilled the expectations and aspirations of all Nepalese citizens. During the Maoists' People's War, from 1996 to 2006, political strife over what type of political system is appropriate for Nepal led to bloodshed. From 2003 through 2008 there has been a collaboration of people from all different political ideologies coming together to demand democracy in reaction to the King's dictatorial attempts. In 2006, democracy was once again established after the People's Movement II ousted the King from power. After the Constituent Assembly elections of 2008, Nepal was officially declared a republic. This period is popularly referred to as "new Nepal." Yet, in reality, Nepali people

have differing conceptions of democracy, which are informed by different ideological orientations, organizational processes, external influences, and activist histories. By the time the Nepali democratic republic was realized as the state political system, the different political parties had established their own political rhetoric, practices, processes, and traditions that are not necessarily informed by liberal democratic values (Krämer 2002; Joshi and Rose 2004; Lawoti 2005 Panday 2000; Shah 2004; Upadhya 2002). Therefore, it must be acknowledged that the various forms that democratic principles take in Nepal have been rhetorically cultivated in conversation with other forms of power in a specific historical and cultural context.

It is from this vantage that I will explore different Nepali conceptions of democracy. In this chapter I will examine ethnographic case studies of Nepali student organizations' internal political processes, specifically during their campus, district, and national conventions, in order to understand the different political attitudes toward electoral processes in Nepal. I will concentrate on the performative dimensions of elections in order to demonstrate how the students and party leaders' self-conscious actions attempt to control the agonistic nature of electoral politics. In the first section I analyze different actors perspective on deliberation and its place in political practice. I then outline the different forms that elections have historically taken in Nepali politics in order to highlight the issues that people confront when they pursue electoral politics. In the third and fourth section I analyze consensus as a traditionally desired approach in the electoral process. I provide ethnographic examples of the way consensus unfolds in order to demonstrate why it is desired and the anxiety around achieving anything less than "pure consensus." In the last section I consider the benefits and risks to

direct elections by highlighting what people contend with while staging democratic elections. My analysis reveals how people's anxieties regarding electoral processes open up an interpretive space that Spencer calls a carnivalesque space that is full of possibility and license, "license to argue, and license to joke, and license to experiment with challenges to the order of things" (ibid: 94).

### **Deliberation: The Basis for Liberal Democracy?**

I begin this chapter by analyzing different Nepali conceptions of the democratic practice by focusing on the topic of deliberation because it elucidates the main contentions that comprise Nepali politics: inclusion, organizational unity, forms of competition, democratic claims, and dictatorial processes.

The academic debate surrounding deliberation reveals the inherent stakes that are present for political actors themselves. Political theory considers deliberation to be one of the central components of the liberal democratic political process as well as a main aspect of any form of societal maintenance that is not dictatorial in form. Political philosophers and social scientists often define deliberation according to the Kantian argument, claiming that reason,<sup>254</sup> inclusion, and justice are the underpinning components of deliberation (Bohman 1996; Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 2004; Little 2007; Mouffe 2000; Schneiderhan and Khan 2008; Steiner *et al.* 2004;

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<sup>254</sup> Cass Sunstein argues that the key to healthy deliberation and dissent is reason. He asserts that much dissent is harmful nonsense and productive deliberation is predicated on the liberal sensibility of reasonableness (2003: 91). To which Adrian Little counters, "why should I act 'reasonably' in a society that excludes me or where the established procedures run contrary to my moral principles? What form of political action aside from the transgressive can I use if the political system in which I reside does not recognize me as legitimate?" (2007: 147). Little highlights the need to acknowledge "disagreement" (Rancière) in order to embrace "agonistic pluralism" (Mouffe), which moves beyond reasonable deliberation and consensus to a radical democratic theory that is comfortable with the tensions of social contingency and uncertainty.

Sustein 2003). Deliberation is enacted through the process of reasoned argument, or what Jürgen Habermas calls “communicative action” (1984 and 1990), which ideally includes the voices and perspectives of all those who are participating in the process. For this reason, deliberation is cited as central to democratic legitimacy. The assumption in a democratic state is that all citizens have a right to be included in the democratic process and, therefore, have access to deliberation.<sup>255</sup>

Jürgen Habermas’s work on deliberation has been the most influential in the academic debate. He described deliberation as an organic phenomenon that unfolds within the specific social process or context (1990: 66). Yet what E. Schneiderhan and S. Khan have discovered in their study that imposed exogenous controls on the process of deliberation, is that the more inclusive the deliberation process is, the more robustly engaged the group is in deliberation (2008: 2 and 9). Their conclusion may be accurate from the presumed premise of an inclusive group dynamic but I would not extrapolate beyond that, because what I have observed is that political participation comprises either partial inclusion or a semblance of inclusion. But their study provides another useful conclusion about the nature of deliberation. It demonstrates that there are ways to affect the pace of deliberation; it is not an organic phenomenon. In this regard, Davies et al. have casted doubt that deliberation has inherent value, premised on reason, inclusion and justice, by questioning the underlying assumption that deliberation naturally unfolds. They argue that there are “recursive loops in which some form of deliberation

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<sup>255</sup> Genevieve Lakier borrows the phrase “illiberal democracy” from Zakari (1997) in her analysis of the role of public protest in Nepal in the democratic years of the 1990s (2007). She argues that without access to liberal, legal forms of representations and deliberation, groups use public protest to assert their rights or as I have shown, in the case of the political elites, to enforce their political views by usurping public space (2005 and 2007).

is needed before determining how deliberation should proceed; but the question of how the earlier round of deliberations can commence without confronting the same selection problem is left unanswered” (2005: 605).<sup>256</sup> Pellizzoni (2003) further warns that we must consider the role of power relations in discursive interactions because discourse and social prestige can be deployed in order to marginalize alternative viewpoints. Therefore one must consider the specific social dynamic in order to understand the parameters of deliberation before the value of deliberation can be understood.

For similar reasons Rancière critiques Habermas’s attempt to distinguish the creation of community upon rational argument as a discrete political interaction that differs from group collaboration based on converging interests. Rancière reminds us that not everyone may be present in the discursive process, and if they are present, they may not be able to articulate their desires and needs to the full extent because they must use the predominant discourse in order to be understood, hence becoming eclipsed by the dominant social logic, or what he calls police logic. He argues that Habermas underestimates the impact of the “multiplication of persons associated with the multiplication of the political logos” and that the third person (or external community) is as much a factor in the social dynamic of deliberation than the two who are deliberating. The third or external that Rancière refers to in his analysis is the basis for a theoretical critique of

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<sup>256</sup> Fearon may argue that what Davies et al. are referring to as the earlier round of deliberations is merely discussion: “Although ‘mere communication’ may not be deliberative, discussion is a necessary prerequisite of the deliberative process because, without discussion, there can be no deliberation” (1998: 404). Whether it is referred to as deliberation or discussion, or it allows discussion to be a proxy for deliberation, it is true that the parameters for which the group deliberates within are often decided by a core group of elites, or leaders who are limited by particular political or social principles, none of which is inclusive of the larger group and or society.

Habermas's democratic theory known as triple contingency. Piet Strydom clarifies the complexity of triple contingency in the following way:

This ability [to communicate] implies that, in addition to the perspectives of speaker and hearer, another perspective comes into play in the development beyond the double contingency relation. This is the perspective of the observer. When this perspective enters social interaction, ego is able to take an attitude that allows him or her to divide alter's communicative role in two, the role of alter ego in the sense of a participating counterpart and the role of a neutral or nonparticipating onlooker or observer belonging to the group forming part of the social situation. As a consequence of this structural differentiation made possible by the adoption of an objectifying attitude in addition to as per formative attitude, the perspectives of speaker and hearer are relativized vis-à-vis a third perspective. The first person who is speaking and the second person who is addressed and responds show up against the background of the uninvolved third person. The emergence of this basic triad marks the structure of communication that takes place in a social group within a situation in the real world. (2001: 174)

Strydom argues that since the public (or the observing third) is a contingent factor in the way socio-cultural conditions dictate epistemic structures, then the broader public must participate in any political debate or restructuring (Strydom 2001: 178). Yet Habermas's theoretic frame does not consider democracy on this level of abstraction.

Triple contingency reveals the limits of Habermas's analysis of deliberation as rational argument, and underscores what Rancière observes as the paradox of democracy: "The demonstration of right or manifestation of what is just is a reconfiguring of the partition of the perceptible or Habermasian communicational intervention" (1999: 55). This unveiling occurs

during disagreement (or radical revolutions), not in a public sphere of consensus or deliberation. Consensus democracy presumes that the parties have already been identified and established, and through the “regime of the perceptible”<sup>257</sup> consensus masks the boundaries between parties. As I established in the introduction, Rancière considers this post-democracy. For him, democracy is the political movement that reveals suppression and exploitation, makes the unheard voices heard, whereas post-democracy’s ultimate end is to obscure the different voices by claiming they are all equal citizens. Post-democracy “is the identifying mode, among institutional mechanisms and the allocation of the society’s appropriate parts and shares, for making the subject and democracy’s own specific action disappear” (1999: 102). The theoretical limits of deliberation and consensus democracy that I lay out here allude to some of the problems that Nepal is facing in its constituent assembly, wherein the express goal is to restructure a more inclusive state through a consensus democracy that assumes all are participating as citizens and specific communities’ concerns are often dismissed in order to make “new Nepal.”<sup>258</sup>

Indeed, establishing inclusion has been an ongoing political debate in Nepal. It fueled the civil war and dominated the peace talks and state restructuring procedures. Many are asserting that, in order for Nepal to become “new Nepal,” broad sweeping inclusive policies are necessary. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN [M]) demonstrated the political capital that the act of inclusion carries through their attempts to bring more

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<sup>257</sup> Rancière defines the regime of the perceptible as “the regime in which the parties are presupposed as already given, their community established and the count of their speech identical to their linguistic performance” (1999: 102).

