

**ACTIVISM AS A MORAL PRACTICE: CULTURAL POLITICS, PLACE-
MAKING AND INDIGENOUS MOVEMENTS IN NEPAL**

By

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Doctoral Committee

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Dedication

To my beloved wife Biju and our daughter Jyopsi

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Abstract

In this dissertation, I examine the everyday and organized ways in which Dhimal, a historically marginalized indigenous people from Nepal's easternmost lowlands, enact locally embedded and globally influenced indigenous activism to assert their distinct history, territorial belonging, and political autonomy as they participate in the processes of crafting new directions for the making of a 'New Nepal' in the post-April 2006 period. Taking 'place' as a central analytic in the study of indigenous politics, I investigate how issues of land and landlessness shape Dhimals' sense of indigeneity, ethnic history, territorial belonging, and their envisioning of the future as ādivāsi in Nepal. In doing so, my ethnography provides new insights for approaching the relationship between Tarai ādivāsi and the land by focusing on the interplay among land, labor, power relations, state-led geographical imaginings, and the role of malaria in mediating relations among ādivāsi, the state, and other social groups, and shaping Dhimals' historical agency in resisting the extractive Hindu state.

Based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2007 and 2009 in Kathmandu, the capital city of Nepal, and Morang district, this dissertation moves beyond the conventional emphasis on the organized and contentious struggles in the study of indigenous politics by focusing on how community-making practices related with marriage, village rituals, and place-making become *constitutive practices* of Dhimal indigenous activism. By demonstrating the centrality of everyday practices in indigenous politics, this dissertation shows how people, located in specific historical-political contexts, transform the global-national discourses of indigeneity and indigenous rights into locally meaningful and relevant political projects through their embedded everyday practices. This analytical focus on locally embedded practices has important implications for understanding how indigenous activism becomes embodied moral practice enacted by people out of their felt sense of responsibility and duty for the social production of their collective self.

Chapter One

Introduction

A Political Rally and A Wedding Ritual: Spaces of Indigenous Activism

I woke up to a boisterous sound and realized that I had fallen asleep, maybe for one hour, on the plastic chair that had faithfully borne my body weight for the last eight hours in the hall where I was observing a political meeting of Dhimal youths since the evening before. It was already three in the morning, but the spirited Dhimal youths, about two hundred or more who had gathered in this meeting hall around 6 pm that previous evening, were still actively engaged in a group discussion focused on the proposed constitution and the declaration of the first national convention of *Dhimal Sanghiya Swayatta Parishad* (Dhimal Federal Autonomous Council, hereafter Sanghiya Parishad).

These participants, some of them high school students, all affiliated with Sanghiya Parishad, had a shared political conviction that the present day nation-state of Nepal should be restructured into autonomous federal states based on ethnic identity, history and territory, with a ‘right to self-determination’ so that “all social groups, classes, genders and regions would be inclusively and proportionately represented and recognized in the national polity” (The Constitution Preamble, DSWP, 2009). In other words, they were gathered there in order to

discuss how they could mobilize their organization in solidarity with other like-minded political groups to realize their political vision of “*Naya Nepal*” or ‘New Nepal.’¹

Seated on plastic chairs and divided into several smaller groups across the hall, these Dhimal discussants would periodically stand up and loudly chant their political slogans, raising one hand, with fist tightly closed, high into the air. Their collective roaring filled the room and the surrounding spaces with echoes of their political presence and expression of their bodily resistance to fatigue, sleep, as well as to the Nepali nation-state that they wanted to reform through their political movement. After six more hours of deliberations, they adopted the proposed constitution of the Sanghiya Parishad, elected its members for the central executive committee and other various organizational units, and formally ended the two day long national convention around 9 o’clock in the morning of December 18, 2009.

These Dhimal youths had actually begun this political event a day earlier with a public inaugural event organized in a huge open ground located in front of the Radhika High School in Urlabari Bazar of Morang district. Hundreds of Dhimal and non-Dhimal from villages in Jhapa and Morang had come there to participate in the rally. Dhimal women, young and old, some carrying their infant babies, had come dressed in *bohna*, their traditional ethnic dress. It was also the first public event in which the cadre male volunteers of *the Limbuwan-Dhimal Volunteer* (L.D.V.), a special organizational unit of the Sanghiya Parishad, had come wearing their olive

¹ Following the peoples’ movement of April 2006, the idea of “Naya Nepal” was popularly used to refer to the political process of transforming Nepal’s two century old utterly centralized and exclusionary Hindu state system into an inclusive secular and federal republic (see Hangen, 2007; Bhattachan, 2009; Lawoti, 2007). Popularly known as the second *jān āndolan* (that of 1990 being the first the one), the April 2006 movement, participated by the unprecedented number of people of all strata toppled the monarchical rule, helped to end the decade long of Maoist’ “people’s war”, and paved the political ways out for the restoring *loktantra* (*people’s democracy*) and provided mandate for a fundamental and radical restructuring of Nepal for an inclusive republic. See Hachhethu (2008) for an overview of the post April, 2006 peoples’ movement and its impacts on peoples’ sense of citizenry and belonging in Nepal.

drab uniforms. The imprint on the back of their uniform read: बाङ्गाई कमाण्ड, L.V.D. (Bangāi Command L.V.D.) suggesting that they belonged to a special youth wing, akin to a combat unit. Bāngai is a legendary commander who is believed to have led the Dhimal army, which together with the Limbu army, bravely fought against the invading Gorkhali force when it attacked their ancestral territories in eastern Nepal in the late 18th century. So for these Dhimal activists, Bāngai represents the Dhimal’s political history of resistance against the “Gorkhali imperial expansion” (Regmi, 1999) as well as their historic alliance with the Limbu, the indigenous group from the eastern hills who, many Dhimal believe, are their “ancestral brothers” (Diwas, 1979).² In wearing the special uniform imprinted with ‘Bāngai Command’ (Figure 1), these LDV youth commemorate past political actors even as they also carry the Dhimal history of resistance on their contemporary bodies. Thus do the past and present coalesce in the struggle for a better future; the legendary ancestors such as Bāngai Dhimal, when remembered in political mobilization, still inspire the new generation toward political action.



Figure 1: LDV volunteer in a political conference (2009), Morang. All photos by the author

² At the end of the 18th century, the king of Gorkha, a small Hindu principality in the present day district of Gorkha, Prithivi Narayan Shah (1723-1775) began a military campaign of conquest through which he annexed many other principalities and their territories into a new Hindu kingdom that evolved into the present day state of Nepal. As such, P.N. Shah’s territorial expansion is depicted as “unification” in the official historiography while indigenous activists consider it to be a form of “colonization.” On Gorkhali imperialism, see Regmi (1999) and Tamang, (2008).

The crowd clapped and whistled when the LDVs, lined up in two rows (by gender) and proudly marched along the ground, many of them holding high the Sanghiya Parishad's flag. As they moved forward pounding the dry ground with their feet, thick clouds of dust rose up and rolled forward with the marching bodies.



Figure 2: The Sanghiya Parishad Rally, December 17, 2009

Thus from the distant corner of the ground where I was standing, the LDV's entrance seemed like a whirling wave of bodies quaking the ground. Around noon, hundreds of people rallied around the Urlabari Bazar and occupied about a mile of the east-west highway, bringing the traffic to a complete halt for about an hour. During the rally, these Dhimal and other participants were demanding that the federal restructuring of Nepal – a political process then underway in the Constitutional Assembly (2008-2011) of the time – should be based on ethnic identity, history and territory (see Bhattachan, 2009). Claiming their indigenous rights to territorial-political autonomy, the rallying Dhimal youths demanded that their ancestral territories, the present day districts of Sunsari, Morang and Jhapa, should be federated as a

‘Dhimal autonomous state’ within the ‘Limbuwan autonomous state’ in the federal restructuring of Nepal. They were also demanding the implementation of the International Labor Organization Convention No 169 (hereafter ILO 169) that Nepal had ratified in 2007.

The rally was unique in that it also symbolized the political alliance between Dhimals and Limbus, the two indigenous groups, one from the hills and the other from the lowland plains, who have consolidated their political solidarity by forming a single political party- the Federal Limbuwan State Council (FLSC)- of which Dhimal Sanghiya Parishad is one of its constitutive political councils.³ Thus this political event also symbolized a concrete practice of inter-indigenous group solidarity for a collective political mobilization in Nepal. Through this political rally, Dhimal asserted their collective subjectivity and claimed their rights as *ādivāsi* in a language that merged the national politics of federalism with broader global discourses of indigenous rights, as for example in the use of ILO 169.⁴

Since the late 1980s, ethnic activists in Nepal used the category of *janajāti* to “denote communities that are outside of the four field of the Hindu caste system and... that have their own distinct language, religion or culture” (Hangen, 2010:50). The English translation of *janjāti* as ‘nationalities’ is significant as it emphasizes these communities as ‘nations’, hence it challenges the unitary and monolithic construction of Nepal as a Hindu nation and also resonates with the notion of the distinct and collective peoplehood emphasized by the category of

³ The FLSC is an affiliate political state council of the umbrella national political party of various ethnic groups, officially registered as a single political party called Federal Democratic National Forum (FDNF) that contested the national election for the Constituent Assembly in 2008. On the relationship between indigenous political movement and ethnic party formation in Nepal, see Hangen (2010).

⁴ According to Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), the national representative organization of Nepal’s indigenous peoples, *ādivāsi janajāti* are: (a) first settlers prior to the formation of Gorkha and Nepal state, (b) dominated group with no representations in the state organs, (c) non Hindu caste groups, (d) those who have the own language, culture and religion different from the rulers, and (d) those listed by Nepalese government Indigenous Act 2002 (see <http://www.nefin.org.np/list/Definition-of-Indigenous/5/0/4>, accessed April 17, 2013). The government of Nepal has identified 62 groups as *ādivāsi janajāti* - hence the term “indigenous peoples” is a legal and political category in Nepal. The term ‘*Ādivāsi Janajāti*’ is also translated as ‘indigenous nationalities.’

‘indigenous peoples.’⁵ In Nepal, the categories of *janajāti* and *ādivāsi* are synonymously used in the sense of ‘indigenous peoples.’ These two terms are now increasingly used together as ‘*ādivāsi janjāti*’ to emphasize the idea of ‘indigenous peoples’ used in the international discourses of indigeneity and indigenous peoples’ rights.

With the ratifications of the ILO 169 and endorsement of the UNDRIP by the Nepali state, the two most important international instruments dealing with the human rights of indigenous peoples, the category of ‘indigenous peoples’ have further become politically salient and important for the historically marginalized groups such as the Dhimal. Hence the political event that I have introduced here represents an example of a locally grounded indigenous activism that aimed to make an impact both at the local and the national levels. By claiming their territorial identity within their ancestral lands, these Dhimal also demanded their right to political autonomy as ‘indigenous peoples’ or *ādivāsi janajāti*, the category of peoplehood enshrined in those very international instruments of human rights endorsed and ratified by Nepal, an expression of its moral commitment and accountability.

The brief ethnographic account of the political event with which I introduce this dissertation provides an apt example of indigenous activism. It shows the dedication and commitment of Dhimal youths, a majority of them high school and college students, who articulated a collective subjectivity and claimed their rights as *ādivāsi* in a language that mediated national politics with the global discourses of indigenous rights. By demanding their rights to political autonomy through a federal state of their own, they also underlined the significance of the politics of “indigenous territoriality” (Liffman, 2011) by asserting that

⁵ Some senior indigenous leaders who were involved in the earlier processes of the formation of the Nepal Janajati Mahasang (Nepal Federations of Nationalities), now called Nepal Janajati Mahasang or Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities told me that the translation of ‘janajati’ as ‘nationalities’ was influenced by the Marxist-Leninist notion of “nationalities” and Lenin emphasis on the rights of nationalities for self-determination.

Dhimal as ‘indigenous peoples’ have inalienable rights to control their ancestral territories, resources, and the decision-making processes that affect their collective life (Bhattachan, 2009: 46).⁶

The anthropologist Paul Liffman reminds us that ‘place’ is the “basic element of territory from the point of view of the people who inhabit it” (Liffman, 2011: 19). These Dhimal youth, by demanding a ‘Dhimal autonomous state’, are also enacting an indigenous politics of place-making. The active participation of Dhimal women and their assuming leadership positions in the Sanghiya Parishad indicate how young Dhimal women are challenging their lack of representation within their ethnic organizations even as it also shows them asserting political agency through indigenous activism. Finally, their wearing of their ethnic dress also signals the importance of traditional dress as a political language in indigenous politics (Allman, 2004).

