

Situated Informalities: *Sukumbasi* and urban politics in Kathmandu¹



Photo: marking the 4th anniversary of the demolition and eviction at Thapathali. *Sukumbasi* have continued to live adjacent to the rubble of their previous dwellings since the razing in May 2012. Leaders from various political parties and *sukumbasi* organizations were invited to speak on *sukumbasi* issues during this occasion.

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Fragment

On the 4th of May 2016, the inhabitants of Paurakhi Basti, the youngest *sukumbasi* settlement in Kathmandu marked their third Black Day². It had been exactly four years since the government under a Maoist party had razed their settlement in an attempt to clear the area of what was officially considered illegal land encroachment in central Kathmandu. Yet, despite the enormity of the violence and contrary to the expectations of the government, *sukumbasi* people continued to live in the settlement area, reconstructing small shacks adjacent to their demolished houses often using debris from the very ruins they were supposed to abandon. At the time of the forced (attempted) eviction, the government had not provided any alternative housing options to the residents of the settlement. Citing the fact that the settlement had been illegally built on land that had been designated for the construction of U.N. Park as part of the Bagmati River Green Corridor project, the settlement of around 258 families had been forcefully destroyed.

Over the four years following the violent razing, subsequent governments have been unable to reach an agreement with *sukumbasi* groups in Kathmandu concerning possibilities for their rehabilitation and/ or relocation. One of the central disagreements concerns the definition of the ‘*sukumbasi*’ category by governmental agencies that dismisses most inhabitants of Paurakhi *basti* (as well as all other settlements in the city) as fake *sukumbasi* or, as articulated in Nepali - *hukumbasi*. On the one hand, concerned governmental agencies claim that *hukumbasi* are not liable for any compensation or rehabilitation/ relocation services. And, on the other hand, *sukumbasi* groups have rejected governmental definitions that dismiss most of their constituency as fake, protested against proposed relocation into ‘housing’ apartments, and demanded *lal purja* (land titles) for a minimum plot of land within the city in exchange for vacating their present spaces of residence.

This U.N. Park is among a series of several beautifying projects through which governmental agencies such as the Kathmandu Metropolitan Office (KMO), Kathmandu Valley Town Development Authority (KVTDA), and the Ministry of Urban Development sought to simultaneously achieve two seemingly divergent goals – 1) to develop Kathmandu as a ‘world-class’ city, capable of attracting global capital (Ghertner 2015, Roy 2003), and 2) to restore the natural beauty and ‘cultural’ heritage that had made Kathmandu a vital location for flourishing civilizations of Newar kings, and ultimately, the Shah Hindu dynasty (Rademacher 2011).

The first goal was oriented towards the future and aimed to showcase Kathmandu as a place heading towards development and modernity, a city soon to be capable of attracting global financial capital (NUDS 2016). The second was past-oriented and re-cast Kathmandu through nostalgic imagery of its exaggeratedly glorified past. Kathmandu was framed as a cradle for sophisticated Newar and Hindu civilizations. A certain nostalgia for orientalist re-castings as the

² In Nepali *sukumbasi* refers not just to a person or a group of people who forward particular claims, but, importantly, *sukumbasi* also refers to the actual physical space where people who claim *sukumbasi* status live. In this manner, *sukumbasi* as people and *sukumbasi* as space are mutually co-constituted – those who live in *sukumbasi spaces* are considered *sukumbasi* peoples, and, conversely, those spaces become *sukumbasi* spaces by virtue of *sukumbasi* people living there. This complex dialectic between people and space makes it impossible to consider one without the other.

gate-way to *Shangri-La* that catapulted Kathmandu as a favored tourist destination was implicit in this second objective (Leichty 1996, 2010). In this framing, *sukumbasi* settlements, like the one that had been razed and partially evicted in Thapathali in 2012, had no place in either Kathmandu's past, where they were blamed for polluting the city's ecological systems and tainting its glorified civilizational history, or its projected future, where they were seen as impediments to development and progress. *Sukumbasi* settlements were indeed considered 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1966), belonging neither to Kathmandu's past nor having a place in its future.

Vantage

My dissertation fieldwork in Nepal, spanning between 2012 and 2016, concerns the relations between informal settlement groups (*sukumbasi* in Nepali), political parties, NGOs/INGOs, governmental agencies, and other local and municipal-level political formations. More specifically, my fieldwork investigates the ways in which *sukumbasi* groups organize themselves (at local, national, and international levels) and negotiate with governmental and non-governmental agencies for municipal services, tenure security, land rights, etc. My fieldwork also investigates the relationships between informal settlement groups and constellations of formal as well as informal 'political formations' that mediate interactions between *sukumbasi* groups and governmental/nongovernmental agencies. I am interested in the implications this has on anthropological understandings of how (urban) informality is produced, framed, and operationalized, and how this might, in turn, provide insights into people's experiences of state, government/governance, politics, and development work.

One significant revelation for me involved tracing the ways in which seemingly emancipatory global circulations of 'shelter rights', that are heavily promoted through international organizations and adopted by national governments and NGOs, not only undermine land rights based movements of *sukumbasi* groups in Nepal but such frameworks are also actively deployed by a range of institutions (national as well as global) to depoliticize and dismantle land rights movements. Shelter rights frameworks don't work well when they are imposed on *sukumbasi* groups demanding land rights. Yet, my fieldwork suggests that global circulations concerning 'shelter rights' permeates through a range of powerful local and global institutionalized forces, actively seeking to transform political groups demanding land rights into 'development populations' needing shelter.

Openings

In conclusion, a close examination of *sukumbasi* politics in Kathmandu and other parts of Nepal suggest that the adoption of 'slums' as the dominant mode of understanding marginalized urban spaces in South Asia and beyond may be problematic. In my dissertation, I investigate how particular groups such as *sukumbasi* are paradoxically framed as 'urban communities' even while governmental agencies actively reject their formal participation in urban systems. I also examine the difficulties that *sukumbasi* groups face in maintaining coherent political identities and forging solidarities around issues of land rights and, in the meanwhile, negotiating with a range of governmental/ nongovernmental agencies, informal/formal political formations to obtain municipal services. I argue that it is vital for relatively small populations of marginalized urban

groups (such as *sukumbasi*) in small cities like Kathmandu to maintain a political presence beyond just the confines of the city.³ Such a need for a regional or even national political presence that transcends urban areas challenges recent assertions that cities have now become the privileged site of citizenship (Holston 1999, 2008). Indeed, it is only by maintaining an ever-so-tenuous relationship forged on issues of land rights between political constituencies in urban, semi-urban, and rural areas that *sukumbasi* groups are able to foment a collective presence that is strong enough to be taken seriously by governmental, nongovernmental (and international), and political organizations.

In the context of renewed academic and institutional interests in urbanization the bulk of the scholarship is dominated by studies of (and *in*) ‘mega-cities’ where the logic of slums is put into analytic operation across cities as varied as Nairobi, Cairo, Manila, Mumbai, Delhi, and Rio de Janeiro. In this context, I hope my dissertation provides a counterpoint that will illustrate how marginalized urban groups in smaller cities like Kathmandu negotiate these powerful global circulations even as their demands for land rights within urban settings is becoming increasingly anachronistic and out of place.

³ Various sources estimate that the total number of *sukumbasi* settlements in Kathmandu in 2016 was anywhere between 64 and 72, with a total population range of 13,000 – 50,000 people. The census of 2010 estimated that the total population of the Kathmandu Valley was 2.6 million.