<sup>258</sup> Chantal Mouffe argues that consensus “exists as a temporary result of a provisional hegemony, as a stabilization of power, and that it always entails some form of exclusion” (2000: 104).

diverse voices into the political fold. In this sense, their accomplishments during the decade of civil war is what Rancière would describe as democracy, because it made the entire society confront the “policing logics” of the Nepali state, the way things are structurally distributed among social, ethnic, and gender groups (Rancière 2003: 201). The People’s War was an act of politics because it threw these distributions into question. It was this strategy that won them the majority of both the first past the post and proportional votes in the 2008 constituent assembly elections.

Yet as I demonstrated in chapter five, inclusion of diverse groups in the party does not necessarily ensure that internal policies promote active inclusion of various voices. When I asked ANNISU (R) students about this, they explained to me that the Maoists’ main attempt at inclusion on an internal level is through deliberation. This is a curious claim because the Maoists are not considered to be a democratic party; in fact many people mistrust their democratic intentions. The Maoist leadership itself has justified coming into the political mainstream since 2006—making a coalition government with the democratic parties and contesting in the Constituent Assembly elections—as the necessary step that the revolution must take to reach its ultimate end, a Maoist People’s Republic. They argue that they must become a central part of the system in order to restructure the system.

Nonetheless, ANNISU (R) leaders cited deliberation as a key component to their internal election process. While discussing their campus, district, and national convention processes with ANNISU (R) students, I inquired as to how they choose their leaders in order to understand the degree to which they value democratic processes. What I found is that deliberation was more highly prioritized than casting ballots, campaigning, or

representational voting. A central committee leader explained it to me in this way:

During our convention we elected our leaders. But our method of election is different. What the bourgeoisie do is, they use the ballot paper and cast their votes; they spend a lot of money to buy the votes and use knives, swords, and sticks to assault the opposition that is within their organization. You might have seen the Nepal Student Union conferences in Chitwan and Nepaljung. They call it democratic norms. We are against that. Rather we hold discussions until we reach a consensus. Therefore, the election procedure adopted by bourgeoisie is for mere show, a performance for the outsiders that elections took place. We don't agree with this process since it is full of conspiracies and tricks... We prioritize internal discussion on our political agenda and road map. Only once we have established our political agenda do we engage in elections. Choosing our leadership is secondary to jointly organizing our group. We feel that if an election is held without becoming clear on the organization's ideology and programs then the organization cannot lead the political movement in any real sense. These are our norms and values. Here lies the difference between other organizations and ours.<sup>259</sup>

It may seem odd that a proclaimed Maoist student leader is embracing a political form that assumes the liberal morals of individual rights and freedom of speech as its basis, values that seem counter to radical socialist views.<sup>260</sup> Yet it is important to take note of what he sets up as its juxtaposition, casting

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<sup>259</sup> Translation of an interview with an ANNISU (R) central committee member on 11.12.06.

<sup>260</sup> C.K. Lal, a prominent Nepali journalist and political analyst, claimed in a public forum after the Constituent Assembly elections that the "Maoists were not real Maoists." He cited their willingness to participate in the Constituent Assembly elections, their willingness to embrace private market economic policies as a transition into their own economic policies, and burgeoning diplomatic ties with conservative foreign powers as proof of their lack of political authenticity within the Maoist ideological orthodoxy (at Martin Chautari, Kathmandu, Nepal, 4.16.08).

ballots. He argues that casting ballots is a bourgeoisie political form that promotes the thumbprint of each individual, but beyond that it is useless.



Figure 23: Police keeping NSU (K) cadres at bay as they look at the national convention voter list, Bharatpur, Chitwan 2007

In Nepal's history, the individuating process of casting ballots has often been manipulated or usurped in order to safeguard traditional, elite political rule. Deliberation, on the other hand, allows people a voice and an active social role in the process. For the Maoists, individual right is not the primary focus of deliberation, but a means to an end. Rather, deliberation is a communal process of consensus. For them, deliberation promotes sociality. Yet their progression from revolution to post-democratic approaches like deliberation highlights the potential for political erasure of what they wanted to convey during their civil war. The action of revolution is contrasted with

the Maoists' final aspiration for consensus.<sup>261</sup> This is one example of how the historical political drama unfolds in Nepal: it is the oscillation between street politics and parliamentary politics or Rancière's disagreement (democracy) and consensus (post-democracy).

The distinction between casting ballots and deliberation that the Maoist student leader makes is what A. Fung and E.O. Wright describe as the difference between real-world deliberation and genuine deliberation (2002:17). They claim that the real world involves heated conflict where there are winners and losers. Whereas genuine deliberation is not necessarily about being fully convinced of the collective agreement, but through reasoned argument all participants are persuaded to endorse it because it is what is most advantageous for the group. If we were to extrapolate this ANNISU (R) student leader's logic to apply to Fung and Wright's paradigm, then casting ballots would be real-world deliberation, and the Maoist internal consensus would be genuine deliberation. But in order to further parse this out, there is another aspect that must be considered, one that Fung and Wright do not address in their analysis, which is the emphasis on solidarity in the deliberative process (2002). Not everyone has her or his own agenda; therefore, it may be enough to provide people with a sense of ownership in the process in order to get them to agree with the party in a consensual way. The degree to which one values the group's agenda over one's personal agenda reflects one's willingness to oblige genuine deliberation over a real-world deliberation situation. This is particularly true within the ANNISU (R), where students are ideologically well-trained and disciplined in their shared

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<sup>261</sup> Rancière warns that, "The uncounted could make themselves count by showing up the process of division and breaking in on others' equality and appropriating it for themselves. The "exclusion" referred to today is, on the contrary, the very absence of a representable barrier. And so it is strictly identical to the law of consensus" (1999: 116).

political agenda, as I establish in chapter six. Their training is meant to put the students on the same ideological footing in the communicative process of deliberation.

The shared conviction to prioritize the group over the individual allows the ANNISU (R)'s convention to have a focus other than the electoral process. Rather than encouraging people to exert their own opinions it is about encouraging them to abide by the agenda that is best for their group. This not only allows them to become a part of the group, but it also reconfirms the social reality of the group. It is not group formation by popular mandate, but group formation through the social process of "genuine consensus." In his ethnography on the last Soviet generation, Alexei Yurchak (2006: 117-19) describes this priority within the cultural value of *svoi* or a sociality that produces a public. He documents the distracted, haphazard process by which *Komsomol* cadres vote for motions. These university students understand that it does not matter what the motions are that they raise their hands in favor of, but rather what matters is the act of supporting the motion. The multiplicity of raised hands confirms the sociality of the event, one that reconfirms the identity of their organization in a public forum. Similarly, the ANNISU (R) students do not proceed with elections until they are organized as a group, creating a shared political agenda is what creates social cohesion for them, only then they are able to choose a leader.

A Maoist central committee leader gave me an interesting explanation for the Maoists' resistance to the parliamentary system, which broadens the distinction between different forms of political participation. His explanation informs the difference between real-world and genuine deliberation. He said that, at one time, the parliamentary system was progressive, but that the

Maoists no longer support it because it has become a reactionary system, which has served as a guise to support the monarch while providing a façade of democracy. He said, “We believe in multi-party democracy if it implies creating consensus among the political parties in order to make Nepal a prosperous and developed country for the betterment and equality of its citizens.”<sup>262</sup> Ultimately, both systems claim to have the same end, yet he invoked Lenin to assert that the process of consensus insured equality and class struggle in a way that the parliamentary system precluded. He also added that consensus combats unhealthy competition. He felt competition stifled the system since it kept people from dedicating themselves to the larger aims of justice by prioritizing their own victory. In other words, competition distracts people with the mere struggle to maintain their presence and to progress within the political system.

This tension between voting and consensus ultimately comes down to what people believe is the best way to balance the liberal individual right of representation or a socialist approach that prioritizes the betterment of the group. In Nepal, this tension is informed by the historically proven suspicion that democratic governments are manipulated for spurious ends. Voting and the parliamentary system can encourage unhealthy competition that factionalizes the larger governmental institution in overt ways, whereas consensus, in its ideal form, may reaffirm the solidarity of the group (or state). Yet those in favor of the democratic process claim that dictatorial attempts are made in the name of consensus, which ultimately undermines the solidarity of the organization. This too is a reasonable worry considering Nepal’s political history. Furthermore, some Nepali politicians have warily contended that

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<sup>262</sup> Translation of an interview with a CPN (Maoist) central committee member on 1.18.07.

consensus is not democratic because, in Nepali political history, the claims of consensus-building deliberation have been predicated upon the exclusion of at least one other political faction.<sup>263</sup>



Figure 24: NSU (D) cadres protesting the postponement of the election at their national convention as party leaders tried to broker consensus amongst candidates, Nepalganj, Banke 2007

In many ways, the preference for “real-world deliberation” or “genuine deliberation” seems to fall along party fault lines in Nepal. On the internal level, the predilection for consensus is influenced by the degree to which organizations prioritize their organizational stability, solidarity, and unity, whereas intra-party interaction is more straightforward regarding “real-world

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<sup>263</sup> “But for parties to opt for discussion rather than a fight, they must first exist as parties who then have to choose between two ways of obtaining their share. Before becoming a preference for peace over war, consensus is a certain regime of the perceptible...consensus thus presupposes is the disappearance of any gap between a party to a dispute and a part of society. It is the disappearance of the mechanisms of appearance, of the miscount and the dispute opened up by the name ‘people’ and the vacuum of their freedom. It is: the disappearance of politics.” (Rancière 1999: 102)

deliberation.” The other factor that informs this preference is rank. Those who are in positions of power who are able to affect what the consensus will be (mainly the party and student leaders) endorse consensus, while those who have more to risk and are more dependent upon possibility are willing to support democracy as an electoral form. This raises the issue of autonomy that I will address throughout this chapter. I will now turn my focus to the types of elections that different student organizations strive for. Through case studies of these various types of elections, I will assess what the students perceive as the appropriate balance between competition, consensus, and mother-party interference in order to maintain a healthy political order.