The event I described here is a motif that scholars of social movements will find paralleled within contemporary organized indigenous mobilizations throughout the world. However, I also chose it as an introduction in order to highlight my argument that, if taken as the representative motif for indigenous activism, it may mask many other constitutive facets of Dhimal indigenous politics. Political mobilization of this kind, while unquestionably very influential in consolidating Dhimal’ political power, is only one of the many ways in which Dhimal from all walks of life and all generations become involved in indigenous activism. If we limit our analysis of indigenous political movement only to overtly organized and contentious mobilizations of this kind, then we will miss how people engage in and enact indigenous

⁶ According to Krishna B. Bhattachan, one of Nepal’s most important indigenous activist leaders and renown sociologists, “The global indigenous movements clearly substantiates that the ultimate goal of indigenous peoples is the right to self-determination or to have control, ownership and utilization of their collective life and over forest, water, mineral and other natural resources and ancestral territories. This is the indigenism. ...There are multiple means to achieve these ends for exercising indigenous rights. When we analyze Nepal’s past and the present day conditions, ethnic autonomy based on federal structure is the most useful political means” (Bhattachan, 2009:46, my translation).

activism through the everyday politics of community making. The following ethnographic example of how one Dhimal friend of mine, an active member of the Sanghiya Parishad, was required to redo his wedding engagement illustrates how an apparently local affair can also become a constitutive practice of Dhimal indigenous activism.

A few days after the political event that I described earlier (December, 2009), my Dhimal friend, whom I will call Kewale, the central level member of the Sanghiya Parishad and a journalist by profession, followed an unconventional path to making a marriage proposal to the Dhimal girl who now is his wife. Dhimal marriage engagement is negotiated and mediated by the village representatives of the prospective families of the bride and groom. In the early 1990s, the Dhimal Jati Bikas Kendra (hereafter the Kendra), Dhimal's national level indigenous organization or '*jāti sansthā*' as they commonly call it, had sanctioned a set of social rules in order to standardize and regulate Dhimal marriage rituals in accordance with Dhimal *riti-tithi* or customary practices. In the case of Kewale I was told, because of urgency and lack of time, his marriage engagement was mediated by a group of his close friends affiliated with Sanghiya Parishad. In fact, Kewale and his friends are aware of and support the implementation of the Kendra's social rules governing Dhimal customary practices. However, they seemed to have undermined the legitimacy of the Kendra's social rules when it came to their own convenience. But Kewale's parents, the village heads, and senior community members from the two sides disapproved of the earlier engagement process. They persuaded Kewale to redo the engagement ceremony, but this time in accordance with Dhimal *riti-tithi*.

The village elders and Kewale's parents reinforced what they believe to be the indispensable customary practices that define and re-create Dhimal sociality, culture and ethnic identity – an important agenda that Kewale and his friends bring out emotionally in their

indigenous activism. For instance, in the political convention that I described earlier, one of the participants, Kewale's friend, a twenty-two year old college student, gave a an emotional speech in which he said, "Dhimal without their culture are like a kite disconnected from its string or like a stream that has lost its source. If we forget our culture, we will be like the *ghoiya sāp* (a species of non-poisonous snake)" (Field note, December 18, 2009). As people do not fear a non-poisonous snake like the *ghoiya*, Kewale's friend asserted that no one would take Dhimal seriously if they forget their ethnic identity and culture. Invoking the idea of what defines Dhimal personhood, he emphasized they cannot claim their political subjectivity as Dhimal without being grounded in their culture and collective identity. Hence by making Kewale follow Dhimal customary practices, his parents and village elders helped him reconstitute the string of social relationships that exist between the two villages because without this connection, he would be "like a kite disconnected from its string or like a stream that has lost its source." Kewale's adherence to customary practice not only conformed to his cultural "roots," but the demands of his parents and village elders accorded crucial moral and social legitimacy to the Kendra. This double outcome ratified the enormous sense of belonging and collective ownership accorded by Dhimal youth to their own umbrella indigenous organization.

The anthropologist Joanne Rappaport reminds us that a defining attribute of indigenous activists is that "they remain conscious of their ethnic identity... and it is through their identity as members of a collective that they function as intellectuals" (Rappaport, 2004: 116-117). Hence, just like Kewale and his Dhimal friends who wear a special uniform to mark themselves as 'volunteers' during certain political functions, their parents and village elders, as I discuss in subsequent chapters, are also important 'indigenous activists' among Dhimal. Their emphasis on following Dhimal customary practices informs us of how Dhimal understand activism as moral

practice. At the same time, as a practice of cultural revival, its grounded historical analysis helps us to understand how Dhimal customary practices surrounding marriage, ritual, and customary institutions such as the village head and the ritual priests, continue to mediate the power relationships both within their community and among Dhimal, the Nepali state, and the such historically dominant social groups as the hill “high” caste Hindus.

Marriage is an important collective practice through which Dhimal work to socially reconstitute their community and establish its social relationships based on Dhimal customary social organizations. Anthropology as a discipline is well furnished with theoretical and ethnographic examples which emphasize the importance of marriage to social reproduction of a community and its social relationships. But the ways in which marriage becomes a contested communal space for indigenous activism – a space in which people engage other pertinent issues such as ethnic identity, customary institutions, governance, cultural autonomy, and similar concerns that Dhimal also bring out and discuss in their indigenous political movements – have not to my knowledge received the same level of analytical focus and scholarly attention brought, for example, to “global indigenism” (Niezen, 2003) and “neoliberalism” (Li, 2000; Pastoro, 2007) in the study of indigenous politics. As exemplified by the case of Kewale, it is through engagement in cultural practices such as marriage and ritual – the realm of locally embedded everyday practices and their underlying values and ethical orientations that Dhimal consider indispensable to their sense of personhood, morality, history, and their understanding of what makes them Dhimal – that activists and their organizations such as the Kendra derive their moral authority and social legitimacy as ‘indigenous activists’ in their community. Hence a cultural practice such as marriage is equally a constitutive practice of Dhimal indigenous activism.

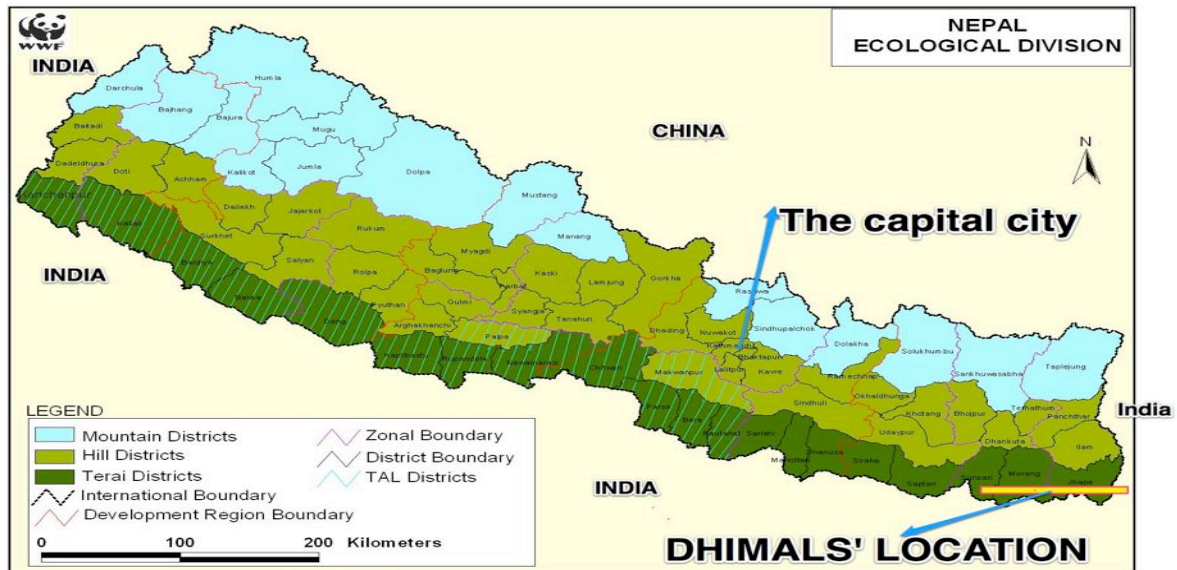
The perceived insignificance of everyday cultural practices such as marriage as a site of indigenous political mobilization was expressed by one prominent non-Dhimal indigenous activist and a professor at Nepal's premiere university when I mentioned to him that I was focusing on marriage and village ritual practices as way of understanding Dhimal's indigenous activism. He politely asked me: "How can Dhimal concerns with their customary practices of marriage help them achieve their political agendas of ethnic federalism?" This is an important question that informs the central focus of this dissertation.

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of the indigenous political activism of the Dhimal, a historically marginalized *ādivāsi* or indigenous people from Nepal's easternmost *Tarai* (Nep. lowland plains). In this dissertation, I examine the quotidian and organized ways in which Dhimal enact locally embedded cultural politics and globally influenced indigenous activism to assert their distinct history, territorial belonging and political autonomy as they participate in the process of remaking Nepal into an inclusive federal republic nation-state. More specifically, my study investigates how Dhimal cultural practices related to marriage, communal rituals and place-making become the constitutive practices of their political mobilization for territorial and political autonomy. In order to understand what is at stake in discussing Dhimal indigenous political activism, a brief sketch of the ethno-historical context is necessary.

Dhimal, who speak a Tibeto-Burman language (King, 2008; Hodgson, 1849) they call *Dhimali*, are one of the aboriginal inhabitants of the easternmost lowland plains (the Tarai) in the present day districts of Sunsari, Morang and Jhapa. Predominately a subsistence farming community of twenty-five thousand or more people, they live in ninety-seven Dhimal villages (Dhimal S. et al. 2010) scattered in twenty Village Development Committee (VDCs) in the

districts of Sunsari, Morang and Jhapa where they comprise less than ten percent of the total VDC population (King, 2008: 2).

Figure 3: Ecological Map of Nepal and the Study Areas (not in scale)



Until the early 20th century, the Tarai region, the Dhimals’ ancestral territory in particular, was thinly populated and thickly covered with dense, malarial forests. The Nepali state and its rulers had long made efforts to colonize the Tarai for land reclamation but the endemic prevalence of malaria and the perceived belief that the Tarai’s *hāvāpani* (Nep. literally air and water) was lethal for hill peoples had discouraged settlement. However, with the ‘eradication’ of malaria in the early 1950s, the Tarai became the most sought-after destination for land-seeking migrants from the hills and elsewhere. Implementation of the state-led land reform of 1964, the land settlement projects of the 1960s to 1970s, the construction of the East-West highway (early 1970s), and the resulting expansion of infrastructure like roads, schools, markets, electricity, and hospitals, drew more and more people into the Tarai. This “frontier

settlement” (Shrestha, 1989) in the Tarai progressively dispossessed Dhimal from their ancestral territories and further marginalized them politically, economically, and culturally.

Contemporary indigenous activism is *one of many* organized ways by which Dhimal are working to subvert their political, economic and cultural marginality in Nepal.

Research Questions and Central Arguments

There is now general consensus among scholars that social movements must be seen equally and inseparably as struggles over meaning as well as material conditions (Escobar, 1998: 69). Melucci (1989) emphasizes that contemporary social movements need to be understood as collective actions that challenge the dominant symbols of the system. When movements deploy alternative conceptions of gender, nature, race, economy, people, culture rights, democracy, and citizenship, they unsettle dominant cultural meanings and enact cultural politics (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar, 1998). Indigenous peoples are asserting alternative meanings of belonging in their nation-states by challenging the dominant notions and practices of citizenship, rights, territoriality, and sovereignty.

In what ways do the national-global discourses of ‘indigeneity’ and ‘indigenous rights’ enact new social meanings at the local level in its specific historic-political contexts? This was the major research question with which I began the fieldwork for this dissertation. As I pursued my research, the emergent political transformations in Nepal that coincided with the period of my fieldwork and the ways in which Dhimal acted on these political processes both through organized indigenous activism and by intertwining their everyday community making practices such as rituals, marriage, and place-making activities influenced and reshaped my research foci.

Over the period of my research, two overarching themes shaped the major issues that I address in this dissertation, and the structures of my ethnographic analysis presented herein.

First, the centrality of the issues of land, landlessness, and sense of territorial belongings permeated Dhimal narratives about who they are, what had happened to them in the past, and what is happening to them now as Dhimal, and their vision of the future as ādivāsi. One could attribute this Dhimal heightened “sense of place” (Feld and Basso, 1996) and territorial-historical consciousness as both a ‘local’ expression and indigenous articulation of the ethnic federalism and territorial autonomy that had become a major national political agenda at that period. But to rely on such an explanation would be to deny Dhimal their political agency and to depict them as simply responding to what was happening ‘out there’ in the global-national space. But Dhimal expressions of their landlessness and its history do far more than appropriate existing global discourses of indigeneity or what others have called the “indigenous slot” (see Karlsson, 2003; Li, 2000). They are, rather, the expression of a history which all Dhimal who are older than fifty have experienced and witnessed since the 1950s. This emphasis on land and landlessness crystallizes their concrete subjective experience of the Nepali state.

Moreover, their sense of territorial belonging was deeply concerned with this history of ecological belonging in the Tarai environment, a belonging which further shapes their understanding of their relationships with the places where they live or had lived in the past, and of their religious practices, social organization, and inter-ethnic relationships. These historical narratives about land, landlessness, and territorial belonging inform the explanations offered by senior Dhimal activists’ for why they become involved in indigenous activism, and why they emphasize place-making practices in order to reclaim Dhimal ethnic history, culture and their

collective future. Hence the relationships among place, history, ethnic identity, and politics emerged as the overarching theme for my dissertation research.

