Negotiating modernity: Narratives of change and development among village women in Nepal

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MA Thesis in South Asian Studies
Fall 2008

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Table of Contents:

Summary:

In this paper I explore the ways in which women in a village called Badhiyagaun in the hills of Western Nepal speak about the experience of being a woman, mediated by metanarratives of nation, development and modernity. Development, or *bikas* in Nepali, is constitutive of the imagining of the Nepali nation state. In addition, the particularities of economic and social transformations in Nepal, and Badhiyagaun in particular, form part of new possibilities and constraints. I attend to how informants talk about who they are, who they are not, and what they may become in a context in which development as metonymic for modernity is hegemonic in Nepal. This is part of the at times intersecting and contradictory experiences of being a woman in Badhiyagaun (as wives, mothers and daughter-in-laws), being the 'beneficiaries' or 'stakeholders' of international development, being local NGO workers or members of a mother's group or women's saving cooperative.

In the paper I first present how the idea of development is constitutive of the construction and consolidation of the modern Nepali nation. I then describe how the notion of underdevelopment forms part of dynamics of social difference within national society. This is intimately linked to the construction of the underdeveloped rural woman as a 'problem' of development in Nepal. I consequently attempt to illustrate how this has come to bear on women in Badhiyagaun. In so doing I provide a description of 'participatory' development initiatives in Badhiyagaun targeted at women. Specifically I will trace the emergence, history and dynamics of membership in the village mother's group and a local microcredit cooperative run by women. I illustrate a reframing of local narratives of gender and gender relations in part informed but not wholly contingent on these initiatives. In particular I show how women position themselves in relation to the image of the underdeveloped rural woman. In the last instance I attend to how some women construct an image of themselves as part of a "new generation" in which we can discern a claim to modernity that is predicated on the reification of social difference.

Acknowledgements:

Introduction

This paper is concerned with exploring the shape of modern life in a village called Badhiyagaun in the hills of western Nepal.[1] The purpose of the paper is to illustrate the modern condition among women of this village in a context in which development as the idiom for modernity is a pervasive national concern. I describe a condition in which these women are, by virtue of their structural location, presented as 'problems' of development. The paper illustrates that attempts to position oneself within the emerging developing nation are mediated by complex structures of social difference. I contend that the idea of development as the vehicle toward an emerging modernity is hegemonic in Nepal. However, I acknowledge that lived hegemony is a process that is never singular, "it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own" (Williams: 1977, 112). My argument is that due to the particular locations they inhabit, of being rural women in 'need to be developed', the women of my study occupy uncertain social positions as they try to negotiate identity in a society in which relations of power are intimately linked with claims to modernity. Women who consciously negotiate, and at times resist the identity of the underdeveloped woman, are not contesting the hierarchy of the national social order but rather the ways in which they have been positioned within it. This contestation does not necessarily mean a breaking down of or a de-essentialising of social identities, but rather a "scripting of mobility, both social and economic, within the existing structures of identity" (Schein, 1999, 286). Rather than assessing the effects of the development apparatus in Nepal as singularly empowering or disempowering for women I will discuss, with particular reference to women in Badhiyagaun, how negotiations of identity are intimately linked with the development/modernity nexus.

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[1] All names in this paper have been changed. This is also the case for place names and names of organisations (except Kathmandu of course).

Development as the condition for modernity

Conceptualising modernity has been a perennial issue in attempts to understand contemporary societies. Post-structuralist and postcolonial currents in the social sciences and humanities have sought to displace the teleological grand narrative of modernity. The question has been how to understand places and people that fall outside the locus of modernity as theorised by Western humanism. How can one theorise the lives of those people who seem *not* to exemplify the paradigm of the modern (Schein: 1999)? Decolonisation in many parts of the world following WWII, and the emergence of new relations of power between poor and rich countries, cast the imagining of modernity into yet another mould expressed through the idiom of development/underdevelopment (Escobar: 1988). The consolidation of the nation-state in postcolonial societies can be understood as happening through the imagining of modernity through development.[2] Simultaneously, the complex relations of discursive and material elements that form part of the international development apparatus (national governments, multilateral institutions, major donors, NGOs) are constitutive of the imagining of development as an emerging modernity. Critical engagement with the development apparatus as a manifestation of global power relations presents this configuration as a case of the European experience of modernity seeking to become universal (Escobar: 1988). With poverty as its entry point, the development apparatus is according to some critics an exercise of bureaucratic power further consolidated through the particular discourse of development (Ferguson: 2003). Moreover, it is argued that the voices of the very targets of the development apparatus, such as rural poor women, are silenced through the production of technical knowledge that seeks to bring them under the global modernising project (Escobar: 1995, chapter 5).[3] These concerns form part of a body of academic writing termed post-development, in which a disavowal of the universal agenda of development constitutes the common denominator (see Pieterse: 1998 for an overview). Post-development thought relies on the invocation of colonial metaphors while it simultaneously valorises so-called local and indigenous resistance

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[2] Even though Nepal was never colonised its relative position within the global configuration of structural power relations allows for this conceptual conflation.

[3] Escobar does acknowledge that the production of development discourses are not always a one sided process, but relates this insight solely to the emergence of peasant, environmentalist and feminist indigenous *resistances* to development.

and difference (Brigg: 2002). Despite the value of a number of the insights that call into question the metanarrative of development I am wary of this valorisation.

The premise for doing research among women in Badhiyagaun was that by listening to their voices I could contribute to a more critical understanding of how the global project of development manifests itself at the 'local' level, and perhaps insert these voices into a critique of this very project. The writing of the paper has been a process in which I have gradually come to question this premise. I have come to acknowledge that using the voices of, in this case, a group of village women in Nepal to 'say' something about development is a contentious endeavour. If I were to pursue this course of action the value of the life stories of these so-called Third World women would be assessed in "what they can tell us about this amorphous entity called 'development'", rather than what they actually mean to the women themselves (Lazreg: 2002, 129). While analysing the interviews with women in Badhiyagaun I realised the following: That even though the narratives of these women could reveal something about the pervasiveness of the discursive formation of international development in Nepal - the intersections of a particular national project and development as modernity with the reification and/or alteration of social relations - they were more than anything the personal narratives of women who were positioned and sought to position themselves in modern society. This had in each case something to do with the at times intersecting and contradictory experiences of being women in Badhiyagaun (as wives, mothers and daughter-in-laws), being the beneficiaries or stakeholders of international development, being local NGO workers or being members of a mother's group or women's saving cooperative. In this context, claiming the erasure of these women's 'voices' by the development apparatus is a moot point.

The paper is a result of research primarily on the membership of women in Badhiyagaun in the village mother's group and a microcredit organisation I have called the Laxmidevi Mother's Saving Cooperative (henceforth Laxmidevi Cooperative) located in the nearby town Bepargaun. The research revealed to me, however obvious it might seem, that the women that form part of this study were not inherently critical of development (*bikas* in Nepali). Rather, they were enthusiastic about the material and social benefits that accrue from access to infrastructure,

education, employment, industry, 'modern' consumer goods and other aspects associated with economic and industrial development. They tended to speak in terms of their (shifting and relational) location, either as individuals, women or citizens, on the road towards becoming *bikasi*, or developed. What also became apparent was the value all informants attached to the benefits of microfinance such as small-scale savings and loans. However, the conversations and interviews with informants in Badhiyagaun revealed a lack of fit between the idea propagated by mainstream development agencies that equates access to economic resources with empowerment (the current neo-liberal development credo) and the actual reasons why access to savings schemes and loans was considered valuable.

In relation to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, of how to adequately understand the modern condition among those who putatively fall outside of it, Akhil Gupta (1998) has introduced the concept of the "postcolonial condition". What is conceptualised here is the experience of modernity as constituting the interconnections between diverging discourses and structural forces in what has been termed the Third World. This amounts to a condition of cultural hybridity devoid of the dichotomous distinction between the local and global, external and internal, or the modern and traditional/indigenous. In this conceptualisation "contradictory logics and incommensurable discourses are intermingled" (Gupta 1998, 5). In terms of discourses of development there is recognition of how they ultimately are "*constitutive* of "local" lives and "local" systems of meaning" (Ibid., 6, italics original). What is important for our analysis here is that whatever we may identify as hegemonic discursive or structural formations they are never monolithic or superimposing. Such an understanding allows for attentiveness to the global manifestations of the international development apparatus, while at the same time being sensitive to the complexities to which notions of development and underdevelopment are constructed at multiple locations.

Theoretical framework

Conceptualising social change as structures of feeling

How can we adequately speak of social change in Badhiyagaun? How can we capture modernity as it is lived? In this paper I explore social change through Raymond Williams' (1977) concept of structures of feeling. The advantage of this approach is the understanding that culture and society are not fixed forms but formative processes actively lived by individuals. This allows for attentiveness to social change as it is felt and acted out. In other words, the notion of structures of feeling constitutes an exploration of the *experience or being of the present* (Williams: 1977, 128). In this way we can attend to the general culture of a period, such as the particular modernising project of the Nepali nation, and the subjective, but not necessarily fixed or explicit, social experience of modernity in Badhiyagaun (see Schein: 1999, 363). Methodologically speaking, employing the concept of structures of feeling is an attempt to move away from the fixed forms of social analysis to an understanding of the complexities of social processes that are always relational. For example the women that form part of this study cannot be understood as expressing a single subjective location. Clearly the experiences of being a woman in Badhiyagaun were expressed relationally and did nor exist outside the "material and symbolic intersections with other forms of difference" (Moore: 1994, 26-27). The idea of social experience as process allows for an understanding of change *and* the durability of symbolic and material social structures. The acknowledgement of this process as relational attends to the emerging and never fixed experience of the social. This is useful in the study of particular groups that seem to be contained within a fixed category, such as poor rural women in Nepal.

Being sensitive of the affective modalities of social experience can enable attentiveness to the ambiguities of identification and the anxieties inherent in the process of social recognition. As Lois McNay points out, an analysis of emotions as constitutive of social relations allows for an understanding of everyday dynamics of power.

If certain types of social experience possess an unfinished or open-ended quality, it is because they may be historically emergent (or residual) or pertain to the experiences of socially 'muted' groups. Although these experiences may be marginal, they are not ineffable but are explicable through the analysis of contextual power relations. (…) it is possible to acknowledge the often uncertain and confused present of lived experience without relinquishing the possibility of tracing its connections to social structures (McNay: 2004, 187).

In relation to women in Badhiyagaun I have chosen to present particular narratives that tell us something about the emergent and the residual, specifically how women speak of gender relations and the experience of being a woman. This is of course tied up with new and emerging notions of agency. Young women in Badhiyagaun seemed to express new ways of understanding female agency that were at times ambiguous and contradictory, containing anxieties about appropriate behaviour, speech and dress. In short, these new ideas of agency brought about their own sets of "palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action" (Williams: 177, 132).

Understanding the social through narrative

In this paper I use narrative as a methodological tool to explore ideas of social change and of social differentiation. In particular due to the time constraints of fieldwork (described in the next chapter) my emphasis on narrative provided a window to understand change through the stories people told, and the idiosyncrasies contained within these stories. I draw on the notion of ontological narrativity, understood as "stories that social actors use to make sense of - indeed, to act in – their lives. Ontological narratives are used to define who *we* are; this in turn can be a precondition for knowing what to *do*" (Somers: 1994, 618, italics original). In this way events are processed into narratives in order to make sense of social being in the world. More importantly, narrativity attends to the temporal and relational aspect of social life, as ontological narratives emerge constitutive of social and structural relations (Ibid., 618). A theory of narrative then enables attentiveness to the durability of particular forms of identity through specific social relations. In this way we can get "a sense of how the historical continuity, or inertia, of cultural life extends from the past into the present, and even projects itself onto the future" (Liechty: 2003, 23). In this paper I take the cue from Mark Liechty's consideration of particular metanarratives that naturalise privileged social practices. Among women in

Badhiyagaun, as with the middle class in Kathmandu that Liechty describes in his study, ontological narratives are mediated by metanarratives of nation, development and progress. In addition, forceful local narratives of place, kin and gender constitute the ways in which young women in Badhiyagaun construct and mediate emerging notions of female agency. In other words, these women have to negotiate a number of competing narratives to make sense of who they are, who they are not, and what they may become.

Agency

Throughout I will be referring to the narratives of change different women in Badhiyagaun told, and what this can tell us about emerging ideas about female agency. It is therefore pertinent that I provide an explanation about what is meant by agency here. Agency pertains to how individuals or groups act in the world. However, as with any social science concept, the concept of agency is culturally constructed. The idea of individual agency, particularly as it is related to resistance, emerged within the particular historical circumstances and development of Western humanist thought (Ahearn: 2004, 54). However, within any cultural context there will be conceptualisations about the acting subject:

Agency is not an entity that exists apart from cultural construction (nor is it a quality one has only when one his whole, or when one is an individual). Every culture, every subculture, every historical moment, constructs its own forms of agency, its own modes of enacting the process of reflecting on the self and the world and of acting simultaneously within and upon what one finds there (Ortner: 1995, 186).

The construction of the notion of agency occurs within lived social circumstances, in the context of specific power relations in a given society. These power relations intersect with constructions of social difference based on gender, sexuality, caste and class. When I speak of understandings of agency among women in Badhiyagaun I am not interested in making an assessment of whether these women possess agency or not. Rather I wish to illuminate emerging ideas about agency among these women. Here I take inspiration from Laura Ahearn's ethnographic study of social change in a

Nepali village. By exploring emergent ideas about agency we can get a better understanding of:

(…) how villagers' ideas about their own and others' agency are changing – how they attribute responsibility for events, what they identify as the constraints on and possibilities for action, and how they view themselves as individuals and members of various social groupings (Ahearn: 2004, 247).

I do not suggest that the women that form part of this study espoused a unified or explicit understanding of agency. As will become apparent every story contains its own set of contradictions and ambivalence. However, I do claim that what I identify as new or emerging ideas about female agency can tell us something about emergent structures of feeling in Badhiyagaun.

Structure of the paper

This paper consists of five chapters. In the first chapter I begin with locating Badhiyagaun as the site of my study. I will introduce the village within the context of political, economic and social change in Nepal. In addition I present a description of the methods used for field research and their limitations. In the second chapter I explore in more detail the particularities of development discourse and practice in Nepal. I will describe how the notion of underdevelopment forms part of dynamics of social difference within national society. This is intimately linked to the construction of the underdeveloped rural woman as a 'problem' of development in Nepal. I consequently illustrate how this has come to bear on women in Badhiyagaun. In chapter three I provide a description of participatory development initiatives in Badhiyagaun targeted at women. I describe the emergence of the mother's group in Badhiyagaun, in addition to the membership of some women in the Laxmidevi Cooperative. I show how the discursive framework of development in Nepal produces a conceptual connection between economic resources, in the form of savings and credit, with notions of social progress through the participation and empowerment of rural women in community development initiatives. In addition I contend that the priorities of women in relation to microcredit were primarily determined by the material constrains of the household as a whole. However, I will explore how the women that form part of this study expressed notions of female agency and

empowerment. In chapter four I illustrate a reframing of local narratives of gender and gender relations in part informed but not wholly contingent on development discourse. In chapter five I show how some women position themselves in relation to the image of the underdeveloped rural woman through the notion of belonging to a new generation. This takes shape through particular ways of speaking, acting and dressing. I argue that it is through the telling of particular narratives of change that these women make a claim to modernity that is predicated on the reification of social difference.

Chapter One: Arriving in Badhiyagaun

Background

I first came to Badhiyagaun with my friend Parvati, whom I had come to know through an internship I had done for an international NGO (henceforth referred to as the INGO) based in Kathmandu. Parvati worked for this INGO's local partner organisation, which I have chosen to call Samudayik Sanstha. Samudayik Sanstha is based in Bepargaun, a small town twenty minutes walk on the motorable dirt road from Badhiyagaun. The village lies within a political division called a ward, denoting a cluster of villages. Nine wards make a Village District Committee (VDC), the lowest administrative unit of a district. The VDC headquarters are located in Bepargaun, while the district headquarters lie in a larger town about an hour bus drive away.