### **Types of Elections**

When I asked a seasoned Communist Party of Nepal (United Marxist Leninist) (CPN [UML]) party activist about the differences between voting and consensus, his explanation was very insightful. It outlined how leadership has been traditionally chosen in Nepal’s political organizations. He said,

In Nepali political history there were three types of election systems. One was consensus-based election system; the other was the election system based on patron-client relationship; and the last one was the direct election system. The middle one, that is, patron-client relationship, is a defective one. The consensus-based system is fine since there is no need to go to the election if a consensus can be reached as to whom is the most qualified. Moreover, it is natural that the voices are raised against the person who is not popular and dynamic. For this reason, if consensus cannot be reached then a direct election system should be the alternative and there should not be influence from outside. This is the only way to declare a victor; he proves to be the most qualified, popular and possess the qualities that the voters desire. Our protest and critique is directed at the system that, in the name of consensus, comes from the basis of

patron-client relationship... We are trying to abolish the system of the patron inserting his client.<sup>264</sup>

During the process of the student organizations' conventions, I have seen all these types of elections, but the process of consensus and the one of patron-client are the most common. As far as I have observed, all the student organizations, despite their claims to being operatively democratic, would prefer the scenario of clear-cut consensus. As I will demonstrate, consensus and the electoral process are not considered mutually exclusive in how democratic Nepali political processes are, particularly in organizationally internal processes. Consensus provides a sense of communalism that people regard as more cohesive than the voting process because it avoids dispute, competition, and the risk of breaking organizational harmony. Yet, as I will show, the desire for consensus allows the term to be rhetorically manipulated in order to mask processes that are seemingly less democratic and ultimately undermine the solidarity of the organization.

The historical precedent of factionalism within Nepali politics underscores why people emphasize maintaining group harmony with such anxious vigor. The splintering trend is classified into two categories, ideological and personal splits. The more leftist the political organizations, the more likely their split will be an ideological one. A Maoist student defended the communist splits, comparing them to the ideological refinement process. He described it to me as a dialectical process that flushes out the negative and positive issues. He explained the challenge for the left's evolution has been their ability to discern between truly revolutionary assertions, even if they go against the party line, and opportunists' revisionist

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<sup>264</sup> Translation of an interview with a CPN (UML) central committee member on 1.14.07.

assertions. He admitted that there would have been less splits if the party leadership were able to accept different opinions.<sup>265</sup> This student's explanation of the history of splits and mergers is a historical materialist view, the unfolding of a materialist dialect toward the realization of truth that his political ideology has taught him. Nonetheless he was sensitive about the predominance of splits in the Nepali communist history, which was apparent in his defensive tone. Most leftist students are. I realized this when I asked an ANNISU (R) leader a question about the Maoist students' lifestyle, the tone of his response echoed that of the student's justification that splits were an aspect of the dialectical process. He said,

There are a lot of questions within this single question. I think your question is based on reality since the Nepali Communist Movement went through various merges and splits. But there is a basis for this. The negative history of the Nepalese Communist Movement was its inability to transform its ideology into a lifestyle or political program. The Maoists have closely studied this because it is our history and it is from there that we have cultivated out lifestyle, one that merges our ideologies, political programs, and personal lives.<sup>266</sup>

As I established in the previous chapter, the Maoists do not see the difference between their personal and political lives. They have melded their aesthetic sense of organization through theory and practice, which is articulated in their internal political culture. For this reason, it is useful to contextualize the Left's history of splits and mergers through an ideological lens.

The Leftists may justify their history of splits as being a process of ideological refinement, but the parties who are more centrist or conservative

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<sup>265</sup> Translation of an interview with an ANNISU (R) central committee member on 11.12.06.

<sup>266</sup> Translation of an interview with an ANNISU (R) central committee leader 10.12.07.

in their political views see the issue of splits and mergers very differently. It is a more pragmatic approach that elucidates the reality of political survival.

One ex-student leader broke it down into this nuanced cycle:

Any cadre working in the student organization, whether he belongs to NSU or the ANNFUSU, knows very well that the party is nothing more than the combination of different factions. Therefore, they want to ascertain their political future by affiliating themselves in one or another faction of their respective party.

What I mean by this is opposition politics, the condition of the parties in course of retaliatory politics... During this period they serve in a united way... It is in this type of situation that the parties become a family of sorts and the interests of the individuals don't take priority... But as soon as the parties enter the stage of power politics, a new type of political culture develops and each party does not remain a party. According to my experience, the party remains in face a group but in reality it is various constituent factions. One who possesses the ability to manage the diverse groups becomes the leader of the so-called party. Otherwise, the party activity is limited in the power sharing and power management of different groups within the party. This is how the liveliness within the party gradually disappears and issues-based discussion cease to exist. The reason behind this is that there will be some two or three [dominant] factions in the party and one has to be the member of either of the groups. Politics in this case goes ahead in accordance to the consensus and disagreements that appear among or between the groups.

What people come to understand from this system is that we can contribute positively only when "I" or "my party" remains in power and the society will deteriorate if he or his party comes to power. This is the understanding of the leadership and it circulates the same message down to the bottom of the organization. This is what happens when parties engage in power politics.

On the other hand, when we are in the stage of politics of retaliation, the distance between the parties is very thin; it seems as if they are not two parties but one and they share a history on the streets and they don't differ in their ideology. But once they reach to the power politics, they are no longer united, and don't even accept the fundamental norms and values of multi-party democracy.<sup>267</sup>

This student's description of retaliatory politics versus power politics references the livelihood of the party and the political system in which it thrives. An example of this was the reunification of the Nepali Congress in 2007. With the impending constituent assembly election, when Nepali Congress was up against the odds of a possible Leftist coalition, they once again reunited as a party. This was necessary retaliatory politics that resulted from power politics, which had split them in the first place. Similarly, NC was able to maintain unity throughout the Panchayat era despite horrible inter-party battles because they were not in power, so their survival as an entity was contingent upon their unity. The King's rule in 2001 and 2005 is another example of retaliatory politics. This experience of suppression caused the parties to identify with one another, which allowed them to maintain street coalitions that could not endure once they were in power in parliament.

This paradigm of retaliatory and power politics can be mapped onto Rancière's distinction between democracy and post-democracy. During the times that NC had to fight for its voice on the streets, it was in a place of retaliatory democracy where unity in numbers mattered, yet as soon as the NC's position of power was properly reinstated and it could dictate the police logic through post-democratic consensus, it then fell into power

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<sup>267</sup> Translation of an interview with an NSU (K) ex-central committee leader, 11.16.07.

politics. I have heard other students say that it was during major party splits that the King was able to seize the opportunity for power. For that reason they describe the split within the party as dangerous because they not only undermine the party, but history has shown that splits threaten the whole multi-party democratic system.<sup>268</sup>



Figure 25: Joint eight-student union protest declaring a common minimum program, Baag Bazaar, Kathmandu, 2004

Another NC-affiliated student addressed the uncertainty of people's positions within the power structure as a reason for splits. He explained,

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<sup>268</sup> Translation of an interview with an ANNFSU (*Akhil*) central member, 11.24.07: "The causes behind the splits and the merges are the conspiracies played on the part of the palace, deviation in ideological line, and the play of the imperialism. Politics is mainly responsible for the making of the state, society, district, etc. The splits that occur in the political parties create political instability in the country."

Translation of an interview with an NSU (D) ex-central committee leader, 11.28.07 : "The past evidence shows that the King imposed his despotic rule at the time when NC got split.... Therefore, my opinion is that the parties should not get split. If the parties could go in a unified way, the ways of restoring to violence and imposing despotism would come to an end. Then the politics of Nepal would follow the path of peace and prosperity."

Splits occur when a leader can no longer accept the other as a leader. There is a tendency to cut the throat of the nearest rival in the party to ensure one's success for the future. In other words, in the absence of realization of political security and political justice, the parties have to split. It has had a negative impact in Nepalese political culture. If the parties had not split, I think that there would have been just two parties in Nepal, Nepali Congress and Nepal Communist Party. Had there been just two parties in existence, it would have been far easier to reach consensus and it would have reduced violent conflict.<sup>269</sup>

Many of the students agree with this student that the splits are counterproductive not only to the parties but to the overall system of politics. They cite the history of factionalism as the reason that citizens became disenfranchised, which led to a decade of violence and extremism on both sides.

The data I have gathered on factionalization informs people's sense of their organization as well as the necessity for coalitions. In a place as diverse as Nepal, people need to rely on coalitions in order to survive and have an effect. Yet coalitions dilute the unique identity and stance of all involved. For this reason, coalitions exist with common minimum programs. It is important to understand this not only on the macro-level of intra-party coalitions but also on the level of inter-party coalitions. As these quotes indicate, parties are not unified entities but are a group of factions. This explains why Nepali political actors prefer consensus as a decision-making process rather than vote-casting or real world deliberation. It not only allows flexibility to push power agendas behind the façade of democratic process, but it is necessary in order to maintain the integrity of very fragile group structures. This

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<sup>269</sup> Translation of an interview with an NSU (D) ex-central committee leader, 11.28.07.

perspective informs the larger theoretical implications of societal makeup, the way in which a group becomes a uniquely identifiable group and the role of difference interaction. Coalition building is situational, opportunistic, and relative. As I established in chapter six in the section on political culture, political groups are accepted as being constructed and continually dynamic. I will now analyze examples of the different types of elections in order to demonstrate the fragility of group cohesion within the electoral process.