Second, as I explained by way of the two examples in the beginning of this chapter, Dhimal emphasis on their communal cultural practices such as marriage and village ritual as spaces of cultural reform and preservation motivated me to focus on these locally embedded practices as important spaces of indigenous activism. Revival of indigenous cultural practices is closely associated with the resurgence of indigenous political movements in many places around the world (Warren, 1998; Hodgson, 2005; Charles, 1999; Ginsburg, 1994; Linnekin and Poyer, 1990; Handler, 1988). In the case of Dhimal, these efforts at reform had continued since the early 1950s when their local social worlds became increasingly multiethnic and the Nepali state imposed assimilative cultural policies in the name of ‘modernization,’ *bikās* (Nep. development), and ‘national integration.’ Dhimal often use the Nepali terms *kuriti* and *bikriti* to refer to what they consider “bad” and deviated cultural practices in need of collective intervention in order to reform them. Not only the indigenous activists affiliated with the Kendra but all Dhimal -- men and women, young and old -- were involved in this cultural politics of reform. I was interested in exploring why they emphasize certain cultural practices such as marriage, village ritual, and traditional dress as sites of reform and preservation.

I argue that Dhimal explanations about *kuriti* and *bikriti* help us to uncover the interplay of history, the state, inter-ethnic relations, and changing social and political-economic conditions in shaping Dhimal’s reflexive evaluation of their cultural practices. My study demonstrates the centrality of cultural politics in Dhimal indigenous activism, for example, those related to marriage, communal rituals, traditional dress, and place-making practices. By demonstrating how marriage, village ritual and place-making practices can become contested spaces of

indigenous politics, my ethnography makes an important contribution in foregrounding locally embedded cultural practices such as marriage, rituals, and place-making as constitutive practices of indigenous activism. I argue that analytical focus on locally embedded cultural politics helps us to discern how people located in specific histories and lived circumstances transform the global-national discourses of indigeneity and indigenous rights into locally meaningful and relevant political projects. Furthermore, my study also demonstrates that such ethnographic focus on people's everyday lives also helps us to understand how people mediate the conflicts and contradictions which emerge in their social movements in terms of gender, age, class positions, political ideologies, and other realities of difference among activists and people involved in the activism.

A Place-based Approach to Indigenous Activism

My fieldwork coincided with the period of radical political transformations in the aftermath of the April 2006 peoples' movement in Nepal during which the demands of indigenous peoples for federalism based on ethnic identity, history and territory (see Bhattachan, 2005, 2009; Hangen, 2007, 2010; Lawoti, 2013) had heightened a distinct sense of "geographical imagination" (Harvey, 2005:212) among indigenous communities (Tamang, 2009).

The fundamental feature of *ādivāsi* identity is the inalienable relationship they have with their land and territories (Gray, 1995; Castree, 2004). In Nepal, since the early 1990s, peoples' claims of *ādivāsi* identity and the state recognition of the *ādivāsi janjāti* have underlined the historical relationship between indigenous peoples and their territories (Bhattachan, 2008). Nepal's indigenous peoples and their movements advanced the notion of *ādivāsi* as a powerful political category of collective rights, including the right to political autonomy in their ancestral territories in the emerging political transformation to remake Nepal into an inclusive federal

state, particularly with the ratification and endorsement of the ILO 169 and the United Nation's Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (hereafter UNDRIP) by the Nepali state in 2007 (see Bhattachan, 2009).

At the community level, people's sense of place, their locally embedded practices of place-making such as rituals and place-names, and peoples' understanding of their historical relationships with their territories acquired new political significance. In this changed political context, Dhimals' experiences of landlessness after the 1950s and their embedded belonging in their ancestral places, hence their understanding of indigeneity, became an important political project which they enacted by integrating it with their village ritual, history writing, and other place-making practices. Hence the timing of my fieldwork (2007-2009) was important because it offered me grounded ethnographic sites within which to understand Dhimial indigenous activism through focus on the dialogical interplay among global-national discourses of indigeneity, political transformation, and peoples' everyday practices.

In order to foreground my ethnographic analysis in these political-historical contexts, I use theories of place and place-making to investigate the Dhimial indigenous political movement. I draw on recent approaches to 'place' as an analytical category in anthropology which consider place to be more than a physical location or "the setting for action, the stage on to which things happen" (Rodman, 1992: 643). Rather, like kinship and religion, place mediates social relationships and shapes our experiences of being in the world (Feld and Basso, 1996).⁷ In

⁷ I argue that the emerging anthropology of place can also be read as a critique of the critiques of place in anthropology which scholars such as Appadurai (1988), Malkki (1992), Augé, (1995), and Gupta and Ferguson (1997) have advanced since the late 1980s to argue against the ideas of the bounded and territorialized notion of culture, anthropological ideas of fieldwork, representations of places with certain images, and homelands. In these important debates about "culture," "fields," "voices" and "representations," the concept of 'place' is used to critique the earlier approaches to understand these problems, although their focus is not on the theoretical and conceptual debates on 'place' as an analytical concept (Feld and Basso, 1996). See Escobar (2001) for an important critique of such critiques of place.

particular, I draw on the emerging scholarship in the anthropology of place that combines the phenomenological approach of “being in place” (Casey, 1996; Basso, 1996) and the political-economic approach (Harvey, 1996) that emphasizes how place is socially produced and experienced.

This new approach to place that combines phenomenological and political-economic perspectives (see Kirsch, 2001, 2006; Escobar, 2001; Myers, 2002) offers a useful analytical framework to account for the ways in which peoples’ sense of place is shaped and transformed by the political-economic contexts of their emplacements (e.g. capitalism, colonialism, state-making, etc.). In other words, this approach helps us understand that the practices of place-making and the experiences of place are always socially and politically organized (Myers, 2002). I contend that place-making is inherently a political project for indigenous peoples’ movements for the right to self-determination over their collective life, territories, lands and resources (see Muehlebach, 2003).⁸

By place-making, I mean the collective practices of individuals and groups to reclaim their historical and lived relationships with places by inscribing new meanings and “structures of feeling” (Williams, 1977; Ahearn, 2001) into their lived geographies. The claim of the ‘right to self-determination’ (see Muehlebach, 2003 for an innovative discussion; also Bhattachan, 2012 for Nepalese context), based on an indigeneity defined as a collective self with inalienable relations to land (Gray, 1995), is the defining global political agenda of indigenous political movements, as indeed it is for Nepal’s ādivāsi janjāti movement (Bhattachan, 2009, 2012). However, this indigenous claim of indigenous territoriality is also one of the most contested points of disagreement between indigenous activists and the state concerning the rights of

⁸ Here I draw on the ILO 169 and UNDRIP when I am referring to indigenous peoples’ rights to self-determination. The concept of ‘rights to self-determination’ is neither the analytical nor substantive focus of my dissertation. See Bhattachan, 2009 and 2012 for how the concept of indigenous right to self-determination applies in Nepal.

indigenous peoples (see Muehlebach, 2003).⁹

Scholars as well as state representatives have criticized the indigenous claim of territorial autonomy in the legal language of right to self-determination on the grounds that such a claim entails an ontology of a bounded and territorialized community that does not exist in the real world. They also argue that an indigenous right to self-determination not only undermines the state's territorial sovereignty but also engenders ethnic violence and segregation by depriving other non-indigenous groups living within the indigenous territories of their rights (Malkki, 1997; Kuper, 2003). While these are important and critical concerns, however, they fail to recognize the fundamental moral claims indigenous peoples such as Dhimel are making when they claim their territorial and political autonomy. Based on her ethnographic study of the indigenous activists who were involved in the transnational advocacy and negotiations in drafting the United Nation's declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples, the anthropologist Andrea Muehlebach (2003: 261) succinctly argues that:

The "self" indigenous activists consistently advocate is a collective, cultural "self" whose existence and rights cannot be reduced to those already existing in international law for either individuals or so-called nation-states.... The "self" in self-determination relies on notions of culture as collective and territorialized practice, a move that is having repercussions in the way in which state violations of local collective rights to natural resources are being understood in international law.

In other words, indigenous peoples are asserting their rights based on a notion of self and personhood different from the liberal notion of autonomous self, one moreover that is an idea of personhood substantiated by cross-cultural anthropological studies and one cherished by

⁹ A major scholarly concern and critique of indigenous peoples' claim of rights to political autonomy based on their historical relationship with their ancestral territory has to do with the ontology of isomorphism among people, place, culture, and history and the fear of geographical exclusion (Harvey, 1996) that other non-indigenous communities' claims to such "homelands" (Malkki, 1997) could promote in the real world situations.

anthropologists as an alternative to the western notion of self and personhood (Mauss, 1985; Strathern, 1988; Carsten, 1995). Hence, my emphasis on place-making as the essence of indigenous struggle recognizes the moral politics embedded therein. It thus calls for a more empathetic ethnographic sensibility that focuses on the locally embedded practices of peoples without losing the weight of the global-national discourses of indigeneity in our analytical framework. Informed by indigenous peoples' experiences, the focus on place and place-making, therefore makes an important theoretical contribution to the anthropology of the state in basing its analytical framework on the dialogical relationships among land, labor, history, and power. I will return to the anthropology of the state later in this discussion.

In this regard, the work of the political geographer Noel Castree (2004) is relevant to this study. Responding to the writings of influential geographers such as David Harvey, Michael Watts, and Doreen Massey who reject indigenous peoples' claim of territorialized identity, hence their political rights based on indigeneity, Castree (2004) empathetically calls for a more supple understanding of indigenous claims of differential geographies as a political project of control over their territories (landed property), resources (cultural and material), and informational knowledge which continue to be colonized, appropriated and extracted by the regimes of capitalism (see Escobar, 2001; Sawyer, 2004, Kirsch, 2006, 2008). He argues that indigenous peoples are "agitating to reverse long histories and geographies of dispossession" (Castree, 2004: 136). By claiming indigenous rights, they want to "make their own places rather than have them made for them" (p: 161). The ability to make their own places entails political possibilities for the continued social production of collectivities possessing their own values, forms of personhood, and history (Turner, 1999; Holmberg, 2011).

Drawing from these theoretical perspectives, I argue that a place-based approach is necessary to account ethnographically for the variegated ways in which people enact a cultural politics of making and claiming the differential geography of belonging. It offers greater scope to understand indigenous activism by centering on how people, place, history, and politics are produced in mutually dialectical relationships (Feeley-Harnik, 1991; Leach, 2003; Kirsch, 2006; Kahn, 2011). Since land is a central analytic in studying the relationship between the state and indigenous peoples, I argue that the focus on place as the analytical framework for understanding indigenous politics can have important implications for rethinking the concept of “state” in anthropology.

Indigenous Peoples’ Movements and the State

A subaltern social movement mobilized on the notion of ‘indigeneity’ needs to be seen “as principle and practice ultimately concerned with reshaping the structure of indigenous people-state relations in the hope of crafting a legitimate political order where innovative patterns for belonging can be explored” (Maaka and Fleras, 2000: 91).¹⁰ Maaka and Fleras’ emphasis on indigeneity as transforming practices of the state-indigenous peoples relations asks us to historicize the structural relations of power between the state and its indigenous peoples. In his seminal paper, the sociologist Phillip Abrams (1988[1977]) suggests that we should demystify the reality of the state by historicizing how, by whom, and for what purposes the state becomes objectified in a specific historical context. In the biographies of nation-states, dispossession and colonization of indigenous territories are, to follow Walter Benjamin, “not the state of exception

¹⁰ I use subaltern social movement to emphasize that not all social movements are necessarily enacted by historically marginalized groups in order to transform the system of domination. The dominant groups or the state may also enact various forms of social movements to maintain the status quo (see Bowie, 2005.).

but the rule” (Benjamin, 1955: 259). Nepal provides an excellent example of this state-led colonization where the project of nation-state formation that began in the mid 18th century with the territorial conquest and annexation of indigenous territories established the Hindu King as *Bhupati* or the husband/owner of the land, and the state as the sovereign landlord (see Burghart, 1984; Regmi, 1971).

The rise of the centralized extractive Hindu state controlled by the hill “high” caste groups, on the one hand, led to the political-economic marginalization of the subjugated indigenous communities through dispossession of their traditional control over their territories, hence their political autonomy (Caplan, 1970; Regmi, 1999; Tamang, 2008). On the other hand, the assimilative policies of Hinduization, imposition of Hindu caste hierarchy through state institutions, and the promotion of the hill Hindu nationalism led to the cultural marginalization of the indigenous communities since the early 19th century (Hofer, 1979; Gurung, 1997).