Historically Bepargaun was a small Magar village until it became a prosperous trading centre along the India-Tibet trade route.[4] Newar traders from the Kathmandu Valley settled in Bepargaun and the village developed into a small town with characteristic Newar architecture.[5] The importance of the town for trade diminished over the years and Bepargaun gradually lost its prominence as an administrative centre of the district. Still Bepargaun is a beautiful town as much of the original architecture of its heyday have been left intact. In addition, a spectacular view of the Himalayas reveals itself from a ridge at the north-eastern edge of the town. Orange groves surround the town and nearby villages. Due to its location and beauty Bepargaun has increasingly become a popular destination for tourists. So far there have been concerted efforts at local level to maintain the distinct traditional architecture of the town, so as not to overrun it with some of the negative trappings of tourism. But changes are occurring rapidly. During my stay in Nepal at least three or four new hotels and restaurants were opened. Clearly the peace deal ending a more

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[4] The Magar are a Sino-Tibetan ethnic group inhabiting mainly the western and mid-western regions of Nepal. Their language is Tibeto-Burman, and they are on the most part Buddhist. The Magar comprise the largest indigenous ethnic group in Nepal.

[5] The Newar are the indigenous inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley. They speak a Tibeto-Burman language, Newari, heavily influenced by Sanskrit. The Newar have been distinguished from other Tibeto-Burman language speaking groups because of their, on the most part, urban culture and intricate caste system within a religious tradition based on both the Hinduism and Buddhism.

than decade long armed conflict between Maoists and the Nepali government, and the hope for political stability in the country, triggered a boom of entrepreneurship in Bepargaun.[6] During the school year the town is crowded with children and youths studying at the government high school or the more prestigious English private school. Many of the old Newar buildings now serve as hostels for students from surrounding villages and towns.

Through work I had frequently visited Bepargaun and together with Parvati I had travelled to villages and towns all over the district. We had become good friends during this time and it was with excitement and a sense of familiarity that I decided to do research in Parvati's home village, Badhiyagaun. Parvati is in her mid-twenties and was born and grew up in Badhiyagaun. While still in school a young man of the village fell in love with her, but it was not until she had passed the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exams that Parvati agreed to marry him.[7] During her school years she had been an active member of a youth club supported by Samudayik Sanstha and a year after the wedding Parvati was offered a job in the organisation. After the birth of their daughter Eena, Parvati's husband left his job as a schoolteacher at the government primary school in Badhiyagaun to find work in Dubai. Due to the remittances he sends home, and the extra income she brings to the household because of her job, Parvati's family is relatively well off. She and her husband are determined to send their daughter to the English medium school in Bepargaun. Due to Parvati's work and the level of respect she enjoyed I was able to draw on her contacts in Bepargaun and social networks in Badhiyagaun. In addition, her membership in both the village mother's group and the Laxmidevi Cooperative gave me an advantage in accessing members of these groups. However, more than anything else it was Parvati's willingness to go to great lengths in helping me throughout research that ultimately made a difference.

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[6] The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) launched a 'People's War' in 1996 after the Congress led government of the time did not respond to a list of forty demands submitted by a coalition leftist oppositional political parties. These demands included the declaration of Nepal as a secular state and the abolition of the monarchy in addition to a wide range of social and economic reforms. (Hutt: 2004) The conflict ended in a peace deal in 2006 and subsequently the Maoists joined mainstream politics, obtained the majority of seats in parliament after the elections of April 2008 and abolished the monarchy. It is estimated that the more than decade long conflict resulted in more than 12 000 deaths and at least 800 political 'disappearances' ("Nepal appeal on 'missing' people" BBC News 15 February 2007 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6363729.stm).
[7] The School Leaving Certificate (SLC) is received after passing the final tenth grade national exams.

The village

Like many villages in the hills of Nepal, Badhiyagaun is perched on a ridge surrounded by terraced fields. Apart from the orange groves it is mainly maize and millet that is cultivated around the village. In addition, each household usually has its own little vegetable garden of onions, greens and herbs for daily subsistence. Parvati's home is among a cluster of Gurung households that comprise a hamlet of Badhiyagaun a little bit above the main village. For the purpose of clarity I have chosen to call this hamlet Junkot.

The Gurung are a Sino-Tibetan ethnic group primarily inhabiting the central and western regions of Nepal. Along with several other ethnic groups of the region such as the Magar, the Gurung language is quite similar to Tibetan. But there are differences between Gurung communities in dialect and in some places Gurung families don't speak the language at all. In addition, many of the youths I got to know in Badhiyagaun who studied in Bepargaun or larger cities spoke only Nepali. The Gurung are primarily Buddhist but incorporate the Hindu pantheon and celebrate major Hindu festivals such as Dasain and Tihar. During Rana rule (1846 – 1951) the Gurung were brought under dominant Hindu caste-based classification within the national civil code (*Muluki Ain*). The Gurung, along with the Magar and some Newar castes, were classified as non-enslavable alcohol drinkers. The *Muluki Ain* sought to structure Nepali society in conformity with high caste Hindu norms. Various ethnic groups responded and adapted differently to this drive, and the lineage-based Gurung community developed its own hierarchy of a higher status grouping (*char jat*) and lower status grouping (*sohra jat*) (Pradhan: 2002, 10). However, Gurung communities express an ethos of solidarity through the idiom of kin. Solidarity and cooperation are expressed through acts of hospitality, appropriate greetings and gift exchange. (McHugh: 1989, 78).

The houses in Junkot are built in the traditional way with a wooden framework covered with mud and dung and thatched with grass. This part of Badhiyagaun consists of eleven households all related through kin. Further down in the rest of the village several houses have been built of brick with corrugated roofing. In the main

part of Badhiyagaun there are a number of Newar households as well as a few Hindu low caste families such as Damai. There are a few small shops selling basic foodstuffs, snacks and cold drinks. The government primary school is situated on a ridge trailing the dirt road leading to Bepargaun.

Socio-economic setting

During my stay in Badhiyagaun there were no young men living in the hamlet as they had all migrated for work. Even though most families in Badhiyagaun are subsidence farmers, most households live off non-farm income. Among the Gurung non-farm income has traditionally come through recruitment of young men in the national or foreign armies. The British Gurkha regiment has recruited from the central and western hills of Nepal and primarily among ethnic groups such as the Gurung, Magar and Tamang. In recent years there has been a steep increase in labour migration of young men from the area to South East Asia and the Gulf states (Thieme and Wyss: 2005). The first time I came to Badhiyagaun I arrived with Parvati quite late in the evening. After having eaten dinner we sat in the small room in the part of the house that belongs to Parvati and her husband. I was extremely tired and a bit overwhelmed by the thought of the impending research. But I felt that I had to be courteous to the women who were sitting in the room talking in Gurung, about me I presumed, with no intention of leaving. Parvati must have noticed my muffled yawns and told me that it was completely acceptable to go to bed. It turned out that the women's presence in the room had nothing to do with me. The woman I later came to know as Som Maya was expecting a call from her son who had just recently left for Malaysia. Such sessions were quite normal as in Junkot there were only two mobile phones. Parvati's phone rang at all hours and it was usually men scattered around South East Asia or the Gulf that called to speak to their mothers or wives, or simply to ask Parvati to pass on some message or piece of news.

Particularly after the political transformations in Nepal during the 1990s the opportunities to travel abroad in general have expanded.[8] The liberalisation in both information and trade coincided with economic developments in the Gulf countries

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[8] From 1951 to 1990 Nepal was ruled by the autocratic Panchayat regime. In 1990, through the concerted efforts of a popular pro-democracy movement, Nepal became a multiparty democracy.

and South East Asia, creating new possibilities for labour migration to these regions. (Thieme and Wyss: 2005). Sharda, a development worker at Samudayik Sanstha, explained these changes to me:

Sharda: In Nepal work is not available. If one works on the field there is not enough food and there is no money. And it is hard to stay here.
Miriam: But it was also like this before, why is it different now?
Sharda: Before it wasn't possible to go abroad. Now it is possible to go legally. The gulf countries have opened up in the last ten, fifteen years. Before it was only possible to go to India.

Recruiting agencies in Nepal have played an important part in the increase of labour migration. The presence of such agencies, especially in Kathmandu, is ubiquitous. There are signboards in addition to TV and radio ads for agencies all proclaiming to provide the right information, documentation and skills to be able to travel abroad either for studies or work. A friend in Kathmandu attended a course geared at the service industry in Singapore. She paid a considerable amount to the agency for organising travel documents, tickets and work in Singapore. On one of my many journeys to Kathmandu from Badhiyagaun the bus driver suggested that I start working within this sector. According to him there is a considerable amount of money to be earned in teaching language or "European culture" to thousands of hopeful young Nepalis planning to go abroad. According to Thieme and Wyss this sector has been mostly unaffected by the Maoist insurgency in Nepal. It has perhaps even been aided by the conflict as the employment opportunities within Nepal have further diminished due to political unrest (Thieme and Wyss: 2005, 61). Those who can afford the courses and itineraries of the various agencies are of course at the high end of those who migrate.

Most Nepali migrants still travel to India due to the absence of immigration constraints and the relative affordability of going there compared to other locations. But destinations for labour migration are ranked hierarchically, with India being the least attractive. It seems evident, as pointed out by Seddon et al., that migrants tend to choose destinations in which there are already established familial connections as, on surface observation at least, there is a pattern of particular pathways of migration in Badhiyagaun (Seddon et al.: 2002, 29). A cursory household survey of Junkot

17

revealed that from all eleven households save three at least one male had gone abroad for employment. Almost two thirds of those who had migrated had left for Malaysia. Taking into account the whole of Badhiyagaun it became apparent that most young men had migrated mainly to Malaysia or Gulf states such as Dubai.

The education system in Nepal is predominantly geared toward administrative positions in which social networks, rather than merit, determine prospects for employment. Ethnic groups such as the Gurung have historically not been incorporated into positions of power or political influence. Formal education beyond SLC and the social capital needed for employment in high level and influential positions have simply not been available. Migration then is not only about the limited prospects for employment within Nepal; its patterns are also implicated with the complex social and political structure within the country. There was an attempt in the 1970's to restructure the education system to make it more geared toward vocational training, an attempt that failed due to vociferous opposition from students at the time (Whelpton: 2005, 127). Education has and is still indicative of social status.[9] There has been an enormous rise in the number of private educational institutions, particularly in Kathmandu, in the last couple of decades. Investing in the education of one's children is crucial in effecting social mobility. Education has become increasingly important, pace the continued prominence of caste and family connections, in obtaining social capital (Liechty: 2003, 213).

Comparatively speaking Badhiyagaun is quite well off in terms of basic services. Due to the proximity to Bepargaun the inhabitants of Badhiyagaun have relative easy access to medical services and schools. About five years prior to my stay the village had become accessible by road. Now Badhiyagaun is provided with electricity and piped clean water, something that was not the case less than a decade ago. Villagers referred to drinking water and toilets as facilities that for obvious reasons had made life considerably easier. For women in particular access to water meant that a number of household chores such as cooking and washing clothes and dishes could be done without having to walk to the nearest public tap and wait in line. Electricity, despite

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[9] The fact that young men in Badhiyagaun who were on the most part educated up to college were not involved in farm work is an indication of how being educated and doing manual labour is seen as incompatible.

18

regular load shedding, did not only make basic household chores after dark easier, it also introduced new modes of entertainment. In Parvati's house there were regular TV sessions where women and children sat cramped together watching mainly Nepali films or music videos.

The road has had a huge impact on the influx of goods, and accessibility to services that are not available in Badhiyagaun. Access to consumer goods and privatised 'facilities' such as piped water and electricity have had an effect on living standards, which in turn is dependent on an expanded cash economy. Currently, in contrast to a few decades ago, at least one person from each household, usually male, has migrated for work. [10] This means that for the majority of households there is at least someone earning money. It is remittances that that households are dependant on in order to actually obtain a sustainable income. Even for those who formerly had jobs in the locality, such as Parvati's husband who used to be a schoolteacher, it can be more profitable to go abroad or at least to Kathmandu for work. In addition, as I will illustrate in chapter four, women's access to microcredit has to a considerable degree increased the opportunity for families to access economic resources. Sharda, whom I have referred to earlier in this chapter, summed up recent social and economic changes:

Before the children would only study in government schools, and because of that one didn't have to spend much money. But nowadays they say that the government schools are no good right, and that one should send them to private schools. Compared to before one has to spend a lot of money because now electricity has come, the road has come and now one has to buy everything one needs. Everything used to be cheap and everybody used to work on their own field and eat what came from that. Now people only look for something they can buy. Because of these things a little bit of money is needed. That's why one has to go abroad to earn. Before people hadn't studied. And because of that they didn't know anything. They would work and stay and live off their fields. And they were not shy to work. But now some people have studied, until SLC or more. And because of that they feel shy about doing work in the village. Because of that as well they go abroad to find work.

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[10] The expanding economy of remittances through labour migration needs to be incorporated into an understanding of the course of economic development in Nepal and other countries where remittances figure so prominently. According to Arjan DeHaan "development studies often ignore migration as a significant factor in agricultural or rural development" (DeHaan: 1999, 3). In reference to the Nepali context Seddon et al. state that "non-farm income is becoming increasingly critical in determining the overall livelihood status of the household and its members" (Seddon et al.: 2002, 21).

<u>Fieldwork</u>

I spent two and a half months in Badhiyagaun sharing a room with Parvati and her daughter at night and spending most days with her or the other women of the village, or playing with the children. I also spent a considerable time with Maiju, Parvati's close friend and relative.[11] I would often spend my afternoons on her veranda drinking tea and chatting.

Ethical considerations

During my stay in Badhiyagaun I conducted anthropological participant observation, learning from the mundane everydayness of village life and talk. I felt that I got to know some women very well, and I believe that the value of these friendships and the conversations I had with these women enabled me to understand much more about aspects of life in Badhiyagaun than some of the interviews I conducted. It has also made me wonder and despair over how I could possibly 'use' my friends as part of my research. This is not a dilemma that has necessarily been resolved in this paper. I have tried as best as I can to make use of those conversations and observations that in some way are of value to the analysis and general argument of this paper, without compromising the integrity of my informants. Everybody in Badhiyagaun knew that I was doing research, even though I am sure many of them wondered if I was actually doing anything useful at all. But most likely they did not consider that everything they said or did could possibly be incorporated as part of this paper. I hope that have been able to make appropriate judgements in regard to drawing on my observations and conversations so as not to have unjustly portrayed friends and informants in Badhiyagaun.

As an outsider in Badhiyagaun I was by various people ascribed the identities of researcher, foreigner ("American" usually), representative of the development apparatus and a particular kind of "free" Western woman. It was regularly pointed out that I was from a developed, *bikasi*, country and that I was rich. Peoples' conceptions about who I was and what I represented did of course have an effect on the ways in

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[11] Even though I called Maiju by her first name I have chosen to use the kinship term that Parvati used. Maiju means mother's brother's wife.

which they spoke to me, and the issues they chose to emphasise. Even though it is important to keep this in mind I do not believe that it makes the information I obtained less 'real'. In any event, peoples' concerns about *bikas*, and the role they attributed to me as a representative of it, says something about the pervasiveness of development as discourse and practice in Nepal.

I am sure that I myself tended to reinforce specific notions about who I, the researcher, was in order to be liked or gain trust. I had an enormous need to 'fit in' in an environment that for a short period of time became my home. This feeling extends beyond the months I was actually living in Badhiyagaun. I have lived several years in Nepal on and off and the confused feeling of negotiating a sense cultural difference has always been there. Attempts to 'fit in' involved to a large degree bodily practice; what I wore and how I wore it, the way I held my body and the way I spoke. My behaviour and dress would change radically when I visited Kathmandu. However, this did not involve instances of me 'acting' out specific roles. As Katy Gardner has pointed out in relation to ethnographic research, physical experience and sense of self are intimately connected (Gardner: 1999, 58). In trying to locate my own identity and position, I have been confronted with a host of ambiguities. The field experience in particular made this more evident.

The ways in which I dressed or behaved say something about my own assumptions about the patriarchal constraints befalling women in Badhiyagaun. My approach in trying to understand gender relations in Badhiyagaun has shifted over time throughout the process of writing. As a result I have tried to make it clear that there are differences between what I identify as a dominant gender ideology and how women actually live their lives and negotiate this ideology. Constantly I have been critical of the pervasive descriptions in Nepal, through sites such as the media and development NGOs, of rural women as backward, oppressed and ignorant. My aim has been to write a paper in which this is contested by making space for the stories of the women involved. However, this paper is not a product of me having done research with my informants, as perhaps the emphasis on narrative would suggest. I do not speak *for* my informants, but *about* them (Comaroff and Comaroff: 1992, 9). I am aware of my own structural location, and the very real differences between my informants and myself (Enslin: 1994, 545). What I write and how I write is determined among other

factors by my own values and assumed expectations to academic writing. Therefore, the experience of fieldwork and the processing of data are a result of who I am, despite shifting experiences of self, and those I presumably write for.