### **The Gap between “Arranging Things” and “Full Consensus”**

The first district convention that I observed was a prime example of what the CPN-UML leader that I previously quoted would call a patron-client election process, but in the name of consensus. It was at this time that I realized the transition in people’s verbal patterns and dialogue in order to accommodate the proper political process. During the convention people would say things “were being arranged” and, once a final decision was made, they would say there was a “full consensus.” The following ethnographic analysis demonstrates the flexibility of the term consensus, and how it allows political actors to maintain the integrity of the democratic process.

I had arrived the day before the district convention elections with a female NSU (K) vice-president, Risha. Since Risha was running for president in the national convention, she was keen to attend district conventions, especially districts where she had established relations. This was obviously one of them. This district was the district of a female NSU (K) central committee member, Tanuja, who Risha was openly promoting. As we arrived, we went directly to the NC party office. I was introduced to everyone and we had tea. Soon after receiving tea, the students and NC district leaders made us aware that they had not yet been able to “arrange things” for the convention

the next day. The NC-appointed election committee excused themselves, to have another meeting with all the possible candidates so they could agree upon a solution. They asked if Risha would like to attend. She declined, saying it was not her intention to interfere; she had come to be supportive of everyone. Tanuja excused herself, saying she should probably participate to see if she could help broker an amicable agreement. As we departed Tanuja whispered to Risha, "I'll represent us."

At about ten p.m. that evening, Tanuja arrived at our hotel room very stressed. She said that they still had not reached an agreement and that NC district leaders were at an impasse with some of the younger students because the leaders felt these students did not have the experience to take such key leadership positions. The NC leadership preferred to endorse the current running president; with the impending constituent assembly election they felt that needed to establish reliable leadership. She expressed disgust with the NC leaders' heavy-handedness in this matter and their sense of impunity. She felt they were using the election-committee responsibility to ensure that the process ran smoothly, as an excuse to interfere. She had sympathy for some of the students who had aspirations to compete in the elections. She said,

They fought so hard for the party during the People's Movement II and have been active all through the Movement Against Regression. They spent time in jail and in the hospital. They feel empowered to serve central roles in this party after all they have contributed. This is how they are compensated, with doubt over their leadership abilities?<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>270</sup> Transcription of a conversation with an NSU (K) central committee member on 2.9.07.

Both of these women felt frustrated by the interference, even though they were serving in positions appointed by the NC central leadership. Their frustration and the position they held revealed how little autonomy their organization has and the extent to which they are beholden to NC party leaders.

The next morning, the meeting began early in order to reach an agreement before the delegates came. The convention was supposed to begin at nine; by eleven the meeting with the election commission was still occurring. Delegates had come from all over the district, some travelling over five hours to reach there by nine. At the time when everyone was getting hungry, Risha barged into the office and started lecturing the NC leaders. She said that if nobody was willing to back down and an agreement could not be reached, then they should hold elections and let the students decide. She berated them, saying that their behavior showed they had little faith in the students of their organization. Within fifteen minutes all the students were called into the convention hall to begin the inauguration. At the last minute it was announced that they would serve lunch first and then begin. This bought the party leaders another hour to push their agenda. By the time the inauguration ceremony began, the NC leaders were relieved and the candidates were distressed. An agreement had been enforced.

During her speech, Risha told the students what had been going on. She emphasized her point, saying, "You have been called here to participate in this democratic process, just as you had been called on to fight to protect our democracy. Now you sit here and wait, wait for the leaders to decide for you. Is this how we should be democratically running things?"<sup>271</sup> When the NC

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<sup>271</sup> Translation of a speech given by an NSU (K) central committee member on 2.10.07.

district vice president,<sup>272</sup> who was serving as the election committee chair, came up to give his speech he acknowledged Risha's critique but claimed that they had reached "full consensus" among all the candidates for the good of the NSU (K)'s district committee. He said,

You have a big responsibility to campaign for the constituent assembly elections. This is as important as the roles you have served in the past in your fight for democracy. You need strong leadership right now that has experience. All the candidates will get the opportunity to gain that experience during this administration.<sup>273</sup>

As we were leaving the party office, there was an air of discontent. A tussle broke out between some of the students who were supporting a candidate who had been sidelined and students who supported the two-term victor. The party leaders rushed to break it up. I asked Risha why they had not let the matter go to a vote. She called the NC district vice president over and said, "Amanda asked why the students were not allowed to vote, please explain it to her, sir [older brother]." He responded, "Many of these students are from plus-two colleges and are very immature. If we had an election, it could have gotten ugly. See, that tussle that we just suppressed is a good example of the risks that would be involved in an election process." After that we talked for a while, and the conversation was relatively good-natured because all the frustrations had been voiced. While I was waiting to get a copy of the district proposals and report, I was surprised to overhear Risha as she turned to the very same NC vice president and say,

Sir, you know we need thirty three percent female representation not only at the country level but

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<sup>272</sup> The NC district vice president is Tanuja's father.

<sup>273</sup> Translation of a speech given by the NC (K) district vice president on 2.10.07.

also in the party and NSU (K). I expect at least fifty percent of the delegates you send to the national convention from here to be female. It is in your power; oversee this to make sure it gets done.<sup>274</sup>

He agreed to do so. I was surprised that Risha had spurned him and the party's interference in the convention, but was willing to rely on it when it was to her advantage.

As we were having our last cup of tea with the party leaders at the hotel before leaving, the NC vice president seemed exhausted and a bit disheartened that things had not gone smoothly. He explained that things were not completely worked out and he would need to do some damage control in order to ensure that all the aspiring candidates would cooperate with the committee president. Throughout the next couple of days on our trip to other district conventions, I overheard Risha and Tanuja provide different versions of what happened depending on the listener: sometimes they said it went well and there was "full consensus," at others they went into a tirade about the district committee's interference.

Another example of this sort of manipulation of the term "consensus" was right after the 2005 NSU (K) national convention, known as the Pokhara scandal that disintegrated into chaos and vandalism.<sup>275</sup> The Nepali Congress constituted a selection committee to form an ad hoc NSU central committee to

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<sup>274</sup> Conversation with NSU (K) central committee member and NC (K) district vice president on 2.10.07.

<sup>275</sup> During the NSU national conference in 2005, the NSU students clashed after some irregularities. The then-appointed president, who was a candidate, was blamed for manipulating the list of voting representatives with the support of NC leaders. The clashes resulted in serious injuries, vandalism of public property, and the torching of the convention hall, causing damages costing over eight million Nepali rupees. The Nepali Congress had to cancel the national convention and appoint a new NSU panel, again postponing the national convention that had been overdue since 2004. During the 2006 Free Student Union elections, a nationwide campus competition that takes place among all the student organizations, NSU lost many of its campus strongholds due to the fact that the central committee was ineffective and did not represent the sentiment of the NSU students.

fill in before they could have the next national convention. This selection committee's responsibility was to work with all the student leaders and ex-student leaders who had recently been active in order to form a NSU (K) central committee. Although everyone refers to the positions as appointed, NC made all the current and previous student leaders sign a document agreeing that the list of appointments were in the best interest of NSU (K). After receiving the signatures of all the key players, NC was able to claim that the NSU (K) central committee was consensually formed and play down their interference. I confirmed this with Akash, the key ex-student leader, whose experience of being sidelined by the party at this convention had sparked the riots and vandalism. He explained that this was NC's regular tactic when they dissolve and appoint NSU administrations. They must manufacture a consensus among the students since their constitution explicitly states that NC will not appoint student leaders. The signed consensus is their loophole. He chuckled, saying, "Yeah, I have signed two of those consensus agreements for their appointed leaderships, once when they dissolved my committee during my general secretary tenure and the second time after I tried to run for president."<sup>276</sup>

The discrepancy in the students' language and the party's actions indicates how they rhetorically manipulate their claims to provide a democratic façade. I do not want to assert that this is a cynical practice; rather, it is a reaction to a political reality beyond their control. The paternalistic anxieties of the NC leaders reveal that they do not feel the students are ready to govern themselves. In response, the students have adopted cues that indicate democratic aspirations while masking their lack of autonomy.

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<sup>276</sup> Interaction with an ex-NSU (K) central committee member on 3.5.07.

Nonetheless, this does impact the students' political behavior, and how they will serve as politicians. They may not only transfer their leaders' wariness of their capabilities onto the generation below them, they are also developing sophisticated patterns of rhetoric that blur the boundary between intentionality and actuality.

### **The Desired "Safe Landing": "Pure Consensus"**

In order to better understand why people manipulate the word "consensus" as an attempt to tag irregular political processes as democratically normative, it is important to highlight the anxiety around maintaining the image of a clean, healthy democratic process. It is this anxiety that compels people to be invested in a "full consensus" outcome. The example of what my informants refer to as "pure consensus" demonstrates the ability of consensus to strengthen organizational unity.

A particularly central fixation of the district conventions of the two Nepali Student Unions'—NSU (K) and NSU (D)—was the concept of "safe landing." The NSU (K)'s last national convention is typically referred to as a scandal that was not only a black mark for NSU (K) and NC (K), but for the institution of student politics—a general example of how politics is a "dirty game." Therefore, it was necessary that all the 2007 conventions run smoothly. An urgent text I received from a Nepali friend during the NSU (K)'s national convention in Chitwan revealed how much was at stake in holding these conventions. He texted the morning after an extremely tense day to inquire if I was safe because he had just seen footage of the previous day's scuffle between the students and the police. The students had tried to storm the convention office after a rumor spread that the central committee was fixing the voter list. He lamented how bad the news coverage was. He texted,

“Don’t they realize that the whole country’s eyes are on Chitwan right now? Do they realize how bad this makes them look, let alone the enterprise of democratic politics?”<sup>277</sup> His worried message signals what all sides can agree upon, that the student conventions should not disintegrate into chaos, everyone must do whatever is in her or his power to ensure a “safe landing.” It is for this reason that there was so much oversight of these conventions by the student organizations’ central committee leadership as well as by the political parties’ district and central leadership.