Since the turn of the 19th century, the Nepali state and its hill Hindu rulers had transformed the Tarai, the lowland plains, into a geography of colonization for land, labor, revenue and political control. While the rulers relied on the resources of the Tarai to sustain their governance and consolidate their political domination, the region was designated as “*Kala Banjar*” (Nep. black barren place), an inhabitable place potentially polluting to the heartland of the Hindu rulers, the capital city, Kathmandu, and the west-central hill regions (see Regmi, 1995: 14-17). So for many years, people of Tarai origin, though many of them are also Hindus, were considered to be liable and held under suspicion (Lal, 2001: 100-101) by their hill rulers. They were considered only as sources of labor, rents, and means for reclaiming the Tarai land for the state and its rulers (ibid). This politics of regionalism (Gauge, 1975) and land colonization in the Tarai had far reaching consequences for the Tarai indigenous peoples such as Dhimal. As a

result of the nature of these state formation processes Dhimal experiences of the Nepali state in the last two centuries have been about “losing ground” (McDonaugh, 1997: 280), which involves the collective loss of their land, culture, and traditional hold on local political and administrative power.

This collective experience of losing ground is well captured when Dhimal ask themselves and others, “Why are we *ādivāsi* Dhimal now *sukumbāsi* (Nep. landless squatters)?” I contend that this question “what does it mean to be *ādivāsi* when one is landless or nearly landless in one’s own ancestral territories?” demands that we understand the category of ‘*sukumbāsi*’ not simply as a narrow econo-centric condition of landlessness but also as an objective condition of dispossession from the material and cultural habitus (Bourdieu, 1986) that enables them to socially produce themselves as precisely Dhimal against a generic Nepali identity (Holmberg, 2012). When historically marginalized people such as Dhimal deploy the collective identity of *ādivāsi* in their political mobilization, even when the notion of ‘indigenous peoples’ is a political category in the making (Barnes, 1995: 1), they are fundamentally redefining their relationship with the Nepali state by foregrounding how state-led structural exclusion and marginality have disempowered or restricted their ability to produce themselves as Dhimal.

The anthropologist Terence Turner (1999: 133) persuasively reminds us that the essence of an indigenous peoples’ movement is “the struggle for the continued production of collective life, the self-production of the social group, with its values and forms of personhood. This is a struggle for social production in the broadest sense” (Turner, 1999: 132). Since indigenous peoples’ relationships to land and territory, as it is encompassed “in its relation to a social context in all its complex totality” (Mauss and Beuchat, 1904: 21), is indispensable to create and recreate their forms of personhood and community at large (see Caplan, 1970 for an

ethnographic example from Nepal), I assert that the indigenous struggle to assert political autonomy over their ancestral territories must first be conceptualized as their struggle for the continued production of collective self. Such a political struggle for Dhimal is contained in the process of place-making. Then how do we conceptualize the category of “the state” informed by indigenous experiences and their political envisioning?

New theories of the state argue that earlier approaches “naturalize” the boundary between state and society (Mitchell, 1981; Ferguson and Gupta 2002), infuse the state with institutional concreteness (Trouillot, 2001), and make it the central institution of power (Foucault, 1990 [1978]). Such approaches simultaneously de-emphasize the role of “culture” (Geertz, 1980, Steinmetz, 1999, Corrigan and Sayer, 1985; Bourdieu, 1999) and everyday practices of state formation and maintenance (Sharma and Gupta, 2006).¹¹ Interestingly many scholars, particularly those informed by the transnational framework of the state (Appadurai, 1996b, 2003; Trouillot, 2001; Gupta and Ferguson, 2001) and Foucault’s works on governmentality (Foucault, 2003 [1976]; 1990 [1978], see Gordon, 1991 and Rose, 1996 for illustration), agree in their de-emphasis and rejection of the issues of land, territory and territorial sovereignty as central analytical entries to an understanding of state dynamics.

I argue that indigenous claims for a collective self as a people have major implications for the rethinking of a theory of the state theory based on Foucault’s idea of governmentality. Foucault defines ‘government’ in general as meaning a “conduct of conduct”: a form of activity aiming to shape, guide or affect the conduct of some person or persons (Gordon, 1991: 2). This conduct of conduct is embedded in power relations and on specific forms of rationality to justify this activity. Foucault (1991) argues for an historical shift from the notion of government as

¹¹ On the new scholarships on the state in anthropology, see Das and Poole, 2004; Hansen and Steppuart, 2001, and Sharma and Gupta, 2006.

“conduct of self” as pertaining to individuals to the realm of the government of the state. In this shift of locus, the state began to rule over its subjects not by external coercion but by deploying a specific political rationality and various tactics of government that not only regulate the behaviors from the outside but, more importantly, create self-regulating individuals. Thus the state, Foucault argues, can be understood only on the basis of general tactics of governmentality (Foucault, 1991: 103). As scholars of social movements and transnational activism make clear, Foucault’s notion of governmentality offers a useful framework to understand how different state regimes rule through indirect regulatory and control mechanisms (Rose, 1996) by deploying various governing technologies and inciting such varied terms of discourse as ‘democracy’ and ‘participation’ (see Paley, 2001 for an excellent ethnographic case).

From the indigenous perspective, the major problem that I see in Foucault’s notion of governmentality is his rejection of ‘sovereignty’ as an analytical site for analysis of the modern state. The judicial model of sovereignty, he argues, fails to provide a “concrete analysis for power relations” (Foucault, 2003 [1976]: 44), and thus he emphasizes that we “cut off the head of the king” (ibid) in thought and in political analysis to approach the state. Foucault’s concept of modern state power is the “biopower,” which is exercised through various disciplinary techniques over individual bodies (Foucault, 1990 [1978]: 135-145). It implies that the modern form of politics is biopolitics.

I see two related problems. First, Foucault’s analogy is an eccentrically Eurocentric notion; Foucault’s modern Europe is “Europe without its colonial history.” The erasure of colonial history from his analysis also ignores the territorial power of the state and a colonial expansion that was based on control over territories, labor, and resources in its colonies (Wolf, 1992; Feeley-Harnik, 1991; Frank, 1998). Second, Foucault’s assigning centrality to ‘biopower’ is

problematic for an indigenous theory of rights. Foucault's concept of the body is a 'liberal self' devoid of its constitutive embeddedness within place and territory, and is thus less useful for arguing the kind of collective self that indigenous peoples advance in claiming their rights. His focus on space seeks to understand the spatial power of the state (Foucault, 1976, 1975), especially its power over populations. While Foucault wants the analyst to "cut off the king's head" so that the ways in which modern state power works can be discerned, indigenous activists want to bring the issue of 'sovereignty' back into political analysis for an innovative transformation of the practice of sovereignty.

Suzana Sawyer's (2004) ethnography of indigenous politics against the multinational oil industry is a welcome approach. She shows how multinational corporations can exploit indigenous territories through state power not only by deploying biopolitical techniques (like managing bodies through development, health clinics, and so on) but also through deploying tactics of territoriality. The "time-space compression" (Harvey, 1990: 240) effects of global capitalism and the rise of new forms of "empire" (Hardt and Negri, 2000) may have weakened and shrunk the spaces of state territorial sovereignty, but it is through "accumulation by dispossession," as Harvey (2003) himself has demonstrated, that the new regimes of capitalist exploitation work. Nevertheless it is important to recognize, as grounded ethnographic studies have shown (Sawyer, 2004; Kirsch, 2006), that one common strategy deployed by neoliberal capitalism is to leverage the state's territorial power to colonize indigenous territories in the name of development and modernization. I contend that we need to consider indigenous politics on the ground and in transnational political space first and foremost as a subversive politics that challenges the geo-power of the various governmental regimes. This is not to imply that other issues are secondary. But an anthropology of the state informed by indigenous political

movement needs to center on the dialectical relationship among geography, labor, history, and power (Coronil, 1997; Mueggler, 2001). My ethnography of Dhimal indigenous activism makes a contribution to this.

Ethnography, Activism, and Friendship

In early August 2007, I contacted the Kendra chairperson and requested a meeting with him so that I could formally contact the Dhimal's representative indigenous organization and ask its permission for my fieldwork. He asked me to come to the Kendra's office the next afternoon. I got there a few hours earlier on the arranged day in order to explore the area before the meeting. At our meeting, after the ritual of greeting and introduction, I also disclosed to the chairperson my affiliation with Tribhuvan University (TU) where I am a tenured faculty member of the department of anthropology in Tri-Chandra College in Kathmandu. Upon hearing this, the chairperson expressed a long list of complaints against scholars and students from TU who had earlier sought the Kendra's help in facilitating their research projects in Dhimal villages but who had never shared their research findings with the Kendra. "Does not TU need to do something about it?" he asked me, underlining his dissatisfaction over how we scholars and students often breach the basic yet important ethics of reciprocity that characterize Dhimal sociality when we use Dhimal only as "respondents" and research facilitators.

The chairperson asked me to write a formal application, stating the purpose of my research. And given that my research focus on their indigenous activism would include studying the Kendra's activities, he also asked me to express my commitment that my research work would not misrepresent the Dhimal *jāti* and their political movements, and that I would

periodically share my research findings with them.¹² I happily wrote the application and stated my commitment that my work would in no way misrepresent and negatively affect their political movement and the Dhimal community at large. Even more than the approval of the Institutional Research Review (IRB) of my graduate school, this application to the Kendra was very meaningful and self-rewarding. It became for me an ethnographic moment which symbolized Dhimal agency through the critical questioning of outside researchers and their research ethics. It was also indicative of the effectiveness of those larger indigenous political movements through which Dhimal and others are demanding that the state and others recognize and implement their rights to “Free, Prior, and Informed Consent” (see Bhattachan, 2012 for an illustration). The question of how our ethnographic work can be of use to Dhimal is important because it brings out the moral and political commitments we, as scholars, bring to the people and communities with whom we engage in relationships of exchange and reciprocity as we mutually produce the knowledge that becomes our ethnography (Fricke 2006; Kirsch, 2002). Mentioning this incident offers me a way to indicate that I share with my Dhimal interlocutors the conviction that ethnographic research is also a moral practice with political implications.

I believe that ethnography is a form of activism (Kirsch, 2002). This is particularly so because what I came to understand about the Dhimal activism I came to study very much depended on my friendships with Dhimal (Fricke, 2006) and on my political positioning in relation to their indigenous political movement. I should make it explicit here that my ethnic

¹² My use of the category of *jāti* reflects how Dhimal themselves use the term. I use ‘*jāti*’ in order to reflect how Dhimal refer to themselves as a collective people in the sense of an ethnic group, not as a “caste” Hindu group. Dhimal emphasis on the *jāti* signifies the importance of the distinct collective as an ethnic group. The English word ‘community’, ‘society’ or even ‘ethnic group’ does not adequately capture this felt sense of collective embeddedness. In everyday usage and understanding, people use the term ‘*jāt*’ (which is translated as caste) to denote a ‘species’ (for example, a dog’s *jāt* or a flower’s *jāt*) or a distinct people (see Guneratne, 1998:150).

background as “Rai,” one of the indigenous groups from Nepal’s eastern hills adjacent to Dhimal ancestral territories, and my own involvement in activism as an indigenous scholar, shaped my relationship with Dhimal and the research processes for this study. Here I need to explain that my social identity as a ‘Rai,’ the self-awareness of my collective identity since the indigenous resurgence of the early 1990s, my participation in the indigenous activism both as a scholar and as a member of an indigenous community have intersected with the strong social expectations that weigh on all scholars from indigenous communities. Because individuals from indigenous community are still a minority in the academy, we are seen to have a moral duty to use our scholarship and our positions as contributions to the collective voices of our communities. This background has powerfully shaped my research project and its methodology.

Throughout my fieldwork period, I also became involved in ongoing indigenous political movements on many occasions. I worked as a scholar with the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), the representative advocacy organization of Nepal indigenous people, the National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN), the autonomous foundation formed by the government in 2002, and other various advocacy organizations. Similarly I was involved as a resource person for the NFDIN’s project for preparing ethnographic profiles of various indigenous communities in 2009-2010. For this project, I worked closely with Mr. Som Bahadur Dhimal, who was one of the vice-chairpersons of the Kendra as well as a scholar and a journalist who prepared the ethnographic profile of Dhimal. It was a crucial learning experience for me that, while I was conducting fieldwork with them, Dhimal were themselves writing their own ‘ethnography’ for reasons that went beyond the production of another document. They studied and wrote, too, as a way to advance pointedly

political concerns, as for example in detailing their collective relationship with their ancestral territories as a means to engage with ongoing political transformations in Nepal.

Scholars have argued against the fixity of the categories of “native” versus “non-native” in terms of “local” and “foreign” anthropologists (see Narayan, 1993), but such distinctions become important in real world contexts where people and communities have differential understanding and experience in working with outside researchers, both Nepali and foreigners in the case of Nepal. For instance, in the case of Nepal’s Dhimal, all foreign scholars with one exception have focused exclusively on language and grammar (Cooper, 1999; King, 1994, 2001, 2009) without any contextualization within the broader political economy and history of Tarai colonization. In the Indian subcontinent, Dhimal have been described as an “unknown tribe” as late as 2008 (see Biswas, 2008) without a word about their political struggle for the recognition of their distinct identity on the ground (Hindustan Times of India, April 16, 2006).¹³ All of these foreign scholars, mostly students (graduate and undergraduate), had undertaken their fieldwork after 1990s, during the period in which Dhimal were intensely active in their indigenous political movements including their claim of linguistic rights. Yet these linguistic studies remain indifferent to such everyday Dhimal political concerns.