Field methodology and limitations

During my stay I would often go to the "office" in Bepargaun with Parvati. Even though I had no office work to do and spent most of my time drinking tea, eating and trying to keep up with the talk and gossip of others I did feel a sense of purpose on these frequent office trips. After a while visits to Bepargaun involved interviews with members of the Laxmidevi Cooperative. Gradually I started interviewing women in Badhiyagaun as well. These interviews revolved around membership and activities of the village mother's group or the Laxmidevi Cooperative. As a guiding thread throughout the interviews I focused on change, in a very broad sense, within the last ten to fifteen years. Consistently throughout fieldwork I emphasised change in Badhiyagaun to the extent that I created a framework in which narratives of change perhaps unwittingly conformed to a false notion of rupture. My own assumption was that there were particular determinants to social change in Badhiyagaun; that of specific development initiatives primarily brought about by NGOs and new patterns of labour migration by predominantly young men. I do believe that these factors are part of the processes of social and economic change in Nepal as a whole, but social processes are always complex and fluid. Nevertheless both development as practice and discourse as well as new possibilities of labour migration are constitutive of emerging possibilities and expectations in Badhiyagaun, along with new patterns of social differentiation and exclusion.

In this paper all my informants are women. There are several reasons for this. Most importantly the focus of my research was membership in organisations run by and for women. I realise in hindsight that interviewing men could possibly have contributed to a deeper understanding of how men relate to women as the subjects and targets of development talk and practice. In addition it might have given a more nuanced sense of how household relationships and community power relations come to bear on the practice of savings and loans. But, proportionately to women there were very few men in Badhiyagaun due to labour migration. The remaining men were of the older

generation and it was seldom that I found myself in social settings with these men. On such occasions our conversations were in general more formal. This had something to do with the particular dynamics of gender and generational relations in Badhiyagaun. However, even though I spent less time with men through conscious effort, the particular setting in Badhiyagaun made interaction with men, particularly the husbands of most of my informants, difficult or impossible. I remember Anita, a young woman of about twenty-two, telling me how boring it had become with no young men in the village and that before there had been lots of activities in which boys and girls had mixed and had fun. If more young men had been present in Badhiyagaun during my stay the research might have turned out quite differently.

In addition to participant observation I conducted interviews. I speak Nepali and I did not at any point use an interpreter. In total I interviewed twenty-five women in Nepali and all interviews, except for five, were recorded on tape. Some of the interviews were conducted with two or three women present. Four of my informants were staff at Samudayik Sanstha in addition to being members of the Laxmidevi Cooperative. Among these, only Parvati lived in Badhiyagaun. I interviewed the current president of the cooperative and two board members all of whom resided in Bepargaun. In Badhiyagaun at least five of my informants were members of both the mother's group and the Laxmidevi Cooperative. The rest were either members the mother's group or not members of any group at all. The names of all informants have been changed, and in some cases I have used kinship terms. Throughout this paper I will refer to the transcribed interviews. In the cases where I feel that a word or statement is of particular importance I have inserted italicised transliteration of the Nepali in parenthesises. If an informant used an English word I have indicated it with quotation marks. In the main text as well I have marked words and terms spoken in English with quotation marks.

Despite daily interaction with women in Badhiyagaun and interviews with some of these women, and with Samudayik Sanstha staff and members of the Laxmidevi Cooperative, this paper cannot convey the totality of the experiences, opinions and thoughts expressed by my informants. The idiosyncrasies, ambiguities and contingent circumstances of everyday experience and social interaction mean that none of my informants can easily be described as determined by overarching structural

constraints. At the same time, their will to act in certain ways has to be understood in terms of normative social reproduction in Badhiyagaun.[12] This is to some degree determined by generation, but more importantly in terms of access to both material and symbolic capital. In addition this has something to do with dominant, but not necessarily complimentary, metanarratives of nation, development and modernity. Even though membership of the mother's group in Badhiyagaun and the Laxmidevi Cooperative formed part of my main research I also draw my insights on those women who were either at the periphery of these organisations or not members at all. This is primarily because I do not seek to assess the work of these organisations, but rather illustrate how objectives and patters of membership may have something to say about dynamics of social difference in Badhiyagaun.

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[12] I draw on Henrietta L. Moore's definition in which social reproduction is about a society's concern "to produce and reproduce persons with particular social identities, that is persons who are appropriately differentiated socially" (Moore: 2005, 90). Social reproduction is about the production of social differentiation and relations of power that are always ideological and implicated in normative notions of rights and needs.

Chapter two: The modern nation, development and the 'problem' of rural women

A ubiquitous form of expression among informants in Badhiyagaun was that of having been left behind, or perhaps more literally having been forced to the back (*pachi pareko*). Where does this notion of having been left behind come from? If one is behind where should one be headed? There is no doubt that development as metonymic for modernity and national progress is hegemonic in Nepal (Pigg: 1992, 510). As a result the ideal Nepali person is constructed through official rhetoric of being modern in a particular way, juxtaposed against what is represented as the underdeveloped. The modern Nepali is an "urban, literate, high caste person" and consequently "illiterate, low caste, rural women (…) are represented as the most undeveloped of the underdeveloped" (Enslin: 1998, 283). The rural and the poor, and women in particular, emerge as anomalous but *at the same time* constitutive of the developing nation. The metanarratives of nation, development and the unitary and unidirectional evolution toward modernity, spatially and temporally removed from the present, produce dichotomised images of old and new, traditional and modern:

In the cities all the "technical" stuff is ahead. Those of us who live in the village don't know anything about those things. They [in the city] are very "forward". They are able to speak because they're "forward". We are a little bit behind and not very "forward". They are "forward" because of all those "technical" things. They know about computers, e-mail, the Internet…and also about other things. Compared to them we have less "knowledge". And another thing, having lived in the cities it was possible for them to study in good schools. Because of that they are able to go into "competition" in all things. But we are not able. They are not afraid of talking about anything, but in some places we are not sure about what to say. That's how we feel even now…sometimes. For them it is not like that. (Sapana)

Sapana was a young Magar woman in her mid-twenties who worked for Samudayik Sanstha in Bepargaun. Her maternal village was about twenty minutes walk from Badhiyagaun, and she regularly passed through the village on her way to work. One afternoon I interviewed her at the Samudayik Sanstha office in Bepargaun. That afternoon we sat on the veranda facing the bazaar bathed in the warmth of the sun and I had asked her about the difference between women living in the cities and women

living in the village. In retrospect I believe this question was informed by my own preconceptions about women in the cities being more in tune with 'modernity'. However, I believe that Sapana's response succinctly describes structural conditions that put 'city women' at a relative advantage and the *feeling* of lacking this advantage.

Sapana's life had never been bounded by the spatial limitations of the village. Not only had she studied in a major city, she had met her husband there and divided her time between her new home in the Kathmandu Valley and her maternal village. In addition, because of her work for Samudayik Sanstha she frequently travelled within the district and other places in Nepal.[13] She worked in an office where she often had to use a computer to conduct her work. In this sense her description is more about the social imagery of development and modernity in Nepal despite being in disjunction with the actual modalities of her work and relative freedom of movement.

Stacy Leigh Pigg has noted that through the collective social imagination in Nepal "images of the village take shape not in counterdistinction to the city but in relation to *bikas*, or development" (Pigg: 1992, 495). *Bikas* in turn is in Pigg's words "embedded in Nepalese conceptions of social difference, through the creation of the village" (Ibid.). Sapana's juxtaposition of herself and other village women against city women is not only about location but about social difference as well. City women happen to 'know' things because they live in the city. More importantly they are able to 'go into competition' and are as such advantaged in terms of social capital. This idea is conceptualised in terms of the telos of development in which differentiation is premised on definitions of being 'forward' or 'behind'. Simultaneously Sapana and other NGO workers were involved in the process of incorporating other village women into the project of modernisation and development through community projects, awareness building and skills training.

Depending on their familiarity with the discourse of the international and local agents of development, women in Badhiyagaun would speak in terms of development buzzwords such as participation, skills and empowerment. It became apparent that

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[13] Due to her having obtained a job with Samudayik Sanstha while her husband was still unemployed it was decided that she continue in the job and lived most of the time in her natal home; a practical arrangement that increasingly seems to be the case in Nepal as new demands of consumption, particularly related to the education of children, require new ways of generating income.

being part of the development apparatus and commanding its particular terminology imbued some women with the right to speak authoritatively, also on the behalf of others. Those who were spoken for seemed to reinforce their ascribed identities as illiterate, uneducated and ignorant village women by talking about themselves in these terms. It was in relation to how informants talked about membership in the village mother's group and the Laxmidevi Cooperative that this became most apparent to me. In the following chapters of this paper I will look more closely at the stories women told, stories that reveal emerging or residual structures of feeling in Badhiyagaun. In this chapter I will attend to the ways in which the metanarratives of modernity, the nation and development intersect with and imbue public narratives in Badhiyagaun with a particular meaning. I do not propose here that the image of the underdeveloped woman, as it she conceptualised either within the international development apparatus or the particular meanings ascribed to her by dominant and privileged discourses in Nepal, superimposes itself on women in Badhiyagaun. Rather, I believe that local meanings and values are mediated but not determined by what may be recognised as the hegemonic discourse of development in Nepal. An overview of the discursive framework that informs development practice in Nepal as well as national political rhetoric is important for gaining an understanding of this.

The construction of the Third World Woman

The image of the Third World Woman, who is always rural and poor, has come to epitomize the idea of the underdeveloped subject of development thought. This is a subject that is discursively reproduced at the intersections of the global, national and local, having emerged as the ultimate target or beneficiary of development practice. The particular trajectory of the relationship between women and development is of course predicated on, as it simultaneously fashions, particular trends within development discourse. In the 1970s feminist intervention revealed development thought and practice as gendered and heavily male-biased. Following from this came the acknowledgement to some degree within development institutions of the gendered dimensions of social, political and economic structures. The introduction of what was termed Women in Development (WID) emphasised equity and efficiency along the general trends of privatisation and structural adjustment in the 1980s. Here the notion of women's incorporation or mainstreaming into development was understood as an

instrumental part of promoting economic growth through efficiently utilising women's labour. WID approaches were thus premised on the basic assumptions of liberal neo-classical economics. Simultaneously structuralist critiques emerged pointing out how gender inequality is implicated with other forms of inequality brought about by a world economy that is structurally asymmetrical. This neo-Marxist approach emphasised class over gender, claiming that gender inequity was primarily a product of global capitalist relations. A shift toward *gender* (ostensibly not only women) marked what has been termed Gender and Development (GAD), in which gender inequity is seen as having to be countered through transforming unequal social and gendered relations through the empowerment of women (For an overview of the history of gender and development see Kabeer: 1994, Bhavnani et al.: 2003, Saunders: 2002).

Major development institutions have embraced many of the assumptions informing ideas about gender and development, and there is a considerable emphasis on incorporating the voices of the poor and marginalised into development policy and planning. In sum, development planning and programming has become considerably more people centred. I will discuss the historical trajectory of this people centred approach in Badhiyagaun in greater detail in the next chapter. Undoubtedly feminist intervention did have a major impact on this particular progression. Suffice to say at this point, the ways in which particular feminist goals have been incorporated and instrumentalised within the wider discourse and practice of development interventions have naturally undermined the political edge of feminism(s) and the crucial contestations of power and social injustice they bring about (Kabeer: 1999, 436). Concepts connoting progressive social change such as participation and empowerment, when absorbed into development policy and planning, have in many cases lost their contentious, and by implication, political value. Thus, despite the seeming emphasis on transformation much of the feminist rhetoric within development thinking has in practice been watered down in terms of policy and planning.

Feminist incursions into development, despite their critical edge, have also been implicated in producing particular constructions about poor women. As Koczberski argues, while WID advocates singularly focused on incorporating women by

emphasising male-bias, there occurred a simplification and homogenisation of women inhabiting the areas forming part of the so-called Third World. It is argued that WID, and the essentialising categorisations it engenders, still dominates development thinking and practice (Koczberski: 1998). The Third World Woman is portrayed in contrast to the Modern Western Woman and is consequently rendered "universally passive, oppressed and ignorant, an image that continues to rely on the unitary oppositions used in colonial discourse" (Ibid, 401 see also Mohanty: 1991 on a critique of feminist writing discursively producing the Third World Woman).

Development and the Nepali nation

In Nepal, a country that was never colonised, the discursive ramifications of colonial/Orientalist constructions emerged not so much through imperialism but in the encounter between Nepal and the West through development (Tamang: 2002 (b), 314). Development, or *bikas* in Nepali, became the "connection between the nation-state and the rest of the world" (Sharma: 2003, xxvii). But the idea of the Nepali nation is and has always been a contested one.[14] Successive regimes, from Rana to Panchayat rule, attempted to consolidate Nepal as a nation through homogenising practices geared at erasing the tremendous ethnic, religious and cultural diversity of Nepal (Tamang: 2002, Pradhan: 2002). Issues of identity and ethnicity prompted both the exclusionary institutionalisation of a particular Nepali (high caste Hindu) identity and the various political and revolutionary movements that have contested the ruling ideology of 'Nepaliness'.

International aid to Nepal became part of the national economy and the quest for economic development after the end of autocratic Rana rule in 1951. Nepal experienced almost a decade of multi-party democracy from 1951-60 until a royal take-over in 1960 by King Mahendra. This resulted in thirty years of Panchayat rule; a regime in which the king effectively held all power while a semblance of popular representation was maintained through Panchayats or village councils and so-called class organisations. Nepal did receive some foreign aid toward the end of Rana rule, but it was from the 1950s and onwards that donors intensified aid to Nepal. A new

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[14] Nepal contains "an amazingly diverse array of ethnic, caste, linguistic and religious communities" (Pradhan: 2002, 1).

Nepali leadership that saw development as constitutive of creating a modern nation-state brought about the partial opening up of the country after the immediate collapse of Rana rule (Sharma: 2003, xxvii). Despite the subsequent tightening of state control and restrictions on foreign 'influences' it was during the Panchayat regime that the amount of foreign assistance and aid to Nepal increased rapidly. As Seira Tamang has pointed out the "fortuitous conjuncture of the post World War-II global project of international development and the Panchayat elite's own need to legitimise itself led to massive injections of foreign assistance to Nepal" (Tamang: 2002, 163). At times international aid comprised more than half of the country's development budget. In addition, international aid seemed to be what kept "the government machinery running" as well as finance the expansion of the government bureaucracy (Whelpton: 2005, 136).

The return to multi-party democracy in 1990 saw the influx of international NGOs and the rapid expansion of local NGOs, so much as for Saubhagya Shah to comment that what "started as an NGO trickle in the 1980's turned into a tide in the 1990s and later" (Shah: 2003, 144). The changing constellations of donors, forms of aid and priorities are closely linked to the changing geo-political climate and transformations in how donors perceive the main purpose of aid. During the Cold War, aid to Nepal and donor priorities were heavily influenced by, or perhaps fully dependent on, donors' foreign policy concerns (See Khadka: 1997). The conditions and priorities of donors have changed following the end of the Cold War, but their influence on the Nepali state and the dependence they generate remains substantial - so much that the amount of foreign aid the country receives is to a large extent understood as a yardstick in terms of the economic legitimacy of governments. This has resulted in successive governments and opposition parties squabbling over who is responsible for either the reduction or increase of aid (Kadkha: 1997, 1055). In terms of those actors that form part of civil society, the changing 'fads' of international development determine the practice of most NGO activity, social science research and independent consultancies (Shah: 2003). In Nepal then, state consolidation, political legitimacy and national progress and modernisation are intimately linked with international development.