A good example of a “safe landing” was the smooth consensus process that I observed at Padma Kenya, the all-female college in Kathmandu.<sup>278</sup> I was able to sit through the entire convention, including the closed session. Throughout the convention, things were pretty chaotic. The female central committee member, Risha, who was meant to observe the convention, actually oversaw many of the processes that should have been the campus leaders’ independent responsibility, including writing the proposals for the convention report. What seemed like interference to me was not only tolerated, but also appeared normal. In fact, nothing to me seemed to run in an official fashion. The whole process resembled family *pujas* (religious offering ceremonies) that I have observed wherein participants have their own ideas of how things should be conducted and simultaneously contribute their input, often bickering about it. The puja procedure is ultimately a combination of everyone’s input, which the most experienced or respected of the family decides to incorporate as he or she sees fit. Risha, who is no longer a student at

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<sup>277</sup> Translation of a text interaction on 5.24.07.

<sup>278</sup> The girls from this campus are known to be some of the most active members of all the student political processes, particularly during the political agitation of the last few years. This campus was one of the main protest zones during the political movement from 2003 to 2006.

this campus, seemed to fill this role, coordinating with the most senior of the campus leaders who was serving as the moderator.

When it finally came to nominating the candidates, two were nominated. After they registered and someone paid their dues for running, the moderator called a break in order to have a discussion with the two candidates.<sup>279</sup> This discussion happened outside the hall among the moderator, the candidates, the soon to be ex-president, and Risha. During the discussion, the female delegates were chanting the name of one of the candidates in unison. After about ten minutes, the team returned and declared consensus: the female candidate who seemed to have obvious support from the hall of chanting delegates had won, because the other candidate had withdrawn. The crowd enthusiastically cheered, and then the convention was over. Different students came up to the victor to congratulate her and thanked the other candidate for her respectable withdrawal.

The moderator told me that the discussion that was held among the student leaders and candidates was a bargaining process to establish the new campus administration. The candidate who had withdrawn would be appointed general secretary by the new president, since it is the president's prerogative to appoint her own cabinet. It would not be surprising if the female student who withdrew would be next in line for the presidency, just as the student who had won was in line for it from the previous election.

The campus convention culminated in all of us—delegates, former leaders, newly consented leaders, central committee members, and me—

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<sup>279</sup> As far as I have observed at the closed sessions that I have attended, all the candidates were sponsored. Their supporters contributed a fixed amount to that wing of the organization (district or campus). Often, the central committee members (who technically are only there as external representatives) solely contributed the money for a specific candidate; which to me exhibited a conflict of interest.

eating lunch together. The whole process, which was seemingly undemocratic, was embraced by all involved as full consensus. Everyone was happy with the procedure and the outcome. Yet this time Risha did not describe it to external party leaders as “full consensus.” Rather, I overheard her on the phone reporting the election was a “pure consensus,” which she said in English. In a sphere that is considered a “dirty game,” using the word “pure” to describe something serves as a strong indicator as to how coded political processes are. In this context, pure consensus represents a civilized process in which everyone is in agreement. It is for this reason that “pure consensus” produces such a sense of organizational harmony: it occurs from a united front, whereby there are no vying interests and all participants become one in their aim of organizational betterment. They are a socially constructed singular with no surplus identities (Rancière 1999:124).

A conversation I had with a few NSU (D) central committee members shed light on this procedure of consensus and how people favor it as part of their democratic exercise. We were returning from the Nuwakot district convention. We had attended the inauguration but decided not to stay for the closed session. On the road back, one of the student leaders was receiving updates on the convention’s progress by phone. I asked him how many candidates had been nominated; he said at the moment it was five or six, the nomination process was still occurring. I articulated my surprise that there would be so many candidates, as I had heard that there would be no election. Another central committee member explained, “The students come forward as candidates and state their intentions and then they talk it through. If they have the ambition to be president then they will probably be willing to serve another position if the delegates don't support them as president.” I

commented that as far as I had observed, during and before the closed sessions, this scenario is referred to as “arranging things,” and after it was arranged, it is referred to as “full consensus.” He responded, “Well, what do you expect, us to compete with guns or throw rocks at one another?”<sup>280</sup> We want to create leadership and teams for the betterment of our organization that all our delegates will support.”<sup>281</sup> His response maintains that organizational cohesion should not be jeopardized by democratic competition. As I have shown, choosing leadership is an anxiety-ridden process for all student organizations during which they cite each other’s blunders and failures to justify their own approach to establishing political leadership.

### **Direct Elections**

The other option for choosing new leadership is direct elections. This procedure is the one that all Nepali political organizations who have supported multi-party democracy must contend with as the acceptable form of choosing leadership in the liberal democratic model (Dahl 1989). Although they recognize it as such, it is not the historically preferred method in Nepali political history (Hachhethu 2002). Direct elections occur when an organization feels it must demonstrate it is capable of the performance of internal elections. It is at those times that liberal democratic values are most audible as political claims. In this section, I will analyze the ANNFSU (*Akhil*)’s switch to a direct election style in order to highlight people’s attitudes and anxieties concerning political participation.

For the first time in its forty-one year history, ANNFSU (*Akhil*) instituted a direct election process at its 2006 national convention. In the past,

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<sup>280</sup> He was insinuating that as an organization, NSU (D) is not violent like the Maoists or as cutthroat as NSU (K).

<sup>281</sup> Conversation with an NSU (D) central committee member on 3.18.07.

the student representatives voted for the national council, which would constitute the election commission. This commission, through the process of consensus, would choose the top leadership, the president, and members of the secretariat. In 2006, all the student representatives directly voted for each position, thereby each person gained her or his position through an electoral mandate. This is commonly described as a direct election that was carried out “from the hall,” which people contrast with the “decision handed down from the party.” The institutionalization of this process allowed me to parse out the strengths and weaknesses of different forms of political representation.<sup>282</sup>

Since 1983, there has been a consistent rift over choosing leadership through the election commission. The ANNFSU (*Akhil*) student leadership demanded that they have direct elections and that their mother organization, CPN-ML,<sup>283</sup> should expand its platform beyond fighting against the despotism of the monarchy (for a democratic republic) to include direct democratic practices. The student leaders argued that CPN-ML should begin by allowing its sister organization the freedom of direct elections. The entire leadership of that ANNFSU panel was dismissed because CPN-ML disagreed and questioned the students’ abilities, since they had strayed from the party

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<sup>282</sup> Another benefit to the changing of this system is that it provided me a context to understand the extent to which (CPN-UML) interferes with and controls its sister organization, ANNFSU (*Akhil*). In my research from 2003-2005, I had tried many different ways to indirectly raise this topic without seeming accusatory or cynical of students’ or party activists’ political intentions, but it was difficult to collect anything substantial. With this institutional change people became more open with me, because direct party interference had become the contextual background, the conceptual piece of history that points to how ANNFSU (*Akhil*), and by default, the CPN-UML, have progressed as a democratic entity. I received across-the-board quotes, followed by in-depth detail, stating that in the past CPN-UML decided on the ANNFSU (*Akhil*) leadership under the pretext of an election commission, which was meant to decide the leadership on a consensual basis.

<sup>283</sup> When this issue was raised in 1983, the party was called CPN (ML) and their student organization ANNFSU, but it has since split into CPN (ML) and CPN (UML), and ANNFSU (ML) and ANNFSU (*Akhil*) respectively, though both parties trace their history back to the original CPN (ML).

ideology. This party ideology has survived through the People's Movement I (1990), in which the CPN-ML collaborated with the other parties to fight for multiparty democracy. It lasted through the first ten years of active democracy. In other words, even though the party that became the CPN-UML was contesting in a multiparty, democratic system, it was running the party, and by extension its sister organizations, internally by consensus. Consensus is the official phrase, but, as I hear, consensus has meant agreeing with the leadership's decisions.<sup>284</sup>

Why has this changed? People say that political change can only occur incrementally, and this is an example. In 2002, along with every other party, CPN-UML had its power torn from it by the King, only to discover a passive public that they had disenfranchised. For the next four years, CPN-UML fought along with other parties for the reinstatement democracy. It was not until the upsurge of public participation during the People's Movement II that the parties actually had the power to change things. In the months after the People's Movement II, the publicly held sentiment was that people's mandate ensured the removal of the King and the reinstatement of democracy. This claim was based on the participation of the common masses in the People's Movement II. All the parties had to be sidelined in order to realize that their power comes from the people. Therefore, the parties made overtures toward

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<sup>284</sup> It is commonly known that the other large mainstream party, NC, is run by appointment. It has elections, but a large percentage of its seats are officially appointed. Furthermore, if the election results do not suit the party president, then he puts pressure beforehand to impact the results, and if that does not work, he is known for dissolving the entire panel and appointing everyone himself (Hachhethu 1992). Since the 1990 democracy, eight of the nine NSU panels have been appointed by their mother organization (NC). Not surprisingly, CPN-UML has always argued that it is more democratic than NC because it operates on a consensus basis, which they feel is democratic at the grassroots.

restructuring the political system to be a “pure democracy” or “complete democracy” (*purna prajatantra*).<sup>285</sup>

CPN-UML has taken these events seriously and, as a result, it has chosen to internally reform itself. One CPN-UML central committee member and former student president described it in this way:

We were struggling for the democratic process. On the national level people are considered sovereign, and the party members must also be sovereign. And they must also have the right to decide. Statewide who decides on the president or prime ministers? It is the citizens. And in the parties and sister organizations, who decides on the leadership? It should be the members. This is how the democratic process and organizations should proceed... Not only at the state level but also at the party level things need to be restructured. How do we restructure? By guaranteeing all the rights of the party members and cadres. This election guaranteed all the rights of the student members (ANNFSU ((*Akhil*)). This is the beginning of the practice of the democratic process.<sup>286</sup>

By making these changes, CPN-UML was not only the first party to show that it was internally restructuring itself, but it was also distinguishing itself from its political counterpart, the Maoists. In 1983, when CPN (ML) had dissolved the ANNFSU leadership for demanding the political agenda of direct democracy, the Maoists were a part of the party.<sup>287</sup> At that time, they all agreed on democratic republic. Yet, today, what the Maoists and CPN-UML mean by democratic republic is different. CPN-UML has shown its support for representative democracy and a Westminster parliamentary system by

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<sup>285</sup> Although *purna prajatantra* more accurately translates to “complete democracy,” Nepali people would use the English phrase “pure democracy” in their speech.