In contrast, earlier Nepali scholars who studied Dhimal during the 1970s and 1980s focused on general ethnographic descriptions of their culture and society in the tradition of a folklorist studies that ratified evolutionary schemas depicting Dhimal whereby Dhimal as “backward” (Regmi, 1985, 1991; Dahal, 1979) or examples the more “primitive” societies of Nepal (see Panta, 1984). Since these earlier scholars belong to the dominant social groups, the

¹³ Dhimal are one of the smallest “tribal communities” (less than one thousand people) in India. They have been organizing their community to demand that they be recognized as a “tribe” and threatened to boycott the state election in West Bengal in 2006. See <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P3-1021667391.html>, accessed April 30, 2013. On the politics of tribal recognition related to communities who live both in Nepal and India, see Shneiderman, 2009; Middleton and Shneiderman, 2008).

hill “high” caste group, it can be argued that the ideologies of caste hierarchy and its attendant unequal power relations influenced their ethnographic representations. Such representations may also have their source in a lack of critical sophistication on issues of representation within the early years of disciplinary formation in in Nepal, where anthropology only began its academic institutionalization in early 1980s.

Since the 1990s, particularly with the resurgence of indigenous movements, there has been unprecedented growth in the scholarly focus on ethnic and identity politics in Nepal (see Mishra, 2005 for the trend). Among disciplinary practitioners, sociologists and anthropologists, particularly those belonging to indigenous communities themselves, emerged as strong advocates and indigenous activists, thus blurring the boundary between “academic” and “engaged” anthropology that is often invoked in North American anthropology (see Lamphere, 2003). This particular academic orientation of engaged anthropology that had shaped my earlier training in anthropology informed this dissertation research and the ways in which I combined ethnographic fieldwork with political activism for broader and deeper understanding of the issues that I have addressed herein.

Fieldwork: Time, Places, and Methods

The primary ethnographic fieldwork for this study was conducted for a period of eighteen months from mid-2007 to 2009 in Kathmandu, Nepal’s capital city, and in Dhimal villages in Morang and Jhapa districts in the eastern parts of the country. In between 2009 and early 2010, I also periodically visited my field sites for updating my data as well as for strengthening my friendship with the Dhimal. The primary data for this study was collected by combining traditional ethnographic participation observation with in-depth interviews, and group discussions.

In Kathmandu, where it is estimated that about one thousand Dhimal individuals reside, the participation of Dhimal in the then ongoing national indigenous movement was limited during the early period of my fieldwork, particularly during 2007. It subsequently increased over the years. In the capital city, I participated and observed the ongoing national indigenous political movement, participated in many workshops, interaction programs and political protests, and held discussions with various indigenous leaders and activists. In particular, I also befriended Dhimal living in the Kathmandu valley, which helped me to understand their life in the city, and how they organized the diasporic Dhimal as a community through networks of kinship, village origins, and through ethnic associations related with political parties, and their national indigenous organization, the Kendra.

My primary field sites were however in the Damak area of Jhapa and in Morang, which are located about 330 miles east of the capital, equivalent to a day's bus ride or an hour flight from Kathmandu. I worked closely with Dhimal indigenous leaders and activists affiliated with the Kendra. I interviewed over thirty different Dhimal activists of three generations, and recorded life histories of six senior Dhimal indigenous activists in order to understand the history of Dhimal ethnic activism. Similarly, I interviewed and held discussions with many Dhimal from different walks of life and gender.

The Kendra was a major ethnographic site of my fieldwork, and I tried to participate, as much as possible, in all the major events and programs organized by the Kendra during 2007 and early 2010. These events included their collective ritual performance in a place called Raja Rani, and the ending of this ritual at the Kendra, periodic political interactions, meetings, and conventions held by the Kendra and other ethnic groups of Dhimal on the premises of the Kendra. The Dhimal youths, to whom I alluded in the beginning of this chapter, emerged as

important political forces during the period of my fieldwork, and hence I also closely worked with these activists and followed their activism. In other words, I followed these various indigenous activists and their ethnic organizations in different locations in Morang, Jhapa and in Kathmandu.

In order to ground my observations in the contexts of peoples' everyday life, I stayed in the Karikoshi village of Morang, which became my "ethnographic village," where I was able to connect with local social relationships of the village by living with a Dhimal family for a period of three months. This village-based observation was important and instrumental in helping me to understand Dhimal social life, the importance of Dhimal's notion of the village, and the practices of their customary institutions such as the village head and the village ritual priests. My participation in and observations of multiple Dhimal weddings and marriage rituals, their village rituals and fairs, and village level indigenous activism and party politics were the major ethnographic sites through which I collected my ethnographic data relating to the cultural politics of reform.

Chapter Organization

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters; six of them draw on my primary ethnographic data while one is a historical-anthropological analysis of the political economy of Tarai land colonization.

The first chapter provides the general outlines the general introduction of this dissertation by discussing the major research questions and the theoretical-conceptual frameworks used for examining these research questions. Similarly, I discuss the processes ethnographic fieldworks, the political contexts of my research period, and how my subjective positioning as an

ethnographer from an indigenous community and my social-academic backgrounds of working in Nepal influenced the undertaking of this dissertation.

In the second chapter, I examine the historical contexts within which Nepal's Tarai region was transformed through the geography of state colonization for land, labor, revenue and political control at the turn of the 19th century. This chapter illustrates how the particular history of state-led land colonization in the Tarai, the extractive land tenure relations based on the dominations of the hill Hindu groups in particular, and the interplay between the politics of regional geographical imaginations, caste hierarchy, Dhimals' reliance on non-farming subsistence to adopt in the densely forested malarial ecology of the Tarai, and their different notions of land (without permanent individual or collective ownership) placed Dhimal at a distinct disadvantage in relations with the encroaching landlord Nepali state till the early 20th century such that large number of them later became landless in their own ancestral territories. With this focus on the issues of land and landlessness, this chapter emphasizes that an anthropology of the state informed by indigenous peoples' politics must center on the dialogical relationship among geography, labor, history and power.

In the third chapter, I expand the history of state-led colonization of the Tarai land by focusing on how Dhimal experienced the extractive landlord Hindu state before the 1950s. In this chapter, I examine on Dhimal experiences of 'losing ground' to discuss why land and landlessness become important issues for Dhimals to index their sense of who they are, what happened and continues to happen to them as Dhimal. With a historical informed ethnographic analysis, I show how the malarial ecology of the Tarai in the past, and the aggressive land colonization and extractive revenue regimes discouraged Dhimal to become the tenant subjects of the state such that many of them preferred not to own any land under their tenurial rights.

Drawing on Dhimals' claims that 'owning land was so much of *dukhā* (Nep. sorrow, painful) in the past', I discuss how the historical encounters between the land colonizing state and the Tarai adivasi with different notion of land later led to increasingly landlessness among Dhimal in the later period. Thus this chapter provides new insights to approach the relationship of Tarai ādivāsi with the land by focusing on the interplay between the territorial sovereignty of the state, the role of malaria in mediating relations between adivasi, the state, and other social groups, and Dhimals' historical agency in resisting the extractive Hindu state. In doing so, it also highlights the critical needs for historically informed social history of malaria to understand the changing relations between the state, indigenous groups and other social groups in Nepal's Tarai.

In the chapter four, I discuss why Dhimal activists consider activism to be a morally embodied practice. The primary goal of this chapter is to provide an understanding of Dhimal indigenous activism by focusing on the life experiences of the senior Dhimal activists whom I know and worked with for this study. I draw on the life histories of these activists and locate them in the localized contexts of larger political and economic conditions to construct an overview of the history of Dhimal ethnic organizing. I use the Dhimal activists as protagonist narrators of the history of their ethnic activism to understand what motivated them to become persistently engaged in indigenous organizing despite various challenges they faced. Based on these data, I propose that indigenous activism needs to be approached as a moral practice that people enact out of their deeply felt embodied responsibility and duty to act on the structural conditions of their marginality so that they could continue the social production of their collective selves as Dhimal. This chapter provides an alternative framework to the 'spatial-economic' approach to indigenous activism, popular in the study of ethnic and identity politics in

South Asia and the Himalayan region, which depicts ‘ethnic activists’ as middle-class urban intellectuals.

The fifth and sixth chapters examine the relationship between Dhimal indigenous activism and the cultural politics of reforms centered on marriage, traditional dress, and village ritual. In the chapter five, I focus on why Dhimal community elders and indigenous activists focus on marriage as arena for cultural reforms and preservation. In order to elucidate why marriage and wedding practices become important in indigenous activism, I first discuss the Dhimal notion of ‘village’ centered on the centrality of the village shrine, the *Gramthan*. Given their marginality and territorial dispossessions which have continued since the early 20th century, Dhimals’ struggle to continue their collective social life is closely tied with their ability to reconstitute ‘Dhimal village’ and its customary social relations emplaced in their lived ancestral places. Then I show marriage and wedding ceremonials help to reconstitute Dhimal village and its customary institutions through concrete practices and how

By showing the centrality of marriage (hence kinship) in indigenous activism, this chapter illustrates how the seemingly abstract concepts of indigenous politics such as ‘indigenous culture’, ‘traditional or customary institutions’, ‘cultural autonomy’ and so forth, emerge meaningfully in Dhimals’ “indigenous analysis” (Kirsch, 2006.) of their lived conditions, and in their practical actions for their community and its future. The contentious and discursive nature of these reform politics, in which large numbers of Dhimal from of all social strata participate and debate about themselves and their ‘culture’, both in appreciation and in self-critical fashions, contribute in important ways to shaping the fundamental contents of Dhimal indigenous political activism. It is through such locally embedded cultural politics Dhimal indigenous activists and Dhimal indigenous organizations such as the Kendra derive their moral authority and social

legitimacy to represent their community in the larger political mobilization. Hence, this chapter illustrates how marriage-wedding ceremonials become important constitutive practices of Dhimal indigenous activism.

In the chapter six, I focus on the making of *Shrejat*, Dhimals' most important village ritual, as the collective national ritual of Dhimal jāti (Dhimal people). By discerning how the Shrejat reconstitutes Dhimal village, its ritual and territorial boundaries, and the moral social worlds and the reciprocal relationships between the villagers, deities, and other beings living in the village ecology, I discuss the ways in which the collective organization of the Shrejat reconstitutes the customary institutions such as the village head, *Majhi*, the village priest, *Dhami*, and other ancestors. Since these customary institutions and social actors associated with them are also the constituent actors and organizational bodies of the national Dhimal indigenous organization or the Kendra, this chapter shows how the making of Shrejat forges a collective sense of peoplehood by connecting all Dhimal villages to the Kendra through the collective organization of the ritual. In doing so, they also confer the Kendra an important communal power to act as the Majhi (village head) of all the villages thereby strengthening its moral and political authority to act on behalf the Dhimal jāti.

The seventh chapter further elaborates how Dhimal use locally embedded cultural practices in their indigenous political mobilization by focusing on the politics of place-making practices. In this chapter, I draw on “place” as an analytical concept in anthropology and the theoretical approaches that combine the phenomenological approach of “being in the place” (Casey, 1996; Basso, 1996) and the political-economic approach to place and production of place (Harvey, 1996), exemplified by the works of Kirsch (2001, 2006), Escobar (2001) and Kahn (2011), in order to argue for the relevance and necessity of a place-based approach to indigenous activism.

The ethnographic material for this chapter largely draws from my observations of Dhimals' annual journey to their newly rediscovered historic place, now called Raja Rani (Nep. King and Queen) village, located on a hilltop nearby Letang bazar in Morang district. In the late 1990s, Dhimal activists rediscovered that their ancestors used live in Raja Rani till the 1930s. After its rediscovery, Raja Rani has been transformed into a sacred place where Dhimal ethnic histories and ancestral spirits reside. During the end of my fieldwork period (2009), the place entered into Dhimals' territorial mapping of their demands for the 'Dhimal autonomous state.' Now many Dhimals claim that Raja Rani is an abode of Dhimals' ancestral kingdom.

Why has this region, where no Dhimal currently lives, acquired such a heightened sense of place for Dhimals? Using ethnographic accounts of Dhimals' collective ritual journey to Raja Rani and analyzing the narratives of the ritual participants and the organizers, I examine this particular place-making practice by locating it in the contexts of Dhimals' experiences of the Nepali state in the past, Dhimal activists' search for their ethnic histories, and the contemporary indigenous articulation of federalism based on ethnic identity, history and territory in Nepal. I discuss how Dhimal ritual performance in Raja Rani not only transforms the sacredness of the place for Dhimals and others, and how Dhimal activists creatively deploy their village ritual to forge a collective sense of peoplehood and territorial-historical consciousness which they interweave into their larger political movements for indigenous rights. In particular, I show how ordinary individuals make and write history in the land by participating in the ritual and physically being in their ancestral places through seemingly mundane practices of chitchat and informal group discussions. Hence, this chapter adds new ethnographic insights to understand the practice of "topographic writing" (Santos-Garnero, 1998) i.e. how people inscribe histories in the land. Furthermore, this chapter offers a grounded ethnographic example to illuminate the

dialogical interplay between global-national discourses of indigeneity, political transformations, and peoples' everyday practices by showing how ordinary people imbue a place with historical significance and how such history making can become powerful sources for indigenous articulation of territorial claims in their specific political struggles, for examples, in the movements for 'Dhimal autonomous state.'