The ideal of the modern Nepali nation finds its expression through a number of channels, such as education and popular culture. Ahearn (2004) has shown the pervasive presence of development discourse in school textbooks, magazines and papers. In school textbooks in particular "nationalism and development go hand in hand" and students are encouraged to "feel proud *as Nepalis* for the progress the country has made in moving away from 'backward' conditions to 'modern' ones" (Ahearn: 2004, 155 italics original). Much of the political rhetoric and legitimacy of the Maoists and their violent revolutionary project during the more than decade long People's War was made possible by a discourse that built on and rearranged the themes of the official state discourse on development, nationalism and progress (Fujikura: 2003, 27). A peace deal, effectively ending the armed insurgency in 2006, led to the incorporation of the Maoists into mainstream politics and their subsequent victory in the constituent assembly and parliamentary elections of 2008.[15] International aid and the discursive framework of development are embedded in conceptualisations, not only of the Nepali nation, but what it means to be Nepali. This means "seeing yourself as a citizen of an underdeveloped country" (Pigg: 1991, 172). As I will elaborate further on in this paper, the implicit assumption that Nepalis are underdeveloped is intimately linked with various and often shifting subject positions. First however, I will look at the intersections of the Nepali nation, development and the construction of the underdeveloped Nepali woman.

Construction of the underdeveloped woman in Nepal

In the Nepali context the particular project of development has always been gendered. Initially this resulted from the Panchayat regime's construction of the underdeveloped Nepali woman. This construction relied on a narrowing of gender roles, subscribing to a particular Hindu high caste ideal.[16] As mentioned previously, this coincided with international aid to Nepal and consequently the construction of the kind of woman in

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[15] The rise of the 'People's War' is generally understood as having come about due to "failed development" during multiparty democracy. However, it has been argued that it is more useful to understand the rise of the Maoists in relation to how "the project of national development has helped engender *new forms of collective imagination*" (Fujikura: 2003, 222 italics original).

[16] I speak here of a high caste (Bahun – Chettri) ideal as the Nepali political and economic elite throughout Rana and Shah (Panchayat) rule has been high caste. The dominant Hindu gender ideology as represented by the high caste in Nepal has been described in Lynn Bennett's Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles of Women in Nepal (1982).

need of aid (Tamang: 2002(a), 164). As poor rural women have become the ultimate targets of development programmes the image of them as illiterate, backward and fundamentally oppressed is perpetuated. Their illiteracy and purported ignorance has become a 'problem' of development. Seira Tamang argues that due to the specific class and caste positions of those women who tend to dominate the development field in Nepal and who serve as so-called native informants to the international donor community there has been a continued entrenchment of the idea of poor Nepali women as ignorant. Social distinctions are maintained by "the elite female native informants and development consultants, for whom paternalistic empathy rather than solidarity defines their relations with their 'un-developed' sisters" (Tamang: 2002(a), 166).

Thus, in Nepal there has been a convergence of the image of the Third World Woman as helpless victim with a particular Nepali construction of the oppressed woman based on Hindu high caste patriarchal configurations. By embedding a particular ideal of the high caste Hindu female into conceptualisations of gender and gender hierarchy the multiplicities in notions of what it means to be a woman in Nepal are obscured. However, as Mary M. Cameron has illustrated in her study of Hindu low caste women in far-western Nepal, there are specifically divergent ideas about the category of 'woman' between high and low caste Hindus. These relate to a number of practices and meanings, such as labour, divorce, widow remarriage and religious roles to name a few, that reflect a specific gender ideology quite different from the dominant upper caste ideology (Cameron: 1998). Similarly, Joanne C. Watkins has demonstrated that distinct, yet changing, entrepreneurial and religious role of Buddhist Nyeshangte women in Nepal reflect quite different notions of the role of women and gender relations (Watkins: 1996).

Appropriate conceptualisations of what it means to be a woman in Nepal are heavily mediated by exclusions of ethnicity, caste and class. This has become evident through international and Nepali discourse around the trafficking of women - a discourse that is undeniably linked with donor and NGO activity in Nepal. This discourse is mediated not only by Orientalist representations of oppressed Nepali women, but also by a particular high caste notion of respectability at times foreclosing alternative conceptualisations of gender relations in Nepal (Joshi: 2004). Empowering poor,

illiterate and oppressed women is emphasised by most development agencies and NGOs whatever main agenda is.[17] In the Nepali context one would be hard pressed to find any UN, World Bank or NGO (international or local) publication that is not couched with the discourse of participatory development, of either community or women, and the goal of empowering these groups.

In this chapter I have illustrated the construction of the image of the underdeveloped woman. I have attempted to show how the construction of this image occurs at the intersections of the global, national and local. The underdeveloped woman does not exist as an objective fact, but has to be continually constructed and recreated through the production of development knowledge. Not only is this construction constitutive of development practice. It also forms part of dynamics of social difference in Nepal that are both symbolic and material.

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[17] For a handful of examples see "ADB to Promote Greater Empowerment for Nepal's Most Disadvantaged Women" http://www.adb.org/Documents/News/2004/nr2004177.asp USAID "Nepal overview" http://www.usaid.gov/pubs/bj2001/ane/np/, UNDP "Women' Empowerment" http://www.undp.org/women/.

Chapter Three: Participatory development, microcredit and empowerment

On one of my preliminary visits to Bepargaun I came to know about the Laxmidevi Cooperative. I had spent the whole day at the Samudayik Sanstha office and joined a group of women in search of an afternoon snack. At a small tea stall in the centre of town I sat at a table with Parvati, Sapana, Sharda, Maiju, who had come into Bepargaun that day, and a woman I later learned was the president of the cooperative.[18] The women were engaged in a lively discussion and I had problems getting a hang of everything that was said. However, I did understand that they were talking about the various possibilities for income generating activities for members of the Laxmidevi Cooperative. Later that evening I asked Parvati about the cooperative and I came to know about the mother's group in Badhiyagaun. She promised me that on my next visit I would be able to attend a meeting. A few weeks later I had moved into Parvati's house in Junkot for the purpose of doing fieldwork. During one of the first days of my stay Maiju took me along to Bepargaun for a 'mother's group meeting'. I didn't understand why we had to go all the way to Bepargaun since I thought we were going to attend a meeting of the Badhiyagaun mother's group. But when we arrived it appeared that the meeting I was attending was more of a gathering of mother's groups from several wards in the area. A few members of each group had attended awareness and skills training organised by a local NGO, and they were giving presentations to the rest of the women at this mass gathering.[19] The women were then encouraged to write up proposals for funding from the NGO, based on collectively identified needs within their given village or ward. By that time I had already decided that I would do research on the members of the mother's group and the Laxmidevi Cooperative, and during the first week of my stay I learned how mother's groups were crucial arenas for NGOs to reach out to local communities.

In this chapter I will trace the particular historical trajectories of the mother's group in Badhiyagaun and the Laxmidevi Cooperative in Bepargaun as conveyed to me by my informants. The information in this chapter is based on interviews with informants

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[18] Parvati, Sharda and Sapana were all staff of Samudayik Sanstha.
[19] The local NGO involved here was not Samudayik Sanstha.

that were members of either one or both groups. I will illustrate that priorities and expectations among women toward such groups changed over time. Women in Badhiyagaun were highly conscious of the structural conditions that determined their economic situation and their ability to generate economic resources qua women. My observation is that to a large extent it was access to economic resources that effected expectations toward local groups and organisations. The ways in which the notion of a newfound ability 'to speak' (*bolnu*) was expressed by a number of informants indicates the emergence of particular understandings of agency and /or empowerment among these women. But this was not necessarily related to microcredit per se. It had more to do with the discourse of empowerment that is constitutive of the incorporation of women into the project of development in general. Moreover, the ability to speak was normatively related to markers of social capital, such as education.

Community development and microcredit

In recent years microcredit, targeted at poor and marginalised women in particular, has come to be viewed as the panacea for reducing global poverty. In addition, the coupling of economic growth and the expansion of markets with the notion of empowerment have emerged as conceptual givens within mainstream development institutions, in addition to international and national NGOs (Rankin: 2001, Brigg: 2001, Pearson 2007).[20] The idea of microcredit and small-scale savings geared at poor women emerged in the 1970s through the efforts of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. There was a concomitant emergence of alternative and more radical approaches to development that were effectively more 'people centred' and not exclusively geared at economic growth. This involved an increased emphasis on the participation and empowerment of the poor in creating 'sustainable' alternatives to development. This was aided by the rise and channelling of development funds to NGOs in Third World countries.

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[20] For example, the Asian Development Bank claims that rural micro-credit schemes "have been pivotal in empowering women, and breaking down gender barriers in Nepal's largely patriarchal rural society." ("Funding a Microcredit Revolution" http://www.adb.org/Documents/Periodicals/Impact/NEP/200801.asp)

The global neo-liberal turn in the 1980s and 1990s clearly provided credence to the idea of civil society as a domain increasingly taking over where the state withdraws. This resulted in the rapid global proliferation of NGOs attempting to take the functions abandoned by states that had left large sections of societies excluded from and impoverished of basic welfare provisions (Chandoke: 2002, 43). Paradoxically, while most development NGOs seem to oppose the neoliberal economic policies of the international development institutions (such as IMF and World Bank structural adjustment programmes), they have simultaneously advocated the kind of autonomy from the state that largely concurs with the overall aims of these very policies (Brigg: 2001, 238). Ultimately, the odd convergence of so-called radical and neoliberal visions of development, through the emphasis on participation and empowerment, is premised on a common disillusionment and/or distrust of the state (Mercer: 2002, 101). This has resulted in global development efforts increasingly being dispersed to 'grassroots' level through new quasi-state and non-governmental institutions and organisations. However, as Rankin (2001) has argued in relation to the institutionalisation of the microcredit phenomenon in Nepal, state power is not necessarily deregulated, but rather reconfigured and devolved to the local level.[21]

The discursive and material developments described above indicate the emergence of a conceptual connection between economic resources in the form of savings and credit with notions of social progress through the participation and empowerment of rural women in such schemes. Critical analysis of participatory development as discourse and practice has emphasised the depoliticised use of concepts such as participation and empowerment. It has been commented that concepts that were initially politically contentious have become mere technical problems within the administration of development funding (White: 1996, Cleaver: 1999). In addition, in the implementation of development projects participation more often than not ceases to be about the sharing or redistribution of power, which by logical extension the notion of empowerment should be about. Andrea Cornwall has argued that

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[21] Rankin (2001) draws on a recent discussion relating to the shift in Western democracies from Keynesian welfare policies to neoliberal market policies as not a 'rolling back' of the state, but rather a transfer of the operations of government to non-state actors (a new mode of governmentality in the Foucauldian sense). Ferguson and Gupta (2002) extend this discussion by proposing that on a global scale one has to see beyond the state to discern the emergence of transnational governmentality through the strategies and practices of major global institutions (IMF, WTO), transnational alliances of activists and grassroots organisations and networks of donor agencies (including states) and NGOs.

participatory development is ultimately about inclusion "on terms and within parameters set by prevailing constructions of development assistance" lending itself in agreement with "neoliberal development agendas in which fundamental questions of structural, intersubjective and personal power remains unaddressed" (Cornwall: 2003, 1326). Furthermore, the discourse of participation reproduces the binary distinction of good and bad in terms the non-state and (unitary) "community" as inherently good (Kothari: 2001, 140). A number of studies have illustrated how complex power relations within and among groups and communities are obscured following from this normative assumption (Cleaver: 2001, Mercer: 2002). The outcomes of participatory community development projects do not necessarily always reproduce the agendas and preferred outcomes that are imagined, at times ambiguously, by the institutions, organisations and practitioners of international development.[22] The manner in which development 'happens' at the local level is often unexpected and at times contradictory (Klenk: 2004).

Participatory community development in Badhiyagaun

The mother's group in Badhiyagaun came about through the presence and initiative of an international non-governmental organisation (INGO), which during the late 1980s ran community projects in the area. The INGO, with its main offices in Kathmandu, had a local representative in Badhiyagaun at the time. During the early 1990s a change in the organisation's policy, coinciding with a general trend among INGOs, led to a shift toward working through local partnerships. Following from this Samudayik Sanstha took over many of the organisation's community development projects in the area. Currently in Nepal the preferred style of most major INGOs is to work through so-called partnerships and networks at the local level. Despite the seemingly equal relationship implied by the idea of partnerships and the devolving of development efforts to the grassroot level, it is more often the case than not that local NGOs model their agendas and projects on the expectations of the international donor

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[22] See Subir Sinha (2002) for a critical discussion of the putatively coherent, unified and self-contained power of global institutions such as the World Bank. Through a reading of World Bank documents Sinha demonstrates the contradictory and at times incoherent discourse emanating from the Bank, in addition to the inability of this discourse to authoritatively produce material effects.

community. I was even under the impression that Samudayik Sanstha had actually emerged as a direct consequence of the withdrawal of the INGO from Badhiyagaun.[23]

The working principles and general approach of the INGO's projects in Badhiyagaun follow a general trajectory of much INGO activity in Nepal over the years. In response to what was often understood as top down development carried out by governments and international financial institutions, an increasing number of NGOs in Nepal placed greater emphasis on the participation of marginalised and poor people.[24] In the1980s and early 1990s the approach of the INGO became progressively more 'people centred' through its interaction with local communities. In accordance with the organisation's evolving engagement with the idea of 'development from below' its strategies accommodated a greater emphasis on communities as bearers of sustainable development. This resulted in, among other things, working through mother's groups in awareness and skills training, related to issues such as community forest management. In addition, it ran a number of evening literacy classes in the area.

The mother's group in Badhiyagaun

During the first weeks of my stay in Badhiyagaun I concentrated on talking to the older generation of women in order to gather information through their memories about the first community development initiatives they had encountered.

Before we didn't know anything…then (the INGO) came saying you have to start a mother's group. And they started teaching us. And the mother's group was started. (Bir Maya)

Bir Maya was one of the initial members of the mother's group. As the statement above illustrates a sense that the appropriate knowledge to carry out participatory

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[23] Initially Samudayik Sanstha's office was located in Badhiyagaun, but it was at a later stage moved to Bepargaun. This move seems to have been precipitated by the expansion of its activities, in addition to the organisation being upgraded as the head of a cluster of local NGOs in the district receiving funds from the INGO.

[24] Interestingly, in a study of a participatory development project in the western hills of Nepal carried out in the 1980s, Linda Stone (1989) illustrated the wide gap between development project staff and villagers' views on participatory development. It was primarily project staff that defined participatory development in terms of development and empowerment. Villagers did not refer to these participatory projects as development (*bikas*).

community development came from somewhere and someone else. All the women who had taken part in early participatory community development activities, including the establishment of the mother's group, frequently stressed the importance of external actors in the maintenance of these activities. Those women who had participated in evening literacy classes and other projects were quick to praise these actors, but maintained that they themselves remained ignorant. Parvati's mother-in-law Aama talked about activities such as evening literacy classes as benevolent acts by development workers who, as she explained, "came and taught…so everybody can know a little bit." The women who had been actively involved in the mother's group during its formative years tended to emphasise the importance of development workers and funding from NGOs in creating the impetus and later maintenance of the group. Interestingly, even though it was these women who had first been introduced to the notions of development as participatory some twenty years ago they were adamant about stressing the role of outsiders. In addition, when talking about change over the past twenty years these women emphasised specific and materially significant changes that were crucially contingent on a number of variables such as access to education, the availability of employment for young men and the introduction of new 'facilities' (such as infrastructure, water and electricity).

During it's formative years the mother's group seemed to have received much assistance from the INGO. This involved, "taking care of the forest" and coming together to "control" alcohol consumption. The women were also encouraged to start income generating activities such as setting up nurseries for growing vegetables to sell. I learned from Amaju, a woman in her fifties who had been active during the early years of the mother's group that Aama and herself had, along with a few other women, started such a nursery. They grew chillies, turnips and carrots, which they then sold. They later abandoned the project due to "enough to do on one's own field". At one point members of the group had been taken on a sponsored trip to another district to learn from some of the more advanced and successful community projects that the INGO had initiated there. As part of this initiative a day care centre for small children was introduced in Badhiyagaun. The centre is located at the heart of the village and consists of a large room with some toys and books, and a small shed for cooking. Several members of the mother's group had spent time working at the centre

and some of them had taken training in childcare offered by a local NGO.[25] In addition, a female teacher was hired to teach the children the alphabet and engage in more pedagogical activities. The day care centre has been sustained, including the salary of the teacher, throughout the years by community contributions in addition to funding from Samudayik Sanstha.

The running of the day care centre had resulted in specific benefits for women with small children, as it made it easier to carry out daily chores and do work in the fields. Som Maya, who lived in Junkot, helped out in the centre on a voluntary basis.