<sup>286</sup> Translation of an interview with a CPN (UML) central committee member on 10.12.06.

<sup>287</sup> The communist parties of Nepal have one of the most complicated histories of splits and mergers (see Thapa and Sijapati 2005).

participating in it since its establishment in 1990. During the Maoist People's War, CPN-UML denounced the Maoists' use of excessive force against the state in order to establish a democratic republic. Yet, after the successful peace talks of 2007, the rejection of violence no longer served as the distinguishing feature between these two parties. CPN-UML has attempted to show this difference in its internal political reforms, and through these reforms it claims that it is acknowledging the democratic aspirations of the people. Yet it is not as simple as it seems. The CPN-UML and, by default, the ANNFSU (*Akhil*)'s embrace of direct democracy and party members' response to it, hits at the base of the internal contradiction that democracy entails, the negotiation of interpretation, which is shadowed by the power of influence.

Both CPN-UML and ANNFSU (*Akhil*) are keen to claim that their ability to restructure is a move from talking (*bhanai*) about "pure democracy" to doing (*garai*) "pure democracy," but they also want to avoid what seems inevitable to Nepali politicians: if you allow things to go to a vote, then you are vulnerable to a complete breakdown of the process through factional clashes. As I have demonstrated, people are very sensitive about this possibility. The embarrassment of the NSU (K) Pokhara scandal is still fresh in people's minds. The NSU (K)'s actions have shown how deep factionalism can weaken the relevance of a party or group. In order to avoid such shame, CPN-UML and ANNFSU (*Akhil*) forewent particular procedures that are considered key to a direct democratic process during the 2006 ANNFSU (*Akhil*) convention. For instance, the student candidates were not allowed to debate, nor were they given an opportunity to express their views or their proposed agenda to the crowd of student delegates. I was told that this approach would create an unhealthy, competitive spirit. Yet some candidates, who already

held high positions in the outgoing central committee, were responsible for presenting the various proposed amendments that the student representatives supported or rejected through applause in the convention hall. Through this procedure particular candidates were granted exposure; this also allowed them to position their intentions within their amendment proposals. This scenario unwittingly revealed the reality that most student leaders progress through the rank and file.

Since there was not open debate, how did the student delegates choose their leadership if they did not know all the candidates' platforms? I was provided with two explanations. The first was media exposure that focused on candidates' actions of political protest during the last five years of political agitation. This did not necessarily illuminate their particular political views or a proposed agenda for ANNFSU (*Akhil*), but highlighted their dedication to political struggle. Students with whom I spoke cited this as a faulty process of media publicity covering the street protests since 2001. One campus leader explained that, since the media focuses on those at the forefront, people gain publicity based on how many rocks they throw, tires they burn, or how many times they get injured or arrested.<sup>288</sup> The media does not deliberate over who is ideologically sound, who could be a competent leader, or who can organize an appropriate political agenda, rather it sensationalizes political spectacle. This underscores the structural reality in Nepali politics that the ability to lead an agitation is a more valuable political skill than the ability to run a student organization, political party, or the government (Snellinger 2007).

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<sup>288</sup> Excerpt from a transcription of a conversation with an ANNFSU (*Akhil*) campus leader on 9.26.06.

The other way students became informed about the candidates was through personal lobbying by individual students, particularly those who have a broad influence over groups of students. I was told this lobbying began as early as six months before the convention.<sup>289</sup> I had witnessed this process, and it seemed no different than securing the votes through the patronage system that operates during national elections.<sup>290</sup> As I observed this, I was not expecting people to admit to me that this was how votes were being secured. Yet people justified that it was safer than creating open, monitored competition because that would officially position the different factions. Rather, networking brought things down to the personal level. It was unofficial and done in private.

Furthermore, a number of recognized irregularities occurred, which could have cast doubt upon the direct election appeal. Yet neither the presidential council nor the losing candidates were willing to officially address them. These included unauthorized panel making, direct lobbying by the CPN-UML party leaders, and last-minute registration of representatives. Panels were forbidden in order to curb factionalism. The CPN-UML leaders reasoned that if candidates were only allowed to run individually, then they would only campaign for themselves and each candidate would be judged on her or his own merits. Nonetheless it unofficially occurred because panel making is an efficient way to maximize candidates' influence; it broadens their

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<sup>289</sup> Translation of an interview with an ANNFSU (*Akhil*) central committee member on 10.18.06.

<sup>290</sup> In national elections, historically, it has not been necessary to campaign and reach out to individuals; rather, it is a process of patronage. The leaders, the landholders, and business owners have to be convinced, typically through favors. Once they are convinced, they can guarantee the votes of those they have influence over. But this dynamic changed in the Constituent Assembly elections of 2008 whereby the parties were directly targeting voters, and the citizens seemed to vote more according to a politically informed personal will than according to any social or filial obligations.

network. The underhanded process of the CPN-UML party leaders endorsing student candidates worked in a similar way. The leaders have a vested interest in having students who are within their spheres of influence, holding positions of power on the campuses and in the Free Student Union. If they can ensure these students' positions by exerting their own influence, there is incentive to do so. In spite of this, lobbying and endorsement are natural to the democratic process; they were only irregularities within the context of the presidential council's rules, which from this view, seem to stymie an open democratic style.

The third irregularity was cited as the most worrisome hiccup undermining the democratic process. Even though there were fourteen hundred representatives chosen in the preparation of the national convention, eighteen hundred representatives were registered to vote on the election day. I was informed of this by a few losing candidates and it was confirmed by the CPN-UML party members who participated in the presidential council. The presidential council members warned the candidates not to contest this issue because they were wary of the convention disintegrating into chaos. Another reason they kept this issue contained was, since inter-organizational competition for students' loyalties was steep, CPN-UML did not want to alienate any students who wanted to participate in this process. By cracking down, they would have possibly disenfranchised four hundred students from future ANNFSU (*Akhil*) politics. These examples highlight that the external perception of a smooth-running democratic exercise was more important than democratic integrity itself.

Participants at this convention claimed that these irregularities undermined the convention's attempt to achieve a sound, unbiased

democratic process. Furthermore, many students felt that those who were most capable and ideologically sound were not the ones who won. Since the process of competition was unmonitored—arranged in the back of tea stalls or over drinks doling out favors and promises—patronage became the dominating influence. It was for this reason that some people with whom I spoke were questioning the democratic process altogether. They reasoned that at the time of the electoral commission consensus, the most capable candidates were chosen to lead. Many ANNFSU (*Akhil*) delegates wondered if the student cadres are capable of choosing what is best for the organization, or if this is a decision that should be left to the leadership. I was surprised to hear such musings from people who had fought so hard to make the 2008 Constituent Assembly elections possible.

The considerations of change or maintaining status quo are very much a part of how leadership is decided. The masses are typically interested in a candidate who can serve them, and can effectuate change in their favor. Institutional leaders are attracted to dedication to the party's ideological stance and political mission. Candidates who acknowledge the political lineage and their place in it are most appealing or deemed to be ideologically most sound in the eyes of the leadership. Through this convention, the students came to see the vulnerabilities of a direct election process. They realized that ultimately it is a question of which system is more susceptible to power and influence. A few of them struggled with this. One student asked me, "How can we want democracy for our country when we don't feel comfortable with it in our own organization?"<sup>291</sup> This student then admitted to me that the hardest reality of democracy is not being able to control the

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<sup>291</sup> Translation of an interview with an ANNFSU central committee member on 11.9.06.

outcome, something he admitted that Nepali leaders have a hard time accepting. He concluded that it is his generation's responsibility to become comfortable with how electoral politics unfold. This student was coming face to face with E. Laclau's claim that democracy is the "only political form that has made undecidability a constitutive dimension of its narrative on political power and authority" (2001:10). Nonetheless, the students have the tools to embrace these aspects of democratic form if they put it in the same context that they confront their own political position, something that is always uncertain, contingent, and ambiguous. When they approach the democratic process with the same flexibility they maintain in their political survival, then they embody the symbolic resources of the democratic logic, creating new political processes within the confines of their historical and cultural context.

### **Conclusion: Establishing Mandate**

Through an analysis of the Nepali student organizations' electoral processes, I have revealed pervasive conceptions of democracy in Nepali political culture. As I have shown, choosing leadership is an anxiety-ridden process for all student organizations; they are caught in an echo chamber wherein they cite each other's blunders and failures as justification for their particular political moves. It is a challenge for the student organizations and their mother parties to portray active competition within their organizations while ensuring that the process does not disintegrate into factionalism. The stakes of gaining or the risks of losing political influence in any sector are too high. The reality is that democratic competition inevitably results in factionalism.<sup>292</sup> It is for this reason that the tradition of appointment has been

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<sup>292</sup> Punnett has argued that "other than when a natural vacancy occurs, leadership contests should be avoided because they can threaten party unity, provide comfort to the enemy, and distract the party from its tasks in government and opposition" (1992: 173). Davies et al. have

maintained for so long; dictatorial decisions handed down often secure the integrity of a group that is willing to abide the leadership. This consistency in leadership also shapes and maintains the identity of the group (Auyero 2001). The liberal democratic process, on the other hand, is about everyone's voice mattering; power is supposed to be shared by all, but in practice it often results in grabbing by a few and the continual process of convincing others to follow (Zakari 1997).