The chapter eight provides a concluding summary of the dissertation by highlighting its major contribution to the anthropology of indigenous movement, and in the study of indigenous politics in Nepal and South Asia.

Chapter Two

Ādivāsi and the Landlord State: Tarai as the Geography of Colonization

Geographical Imaginations: “Hills contain the soul of Nepal”

During my elementary school days (the late 1970s) in Nepal, students were required to sing their grade-specific national songs. Although in fragments, some of these songs still vividly echo in my mind. One such song was about the nation’s geography, which was perhaps used to instill in us a strong sense of pride in being citizens of the beautiful country called Nepal. Like other national songs that eulogized either the geography or the crown, or both, but not the diversity of Nepali people and their cultures, this song focuses on how beautiful Nepal looks.

One of its stanzas goes like this:

Look at the Tarai!
How beautiful it is!
Because it has the green forest
Look at the hills!
*They are *more* beautiful!*
Because the rhododendron blooms there¹⁴

The song introduces the dominant regional geographical imageries to school students, that their nation comprises high hills (*Pahad*) and lowlands (*Tarai*), each with its own beauty. Per the song, the Tarai owes its beauty to the green forest, a popular image of the region, though in

¹⁴ The stanza in Nepali: ‘Tarai hera kati ramro, hariyo ban hunale ; Pahad hera jhanai ramro, gurans fulnale’

reality that forest has mostly disappeared by now. But, interestingly, the hill region is depicted to be more beautiful than the Tarai by its association with the rhododendron, Nepal's national flower, found only in the hills and mountains. The hills where the national flower blossoms make the region, hence Nepal, even more beautiful. The national song, which I myself sang countless times growing up, is a concrete illustration of the way in which the Nepali state naturalizes and produces a hill-centric nationalism through everyday practices of the school system.

David Harvey (2005: 220-221) has eloquently argued that "nation-state formation was and is still dependent upon the creation of certain kinds of geographical understandings (everything from mapping boundaries to the cultivation of some sense of national identity within those boundaries), and the more a state (and its rulers) can mobilize this geographical imaginary, the more they could ground their legitimacy and power." The reference to the national song attests to such politics of "geographical imagination" (Harvey, 2005:212), which is reflective of the two-century long history of state-led colonization of the Tarai and the making of Nepal as a *hill-Hindu nation*.¹⁵

In this chapter, I will examine the historical contexts within which Nepal's Tarai region was transformed through the geography of state colonization for land, labor, revenue and political control at the turn of the 19th century. The overall objective of this chapter is to provide a brief historical analysis of Nepal's political history and the power relationships between the dominant hill Hindu rulers and their subjects (see Gaige, 1975; Yadav, 2006; Gurung, 1997, 2003) by focusing on state-led colonization of the Tarai in reference to the history of the state

¹⁵ According to David Harvey, geographical imagination enables the individual " to recognize the role of space and place in his own biography, to relate to the spaces he sees around him, and to recognize how transactions between individuals and between organizations are affected by the space that separates them" (Harvey, 2005: 212).

formation in Nepal. For the historical data on the land tenure system, this chapter draws heavily on the works of Nepal's pioneering economic historian Mahesh Chandra Regmi (1929-2003). Regmi's characterization of the late 18th and the mid-19th century state of Nepal as an empire in the making (Regmi, 1999) is insightful in examining the indigenous peoples' experiences of the Nepali state as a form of colonization (see Tamang, 2008). My focus in this chapter is to offer a regional political-economic history of state-led production of the Tarai as a "state space" (Scott, 2009: 40-63).

"State space," according to James Scott, is an ideal space for appropriation in order to ensure a reliable supply of labor, revenue, rents, food, tradable goods and other means for the state and its rulers. Scott's historical analysis substantiates that geography powerfully constrained the state-making processes in the pre-colonial period in Southeast Asia. Since these states depended heavily on taxes or rents (foodstuffs, corvée labor, soldiers, tribute, tradable goods, species), they sought "state-spaces" (or created them through colonization) in order to guarantee a reliable supply of labor and food at a low cost (Scott, 2009: 40-63).

The state's control over land, the primary means of livelihood for the majority of the people, was one of the major governing principles and techniques by which Nepal's rulers appropriated land, labor and wealth, and subjugated their subjects (see Regmi, 1971, 1978). Scott's spatial category of "state space" is a useful analytic to examine how the Tarai region became an important geography of state-extraction in Nepal during the 19th and 20th centuries. This particular history of extractive political economy and state-led colonization of the Tarai for land, labor, revenue, and political control and the marginalization of people of Tarai origin is pivotal to the understanding of Dhimal experiences of territorial dispossession and landlessness. However, the concept is inadequate to understanding the overarching moral and political

rationalities that Nepal rulers' envisioned and used to legitimize their sovereignty over the people and territories they claimed to govern. I argue that the making of the Tarai as a 'state space' needs to be examined both in terms of the political-economic needs of land and labor for the colonizer (the landlord state and its rulers) and the politics of "geo-body" (Thongchai 1994) they used to govern the relationship among rulers, land, subjects and territories during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

We know that the imperial model of territorial appropriation through conquest was the normative state-making practice in the South Asian-Himalayan region during the 18th century (Regmi, 1999; Michael, 2012). But governing the conquered territories and its subject population was also legitimized by the cultural logic that the Hindu rulers of Nepal used to rationalize and justify the extractive political economy and the colonization of the Tarai. In this regard, the rise of the House of Gorkha as a Hindu kingdom in the late 18th century and the ways in which its hill Hindu rulers envisioned their kingdom and its territorial possessions as a moral universe in which various social groups lived, occupying distinct ecological-cultural niches or what I have called, drawing from Thongchai (1994), the making of a "geo-body" of their kingdom is equally important to frame the historical analysis of the state's control of land in Nepal.

Since state control of land and territory is the central focus of my analysis here, and these are equally the fundamental concerns for Dhimal and other indigenous peoples, it is important to consider how the Nepali state and its rulers institutionalized the praxis of territorial sovereignty. I draw on Thongchai's (1994) notion of "geo-body" that he compellingly uses to discuss how the kingdom of Siam with its overlapping and multiple indigenous territorial sovereignties was transformed into the modern nation of Thailand as a natural and stable territorial entity during

the 19th century. Thongchai's primary focus is to show the emergence of this new territorial entity by examining the influence of modern mapping techniques on Thai conceptions of nationhood. As such, the concept of "geo-body" describes the "operations of the technology of territoriality that created nationhood" (p. 16) and "the geo-body of nation is a man-made territorial definition which create effects-by classifying, communicating, and enforcement – on people, things, and relationships" (p: 17). Though mapping is the primary technology for creating the nation's geo-body in his analytical framework, Thongchai argues that the term geo-body does not merely signify space or territory. He explains:

It (geo-body) is a component of the life a nation. It is the source of pride, loyalty, love, passion, bias, hatred, reason and unreason. It also generates many other conceptions and practices about nationhood as it combines with other components of nationhood (Thongchai1994: 17).

In this chapter, I use the notion of geo-body to underline how Nepal's 19th-century rulers imagined their kingdom as a 'pure land of Hindus,' and hence my emphasis is on the production of the nation's geo-body through discursive cultural practices rather than through the cartographic technique of mapping. A focus on the geographical imagination that Nepal's Hindu rulers envisioned to delineate the boundaries of their territorial possessions and ritual realms (Burghart, 1984), as well as to define their distinct identity vis-à-vis their subject populations and other rulers in the region, helps us to understand the convergence of the politics of geo-body and the political-economy of resource extraction in the Tarai.

A detailed synthesis of the two-century long (18th-20th centuries) history of land colonization in the Tarai is beyond the scope of this chapter. I will broadly divide the historical period into the Gorkhali empire (1740s-1816) and the Rana regime (1846-1951) in order to highlight three major arguments. First, I argue that the rise of the present-day state of Nepal as a Hindu kingdom at the end of the 18th century fundamentally transformed the proprietorial

concept of 'land' by making the state sovereign '*mālik*' (Nep: master/owner) of territories under its possession or the '*muluk*' (Nep. country or the entire possessions, Burghart, 1984). I will expand on Richard Burghart's (1984) insightful analysis of the concept of the Hindu kingdom used by Nepali rulers at the turn of the 19th century. In particular, I examine the idea of the king as *Bhupati* (Nep: master/husband of the land), a fundamental governing principle used by Nepal's Hindu rulers to claim and legitimize their political authority and territorial sovereignty. I contend that the notion of *Bhupati* essentially dispossesses and alienates people from their embedded relationships with their lands, and transforms the land into a *rentable* state possession.

Second, I focus on the politics of the land tenure system and land grants (*Birta* and *Jagir*), a widely institutionalized practice of state patronage during 19th and early 20th century Nepal. I rely on the pioneering works of M.C. Regmi on the history of land tenure system (Regmi, 1971, 1978, 1995, 1999) in order to illustrate how state control of land hierarchized the spatial-political organization of ruler, people, and territory through unequal tenurial and caste systems, thereby strengthening the domination of the hill rulers over their Tarai subjects.

My discussions in this chapter will help us to understand the impact of the emergence of the feudal relationships of extraction on the moral economy and relatively egalitarian nature of the indigenous communities. Theoretically, this chapter offers an ethnographically informed analysis to approach the intricate concept of 'state' by taking into account the dialectical relationships of labor, territory, history, and power in our analytical framework. Since *land* is a central analytic in studying the relationship between the state and indigenous peoples, our investigative approach to the state needs to historicize how, by whom, and for what purposes its territorial sovereignty becomes objectified in a specific historical context (Abrams, 1988). Hence an anthropological account of the state which is informed by the experiences of

indigenous peoples, *must* consider the dialogical relationships of labor, territory, and history in grounding our understanding in its analytical framework.

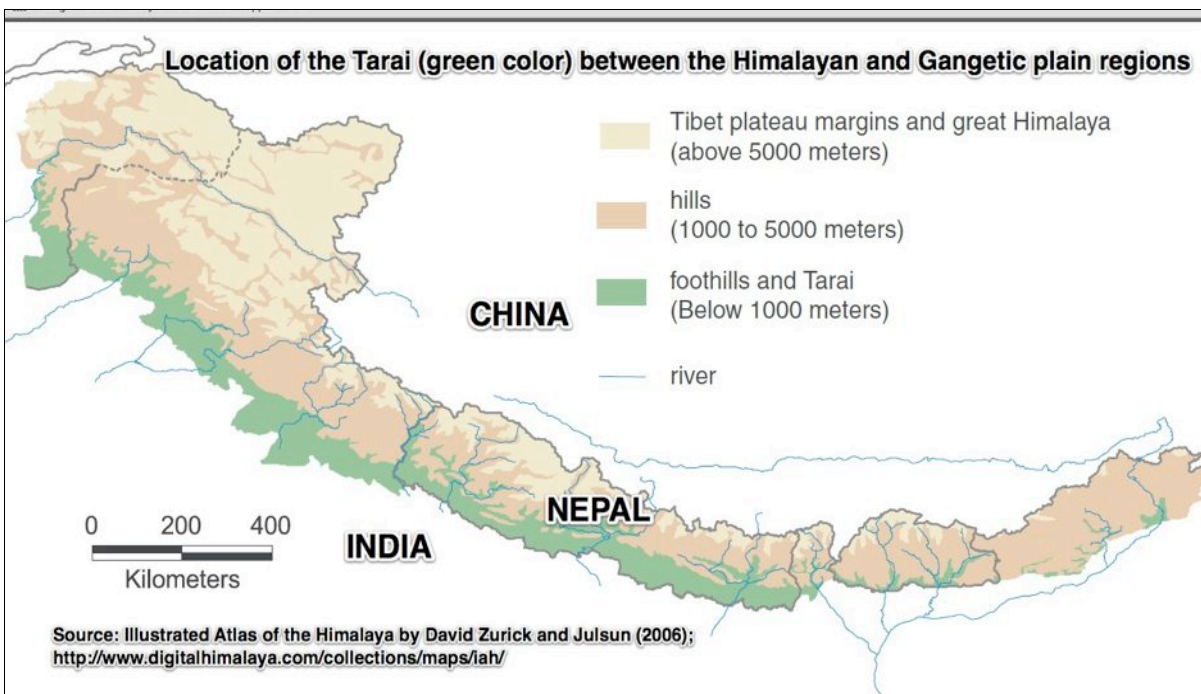
As this chapter demonstrates, it is equally necessary to embed our analysis of ‘states’ in a larger geo-historical context of political pluralism in the regions in which centralizing hierarchical states coexist alongside radically egalitarian polities. The rise of the House of Gorkha, the political order that evolved into the present day state of Nepal at the turn of 19th century, together with the emergence of the British Empire in the region, led to the formation of a centralized hierarchical polity through its campaign of territorial conquest and colonization. This hierarchical political entity attempted to dominate the egalitarian polities that had flourished in many indigenous communities of Nepal in the past. Dhimals, before the Gorkhali king annexed their territories, exemplified such egalitarian-oriented polities in the Tarai. Today they are making efforts, through their indigenous political movement, to reform the contemporary state in which they are now encapsulated in order to shape it along less hierarchical and more egalitarian lines. I contend that we cannot fully appreciate what motivated Dhimal to engage in what we now call indigenous politics without understanding how land shapes their understanding of their collective subjectivity (as the Dhimal *jāti*), history, and political agency.