It is easy. One brings the children here and it is possible for the mothers to do work.
(…) After leaving the children here the women are able to go wherever they need to go. And for the children food is available. It's possible for the children to learn the alphabet. And when they need to sleep they can sleep. It has become very easy! (Som Maya)

I heard stories about how women earlier had to carry their newborn babies on their backs when they worked in the fields, or how some women had to lock their children in a room or tie them to a tree so as to get all the work done. Whether this used to be the norm I don't know, but the existence of the day care centre meant that the smaller children were taken care of while their mothers worked. In addition, many women stressed the potential benefits for the children in terms of being introduced to the alphabet and becoming better equipped for school.

The first members of the mother's group told me that they had lost track of the activities of the group and were no longer active. There was a sense that priorities had changed fundamentally. When looking back Amaju regretted what she considered the demise of the mother's group, especially because the INGO had done so much for the village. There were no longer regular meetings, or if there were any she didn't attend them. What remained of the afore mentioned activities seemed unclear, and through the testimonies from younger women it is apparent that they did not think the mother's group was involved in much else than the children's day care centre, which during my stay was precariously kept afloat with very few resources.[26] I had problems

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[25] The local NGO involved here was not Samudayik Sanstha, but another partner of the INGO.
[26] By the time I came to Badhiyagaun Samudayik Sanstha had phased out its support.

finding out specifically what other projects the group was involved with. Activities seemed to be initiated by a few members on an ad hoc basis due to their involvement in other NGOs or networks. When I asked around I would more often than not hear comments like "work is being done, they say". In addition, it was impossible for me to get in touch with the president of the group because she, for reasons that were never made clear to me, lived in another village. This does not mean that the idea of "coming together" to carry out community development was obsolete among women in Badhiyagaun. However, there seemed to have occurred a change over time in both priorities and engagement with forms of collective organisation.

The Laxmidevi Savings Cooperative in Bepargaun

The Laxmidevi Savings Cooperative was established through the initiative of a group of mainly Newar women in Bepargaun. The establishment of the cooperative coincided with a general trend in Nepal in the early 1990s of the emergence of credit and savings cooperatives. In Nepal there has been a concerted institutionalisation of microfinance, through national bodies set up to aid local microcredit organisations. The Nepali government, in response to pressures from the major global financial institutions, has according to Katharine N. Rankin:

(…) restructured a previously nationalised banking system not only to promote foreign investment but also to devolve rural credit delivery to a new set of local institutions specialising in the provision of microcredit" (Rankin: 2001, 19).

The Nepal Cooperatives Act was promulgated in 1992 stipulating specific requirements for registering as a cooperative or union, the aim being to enable various groups "to work for the economic and social development of the general consumers on the basis of mutual cooperation and cooperative spirit" (Preamble, Cooperatives Act: 1992).

Currently the Laxmidevi Cooperative provides a savings scheme, loans and a few training workshops a year. Apart from their own savings women can register their children as members with separate savings accounts. The child can obtain these savings after turning eighteen. In a month the women can save from a hundred to five

hundred rupees for themselves and ten to two hundred and fifty for the children. A member can take a loan of 50 000 rupees at one time.[27] This has to be paid back in instalments within one year. If the loan is not repaid within year there are no possibilities for obtaining a new loan.

Among members of the mother's group in Badhiyagaun and the Laxmidevi Cooperative in Bepargaun there was enthusiasm for savings schemes and the availability of loans. Taking loans seemed to be regarded as both necessary and normal, as Phul Maya and Shanta Maya, my neighbours in Junkot, pointed out to me:

Shanta Maya: Everybody takes loans
Phul Maya: Sometimes a lot is taken…sometimes just a little bit. If one is able one takes a lot. Then one [the husband] goes abroad…for them one borrows the money.

Women in Badhiyagaun were concerned with savings and credit in terms of contributing economic resources to the household.[28] Loans were primarily taken for household spending, children's education and funding the migration of male family members. Membership in a women's saving cooperative was for the most part valued in terms of its ability to provide extra income to serve priorities that were evaluated in terms of the household as a whole.[29] In relation to long term investment the highest priority was children's education. This has everything to do with changes in Nepal in general and Badhiyagaun in particular as people from rural areas increasingly seek possibilities for salaried employment elsewhere. Phul Maya summed up the changing attitudes toward education:

Before there was no talk of getting the children ahead. Before they would say: 'If you study what is available? If you work [in the field] you will at least get food.' These days they say you have to give the children some education.

Among those informants who were members of both groups emphasis was placed on the unavailability of cheap loans from the mother's group. The Laxmidevi

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[27] The interest for loans is 15% and 9% for the savings. For the children's savings the interest is 10 %.
[28] This observation is based on interviews in which informants were specifically asked about savings and loans.
[29] Similar tendencies have been pointed out elsewhere, such as Mercer's study on membership and participation in women' groups on Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania (Mercer: 2002).

Cooperative did not only offer these services, it was also generally asserted that it was successful and effective due to the strict disciplinary measures it enforced in terms of membership, lending and repayment. Every year the cooperative took in new members on the basis of a selective process involving applications and interviews. During this process women had to display their familiarity and understanding of the workings of the organisation. Perceptions of the mother's group in Badhiyagaun tended to revolve around its lack of order and discipline. It was pointed out that there were quarrels and that some members drank alcohol before and during meetings. However, the most vehement complaint was that the mother's group didn't offer good interests on savings and cheap loans.[30] This is particularly interesting as this was never the intention on the part of the INGO that initiated the establishment of the group. This illustrates the changing priorities and expectations of women in Badhiyagaun to NGOs and forms of collective organisation –which to a large extent is related to changing development trends.

Speaking of economic resources and empowerment

I heard about other organisations and cooperatives in surrounding towns and at the district headquarters from which several informants had obtained loans. None of them had taken loans from a bank. For those women who were active members of the cooperative there was a definite sense of ownership in terms of both resources and process.

Now…there are banks that are run by other organisations as well. In our organisation it is our own money, right. If it's our own money why should we take the money from somewhere else? So we take it from our own organisation. And in the bank there is a lot of business that we don't understand. Its not easy, just trouble. And they take a lot of "commission". And anyway they just give a little bit to us. (Sangeeta)

Sangeeta worked as a teacher in Bepargaun and was a member of the Laxmidevi Cooperative board. She was a very active woman and during our interview she was clearly ideological in her approach to explaining the role of the cooperative in effecting progressive change. Sangeeta emphasised structural gender inequality in Nepal and stressed the importance of the cooperative in destabilising this inequality.

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[30] The mother's group did have a savings scheme, and it was possible for women to take loans.

Like the other board members I had talked to she was concerned with the empowering aspects of access to economic resources.

Women don't have their own capital. They aren't employed anywhere. And if we need money we have to ask the men. We have to wear bracelets and we have to wear *tikka*[31]…and we have to ask the men for everything. But if there are many members it is possible to "share" and if it is possible to "share" the good and bad (*dukkhasukkha*) it will become easy for us. And if one has a lot of one's own money one can put it there [the cooperative] and one can take it out when one feels like doing something with it. And now we don't have to ask the men. That's why we are members. (Sangeeta)

Sharda, who worked for Samudayik Sanstha in Bepargaun and who was an active member of the Laxmidevi Cooperative, told me that members of the board were considering the options for starting a bank. Her emphasis as well was on the liberating aspects of savings and loans and stressed that she wanted to "empower" the women. It was evident that active members of the Laxmidevi Cooperative were more familiar with a particular development terminology, which they frequently used when talking about microcredit. These women tended to speak about the work the organisation did in terms of the general empowerment of village women. They had themselves benefited economically from savings and loans and the way in which they spoke "engaged simultaneously with the material realities of their lives and with discourses on women and development circulating at local, national, and global levels" (Klenk: 2004, 72).

But not all women spoke about microcredit in terms of empowerment. In Junkot Phul Maya, who did not receive any benefits from the investment in her husband's work abroad, was responsible for generating income to the household and her four children. Her husband had left for Malaysia and when I lived in Junkot he had not only been away for more than five years but had stopped sending money home. She raised chickens and had a goat that she lamented had become too old. In addition, she made alcohol from millet once or twice a month, which she sold. With her restricted resources in addition to responsibilities and workload in the home there were limits to the potentialities of entrepreneurship generating surplus income beyond what was

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[31] Wearing bracelets and *tikka* are Hindu signifiers of marriage. Sangeeta was the only Bahun (Hindu upper caste) informant and perhaps her emphasis on these bodily inscriptions is of more relevance to her than the other Gurung and Magar informants.

used to meet basic needs. There were also limits to the extent to which her economic contribution to the household made a difference to her relative influence and position in the household. During our interview she did not at any point speak of loans as empowering. She simply stated how loans were one way of sustaining the management of household expenses. Phul Maya, like many women who struggle to make ends meet, had always contributed to the household through her labour and sometimes through small income generating activities. Just because mainstream development valorises income-generating activities, doesn't mean that it had a substantial impact on her experience of economic marginality or sense of relative empowerment.

Economic processes, such as the gendered processes of production, exchange and distribution, are "practical activities which operationalise gender ideologies" (Moore: 2005, 92). Thus, gender ideologies are not merely ideas outside of economic possesses, but are constitutive of them. Altering access to and control of economic resources may destabilise normative gender difference. But the participation in microcredit schemes are not empowering per se. Savings and loans are constitutive of wider processes of determining household priorities. Contributing economic resources to the household can, but does not necessarily, significantly destabilise or alter relations of power (for discussions on microcredit and empowerment see Kabeer: 1999, Mercer: 2002, Rankin: 2001). Empowerment is usually about someone, in the form of institutions, organisations or individuals, aiding others, as individuals or groups, to change their relative position in relation to power. At times this will have something to do with creating the conditions for women to gain access to and control over financial resources. In Badhiyagaun social change takes place mediated by a host of economic and political processes. This change is related to the altering of meanings about gender difference. To some degree this has occurred due to the collective organisation of women and the possibilities accruing from group membership.

Being 'able to speak'

Throughout the interviews I conducted with informants both in Badhiyagaun and among members of the Laxmidevi Cooperative in Bepargaun I was continually reminded of the newfound 'ability to speak' (*bolnu*) among women. In relation to the

mother's group and the Laxmidevi Cooperative I was given the same account of change time and again. According to this story women in Badhiyagaun, like all women in the villages, had been 'unable to speak'. This inability appeared to encompass the physical constrains of entering authoritatively male public settings and the sense of lacking the legitimate knowledge to be heard. It also seemed to include the ability of women who had previously been shy (*laj*) - a demeanour that was otherwise normatively valued among the women - to speak in public.

Before the women didn't even speak Nepali [only Gurung]. They couldn't even write their own names. But they learned how to speak. They [INGO representatives] told us: 'You have to speak. You must not be afraid. You have to get into the habit of speaking.' And now the women are able to speak a little bit more than before. (Amaju)

Amaju did not relate this to *bikas* as such. When I asked her about development she was more concerned about the unavailability of work for her children. But clearly the notion of being able to speak had been an issue during those initial meetings in which women were summoned to participate in community development projects. And evidently the empowerment of village women as conceptualised by this particular INGO was incorporated into narratives of change in Badhiyagaun. According to Amaju, 'being able to speak', was related to a command of the Nepali language and to literacy. Similarly, Sharda conveyed a transition in women's ability to speak publicly. Sharda's account reveals more explicitly the complexities of the dynamics power related to education and national belonging. The excerpt below is taken from a conversation I had with Sharda about the Laxmidevi Cooperative.

Miriam: This group is very big and very active. In other villages one can also find mother's groups. But what is the difference between this one and the ones in the villages? [32]
Sharda: In this one there are some educated women. So doing the work is easy. And here we run by "rules"…the "rules" are very "strict". And because of this the organisation has become good. And in the villages the women haven't really studied, there is no "empowerment", and they don't "follow-up" the rules…because of this they are quite weak.
Miriam: In your opinion what is needed for "empowerment"?
Sharda: "Training" is needed, "awareness" is needed…and "skills" are also needed. If they have the skills they can "empower" themselves.

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[32] Here I referred to the Laxmidevi Cooperative as a mother's group, even though it was a registered cooperative. I was at a later stage corrected on this point.

Miriam: In your opinion what does "awareness" mean? What does one have to be "aware" about?

Sharda: One has to find out about oneself. One has to ask questions like 'Who am I', 'What do I have to do'. One has to find out about these things. One has to learn about the country and be able to do an "analysis" about the country on one's own. One has to be able to develop.

Miriam: And in your opinion what was different ten, fifteen years ago compared to now?

Sharda: If one looks at the members of our organisation…ten years ago they were not able to speak. They were not able to stand up and say 'Namaste! My name is…' Everybody was shy.

Miriam: In the group as well?

Sharda: Yes in the group as well. They were not able to stand up and talk. They were not able to express their own opinion. And when leaving the house the parents-in-laws and the husband would scold them, telling them not to come to meetings. It was hard to leave the house. Now that they [parents-in-laws and husband] know that the organisation does good work they let the women go.

Sharda's remarks above indicate the subtle complexities of power relations that are not only determined by gender. This was ultimately brought home during a conversation with Phul Maya and Shanta Maya in Junkot, who throughout our conversation emphasised their marginality in terms of involvement with the mother's group in Badhiyagaun.

Shanta Maya: We sit there to listen to their talk. We have to go.

Miriam: And have you applied to the Laxmidevi Cooperative?

Phul Maya: Some people have done it.

Miriam: From Junkot?

Phul Maya: Parvati and them have done it. And our own Anju [Phul Maya's younger sister in-law].

Miriam: But you haven't done it?

Phul Maya: No…you need a photo…for us it's a pain. We can't write, we can't speak. That's why we haven't gone. They have completed their studies. That's why.

I do not believe that the exclusion of these women from the participatory processes of collective organisation, due among other things to their illiteracy, is primarily about the closure of their voices, or knowledge, by development discourse - suggested by post-development thought. It has more to do with local dynamics of social differentiation and processes of social reproduction *and* change. In addition, the dynamics of social differentiation, which are constitutive of economic and political processes, override the vague notions of empowerment, as an end in itself, postulated by theories of development.

In this chapter I have presented an overview of the developments of the mother's group in Badhiyagaun and the Laxmidevi Cooperative in Bepargaun. When the mother's group was initiated in Badhiyagaun the impetus seemed to emanate from the contention that women had to be incorporated into decision-making processes related to community development. In recent years aiding poor women's access to small-scale loans appears to be the most popular strategy among development organisations and institutions. In any event, access to microcredit has in Badhiyagaun, as in many other locations I suspect, become one crucial element for households to obtain economic resources. In some cases this may very well lead to alterations of gendered power dynamics within these households, but this is not a given outcome. The relationship between women's economic activity and their empowerment is complex and context specific (Pearson: 2007, Kabeer: 1999). Yet, it is apparent that there has been a long engagement with the concept of empowerment in Badhiyagaun. As both this and the previous chapter have illustrated women did speak of perceived changes in the agency of women, whether through 'being able to speak' or controlling economic resources. In the following chapters I will explore in more detail the ways in which emergent conceptualisations of women's agency form part of the altering of particular gendered narratives in Badhiyagaun.

Chapter Four: Speaking of pain and imagining development

Pancha Maya: There is a lot of tension in my life, that's why I easily forget (*bhulchu*).[33]
Miriam: What tension?
Pancha Maya: I have to do this kind of work [carrying manure]. The children cry and I have to do household work. There is work outside. That's why I forget things.
(…) Nepali women haven't studied and the men go abroad. Nobody [women] is studying. One has to work and get many children. That is why for many Nepali women it is very hard.