Figure 26: Newly elected campus leaders hoisted during an ANNFSU (*Akhil*) victory rally, Kathmandu 2004

After observing six national conventions and numerous campus and district conventions of the student organizations from 2006 through 2007, I constructed a series of questions for the students about the conventions, then

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referred to this challenge as a “we rather than me in decision-making issue of ancient-modern controversy over whether a public-centered perspective can itself be meaningfully separate from a private interest” (2005: 607).

followed with questions about the Free Student Union elections (FSU) (campus-wide elections in which the different student organizations compete with each other for seats), and about student organization alliances in order to understand how the students make meaning of the inter- and intra-organizational democratic process. A Maoist student leader reacted to my questions by saying,

Holding the conferences and choosing the leadership of the unit committee or the central committee are different processes than Free Student Union (FSU) elections ... Our internal election procedure follows a different pattern. The election within our organization is the competition of those having the same ideology, a common program, and they share norms and values. This is the competition of a bicycle with a bicycle, a motorbike with a motorbike, or car with a car. It is an organizational process to determine which bike will get us there in the best way. But the FSU elections are about how do you prefer to travel, bike, motorbike, or car? One should choose according to ideological preference. For this reason, we think that the two cannot be placed together and one cannot draw a conclusion on the basis of this comparison.<sup>293</sup>

Indeed, how democracy occurs internally is construed very differently than what people expect of the larger democratic political system. Yet the discrepancies between the two levels elucidate people's attitudes and ambivalent feelings about democratic practice as a societal form. This same student leader used this logic to argue in favor of a proportional system as opposed to the traditional first-past-the-post system in the FSU elections. This was an issue that the Maoists fought for during the People's War and pushed in the constituency assembly election process. Their argument was that it

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<sup>293</sup> Translation of an interview with an ANNISU (R) central committee member on 11.12.06.

should be a competition of ideologies, not personalities (or, as it is known in liberal democracy, individuals). Furthermore, the proportional system encourages all to work with one another rather than have individuals squabble over perceived mandates they received for their various positions. He argued that a proportional system “will represent all...The representation of all the student organizations means collective work; they would work together; the programs would be launched after the discussion held in the presence of all.”<sup>294</sup> His reasoning reveals that the Maoists perceive their participation in the constituent assembly as revolutionary. Yet, as I established in the first section, the constituent assembly is a post-democratic process, which is based on the assumption that they are restructuring the Nepali state equally for all citizens. What the Maoists don’t realize is that both the proportional and the first-past-the-post system rely on the same premise. Everyone is counted in equal fashion, and through that process, the individual voices are collapsed into the only decipherable form: a vote. Similar to putting all inequalities into the context of class struggle, the voting system removes the difference of people’s experience.

The Maoists chose to embrace the democratic process in the constituent assembly elections in order to restructure the constitution, the state and the army. Many doubted their sincerity, and everyone underestimated their ability to contest successfully. The results were surprising; not even the Maoists predicted them. They gained over forty percent of the first-past-the-post seats and thirty percent of the proportional positions. One activist told me that the Maoists won because they used “*sam, dam, dhanda, bheda*.”<sup>295</sup> I

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<sup>294</sup> Translation of an interview with an ANNISU (R) central committee member on 11.12.06.

<sup>295</sup> “*Sam* (persuasion), *dam* (economic incentive), *danda* (coercion), *bhed* (divisiveness)’ is a political proverb that is equivalent to “by hook or crook,” meaning to exhaust all measures for a favorable outcome. It has a negative connotation.

retorted, "As far as I observed, all the parties attempted '*sam, dam, dhanda, bhed*' in order to win; therefore, the Maoists' victory must be legitimate." Another student responded, "*Sam, dam, dhanda, bhed* is the operative style of Nepali elections. So I guess you are right, they played by the tradition that everyone follows." He paused, cracked a smile, and continued, "They just did it better."<sup>296</sup> It is understandable why people take pause at the prospect of direct, internal elections when a proverb such as this describes the operative style of politics. Nonetheless, there is a desire to achieve democratic process, which has been proven by the rhetorical resonance of the promise made by the parties to establish a "pure democracy for new Nepal" after they regained power in 2006.

The Maoist government has attempted to run their government in the consensus style that was used by the interim government. As my data has shown, this is the style that most Nepali political organizations are most comfortable with, at least internally. To attain consensus across ideological differences is much more complicated because it involves surplus identities.<sup>297</sup> Yet, within the context of Nepal, it provides a safety measure that direct democracy has thus far not provided. "Democratic spontaneity encodes a measure of uncertainty and indeterminacy into the operative style of the politics" (Connolly 2001: 15). The consensual process, conversely, rules out that degree of uncertainty. Most Nepalese would agree that there has been far too much uncertainty since the establishment of democracy. Therefore, if this

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<sup>296</sup> Conversation I had with students of various student organizations about the election results at a farewell tea party I hosted on 4.15.08.

<sup>297</sup> Ranci re posits that the potential for disagreement lies in the fact that consensus is never a seeing of eye to eye. The surplus identities inevitably result in the following, "We should take it to mean a determined kind of speech situation: one in which one of the interlocutors at once understand and does not understand what the other is saying. (it is the conflict of one who says white and another who says white but does not understand the same thing in the name of whiteness.)" (1999: X).

government can make progress, then hypothetical consent of those who are not present has been legitimized through the Constituent Assembly elections.

For this reason, there is some sense to the political actors (including UNMIN) reliance upon consensus. The fact that the Constituent Assembly was established on a democratic electoral basis,<sup>298</sup> which is deeply ingrained into the political imaginary of Nepali history, will allow Nepal's restructured state to unfold in the way that has been historically comfortable for all Nepal's leaders. In Nepal's case, parliamentary politics that attempts to restructure the state through consensus-building, looks very attractive after the contentious politics of civil war and street protests over the last ten years (Burnell 2006: 559). Yet during the consensual process of state restructuring people will come face-to-face with the following truth again:

Equality turns into the opposite the moment it aspires to a place in the social or state organization. Intellectual emancipation accordingly cannot be institutionalized without becoming instruction of the people, in other words, a way of organizing the eternal minority. The two processes must remain absolutely alien to each other, constituting two radically different communities even if composed of the same individuals, the community of equal minds and that of social bodies lumped together by the fiction of inequality. (Rancière 1999: 32)

Chantal Mouffe articulates the same critique of consensus in liberal democracy, arguing that it crystallizes power relations; it is an artifact that is produced by and produces hegemony (2000: 49). When Nepali citizens realize this, then the political pendulum will swing back into that action of *āndolan*,

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<sup>298</sup> Although there is popular sentiment that the current constituent assembly no longer represents the electoral mandate because the Maoist prime minister resigned and Madhav Kumar Nepal of the CPN (UML) was appointed the interim prime minister in the fall of 2009.

and people will again question the policing logic and distribution of the sensible that is attempting to restructure the Nepali state. For this has been the cycle of politics in Nepal.

## EPILOGUE

When I returned to Nepal in the fall of 2009, many people asked me if I had finished my dissertation. This was a sensible question; I had been gone for a year. When I explained that I was finishing up, most people's next inquiry echoed Prabat's, who at the CPN-UML's Dasain tea party asked me, "So, what is your conclusion? What is the solution for Nepali politics?" Currently many people are struggling to find political solutions in Nepal. The constituent assembly has had to extend the deadline for drafting the constitution and it is common knowledge that the parties have yet to agree on the most basic premises. The Maoist prime minister has resigned, and there has been palpable fear that the constituent assembly government will fall apart. My research spanned the transformation of the Nepali state. My dissertation writing process has run parallel to the ongoing constituent assembly. It makes sense that my analysis might offer a solution that people are so desperately seeking.

Yet that has not been the intention of this dissertation. I replied to Prabat, "I don't have a conclusion. Can there be a conclusion to Nepali politics? Anyway it was never my intention to offer solutions. You are always railing against foreign intervention. No, all I have to offer are some theories and my view of Nepali political culture." He looked at me and repeated, "Theories...I see. So what is your theory on why politics never moves ahead?" I replied, "Well, what I can tell you is that game theory does not exist in Nepal." I then asked him if he knew what game theory was and he admitted he did not. I explained it to him, and then extrapolated with the following metaphor, "Take Kathmandu traffic as an example. Deadlock is so common and people only focus on how to move their own vehicle forward. People

don't consider that giving way to someone else may get traffic flowing and in turn they can proceed." He nodded knowingly. His explanation for this was one that I often heard. He explained that no one in Nepali politics is far-sighted (*dūradarshitā*) or transparent (*pāradarshitā*). Therefore nobody knows how to give way in a form that will ensure one's own benefit in the long run, let alone the country's benefit. He continued asserting that everyone yearns for consensus but no one knows how to compromise. He stopped to think and he said, "You notice that nobody makes eye contact while driving? If you did then it would be rude not to give way. In politics, nobody thinks beyond what benefits their party; if they considered others then it would be unethical not to strive for the benefit of all." He paused and his eyebrows rose as if he was making a connection. "Perhaps that is why they are not far-sighted." Then he sighed and said, "*Ke garne?* [What to do?]"<sup>299</sup>

The basic assumption of game theory is that there is a certain system, rules and institutions, on which one can rely and strategically compromise or give way in a manner that moves the process ahead while ensuring one's own progression. Prabat's final lament, "*Ke garne,*" reveals why game theory is not prevalent in Nepali politics. This phrase is ubiquitous in Nepali culture. It is an expression of resignation, recognizing what is outside one's control. I myself am surprised to find how much I use this phrase in Nepal. I rarely express such a sentiment in my life in America, where I have the common entitled expectation that I am mainly in control; for the most part I can make things happen. For many reasons there is a lot less certainty in Nepal. This dissertation highlights the basis for the uncertainties that exist in Nepali

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<sup>299</sup> Based on an interaction with an ANNFSU (*Akhil*) student on 9.27.09 during the CPN-UML Dasain tea party.

politics. I demonstrate that uncertainty is not a hopeless endeavor but rather a fact of political life. Nepali student activists have found belonging in the political uncertainty that they experience and have established political modes of being like speculation and frame their lives in the metaphor of service and sacrifice, as I framed it in chapter two. This analysis highlights that politics for the students is not a rational process of liberal democracy but rather one of sociality, which provides them a sense of meaning.