The Tarai: The Visibly Invisible Place

Topographically Nepal is divided into the *Himal* (Nep. mountain, snowpeak), the *Pahad* (Nep. hill), and the *Tarai/Madhes* (Nep. lowland plains). Each ecological region includes distinct ethnic, religious and linguistic diversity, influencing peoples’ sense of regional identity, belonging, and geographical imagination (see Map 2). The mountains and hills cover about 77 percentage of the total area, making Nepal predominately a ‘mountainous’ country in her topographical composition. The *Tarai/Madhes* is a narrow strip of lowlands (with elevations of

less than 1000 meters above sea level), located between the foothills of the Himalayan hills and the vast Indo-Gangetic plains, stretching over “two thousands kilometers from the district of Naini tal in the northwestern Uttar Pradesh to the Arunachal Pradesh in India’s far eastern corner” (Guneratne, 2001: 20).¹⁶

Figure 4: The Tarai Region



Nepal’s present-day Tarai boundary was fixed when the Nepali state gave up much of the territory it occupied in the Tarai by signing a treaty of friendship (known as the Treaty of Sugauli) with British India after Nepal’s defeat in the Anglo-Gorkha war (1814-1816).¹⁷ Later, the wholeness of the present-day territory of Nepal was restored when British India returned the

¹⁶ The Tarai is also written as ‘Terai’. The inner Tarai or ‘*Bhitri Madhes*’ refers to the small valleys located between the foothills of Siwalik or Churiya hill and the Tarai belt. In this chapter, I use ‘Tarai’ to refer include both the Tarai proper and the Inner Tarai.

¹⁷ For the Anglo-Gorkha war (1814-1816), see Michael (2012). See Stiller (1976) for the impact of the war on the social and economic life of the people of Nepal during 1814-1836.

current five districts of the Far Western Tarai to the then Nepali rulers in acknowledgement of their military support in suppressing the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 in India.

Nepal's Tarai comprises less than one-fourth of the country's total area, but now it is home to almost half of the nation's total population, and the increasing shifts of population growth toward the Tarai shows that a majority of Nepal's people will be living in the Himalayan country's plains region within the next few years. Population growth in the Tarai, the result chiefly of migration from the hills to the plains, is a recent phenomenon (post-1950s), but the region has always been culturally, economically and politically very significant in the geography of the Himalayan-Indo-Gangetic region. For example, the Tarai has been the 'bread-basket' of Nepal since the onset of nation-state formation, and the people of the region, particularly the Tarai ādivāsī, had "nourished" hill principalities (Meyer, 2000:19) long before the Tarai became part of the current state of Nepal.¹⁸ As a historic region of cultural flows across boundaries (see Lal, 2002), the regional history of the Tarai is as ancient and rich as those of any other region of Nepal.¹⁹

Historical records show that substantial parts of Nepal's Tarai, particularly the Morang region, were indeed densely forested until the end of the 19th century (Buchanan-Hamilton, 1819; Oldfield, 1880; Guneratne, 2002).²⁰ However, the Tarai cannot be considered to have been a

¹⁸ For example, at the end of 1950s, the Tarai region had two thirds of Nepal's total cultivable lands; still almost 53 % of Nepal's arable lands are in Tarai and 80 % of the arable land in Tarai is used for paddy- the most important cereal crops in Nepal (Nepal Agriculture Census, 2001-2002; CBS, 2001).

¹⁹ For example, the archaeological findings at Lumbini- the site of the birthplace of the Buddha located in the central Tarai of Nepal, date back to as early as 3rd and 4th century A.D. The archaeological excavation was led by India archaeologist P.C Mukherji in 1899 (see Rijal, 1996)

²⁰ William Kirkpatrick who represented the British Mission to Nepal in 1769 observed dense forest of "eight and half miles in horizontal depth" with few settlement and "this forest skirts the territories of Nepal throughout their whole extent...separating them everywhere from the Company's (East India) possessions" (Kirkpatrick, 1811: 16). These forests contained "inexhaustible source of riches" which could be made to "supply valuable timber, not only to the countries washed by Ganges, *but even our settlements in India*" (p: 42, emphasis added).

“primeval forest” while “civilization” developed elsewhere in the Indian sub-continent and the Himalayan regions. Rather than an unchanging wilderness, the landscapes of the Tarai were impermanent. Criticizing the scholarly and popular depiction of the Tarai as a “primeval forest” Krauskopff (2002:35) emphasizes the need to rethink the popular historicity of Nepal’s Tarai.

She writes:

Old kingdoms have risen and fallen there (Tarai) for at least 2000 years. The forest retreated when farming expanded under prosperous political conditions; jungle took over in times of instability and conflict. Reading today the journeys of the Chinese pilgrims from the 5th and 6th centuries in search of Buddhist shrines gives a sound idea of the impermanent landscape of the Tarai. It seems after that several centuries after the Buddha’s birth in the Sakya kingdom of present-day Kapilvastu, a previously well-developed area had partly reverted to wilderness (Bell 1884: 2680).

The Tarai is home to many indigenous groups, and these *ādivāsi* groups had lived and thrived in these malarial places long before the rise of the present day nation-state of Nepal during the 18th century. Because of the ‘harsh’ environmental conditions and the shortage of labor, the hill kings as well as the British colonial regime encouraged and relied primarily on Tarai *ādivāsi* like the Tharus to reclaim the Tarai forests for cultivation and settlement. The recent publication based on the fifty royal documents issued to the Tharus by Kings of Nepal from 1726-197, collected by Tej Narayan Panjiar, a Tharu native from Udaypur district of Nepal, shows how the hill rulers who controlled the Tarai territories depended on Tharu chieftains to cultivate Tarai land for their principalities during the 18th and 19th centuries (Krauskopff and Meyer, 2000). These documents help us to understand the important role of the Tharu in transforming “mosquito-infected malarial jungles of the Tarai into the breadbasket of Nepal” (Krauskopff, 2000: 25-49). So the Tarai *ādivāsi*, contrary to popular representations of them as “savage dwellers of a primeval forest” (Krauskopff, 2000: 35), who are presumed to be “faceless

in history” (Panjiar, 1993:20-21), were actively involved in the emergent political transformations in the Indo-Gangetic and the Himalayan regions.

The Tarai, instead of being an insulated forested region peripheral to the world, was a shared frontier formed by an intersection of “ecological, agrarian, social, and political regimes, whose extent, though overlapping was never constant” (Michael, 2007: 314). At the end of the 18th century, different parts of the Tarai region were controlled by various petty hill principalities located in present-day Nepal’s territory, as well as by the kings of Sikkim, now a part of India, and some landlords from the neighboring districts of India, then under British colonial rule, (Michael 2012, 2007). For those hill principalities that claimed control over the Tarai areas, land tax, agricultural potentials from the Tarai, and its abundant forest resources were important sources of state revenue (Buchman-Hamilton, 1819; Michael, 2007; Krauskopff and Meyer, 2000). Furthermore, the dense and malaria-ridden Tarai forest also acted as a “natural fence” for the hill principalities against potential invasions from the south. Hence these hill rulers preferred to keep large parts of the Tarai forested while encouraging land reclamation in selected areas. For instance, Francis Buchanan Hamilton (1762-1829), an accomplished surgeon-naturalist of the East India Company who visited Nepal and spent a year in Kathmandu valley in 1802-1803, observed that:

Before the conquest by the Nepalese, the petty Rajas, who governed its different portions, were so much afraid of their neighbours, that they did not promote the cultivation of this low land. They rather encouraged extensive woods, and contented themselves, in a great measure, with the produce of the forests in timber, elephants, and pasture; even then, however, many rich spots were occupied, and very productive; but they were so buried in the forests as to be little observable. The Gorkhalese, being more confident, have cleared much of the country, although still a great deal remains to be done (Hamilton, 1819:64).

The Tarai region, because of its abundance of land (both cultivated and cultivable), forest resources, and its strategic location between the Gangetic plains and the Himalayan regions (in

terms of geo-politics and transnational trade routes) acquired new political and economic importance for the two emerging imperial powers in the Himalayan region: the House of Gorkha, the polity that evolved into the present-day state of Nepal, and the British, represented by the East India company.²¹ The Gorkhali annexation of the Tarai at the end of 18th century transformed the region in unprecedented ways.

The historicity of the Tarai is not often considered in the anthropology of Nepal or in the popular imagination of Nepal as a ‘Himalayan nation.’ C. K. Lal, one of Nepal’s most influential columnists and political analysts, who himself belongs to a Tarai community, succinctly describes this paradoxical invisibility and omission of the Tarai from the popular representation of Nepal:

The very name ‘Nepal’ evokes the image of a country set amidst the majestic Himalayan peaks, where exotic valleys still harbour the serenity of the lost Shangri-La. Sold to the world by Western explorers and latter-day adventurers and travel writers, this portrayal of mountain exotica hides the fact that a considerable part of what constitutes the territory of Nepal is actually as flat as a table-top. This is the Nepal tarai.... Despite its cultural, social and economic significance, however, the tarai receives scant attention. For the Nepali hill elite that would like to mold the country after its image, the tarai is a region to be exploited -- its resources are useful but its people (not the newly migrated hill folk, but the indigenous tribes and the Madhesi of the plains) are a liability. Meanwhile, as far as the world is concerned, the tarai is merely an extension of the Ganga plain.” (Lal, 2002: 100-101).

C.K. Lal’s critical note that “for the Nepali hill elite, the Tarai is a region to be exploited” addresses a major thrust of this chapter. This issue needs a much more detailed discussion of the complex political histories of Nepal than this chapter’s focus on the land.²² Here I will briefly

²¹ The control over the Tarai territories was a major source of conflict between these two emerging regional powers; the Gorkhali state and the British India fought for two years (1814-1816) over the disputed territories of the Tarai (Michael, 2012; Stiller, 1976).

²² On recent writings on the issues of Madhesi people, their history and struggles, see for example, Yadav, 2005; Shah 2006; Thapa and Mainali, 2006; Guneratne, 2011; Sijapati, 2013; ICG, July 9, 2007; Hachhethu, 2007; Gautam, 2008.

address the issues of the marginalization of the Tarai peoples in order to relate them to my focus on the land colonization of the Tarai.

The people of Tarai origin include Hindu caste groups, indigenous or Tarai ādivāsi, and other linguistic and religious groups (for example, Muslims). They are also collectively referred as ‘*Madhesi*’ after ‘*Madhes*’, the country in the middle between the Himalayas and the Gangetic plains. The term *Madhesi* was used more derogatively in the past but now, particularly since the 1990s, it has been established as a powerful political category. However, the Tarai ādivāsi such as the Tharu, Dhimal and others reject the category of *Madhesi* for themselves. They argue that ‘*Madhesi*’ are descendants of the people from India who migrated to the Tarai region during different periods in history. The Tarai indigenous groups prefer to self-identify themselves as ādivāsi or ādivāsi janajāti. In Nepal, regional identities, particularly the distinction between the *Pahade* (Nep. people of hill origin) and *Madhesi* (Nep. people of Tarai origin) are also equally salient and politically contested (see Guneratne, 2011). This distinction and conflicts between the hill and the plain people have emerged primarily because of the ways in which the lowland plains were colonized and the history of discrimination against Tarai people by the state and its hill rulers.

Nepal’s traditional ruling groups come exclusively from the hills, and they had used the Tarai as an extractive colony in the past. In the post-1950s period, when hill-centric nationalism became the sacred state ideology (see Gaige, 1975), the hill rulers were successful in promulgating the dominant geocentric attitude and view that the “hills contain the soul of Nepal” (Himal, Sep/Oct, 1990: 5-8). Until recently, because of the region’s geographical proximity to the bordering regions of India together with existing cultural-linguistic similarities, kinship, and economic ties between communities across the borders, the people of Tarai origin were often

looked down by the hill people as “Indian in disguise” or for being “less Nepali” than the hill people (see Gaige, 1975; Thapa and Mainali, 2006). After the 1950s, the Nepali state, under the rubric of ‘*bikās*’ (Nep. development) and ‘national integration,’ aggressively imposed a policy of ‘one language, one dress, and one nation,’ based on the cultural symbols of the ruling hill caste groups to assimilate the Tarai people, indigenous groups and other cultural minorities. Hill peoples were encouraged and systematically resettled in the Tarai region so that they could assimilate the Tarai people into ‘Nepali nationalism’ (see Elder and et.al. 1976).²³

That Nepal’s rulers regarded people of Tarai origin, particularly the *Madhesi*, with suspicion becomes irrefutably evident in the fact the Tarai people were not recruited into the Royal Nepal Army (now Nepal Army) until recently, and many of them were denied Nepali citizenship on the pretext of their concealed Indian origin (Gaige, 1975). Therefore, the hill- or mountain-centric bias, a dominant attribute of Nepal’s nationalist thinking in the past, is revealed in the political marginalization of the Tarai region from state power and the history of discrimination against the people of the Tarai origin in Nepal. In order to provide a brief historical analysis of Nepal’s political history and the power relationships that produced and sustained such a hill-centric national imagination in Nepal, I will first locate the Tarai and its historicity in reference to the history of the nation-state formation in Nepal.