Pancha Maya was a young woman in her mid-twenties with two children and a husband who worked in the Nepali army. He was seldom at home and Pancha Maya and her children lived with her parents-in-law and two nieces in the main part of Badhiyagaun. She had married at seventeen and consequently left school. The day that I interviewed her we sat by a mound of manure, which she and a friend were carrying to a field at the other end of the village. Pancha Maya's friend lit a cigarette, made a few sullen remarks before she dozed off under the shade of a tree. Pancha Maya was very talkative, funny and opinionated. She would regularly remind me of the general suffering of Nepali women, and she would always relate this suffering to lack of education, or more precisely that women had been denied education. I encountered this particular framing among several women in Badhiyagaun. This might appear as simply stating the obvious; women were aware that higher education brings with it the opportunity for employment beyond labouring on the farm. However, these women's lack of literacy or higher education was incorporated into a particular form of collective narrative of female suffering, or *dukkha*.[34]

When I questioned women in reference to the mother's group, about why they felt it was necessary to be gathered as a group on the basis of being women, several of them expressed the need to collectively share life's suffering and happiness (*dukkhasukkha*) with one's sisters (*didi-bahiniharu*). In this chapter I will attend to the ways in which speaking of pain and hardship is constitutive of processes of identity formation. I argue however that narratives of pain and suffering were in some instances reframed by a set of new expectations. I am not suggesting a dichotomous break between the

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[33] The mind goes astray.
[34] Here I have translated *dukkha* as meaning suffering. The expression encompasses encountering trouble and misfortune and the feeling of pain, grief and worry. I will also refer to *dukkha* as the experience of hardship.

traditional and modern, rather I seek to show that new structures of feeling emerge heavily mediated by pervasive normative practices of social reproduction. My contention here is that for poor and/or marginalised women in Badhiyagaun speaking of one's *dukkha* could at times appear as a mode of expression of how one as a woman *bears the pain of underdevelopment*. This meant that these women were not so much lamenting the hardships of being a woman in the village or the household. These stories were framed within a much larger narrative in which these women were placed as having been 'left behind'.

According to the dominant gender ideology in Badhiyagaun, representative for most of rural Nepal, the identity of a woman is determined by kinship relations in which the shifting roles of daughter, sister, daughter-in-law, wife and mother-in-law have a profound impact on a woman's relative social position.[35] The most significant event in a woman's life is her wedding, as it marks the unavoidable and irreversible transition from childhood to adulthood.[36] The fate of a daughter- in-law is that of hardship, and her labour underscores the dynamics of power within the household. A woman's entitlement to respect and authority is determined by the eventual source of power she obtains through being the mother of her son and thus the mother-in law of a household. A number of anthropologists of Nepal have illustrated the ways in which the experience of uncertainty, disjuncture and pain of marriage constitute the construction of female subjectivity (McHugh: 2002, Holland and Skinner: 1995, Skinner: 1989, DesChene: 1998). The physical labour of women is premised on the reification of normative gender differentiation through the construction of female subjectivity and agency, emerging from the experiencing and skilful manoeuvring of *dukkha*.

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[35] It is important to note that the diversity of the various communities and ethnic groups, in addition to social classes, in Nepal means that a general statement on the position of women is problematic. I have already referred to the ethnographic work by Cameron (1998) and Watkins (1996) earlier in this paper indicating the complexities of gender relations in Nepal. Nevertheless, the dominant gender ideology in Badhiyagaun is representative of a generalised picture of the hegemonic discourse on gender relations in Nepal. The actual interactions between men and women are of course more complex and contingent on a number of other factors.

[36] McHugh (2004), in her study of a Gurung community in western Nepal, has described the processes in which women's symbolic connection to place has traditionally been intimately bound to ties of kinship and marriage that ultimately defined a woman's economic and social well being. These processes have been altered over time through the multiple processes of national development and globalisation, which in turn have changed conceptions about marriage. Ahearn's study (2004), on a Magar community in the same region of the country, illustrates the same, as marriage is increasingly defined in terms of notions of romantic love and agency on the behalf of the girl.

(…) throughout Nepal, certain types of pain are unambiguously condemned – particularly suffering caused by other people's irresponsibility, selfishness, thoughtlessness, or greed. But in other situations, painful struggle is seen as a normal, even normative, aspect of a woman's life; indeed, *it is through certain types of suffering that the adult feminine subjectivity is produced"* (Leve: 2007, 153 italics mine).

Forms of expression, through narrative and song, provide not only avenues for giving voice to these experiences but in fundamental ways serve to naturalise them. Songs and stories of *dukkha* have in this way functioned as mediating devices for women to "express their emotions to themselves about the difficulties and ambiguities of their roles in life, and perhaps control their emotions in some sense" (Skinner: 1989, 189). However, it has been suggested that some ritualised practices and traditions have served, and are serving in new ways, as sites for critical social and political commentary (Holland and Skinner: 1995).[37] Political transformations, radical visions for the future, and an expanding national civil society consisting on the most part of developmental NGOs, have paved the way for notions of alternative femininities to emerge.

The painful experience of being a woman

Gender is a cultural construction and not just 'out there'. Much recent feminist social theory has emphasised the nature of the symbolic construction of corporeal identity. However, this emphasis on the symbolic construction of gender and sexual identity overshadows how the social practice of gender differentiation is *material and structural* as well as symbolically determined (McNay: 2000, 14).[38] Pierre Bourdieu's insight that "we use our living bodies to give substance to the social distinctions and differences that underpin social relations, symbolic systems, forms of labour and quotidian intimacies" has informed feminist understandings of gender difference as

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[37] Such as the Hindu Tij festival at which women fast and pray for the good health of their husband and cleanse themselves of ritual impurity. In the songs that are sung during this festival the women's thoughts and experiences of hardship are extended from a intimate setting to a public one (Skinner and Holland: 1995)

[38] This is a crude conflation of the trajectory and critical ruptures of feminist social theory. The point however is that following from the immense influence of poststructuralist thought, with the notion of identity as discursively produced, there has emerged somewhat of a split between emphasis on the symbolic or material. The challenge has been to conceptualise the convergence of the material and symbolic. (McNay: 2000, 2004)

bodily practice within material structures (Moore: 2005, 71). In this way, normative gender difference has to be continually reproduced and lived through daily *practices* of differentiation. The fact that dominant (and here I mean Hindu high caste) ideologies of normative gender difference are not pervasive all over Nepal illustrates that the social practice of gender differentiation is in no way homogenous, nor static (Watkins: 1996, Rankin: 2004, Cameron: 1998). However, it would be a mistake to underestimate the extensive albeit varying forms of cultural and institutionalised gender discrimination found throughout Nepal.[39]

The relative egalitarian ethos of Gurung society has considerably softened the more extreme forms of value-based differentiation and inequality found elsewhere in Nepal and South Asia. Gurung women, along with the women of other ethnic groups like the Magar with similar cultural values and practices, have been perceived by other Nepalis and foreign commentators as more outspoken and autonomous (McHugh: 2004, DesChene: 1998).[40] However, as Mary DesChene points out "there are many quiet forms of constraint on the 'freedom' of Gurung women [that are] woven so finely into the texture of daily life" (DesChene: 1998, 42). These constraints follow from the practices of marriage, inheritance and domestic authority in addition to cultural definitions of female comportment intersecting with notions of family honour.[41] The idea and practice of raising girl children to be given away in marriage consolidates the construction of embodied female subjectivity. For most women, marriage marks a profound rupture that is not only symbolic but takes form through the labour expected of a daughter-in-law. Village exogamy in relation to marriage, not only confined to Gurung communities, exasperates this rupture (McHugh: 2004, 581).

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[39] Within the parameters of the Nepali nation state, women have been systematically discriminated against in terms of heir legal rights relating to property, inheritance, marriage, freedom of movement, in addition to sexual and reproductive rights (Manandhar and Bhattachan: 2001, for documentation of discriminatory laws see Forum for Women, Law and Development http://www.fwld.org.np). The political transformations in Nepal during the 1990s, concerted efforts by local and international rights based NGOs and the political force of the Maoists have all contributed to changes ongoing processes of social and legal change. The victory of the Maoists in the 2008 constituent assembly and parliamentary elections brought about the unprecedented influx of women, ethnic minority and low caste elected representatives. No former democratically elected parliament in Nepal has been this representative of the general population.

[40] Moreover, high caste stereotyping of the women of Sino-Tibetan groups has portrayed them as sexually promiscuous (see Ahearn: 2004, chapter four)

[41] Among the Gurung, and other Sino-Tibetan ethnic groups, there are few restrictions on women based on ritual impurity.

Most of the women in Badhiyagaun did not only come from other villages, but from other districts which meant that the distance from one's natal home could be a several days journey away. For these women visits were usually just made in relation to major festivals that require a daughter to return to her natal home. During my stay in Badhiyagaun I was told stories about loss, pain and the feeling of immense loneliness that lasted for a year or two while trying to adjust to a new and often arduous life among strangers. According to these women the arrangement of their marriages had occurred over their heads and often by family members other than their parents.[42] A visit to a relative or friend in another village could suddenly result in a girl being given away in marriage.[43] In addition to the sense of rupture and loss women entered into a new household with relations of power and hierarchy that rendered them vulnerable to the whims of other members of the family. In any event, the fate of a daughter-in-law was to a large extent determined by expectations in terms of her labour and reproductive responsibilities.

The sense of *dukkha* that women endure was not confined to feelings of disjuncture and loss. It was regularly pointed out that women tend to do most of the work, either related to the household or other farming activities. During my stay in Badhiyagaun this was easily observed as from early morning women would start cleaning the house, make food, fetch fodder for the animals and then proceed to other work related to the fields or herding the animals. Among women in Junkot at least, there were practically no restrictions on the kinds of farm related work women did.[44] It was regularly pointed out by women how I was unable to do these things and that they themselves were particularly strong because they daily had to attend to such strenuous tasks. In Badhiyagaun as a whole, women were actively engaged in daily activities of running family businesses such as tea stalls and shops. Relations between men and women in the village did not necessarily always conform to the dominant gender

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[42] The limitations of fieldwork did not allow for an exploration of the relational dynamics of such unions. As far as I can tell marriage unions in which neither the girl or her parents had been actively involved were about ties of reciprocity between the groom's family and whoever was involved from the bride's family.

[43] I am aware that marriages are not necessarily always that unexpected or without the complicity of young women. Stories are perhaps sometimes told in a manner in which to avoid revealing the fact of one's own complicity out of reasons relating to honour, one's own and one's family (Leve: 2007, 156). The scope of my fieldwork did not allow for the exploration of these complexities. Regardless, a sense of nervous anticipation, rupture and dislocation shapes the experience of marriage for women in a way that is in stark contrast to that of men.

[44] Except ploughing which is considered a strictly male endeavour.

ideology. The point here is not that this ideology necessarily confers a lack of agency on the part of women. But it does to a large extent determine how agency is conceptualised, or how competing conceptualisations emerge.

Bearing the pain of underdevelopment

In Badhiyagaun speaking of the experience of being a woman was regularly expressed in terms of the collective fate of women as daughters, wives and daughters-in-laws. These stories reiterated the acceptable trajectory of the life of a woman. Eventually a woman gains a relative position of power as mother-in-law, but this path is a long and painful one. In one of the first conversations I had with Parvati's mother-in-law Aama she underscored the pain she had endured through physical labour. She then continued:

These days there is some happiness…there is some happiness for us [old women]. But now the time to die has come. We don't know what it is like to die. Until now we have not died doing all the work we need to do. Cut grass, sow corn, sow rice…now [as we are old] there is a little bit less work.

But among some women in Badhiyagaun, especially those who were part of a generation in which education had become an option for girls in a way that had been unthinkable before, a new dimension had entered the narratives. Narratives of hardship that ultimately related to the localised sphere of the village and domestic relations were infused with the idea of development. I found that women would most often relate the difficulties they faced in life in terms of their lack of education, be it in basic literacy skills or in not having passed the higher-level School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exams. Stories of hardship were mediated by new ideas of female subjectivity informed by notions of empowerment and female autonomy to a large extent emanating from development discourse.[45] But at the same time this was

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[45] But not exclusively of course. Other elements such as the media play an important part here. However, I do contend that the numerous factors that contribute to an increasing diversity of imaginings of female subjectivity are to a large extent mediated by overarching notions of development and national progress. For example, during the many TV sessions in which the women gathered in Parvati's house we would watch *lok geet* music videos. *Lok geet* is a long-standing musical genre in Nepal in which various elements of traditional folk music and Western music are fused together, forming a 'national' sound. This genre was originally cultivated by the state run Radio Nepal in the 1950's (Greene: 2001). Many of these songs were critical commentaries of social inequality, the lack of development, the greediness of the rich-all framed within the image of a unified Nepal.

balanced by ideas of female propriety and ideal citizenship. The way in which this was really brought home to me was in a series of educational booklets I found at the Samudayik Sanstha office in Bepargaun. This series told the life story of Mira, a young village girl. I am retelling this particular story, not because I am arguing that it directly impacted on women in Badhiyagaun. Rather, the point is to illustrate the emergence of a new collective story of women in Nepal that is repeatedly told through various channels. This particular story conveys the image of a new and modern kind of woman, who despite the backwardness of the village overcame the hardships that she met. Obviously the aim of this series was to critique certain social practices that lead to the subordination of women. It presented a particular kind of female subjectivity. Mira broke free from a number of societal constraints, but at the same time seemed to gravitate toward a specific notion of female respectability.

Mira is a 'typical' Nepali village girl. As a child she is deprived of an education while her brother is sent to school. After a while her parents decide that it is time for her to get married. She refuses and begs her parents to let her go to school. But her mother tells her it is the fate of a daughter to get married. So Mira is married off. Her misfortune is compounded when it turns out that her husband is mean and beats her. Her mother-in-law as well yells at Mira and beats her if she does not complete the household chores. During a visit to her natal home Mira cries and begs her mother to let her come home, but again her mother explains that it is the fate of a woman to suffer these hardships. To cut a long story short, Mira encounters problem after problem that involve rape, murder in self-defence, which leads to a jail sentence and being turned away from both her in-laws and parents. Mira flees to Kathmandu and is lured into prostitution. Luckily an NGO worker informs her about the risks of HIV/AIDS and she gets out of the trade in time. In addition she finds another job, gets married again and has a child. Things seem to work out until Mira's husband starts drinking and spends all his earnings on alcohol. Mira now has to find a way to pay for their son's school fees. She gets together with a friend and they run a small vegetable stall at the bazaar. Eventually her husband agrees to receive treatment from a hospital for his alcoholism. The story ends with Mira living happily with her family. She still spends her free time on NGO work, disseminating information about HIV/AIDS.

This story provides a paradigmatic example of how a particular narrative is continually reproduced at the various sites in which women encounter the development apparatus in Nepal. The series neatly summarises the problems in Nepal and why there is underdevelopment. Underdevelopment is related to backward village practices or moral degeneracy of the modern cities. It illustrates that by obtaining the proper 'know how' one can distance oneself from this underdevelopment. The story retells the narrative of female hardship in Nepal and recasts it as a case of underdevelopment.

Hira's story

A crucial component of social reproduction in Badhiyagaun has been and is still the physical labour of women. Lauren G. Leve (2007) argues that it is through enduring and managing *dukkha* that women in Nepal display agency. Leve's analysis is related to the reasons why women have figured so prominently in the Maoist insurgency. She argues that contrary to the idea that women who have joined the insurgency represent a new generation of empowered women (brought about by development discourse and programmes) their choices and reasoning for doing so might have as much to do with the moral economy that values sacrifice and pain. Crucially the forging of new identities and political consciousness take shape within contexts of moral and social constraints. I find Leve's argument compelling but I think that more attention needs to be paid to the ways in which notions of *dukkha* are reframed in conjunction with the increasing impact of pervasive images and ideals of development, progress and modernity. Leve might be right that notions of female empowerment as conceptualised in the West do not necessarily figure in the minds of most young women in Nepal, but I do think that the sense of having become victim to injustice is increasingly framed in terms of having been denied the benefits of development. I would like to illustrate this point by telling the story of a young woman called Hira.

I would often spend the afternoons with Maiju sitting on her veranda drinking tea. Her house was precariously perched on the steep hill that descended towards the dirt road leading to Bepargaun. The house had been built a bit further away from the rest of Junkot, but just beneath it, a little bit closer to the road, was Hira's house. Hira was the young wife of Maiju's brother-in-law. Even though she was a married woman she

would usually spend her free time with the unmarried girls of the village, who were closer to her in age. Throughout the course of my stay it became apparent to me that the various constrains that befall the life of a married woman in Badhiyagaun set Hira apart from these girls. Sitting on Maiju's veranda I would often observe Hira going about her work. I had not talked to her much as I spent my time mostly with the older married women in Badhiyagaun and in many ways Hira appeared to be irrelevant for my research. She was not a member of the mother's group and she was not actively involved in any community development programmes. However, one early afternoon, as Maiju was taking a nap, I approached Hira asking her if we could talk. Our conversation turned out quite different from the ones I had had with other women as in effect Hira chose to tell me the story of her life. I will end this chapter by recounting Hira's story.

