

Participant Task – Sudhindra Sharma

Broad context and historical overview

- Kathmandu, currently the capital city of Nepal, has had a continuous history of around two thousand years.
- During the Rana era (1846-1950), Kathmandu Valley with its several small urban settlements was largely secluded from external influences. The Rana rulers, emulating the British, built palaces in the Greco-Roman style. These were located away from the traditional urban centers based on Indic cosmology and architectural style (cf. Mary Slusser). The unintended effect of this was that it paved the way for urban expansion i.e., out and away from the old urban centers.
- Nepal was not colonized. Has no colonial history. The colonial ruler has not had an imprint on the formation of the city. The structure and formation of Kathmandu, therefore, different from the cities of the rest of the sub-continent, which generally tend to have a colonial imprint. (And in this regard would make for an interesting contrast between Delhi and Nairobi).
- There has not been any specific agency that has been mandated for allocating lands.
- Much of the land in the Kathmandu Valley used to be *Guthi* land – land donated to temples by kings, courtesans and wealthy merchants.
- Urbanization of the past 60 years has meant or has been possible by the increasing encroachment of *guthi* lands.
- 1951 saw the beginning of the era of aid. Nepal as a front-line state against Communist China. Nepal, seen by India as its backyard. The era of aid beginning with US and Indian aid. Foreign aid regime in this non-colonized country has played much of the role that colonialism played in the colonies. Foreign advisors and donor along with Nepal's commitment in global organizations such as the UN shaping the formation of modern ministries and departments, including those mandated for urban development.
- The gradual emergence of municipal organizations and its growing responsibility and authority – initial mandate – collecting the city's garbage, cleaning, setting standards for approving the construction of new houses.
- Momentum towards urbanization accelerating from 1990 onwards.
- One of the main constraints of Kathmandu – no public land available; mainly private land; housing companies buying private lands and constructing buildings in those lands.
- Environmental and water dimension – the natural course of the Bagmati river being restricted by embankments on both sides of the river. Appropriation of the part of the natural river-way i.e., former bank, to construct a road by the municipality versus squatters setting up squatter settlements. Both of these sets of human actors are actually appropriating for themselves what used to be the meandering river's natural banks.

General background information related to urban poor

- Urban poor in the context of Kathmandu as those people that supply various kinds of informal services to the well-off. Domestic helpers; porters; labourers involved in housing construction industry; taxi and bus drivers; street vendors; garbage collectors; professions ranging from the unskilled (labourers or *jyami* in Nepali) to the semi-skilled (plumbers, carpenters, grill-workers, electricians, masons, etc.)
- Migrant labour coming from poor Indian states such as Bihar; Orissa; these are, however, more skilled compared to the Nepali worker and generally fall under semi-skilled category.

- The poor are delivering services and the well-off are getting services. Based on either daily wage rates – determined by market prices or on a monthly basis (such as in the case of domestic helpers).
- What kinds of services do the poor have in the areas they are living in? Manner living in the squatter areas – areas where make-shift houses have been constructed illegally. Others living as tenants in poor neighborhoods. Paying low rents in poor neighborhoods.
- Urban bureaucracies that might form crucial sites of research for the comparative project? Recently reconstructed municipalities. Kathmandu Maha Nagar Palika. Lalitpur Nagarpalika. Bhaktapur Nagarpalika. Also the presence of the various line agencies that provide services such as water and sewerage, electricity, etc.
- Utilities and urban infrastructure; access to services – whether or not they have water and sanitation, electricity? Tend to send their children to public or government schools (which are “free”); access to remaining traditional water spouts (many of which are drying up) or community taps; sanitation – public toilets? These also tend to access the government hospitals. Whether it be government schools or government hospitals the poor demand and seek access to such services because accessing private services are beyond their means.
- What is the relationship between electoral politics and policy making? Political parties eyeing the squatters as an important voting block; political parties engaging in double speak – the language of modern planning and development with well-off residents and covertly supporting the squatters as important vote banks.
- Example of contested space – Lalitpur sub-metropolis. “Commons” – the river and its shores; the river subsequently being restricted to the area within the embankments. The area that earlier used to be river bank – now has become “commons”. This “commons” being contested. The well off people’s preference for a park that has been named UN Park versus poor’s preference for retaining the squatter area. Coupled with municipality’s preference for using the area as road since because of lack of space or the high value of land, it is not possible to construct roads in other locations.

Questions posed and their tentative answers in the context of Kathmandu

1. How are households of the urban poor taking action to gain what they need?
 - Relatively strong organizations, which are affiliated to political parties and function as political parties’ sister organizations
 - Need access to electricity and water; in fact have access to these
 - Access to these services mediated through local (party-affiliated) organizations
2. What sorts of formal and informal work offer opportunities for men and women to make a living?
 - Women as domestic workers and street vendors; selling green grocery in the street pavements during certain times of the day
 - Men as porters; laborers involved in housing construction industry; street vendors; garbage collectors;
 - Some men also engaged in semi-skilled professions (taxi and bus drivers; plumbers; carpenters; grill-workers; electricians; masons; etc.)
3. Are there ways in which community based organizations and NGOs are representing and supporting the claims and negotiations of the urban poor with employers, city agencies and other?

- Most of the NGOs have been transformed into service delivery NGOs; after the earthquake of April and May 2015, these have been pre-occupied with re-building and re-construction
 - NGOs tend to be less associated with right-advocacy
4. How are women and men in informal settle means able to gain education of health care and how is that changing?
- Access to public or government schools (which are “free”) and government hospitals continue to be important; relatively easy access to government school – the government schools need to increase the number of attending students so as to justify the number of teachers they have; access to remaining traditional water spouts (many of which are drying up) or community taps; sanitation – public toilets? The poor also tend to access the government hospitals. As in the case of the government schools, the government hospitals provide services for nominal costs (though the line for these may be very long and the services not-so-good).
5. Are national and municipal agencies attempting to upgrade the living conditions of the urban poor? Are agencies responsive to concerns of residence? What is happening as a result of such action?
- Success in some locations while in other locations the results have not been positive
6. Are the poor able to achieve secure housing? What obstacles hinder this achievement?
7. Is there action focused on women’s domestic work and the risks and indignities that women face? Unable to answer.