I earnestly meant what I said to Prabat regarding a conclusion. I can't imagine there being a conclusion in or about Nepali politics because it is an ongoing, ever-emerging process. Throughout this dissertation I have sought to demonstrate how Nepali political actors postpone their endpoint. They suspend conclusion because they do not want to foreclose the possibility that their political life entails, a life on which their identity and networks are based. Their abeyance creates feedback loops, which entrench practices that have created a culture, as I demonstrate in chapter six. As new generations enter into this culture they are compelled to underscore their own possibility, which is defined by their future orientation as tomorrow's power brokers, as the analysis in chapter four indicates. I have attempted to craft an open-ended analysis that captures the Nepali political process and its historical underpinnings as one of ongoing contestation of what is and ought to be and how it informs the lives of Nepali citizens, particularly in chapter three. My analysis has been an endeavor to capture the aesthetic form that political culture takes in order to ascertain the parameters of Nepali political imaginary without foreclosing its own possibility.

Rather, I have provided a culturally focused study of Nepali politics, which I feel is particularly relevant in the current context while Nepal remains

on the radar of international monitoring groups. Nepal has had a history of aid dependency since the 1960s. But since 2006 it has relied on international bodies—such as the United Nations Mission in Nepal, The National Democratic Institute, and The Carter Institute—to prevent it from becoming a failed state. In a sense the “world police” have been actively present in Nepal. It is important that international bodies maintain a nuanced understanding of Nepali politics as they continue to negotiate and support particular policies and political processes in Nepal—particularly the Nepali political predilection for “consensus” and its cultural underpinnings (chapter seven). In this regard I agree with Rancière’s conclusion of *Disagreement* when he posits,

There is a world of police and it can sometimes achieve some good. But there is no world politics. The “world” can get bigger. The universal of politics does not get any bigger. There remains the universality of the singular construction of disputes, which has not more to hope for from the newfound essence of a globalization more essentially “worldwide” than simple identification of the universal with the rule of law. We will not claim, as the “restorers” do, that politics has simply to find its own principle again to get back its vitality. Politics, in its specificity, is rare. It is always local and occasional. (ibid: 139)

Anthropology is a discipline that relies upon context, of which the local and occasional are major aspects. From this perspective my study informs how “global categories” actually play out in Nepal, the way they are perceived and the way they are used to support or undermine authoritative norms.

Anthropology’s origin was framed by the scientific claims Malinowski used to define the discipline. Through our trusted methodological form of ethnography we have aspired to capture “the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world” (Malinowski 1984 [1922]: 25).

Yet as Gregory Bateson (1958 [1936]) has demonstrated, culture cannot be contained by empirical facts; what can be measured, monitored, described, or classified does not tell the whole story, as we understand it. For anthropology, culture is the extent of the story, but it also expands beyond what we can apprehend or represent. For this reason, ethnography is an ever-developing form that is grounded in objective observation but tries to also surpass empirical boundaries in order to provide a more nuanced picture of our analytic.

This aspect of ethnography is similar to politics: both are simultaneously framed by and obviate the real in order to capture the relevant. The difference between ethnography and politics is that ethnography tries to avoid reifying its analytic in order to avoid limiting its possibility, whereas politics continually reifies its focus in order to exploit its possibility—recall the difference in the way politics and anthropology deploy the category of youth (chapter four). Furthermore, as I demonstrated through my analysis of politics as a mode of being (chapter two) and the aesthetics of organization (chapter six), anthropology is meant to extend our knowledge and politics is meant to frame it. In anthropology it is through culture that we see epistemic possibilities, and it is epistemic development that allows us to apprehend culture in new forms. This is what Hiro Miyazaki has defined as the analytic of hope (2004). In politics, hope is both a non-conclusive orientation and a tool that envisions the possible horizon, for it is the “category of the possible” (Rancière1999: 129). In this dissertation I maintain the tension between possibility and undecidability in order to demonstrate the diverse ways that my interlocutors envision playing the democratic game.

Yet I do not think the abeyance of finality is anything novel to Nepali politics (nor is it specific to anthropology). Nepali politics demonstrates the implicit paradox of democratic politics.<sup>300</sup> Politics is the social aspiration for the whole to encompass all of its parts, to create the *demos* in which all voices are heard. But if citizens want to avoid their individual particularities being erased into an abstract singular of citizen, then politics can only be a contentious pursuit involving the politics of recognition (Rancière 1999: 14). Indeed, as I demonstrated in chapter five, “Politics is the art of warped deductions and mixed identities” (ibid: 139). It is the venue in which people and groups stake their claim, which is continually taking new form in Nepal. There is potential for change, because as I argued in chapter seven, democracy’s logic embodies the symbolic resources for new political processes. Yet as this study demonstrates, the political processes have unfolded in an entrenched cultural and socio-historical context, which has limited innovation in favor of tradition and the maintenance of group identity. This in turn has encouraged ongoing political contestation in the form of *āndolan*, as the means to apprehend new forms sociality and the political. I view Nepali politics as the perpetual process of incorporating new symbolic resources into the political conversation as an attempt to effectuate change. My study focuses on this process as a generational process.

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<sup>300</sup> Chantal Mouffe argues that the democratic paradox exists because politics is a socially contingent process of differing between “us” and “them.” This is revealed in the incompatibility between the liberal and democratic traditions. Liberalism is based on the rule of law that defends human rights and individual liberty. Democracy is about equality and the process of governing according to popular sovereignty. She argues it has been dangerous for proponents of liberal democracy to gloss over the tensions of these two traditions, and cast liberal democracy as a rational solution for societal harmony. Nonetheless, she does not go as far as Carl Schmitt who argues that liberal democracy is impossible (1996 [1976]). Rather, she feels that a liberal democratic system is possible if we acknowledge the inherent tensions between the two logics and embrace them as agonistic pluralism, in which all the members of the *demos* are equally respected as sharing the same symbolic space. (2000: 4-10)

A good example of the students' potential for inclusive democracy is the line from a NSU (K) student leader's speech during the constituent assembly campaign that I analyzed in chapter six: "I do not agree with Prachanda's politics, but I will fight to the death for his right to do politics that I don't agree with."<sup>301</sup> Even though the Nepali Congress is wary of the Maoists' political agenda and institutional culture, they view the Maoists as worthy contenders in the political field. This has been the case since the seven-party unity and the Maoists forged the 2006 joint-agreement, in which the Maoists agreed to come into the political mainstream and support constituent assembly elections. At that time the relationship between the Maoists and the mainstream parties shifted from enemies to adversaries. Chantal Mouffe argues that an adversary is different from an enemy, because it is someone not to be destroyed, but rather "somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question" (2000: 102). As this student's quote indicates, the Maoists are legitimate enemies, with whom they can at least agree on the structure of the political and how it is to be contended.<sup>302</sup>

This recognition of other parties as necessary competitors in the political arena shows that the potential for democracy is strong in Nepal. But as my analysis indicates, political actors need to embrace the antagonism

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<sup>301</sup> Translated excerpt from constituent assembly speech given by an ex-NSU (K) student leader and current constituent assembly member, 2.23.08. For more analysis of this quote see chapter six, section: [Differentiating: The Parameters of Political Culture](#).

<sup>302</sup> When one considers the history of political coalitions and inter-party splits and merger in Nepali political history, it becomes apparent that the shift between enemy and adversary is a fluctuating one. For instance, the Maoists were the enemies of the state during the People's War from 1996 and 2006. It only became a viable adversary after the joint agreement with the political parties in 2006. The relationship with the monarchy has also shifted from enemy to adversary and back again. By 2006 the monarchy had become the official enemy of the democratic parties when it was apparent that there was no room to safeguard the political party system and have an active monarchy.

inherent in democratic politics rather than pushing for consensus in order to ensure “safe landing,” which only produces negative feedback loops that alienate political actors (chapter seven). In other words, it needs to be recognized that the constitutive dimensions of democracy cannot be overcome but rather need to be negotiated in new ways (Mouffe 2000: 5). One way this can be done is by focusing on commonality instead of homogeneity. The tradition of the “common minimum program” amongst political coalitions contains this potential (chapter seven). Moreover, denying antagonism creates enemies, which leads away from the possibility of democratic interaction (ibid: 12).

In closing, Nepali political culture is encompassing; it impacts most sectors of Nepali life in varying form. This study is a provisional focus on one of the sister organizations to the mainstream parties. Nonetheless, it covers a large span. Throughout my fieldwork I struggled with how to balance and represent larger Nepali political culture based on my own ethnographic work in a way that captures the spirit of Claude Levi-Strauss’s distinction for anthropology as a social science discipline. He argued that the anthropological task is not to reduce complexity but to make it more comprehensible. This dissertation has tried to keep the complexity of Nepali student politics at the forefront of its interpretive endeavors; my ambition has been to make that complexity comprehensible in order to contribute a nuanced view of Nepali political culture.

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