Hira was originally from a village in the hilly region of central Nepal a considerable journey from Badhiyagaun. When I met her she was twenty years old and had lived less than three years in Junkot. It was while on a visit to her mother's younger sister in a village fifteen minutes walk from Badhiyagaun that her own wedding had been planned and formalised by her aunt, without the knowledge of her parents.[46] She was seventeen at the time. Her husband, Dan Bahadur, was almost thirty. She denied that it had been a "love marriage", but during her visit they had met and Dan Bahadur had liked her. Her aunt's family were set on the union. From the way Hira relayed the events they had presented him as a good man, something that Hira did not dispute. "They said that he would be a good husband. He had asked and they gave me. It happened very quickly." For obvious reasons Hira's wedding resulted in a major and painful transition. She had to leave her family and friends and at the time she had not known a word Gurung which was not spoken in her natal village. Only four months after the wedding Dan Bahadur left for Malaysia. His absence clearly had an effect on conditions at home. Her parents-in-law ran a small shop in the main part of Badhiyagaun and Hira was left to do all the farm work. She was not only left with an immense workload, she daily had to endure their bickering. There were frequent quarrels between her mother-in-law and herself about the remittances her husband

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[46] Hira was adamant that it was not her parents that had given her away in marriage, but her aunt.

sent home. Hira's mother-in-law would accuse her of manipulating him to send her a larger share.

Hira: It is hard. My parents-in-law insult me and yell at me.
Miriam: Would it have been easier if your husband was here?
Hira: It would have been easier. To do the work it would have been easier. They [parents-in-law] wouldn't be insulting me.

At twenty Hira had already experienced a fair share of pain. I had not asked her about children. I knew she didn't have any and had assumed that because Dan Bahadur had left so soon after the wedding that it had been decided that they wait. But suddenly Hira said:

I had a child, but it died. Maybe because I was so young (…)
For such a long time I had carried the child inside of me, but it died. It died inside the stomach. Maybe it died because I was so young. Maybe I was too young to have a child.

For obvious reasons, Hira spoke of the things that had happened in her life in terms of *dukkha* because it described the pain that she had and was still enduring. But in so doing she didn't convey the injustice of what had happened in terms of fate, but in terms of a course of events that should have been avoided. Hira attributed the tragic loss of her child to having been married too early. When I had asked her about what married life was like she again made a point of her early marriage, this time as a general problem for many girls.

It's painful (*dukkhcha*). To marry at an early age, to move to another house, to have children, to do the work that one is told to do. Its painful. If the girls aren't married off early they can study, and go somewhere else and find a job

Compared to many of the older women in Badhiyagaun Hira did not self-deprecatingly proclaim that she knew nothing or lacked the knowledge to have anything useful to say. Even when I asked her about things she claimed to have no knowledge about, such as the activities of the mother's group, she would relate this fact to her own particular circumstances. She explained to me that, as her mother-in-law was a member of the mother's group it was unlikely that she as well was entitled

to membership. Later during our conversation she reiterated this point by stating "perhaps only one person from the household can be a member." And again a little bit later she suggested that maybe when her mother-in-law leaves the group she could become a member. It was evident that Hira was doubtful of whether this was actually a legitimate reason for her exclusion from the group. Most probably the particular power relations of the household to which she belonged, the dynamics of which became apparent during our conversation, determined the reason.

Hira did not relate her story only in terms of an acceptance that the life of a woman is by definition, through her position in society, hard and something that has to be endured. In the way in which she told her story she placed herself within a competing narrative of what it means to be a woman. She made it clear that the idea that her life could have taken an entirely different course was plausible and indeed legitimate. What Hira's story, or more precisely her telling of it, illustrates is a sense of social marginalisation that is informed by the notion of somehow being on the wrong side of a great divide.

Hira's story is not particularly novel in terms of the experiences of many young women in Nepal. The reason I have chosen retell it here is because I believe it conveys the ways in which young women understand their place in society in profoundly new ways. It also illustrates the way in which a generation of women who to varying degrees have been educated in government schools have obtained what Laura Ahearn has called "a certain type of cultural literacy" informed by a national discourse of development and progress (Ahearn: 2004, 246). Undoubtedly exposure to the activities of development NGOs, and the rhetoric of underdevelopment and backwardness, accompanied with new and compelling notions of alternative femininities, played an important role. Hira expressed a sense of profound injustice by relating her story, not so much to the unjust acts of others, but rather by relating the events in her life to their disconnectedness with an ideal that appeared not only to be legitimate but increasingly likely for many young girls.

In this chapter I have illustrated the emergence of a narrative in which the agency of women is conveyed as being constrained by underdevelopment. My aim has been to point out the continuities and disjunctures inherent in gendered social reproduction in Badhiyagaun. As was pointed out in the previous chapter, the investment in education

was one of the most important incentives for savings and loans. This was related to the idea of 'getting ahead'. Having been denied education was similarly couched within the image of having been 'left behind'. In the next chapter I will explore in what ways descriptions of hardship were related to illustrating social difference. As will become clear, distancing oneself from underdevelopment, epitomised by the village, was crucial in effecting social mobility through difference.

Chapter Five. Telling the story of the new generation

There is a big difference from before. Before it was only women who cooked. Washing the dishes, washing clothes, cleaning the house…all this work the women would do. As well as work in the fields. My father used to hit my mother a lot. In the village it used to be like this for a lot of women. And if the wife gave birth to only daughters and there was no son they would marry again. That's what they used to do. Now it's not like that. Now one will work together to get things done. But, now as well maybe one percent is still like that. (…) Before if there was anything [important] to be done only the men would do it. It was like this in the home as well. If there was something to be done they would not ask their wife. But now if there is something that has to be done they will ask their wives. When they need to make a decision, they will seek advice from the wife. Before so many men did business on their own. But now women do all these things. (Sapana)

I introduced Sapana in chapter two, and I have chosen to return to her here because the passage above sums up a narrative of change encapsulated by what I came to learn as the emergence of a "new generation" of young, and invariably educated, men and women.[47] It conveys an account of change in which hardship was consistently, but never totally, placed in the past. For example, Sapana would often talk about the hardship of women in the villages, but there was a definite pattern that indicated a rupture from a problematic past. Our conversations were perhaps limited by the conceptual boundary I had constructed between past and present, but the distinction between past, present and future were often blurred. The hardships of village women were presented as indications of a residual, yet at times pervasive, past. Sapana's own story was certainly presented as containing a rupture that conveyed a sense of having moved beyond the constraints of the village.

Sapana: Of the women of my village I was the first one to complete the SLC exams. My elder sister studied as well but after ninth class she got married. And before that nobody had let their daughters study. But our uncle (*kaka*) had studied. And he said that daughters have to study. And because there was a school near to our village we went to school. Until class five we studied easily right, but then my grandmother died and my father married again. He brought a stepmother [even though he took a second wife he did not divorce from Sapana's mother]. And he tried to get us to quit our studies. But I didn't quit even though it became very hard to study. In the village none of the women were able to study and take the SLC exams. But I did it. It was very hard. We would get up at five thirty or six in

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[47] I have used quotation marks here to indicate this term was spoken in English. However it does not mean that informants continually made reference to this term. Rather, the particular narratives I present in this chapter are indicative of this sentiment. Henceforth I will not use quotation marks.

the morning to cut fodder. The drinking water tap was far away, and we went to the tap to fetch water for the house. We would get dressed, carry our books and go to school. The primary school was in the village but to study in high school we had to walk for one and a half hours. In the evenings we first had to do work and then study. At that time there was no electricity. We used to light kerosene lamps. I studied like that. Maybe if my mother had not supported me I would not have studied either.

Miriam: Your mother supported you?

Sapana: My mother had to work a lot right. And my father would say 'your daughter is studying, if you don't work who will do the work?' so my mother worked a lot. And during the remaining time we would help her.

Miriam: But these days in your village all the girls are studying?

Sapana: All the girls are in school right. But they have to do a lot of work at home…but despite this they all go to school. They all go to school but there is a lot of work in the home…cut fodder, make food, clean the house, wash clothes. They have to work. But after class ten [SLC exams] they can get ahead. These days they treat boys and girls equally when it comes to education.

I have retold a fragment of Sapana's story here because it in many ways conveys the sense of having overcome hardship in spite of constraints. It says something of the material changes that have taken place in her village, the acknowledgment that girls in the villages do experience hardship and the final contention that the idea of gender equality has become a legitimate normative assumption. Crucially, Sapana pointed out that people now have the opportunity to get ahead, to pursue a course of action that is not entirely determined by the constrains of the village. NGO workers such as Sapana did not singularly and uniformly tell this story. Fragments of it emerged as part of other stories, such as Hira's in the preceding chapter, or in casual comments made by women like Shanta Maya and Phul Maya in Junkot, in which education was conveyed as a precondition for the availability of certain choices and course of action.[48]

In this chapter I will explore the ways in which the notion of the emergence of a new generation tells us something about particular ideas about agency determined by new expectations in terms of social mobility. With these expectations come new anxieties. I argue here that through the telling of narratives of change some women positioned themselves socially in juxtaposition to others. I also give an indication of how bodily practices, such as how one dressed, was constitutive of this process. To a large extent this involved negotiating a position between 'backward' village women and decadent

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[48] I have made references to Phul Maya and Shanta Maya in chapters two and three.

city women. As Maiju put it, "The women in the city just sit around. For them there are a lot of facilities. They have lots of money."

Telling the difference

The last week of my stay in Badhiyagaun coincided with the Nepali New Year.[49] From the early afternoon we had been served food at Parvati's older brothers' house in the main part of Badhiyagaun. Parvati's eldest brother who had spent several years in the Indian army had built a house in Pokhara, but was now in the village on a visit. Parvati's other brother had just come home after three years in Dubai. Not only was the whole family gathered for the first time in several years, a few days before the first democratic elections in almost nine years had been held. Clearly there was reason for celebration and alcohol had been served throughout the day. The women of the household had prepared large amounts of food and they had spent the whole day serving the steady stream of relatives and friends who had stopped by. During the day the men had gradually disappeared to drink and play cards somewhere else. In the evening I talked to Parvati about the festivities.

Parvati: These days the young men don't play cards. The men of the "new generation" don't really drink that much. They don't hit their wives. And when it comes to taking decisions there is a sense of equality. If the man needs to take a decision he will ask the wife. That's why these days there is a sense of "equality". Before they said that a man couldn't do household work, that he should not make food or wash the dishes. But these days the men do household work. They cooperate.

Miriam: But are you talking about your husband? Or are men in general like this?

Parvati: Well, only a few are like this. Even these days they say that a man should not wash his wife's clothes. That's why it is hard.

Miriam: Why is it like this do you think?

Parvati: I think it is because of earlier "society" that is like this (*pahilako "society" tyestai cha*). Even if the husbands who understand (*bhujne srimanle*) will wash their wives clothes the people of the village will say that one should not do that.

I can give you an "example". Once I was ill and my husband took his and my clothes to the water tap to wash them. And you know what the village people said? They asked if he was really going to wash his wife's clothes. And then he returned without having washed my clothes!

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[49] New Year is celebrated on the first day of the first month, Baisakh, of the official Nepali lunar calendar.

Clearly there was ambivalence to the behaviour of men of the new generation. However, Parvati conveyed a sense of radically new expectations in terms of domestic labour and gender relations. The rendering of altered gender relations emerged in conversations with other women as well. And the contrasting of new and old constituted the expression of this change. I remember on one of the last days I spent in Badhiyagaun I was sitting in the shade with a young woman called Meena. Phul Maya's mother-in-law sat down with us for a few minutes to talk. This was one of the few times I had spoken to her. Usually she would say something to me in passing, often in Gurung. To me she appeared slightly enigmatic, as if the unintelligible Gurung phrases she flung at me contained some hidden meaning. I can't remember what prompted it but somehow we were talking about men in the village. As a final statement to the conversation she theatrically made a gesture of drinking accompanied by a stagger. She then picked up a small branch that had fallen to the ground and beat it in the air. She laughed and tossed the branch. "That's what men are like" she said. To me the message was not new, women often made a point of problems of alcohol abuse and domestic violence. At times these problems seemed to appear slightly clichéd, as a generic account of the general hardship of women.[50] But Meena hastened to add that most young men do not behave in this way and that in general relationships among young people are characterised by mutual respect. The sentiments expressed by Parvati and Meena reflected very real material changes that have taken place. But where did the notion of equality, often spoken in English, come from?

Parvati and Sapana were by virtue of their employment with Samudayik Sanstha and by the nature of the work they did inclined toward speaking in terms of an emerging present. But other women in Badhiyagaun were often in some way or other also active participants of workshops and other activities related to community development in which particular visions for the future were articulated. For example, members of the

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[50] I am not suggesting that alcohol abuse and domestic violence are not serious problems in Badhiyagaun. During my stay I was made aware of several instances in which beatings had taken place. Other women would sometimes interfere. I was once witness to one such interference. Parvati and I had just arrived from Bepargaun and had decided to stop by Maiju's house. Suddenly we heard screams coming from the road. Maiju and Parvati summoned Hira and the three of them managed to interfere and stop a severe beating, in which a drunken man was accusing his wife of an extramarital affair.

Laxmidevi Cooperative had attended "gender training".[51] These workshops tended to present gendered inequality as in disjuncture with an emergent modernity. During a conversation with Maiju, in which we on the most part talked about her membership of the Laxmidevi Cooperative and her active involvement in a number of community development projects in Badhiyagaun, I asked what the gender training was about.

Maiju: Women and men have to be equal
Miriam: What else?
Maiju: What else [laughing]…a lot… its already forgotten! Boys as well should do the work girls do…but women are also able to do the kind of work that men do. One should not differentiate.
Miriam: And in your opinion this is right?
Maiju: Yes I feel good about it. Not only women are human...men are also human. The kind of work that women do, men are able to do as well. And the kind of work that men do, women are able to do. (…) But women are not given a "chance" to do these things (*garnako lagi "chance" paena*). That's why they have been left behind (*tyas karan pachi pareko*).

These workshops clearly questioned the validity of the gendered division of labour with its implicit reproduction of normative gender difference. But as pointed out in the previous chapter people tended to speak openly about the hardship women faced, both emotionally and in terms of labour. This was not something that needed to be identified through "gender training". However, among those women who had attended such training workshops there did seem to be a questioning of gendered inequality in terms of underdevelopment. In addition, this questioning involved new ideas about the entry of women into arenas that had traditionally been off bounds.

New anxieties

A new generation of young women in Badhiyagaun had grown up under very different circumstances than their mothers and grandmothers. Some of them could legitimately make certain choices that had been unacceptable a generation before. At the same time, these women had to negotiate a tricky balance as it appeared as if new expectations brought with them new anxieties of how to be appropriately modern. In his study of middle class culture in the Kathmandu Valley Mark Liechty (2003) has illustrated the difficult tensions inherent in forging middle class identity. This process

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[51] Again, quotation marks are used to indicate that this was a term spoken in English.

is caught up in negotiating the signifiers of modernity, which in Kathmandu is marked by the consumption of media culture, fashion and education, and notions of honour and prestige. Liechty relates the anxieties of respectability in particular to "doing fashion" and the tensions inherent in consuming the markers of modernity that are invariably "tinged with immorality" (Liechty: 2003, 79).

The patterns of consumption in Badhiyagaun are not comparable to the capital city, and the urban context of the Kathmandu Valley with its considerable middle-class population complicates Liechty's conclusions for our purposes here. But his study of the middle class in Kathmandu provides some powerful insights to the tensions that form part of the imagining and experience of being part of a modern generation. The young women I got to know in Badhiyagaun would measure themselves and others in terms of what I perceived as specifically middle class notions of respectability. The anxieties following from this illuminate the fault lines expressed between the city and the village, between being modern or backward. The middle class in Kathmandu is not a unified category but the sense of middle classness constitutes a social space that is characterised by:

(…) a shared project of locating oneself in a new and legitimate space between two devalued poles. This space is one separated from the "vulgar" lives of the national elite, whose distinction lies in their emulation of a foreign modernism, and from a lower class trapped in equally vulgar lifestyles of "tradition" and poverty (Liechty: 2003, 67).

In my mind this characterisation describes a general strive toward configuring and maintaining a modern identity. The excerpt below from my conversation with Sapana provides an illustration of the tensions and anxieties of negotiating a modern identity. Sapana's subjective observation conveys how being modern is rife with problems in a country that is defined as perennially underdeveloped.

Within Nepal it is very hard for people from Kathmandu to come to Bepargaun. Because in the city they don't have to leave their house. If they leave the house they go to college. And from college they will go back to the house. And if they go anywhere else they go to the "cyber". They have just travelled around within the "valley". If they go out and see the villages they feel scared. And another thing is that they are not allowed to leave. Its is said that the women in the city are so "free". It is said that it is not difficult for them to do anything. But those people will loose their honour (*ijjat*). And perhaps for

them it is very difficult to leave the house. (…) Before the women in the villages had not studied, now some have studied a little bit. And they are able to go places on their own, right. They are able to work. But in the "city area" maybe "fifty percent" of the women are "forward" and for "fifty percent" it is very hard. I have seen this.

There are several interesting points about Sapana's observation. She is clearly describing the middle class – those who can afford to send their daughters to college. Their fear of the villages reflects the sense of uncertainty in relation to that which is constructed as backward. At the same time there is a sense of ambivalence in terms of certain 'modern' freedoms. Sapana seemed to convey the sense that village women possess a new kind of agency precipitated by education. She also seems to imply that village women are not constrained by middle class notions of propriety and honour. But the incident described below complicates Sapana's telling of village women's relative freedom.

During the beginning of my stay in Badhiyagaun I was invited to join Parvati and Sapana on a work related field trip. We were travelling with a busload of teenagers, who were all members of youth clubs in the district, as part of a networking and sharing initiative with NGOs and youth clubs from other districts. It was a full day journey in a crowded buss full of teenage boys and girls who were loudly singing and joking. Most of the girls were dressed in jeans and t-shirts and a number of them wore makeup. Parvati commented disapprovingly to me that one girl in particular was wearing a low cut t-shirt. Later that night the girls were gathered in one of the cramped hotel rooms and Sapana grasped the opportunity to lecture the girls on appropriate behaviour and dress. She stressed that as they were all in some way "social workers" committed to the betterment and development of their communities a certain amount of respectability was required. Dressing inappropriately would ultimately send the wrong message, confusing people to believe that they were not serious about their business. She explained that if the girls were concerned about gaining equality and respect in relation to boys, dressing in "sexy" clothes was ultimately detrimental to this goal. To my surprise Parvati then presented me as an example of someone who is "free" and yet displays a respectable comportment. She explained that even though I come from a "modern" society where women are "free" I did not dress or behave vulgarly. I was jolted by Parvati's remarks not only because

I didn't really identify with the virtues she ascribed to me. I had consciously dressed and acted in certain ways during research that I hoped were appropriate, reflecting my own assumptions about respectability.

Occasionally during conversations with Samudayik Sanstha staff issues of respectability would surface. After the winter months the tourist season had started and there were frequent comments on the dress and behaviour of foreign women as exemplifying some kind of moral degeneracy. Nepali visitors from Kathmandu dressed in high heels and low-cut t-shirts were frowned upon as well. Simultaneously there was a concerted distancing from other village women who seemed to represent backwardness. This did not only occur by speaking of village women as targets of the work they conducted through the introduction of education, cleanliness and healthcare or other strategies to empower them. All in all they tended to attach value to specific forms of female comportment that rendered other village women morally contentious. In this way they would consider smoking and drinking, or what they viewed as vulgar speech as highly problematic in terms of appropriate behaviour for women. Women I knew who were in involved in development work would create a conceptual difference between themselves and what they referred to as the *burhiharu*. *Burhi* literally means old woman, but in the context in which the word was used I sensed that it implied a certain type of village woman. When we discussed change in Badhiyagaun there were often references to how the *burhi* women were still backward. They were described as not caring about their appearance, that they are illiterate, uneducated, and superstitious and indulge in bad and unhealthy habits such as drinking and smoking. Generally they were portrayed as possessing inadequate 'knowledge' that at times was directly detrimental to their own and their children's health and well-being. Sometimes this was spoken about as something of the past, and sometimes as a current problem in the villages. In an interview with Sharda in which she described the benefits of the Samudayik Sanstha awareness programmes this portrayal clearly came across.

Before they [village women] smoked a lot of cigarettes and drank a lot. They didn't do much sanitation. And they were careless with the children. But these days they are not careless and they do practice cleanliness. (Sharda)

Dressed for difference

In retrospect I have come to appreciate how clothing played a crucial part in the dynamics of social differentiation in Badhiyagaun.[52] This did not only pertain to ideas about female decency. Or rather, dressing 'decently' had as much to do with making a statement about one's social position. The way some women in Badhiyagaun dressed had everything to do with being modern in specific ways. The seemingly mundane activities of what one wore at home and what one changed into when going to Bepargaun was of utmost importance. In Junkot most women would wear a *lungi* (a printed sarong) with *cholo* (blouse tied with knots) or a t-shirt. The older women would wear a *patuka*, a cloth belt, tied several times around the waist. I did not observe any young women wear a *patuka*, except when they dressed up in the full traditional Gurung dress for festivities. After a couple of weeks of my stay I also began to wear a *lungi* and t-shirt. I thought the variously printed *lungis* were pretty, and I wanted to show off my new style on visits to Bepargaun. This did not go down very well. I was frequently reminded to change before going to the office, and not only by members of the household. On my way, which would always include several stops to chat with passers- bys, I would be asked if I was really going to the office dressed like that. The women I would accompany to Bepargaun would always change into *kurta surawal* whenever they left the village.[53] It was evident that dressing in village clothes was not something one did if one worked in an office. Young girls who would wear *lungis* in the village, often tied much lower at the waist, would either dress in *kurta surawal* or jeans when going into town. This does not mean that all village women would change their style of dress when going to town. In fact, most women would wear *lungi* wherever they went. But it was evident that among some women, making a distinction between village and town, home and outside was of importance.

On the day of my final departure, Maiju and Parvati were going to take me to the bus leaving from Bepargaun to Kathmandu. They were both wonderfully dressed in sky blue *saris,* as it happened to be the yearly anniversary celebration for the Laxmidevi

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[52] I would like to thank Arild Engelsen Ruud for making this clearer to me during one of our conversations.

[53] *Kurta Surawal* (*salwar kameez* in Hindi) is an outfit used all over South Asia. It consists of a long shirt or tunic and loose pyjama-like trousers.

Cooperative that day.[54] Seeing these two women in *saris* was not completely new to me. However, most of the time they would wear *kurta surawal*, except when they were in the house, where they would always change into *lungis*. It turned out that Parvati and Maiju were wearing the 'official' Laxmidevi Cooperative *sari*. Traditionally in Nepal *kurta surawal* and *sari* have been worn by the upper caste Hindu elite. In an organisation of mainly Magar, Newar and Gurung women then, who came from villages where *saris* had never traditionally been worn, it had been decided that *sari* was the appropriate dress for its members.

The importance of clothing has gained increased attention in much anthropological work over the years. This interest has occurred in conjunction with mounting concerns about agency, and how this is related to bodily practice and performance (Hansen: 2004). In addition, the meaning attributed to clothing and the importance of fashion says something about consumption as a marker of class (Liechty: 2003). A discussion of the importance of clothing in Badhiyagaun merits more attention than what I have been able to say about it here. I have chosen to point it out in order to illustrate that there were various ways of staking out social difference in Badhiyagaun. I am not suggesting that making statements through how one dresses differently in discrete spheres is new in Badhiyagaun. I am sure that clothing has always in some way functioned as an illustration of social difference. Rather, my point is that the ways in which some women chose to dress, or not to dress, is indicative of the kind of modernity that they were laying claim to.

In conversations with women such as Parvati, Sapana or Maiju, it was apparent that there were a number of aspects of 'modernity' that were considered highly problematic. This related to perceived problems of fast paced and materialistic lifestyles in Kathmandu resulting in the break down of family ties and relations of reciprocity. They talked about visits to Kathmandu as stressful as it was a dirty and dangerous city. However, other aspects of modern life were highly valued. This related to a number of identified freedoms enjoyed by women in the West, such freedom of movement. In particular they valued the freedom of being able to put off marriage in order to pursue other aspirations such as work. This was coupled by a

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[54] *Sari* is a garment worn by women in the Indian subcontinent. Basically, it is a long strip of cloth draped over the body in various styles.

sense of the relative selfishness of Western women. It was assumed that in Europe and America women never breastfed their babies out of vanity. When they spoke about the behaviour of Western women, whom on the most part were tourists they encountered in Bepargaun, they would also refer to what they identified as immoral or vulgar behaviour. In particular this related to tourist couples holding hands and kissing in public. I remember Parvati telling me about how she in astonishment had observed a Western couple bathing completely naked at one of the public water taps in Bepargaun. But even though Parvati and her friends reacted with contempt at the indecent behaviour of Westerners they did indicate that it was not so much the behaviour in itself that was problematic. What troubled them the most was that it was completely out of place. In this way Sapana would tell me that it was acceptable that people in my country behaved in this or that way, but in Nepal it was simply not appropriate. The emulation of Western dress and behaviour among Nepali youth was clearly problematic as the incident with the teenage girls indicates.

In this chapter I have presented narratives of change that tended to indicate a notion of progress. Despite the ambivalence contained in these stories I believe they can tell us something about new or emerging conceptions of gender relations and female agency. More importantly I believe that the ways in which these stories were told, and the ways in which narratives of change were conveyed, were about claims to modernity. Young women in Badhiyagaun, in this chapter exemplified by young development workers such as Parvati and Sapana, were concerned about being modern. In a country where social hierarchy is to a large extent determined by one's relative position in relation to *bikas* these women were continually attempting to:

(…) not only position themselves vis-à-vis modernity through multifarious practices but also struggle[d] to reposition themselves, sometimes through deploying the very codes of the modern that have framed them as its other (Schein: 1999, 364).

This repositioning took shape through descriptions about social change and progress, and the ways in which women like Parvati and Sapana, located themselves within these processes. Claiming modernity happened through how one spoke about others - their habits, clothing or values. In addition, through particular practices, such as how one dressed, a distancing from the village was reinforced. Finally, the emphasis on

equal relations among men and women as a defining feature of the new generation tells us something about a particular imagining of modernity. It illustrates the importance of the, at times, intersecting discourses of gender equality, development and national progress.

Conclusion:

The imagining of modernity in Nepal is expressed through the idiom of development. As such the experience of modernity is felt as never fully complete. Development, or the absence of it, denotes a placement within a progressive continuum toward an imagined condition in the future. In this paper I have related this to the wider context of the structural location of Nepal in a world in which development aid has become a defining feature of international relations. The designation of Nepal as underdeveloped occurs through the large-scale influx of development aid, in all its manifestations, to the country. Nepalis understand their belonging to the nation in terms of this condition of underdevelopment. But the ways in which people negotiate the identity of being underdeveloped is not singular, and is mediated by a host of contingent circumstances. More importantly the imagining of modernity as development does not occur in a vacuum outside of social structures. In other words, imagining modernity is related to complex relations of difference and power. Social positioning in Nepal is about staking out one's relative position in the process of *becoming* developed.

In this paper I have presented narratives of change that I encountered in Badhiyagaun. While I have provided an exploration of women's membership in the village mother's group and the Laxmidevi Cooperative, the aim for doing so has been to give an illustration of how this is constitutive of modalities of social difference. As pointed out in the introduction to this paper the intention has not been to assess whether women possess more agency now than before due to the presence and activities of development NGOs. Rather, I have explored how different conceptions *about* agency have changed over time. In addition, I have alluded to ideas about what constitutes constraints to agency.

Women in Badhiyagaun identified in various ways with being underdeveloped, and they expressed the degree of their individual and collective agency in connection with the constraints brought about by the condition of being underdeveloped. By way of illustration, women spoke about having become 'able to speak'. Relating this newfound condition was expressed in different ways and the meaning ascribed to it

was not uniform. Sometimes it appeared as if 'being able to speak' was contingent on being educated, a crucial marker of social standing. The pervasive articulation of this phrase says something about how agency in some instances was articulated in terms of development discourse in Nepal in which concepts such as 'empowerment' have figured prominently.

In chapter four I argued that social reproduction in Badhiyagaun is to a large extent predicated on daily practices of gendered differentiation. The symbolic position of women within the household is derived from their labour, which in turn sustains particular relations of power. Marriage marks the most defining rupture in terms of a woman's relative position. Married women are confronted with a whole array of expectations and constraints, often experienced as painful. Speaking of pain and hardship in regard to being a woman is constitutive of processes of naturalising this particular experience. At times it can function as an articulation of critique or resistance. In Badhiyagaun narratives of pain and hardship were occasionally reframed by a set of new expectations, which related to an emergent collective story: that of women bearing the pain of underdevelopment. These narratives identified the relative constraints that women encounter as determined by the injustice of underdevelopment.

I do not propose that currently women in Badhiyagaun are in some way more aware or critical of the gender identity ascribed to them than before. Women have always given expression to felt injustice, such as through ritual practices or songs. In addition, even though we can identify a particular gender ideology as dominant its corporeal and material effects are never complete or singular. However, the dominance of a particular ideology reflects the modalities of structural power relations within a given social setting. Rather than emergent narratives of hardship indicating a break from the past I propose that they say something about the pervasiveness of the metanarrative of development in Nepal.

In the final chapter I explored in what ways narratives of change were related to affirming social difference. The concept of a new generation, expressed by some young women, tells us something about new expectations in terms of social mobility. However, with these expectations come new anxieties, related to being modern in an

appropriate way. Women who identified with what they called the new generation spoke about themselves as educated women who had managed to 'get ahead' *despite* the constraints of the village. This in turn correlates with how they positioned themselves socially in juxtaposition to others. This positioning was predicated on negotiating a fine balance between the 'old' and the 'new'. This anxiety illustrates that some women were not only concerned about being modern. They imagined a particular modernity that precluded particular ways of behaving, speaking and dressing. The myriad ways in which women in Badhiyagaun experienced and acted out this anxiety are not sufficiently described in this paper. I have tried to give an indication of this experience in terms of how a particular group of women spoke about others. But the various modes in which the anxiety about being modern was expressed through a host of performative practices warrant much more attention than provided here. It would be interesting to explore further how rural women who do not identify with the identity ascribed to them, as illiterate, ignorant and backward villagers, act, dress and consume in ways that indicate a distancing from this identity.

Young women in Badhiyagaun grew up during a time when the presence and activities of development NGOs undoubtedly had an impact on notions of social change. Their mothers' generation were the first targets of the type of participatory community development initiatives that emerged in the 1980s all over rural Nepal. Programmes such as evening literacy classes or income generating actives did perhaps not result in the intended material changes for the women involved, but they most certainly generated concepts of collective and individual agency impacting on later generations of women. In addition, within the span of only a couple of decades there occurred a host of political, social and economic changes in Nepal that resulted in substantial material alterations from one generation to another. Increased access to education, and not least the emergence of private education, compounded the expectations for possibilities of social mobility.

In this paper I have primarily been concerned with the discursive and material effects of development initiatives in Badhiyagaun on emergent ideas about agency. There are of course a number of important factors that are not adequately explored in this paper. I have failed to consider in any detail the importance of changed patterns of consumption that are intimately linked with demonstrating social difference. Even

though consumer culture has been explored as a defining feature of the construction of 'modern' identities in Nepal, this exploration has on the most pat been confined to the urban setting of Kathmandu (Liechty: 2003). It seems to me that when speaking of the experience of modernity in Nepal we tend to make Kathmandu stand in for the whole country. Further considerations of how consumption plays a part in fashioning a modern identity in the rest of Nepal would be of great value; particularly in light of the tremendous material changes that have occurred due to extensive labour migration and the remittances that accrue from this.

Before I conclude I would like to return to some of the points I made at the beginning of this paper. In trying to give a sense of the experience of modernity among women in Badhiyagaun I have perhaps introduced a certain amount of rigidity to what has been identified as this experience. But, as I already suggested at the outset, women in Badhiyagaun do not inhabit one subjective location. Throughout in this paper I have argued that the development/modernity nexus is hegemonic in Nepal. But hegemony is never total, and the metanarrative of development contains its own contradictions. This is not only apparent in the differences between women in Badhiyagaun. None of my informants can be said to have expressed one singular subjective position. It is not the case that these women, or the at times conflicting stories they told, are somehow fragments of the social whole in Badhiyagaun. Rather, each story contained its own contradictions and ambiguities.

In the rendering of these stories I hope to have given an indication of structures of feeling that tell us something about modern life in Badhiyagaun.

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