²³ In their evaluation report of state-led planned resettlement program in Nepal’s Tarai which was funded by the international donors community, the team of “experts” led by scholars affiliated with the department of sociology, University of Madison (USA) and the Tribhuvan University, Nepal praised that the state’s efforts of settlement of the hill people in the Tarai for ensuring “the cultural stabilization of the border regions.” They write, “even today the majority of residents in the Tarai do not speak Nepali as their mother tongue (p: 28). And the Hindu festivals of the Tarai tend to be more Indian than Nepali. Given the degree of cultural continuity between the Tarai and India, the decision of King Mahendra and his cabinet to clear and settle a two-to four-mile strip along the entire southern border of Nepal is understandable. The movement of Nepali-speaking hill people on to the Tarai border through the Punarvas Company Program (resettlement company) *could contribute much to the cultural stabilization of the border*. Furthermore, the scrub of jungle on the border had long provided refuge not only for the wild animals but also for smugglers and dacoits. *The clearing of these jungles could do much to discourage such “anti-national” elements and to civilize the area* (Elder et al. 1976: 28-29, emphasis added).

The Tarai as a “Currency of Gorkhali Conquest”

The present day state of Nepal evolved out of the territorial expansion of the House of Gorkha, then a small hill principality in the mid-western hills, located in the current district of Gorkha.²⁴ During the five-decade-long “campaigns of conquest” (Regmi, 1971: 9), initiated and led by its Hindu king, Prithivi Narayan Shah (1723-1775; hereafter P.N. Shah), the ancestor of Nepal’s recently dethroned monarch, the House of Gorkha expanded from a state of a few hundred square miles into an area of appropriately ninety thousand square miles in the Himalayan region (Stiller, 1973: 278). It controlled territories extending from the Tista river in the east to the Sutlej river in the west on its way to “becoming an imperial power in the Himalayan region” (Regmi, 1999: 4).

The dominant nationalist discourses and their state-centric historiography excessively glorify P.N. Shah as the “founding father” of the present day Nepali nation-state, and his project of territorial expansion has been uncritically credited for unifying the present day Nepali nation. The popular explanation is that P.N. Shah united the petty kingdoms and principalities, which had weakened due to the many wars they fought against one another. P.N. Shah thus rescued Nepal from being colonized by the British Empire as it had done with the people in India and elsewhere. However such nationalist history denies the existence of alternative narratives, including histories of indigenous and subaltern resistance against the Gorkhali state and its political order.²⁵ Similarly such nationalist historiography undermines the larger historical and

²⁴ I use the term ‘Gorkhali state’ or ‘Gorkha state’ to refer to the pre 1930-Nepali state. The rulers of Shah dynasty used to refer themselves as the kings of Gorkha till 1930 (Burghart, 1984: 102)

²⁵ See Chapter 7 for my discussion of the emerging genre of scholarship on the formation of the Nepali nation-state has challenged the conventional state-centric official historiography.

political-economic contexts in which Gorkhali territorial expansion led to the transformation of the Tarai into a colony for resource extraction by the hill rulers.

The mid-18th century Gorkha was an agrarian principality, which lacked a substantial source of monetary income, to such an extent that its rulers used to borrow money from their subject population (Regmi, 1971: 4). Land, as historian Ludwig Stiller has pertinently emphasized, “provided the basic motivation for the conquests that led to the unification of the petty states of the hills into the modern state of Nepal” (Stiller, 1973: 276; Regmi, 1971: 9). In this regard, the pioneering works of Nepal’s distinguished economic historian, Mahesh Chandra Regmi are very insightful in understanding the political-economic contexts of the rise of the House of Gorkha as a form of imperial expansion (see Regmi, 1971, 1976, and 1999). He argues that P.N. Shah’s “underlying objective was to *gain control of territory of the Tarai* as well as the trade routes between India and Tibet” (Regmi, 1971: 9, emphasis added).

Regmi (1995, 1999) has aptly described the Gorkhali territorial expansion as an empire in the making.²⁶ His analysis of Gorkhali rule in Kumaun, now a district in the Uttarakhand state in North India, shows how the Gorkhali rulers deployed extractive measures to exploit land, labor, and tax from the conquered populations, and how they imposed cultural assimilative policies to establish the victors’ legitimacy and political control. I argue that the analytical lens of empire is relevant and useful in understanding the political-economic contexts that led to the increased significance of the Tarai territory as the “currency of the Gorkhali conquest” (Stiller, 1973, 1976).

²⁶ In his last publication, *Imperial Gorkha: An Account of Gorkhali Rule in Kumaun (1791-1815)*, Regmi uses the notion of empire in the sense of ‘was an expansionist attempt or policy by one state or some its citizens to influence, exploit, and dominate the people of another, usually weaker, country by overt or covert political, military and economic and cultural means’ (Regmi: 1999: xii, his emphasis). He argues that ‘it is the nature of the control, rather than its extent, that determines whether or not a state is an empire’ (Regmi, 1999: xi).

Since the hill regions had only limited availability of new arable land, and there were fewer prospects of generating more land-based revenues from peasants in the hills (Stiller, 1976), the abundance of agricultural lands (cultivated and cultivable), and other, forest based revenues made the Tarai the most valuable of all its conquered territories (Regmi, 1971; Stiller, 1973; Ojha, 1983).²⁷ The revenue received by the Gorkhali state from the Tarai came mainly from four sources: first and most important, land revenue paid by the peasants; second, duties imposed on the felling, sale, and export of timber to British India; third, sale of elephants; and last, fees paid by herdsmen who brought their cattle from India to graze on the Tarai pasture during the dry seasons (Guneratne, 2002: 28).²⁸

The eastern Tarai contributed substantially to the cash revenue of the new Kingdom of Gorkha; it is estimated that 60 percent of the state's revenue in 1861 came from the eastern Tarai (Regmi, 1971: 10, 57: fn 9).²⁹ For example, the Tarai region of Morang, located between the Kosi and Mechi rivers, though mostly forested (Oldfield, 1880: 142-146), was an important trading zone between Nepal and the neighboring districts of then British India in the early 19th century (see Buchanan-Hamilton, 1928). The balance of trade between Nepal and British India through Morang in part enabled "the court of Nepal to purchase arms and clothing for their troops, and luxuries that are sent from Patna (India) to Kathmandu" (Buchanan-Hamilton, 1928:

²⁷ They were already overburdened and pauperized by then existing tax, rent and corvée labor obligation (see Stiller, 1973; Regmi, 1971).

²⁸ According to Buchanan-Hamilton (1928: 561-578), a large quantity of timber used to be exported from the forests of Morang to India during 1809-10. Nepali state used to collect revenue up to Rs 10,000 from the sale of timber from Morang only.

²⁹ The eastern Tarai in the chapter refers to the current districts of Parsa, Bara, Rautahat, Mahotari, Saptari and Morang (which also included present day districts of Sunsari and Jhapa).

574).³⁰ James Baillie Fraser, an English officer who visited the Tarai regions under British India control during the Anglo-British War (1814-1816) commented that without the territories of the Tarai, “the Nepālese could never have risen to the greatness which they had attained” (Fraser, 1820: 9).

The importance that the Gorkhali rulers assigned to the possession of the Tarai becomes evident from a letter that P.N. Shah wrote to one of his generals posted in the Eastern Tarai (Regmi, 1971). In the letter, the Gorkhali king, according to Regmi (1971: 9), described the Tarai as “superior and high revenue-yielding territory” and the hill regions as “inferior territory” so that “Gorkhali should never relinquish territory in the Tarai... even if there is a war” (Regmi, 1971: 9). The fact that P.N. Shah called the hills, the very geography of his belonging, territory inferior to the lowland plains indicates that revenue generated from the hills was inadequate to sustain the Gorkhali campaigns of conquest. In other words, even if the “hill contained the soul” of the Gorkhali state, it needed the Tarai to ‘nourish’ the Hindu kingdom. Hence, of all the conquered territories, the Gorkhali rulers made it their utmost priority to retain control over the Tarai territory, particularly in the contexts of the rise of the British imperial power in India that also claimed sovereignty over the Tarai region (Michael, 2007, 2012).

But even more important than the revenue was the purchasing power of the Tarai land that enabled the rulers of the 19th century Nepal to buy political support and to control disloyal elements (Regmi, 1971). Since there was a shortage of cash in the state’s treasury and land was the most important source of livelihood for common people, the Gorkhali rulers efficiently used land grants (called *Jagir*) as emoluments to pay army personnel and government functionaries

³⁰ Hamilton estimated that the value of exports (mostly timber, agricultural products, woolen cloth, herbs, ghee-clarified butter, elephants, ivory, copper, etc.) from Morang at Rs 363,000, and of imports (chiefly salt; other import included sugar, tobacco, spices, indigo, metal utensils, etc.) to be Rs 71,000 (see Buchamnan-Hamilton, 1928: 556-576; Regmi, 1979: 23-26).

for their services and loyalty. On the importance of the Tarai as the supplier of *Jagir* land, Stiller (1976) explains “the unity of the Gorkhali state depended on the continued loyalty of these officers and execution of their duties to the state. The guarantee of both was their *Jagir* land. And *this was in the Tarai*” (Stiller, 1976: 19, emphasis added). He credibly argues that the Tarai bore the “cost of the unification” (Stiller, 1976: 18-20); hence, the Tarai was essentially the “currency of Gorkhali conquests” (Meyer, 2000:17).

Similarly, the King and those who controlled state power generously granted *Birta*, a tax-free land grant, for three reasons: first, to individuals for appreciation of their services to the state (the rulers); second, as ritual gifts (to Brahmins, the “high” caste priests) to earn religious merit; and third, as a mark of patronage.³¹ *Birta* lands were provided to “members of the nobility, civil and other selected groups in the society on which they depended for the sustenance and continuance of their authority” (Regmi, 1971: 39). The practices of land grants may have served important economic and political functions in organizing the foundation of the new political authority and administration but *Jagir* and *Birta* lands did not yield any income to increase the state’s treasury (Regmi, 1971).³² However, these land grants could enrich grantees economically and strengthen their political authority and class domination.

The Gorkhali Shah and the Rana rulers exclusively came from the hill “high” caste groups: Bahuns, Thakuri, and Chhetri from the Gorkhali “heartland” (Regmi, 1995: 14), and because of their political domination, they also emerged as the “landowning elite.” Regmi (1971, 176)

³¹ On history of *Birta* and other land tenure in Nepal, see, especially Regmi (1978).

³² The *Birta* owners and *Jagir* holders were not only entitled to extract rents from the peasants cultivating these lands as their personal income, they were also delegated with the right to dispense justice and extract unpaid labor. On the other hand, they were also obliged to supply troops and weapons to the government, reclaim “waste lands” and resettle people, and provide additional services for the state on various events. However, the privileges of *Birta* owners and *Jagirdars* considerable outweighed their obligations (see Regmi 1971 and especially 1978).

emphasizes that the policy of *Birta* and *Jagir* land grants followed by the Gorkhali rulers favored “Brahmans, Chhetris and Thakuris, particularly from the western hill areas, who sustained the political authority of the new rulers,” while “Gurungs, Magars, Tamangs, and Newars typically did not receive such favors and suffered gradual depletion of or encroachment on the lands they had obtained during previous regimes as a result of *Birta* or *Jagir* assignments” (Regmi, 1971: 40).³³ Therefore these land grants were important tools of statecraft through which the traditional dominant groups consolidated economic and political power over the marginalized and excluded indigenous communities.

The politics of land grants further enhanced the significance of the Tarai. Regmi (1971: 38) reminds us that, prior to the conquests of the Tarai, the practices of *Birta* grants were limited due to the scarcity of land. But the rulers’ generosity in awarding *Birta* lands to individuals substantially increased with the annexation of the Tarai territories to the Gorkhali state. Thus these land grants practices simultaneously led to the emergence of privileged landed-class groups from the hills, with rights superior to those of common peasants, who, with the favor from the state, usurped lands that belonged to the indigenous communities (Caplan, 1970; Guneratne, 2002).

It is important that we consider the fact that the *mālik* (owners) of *Jagir* and *Birta* lands in the Tarai were predominately from the *hill groups* (and “high” caste), and the tenants who cultivated these lands were mostly the people of the Tarai origin until the early 20th century. Because of the fear of malaria and the perceived hostile climate of the Tarai, land grantees from the hills continued to live outside of the Tarai while they rented out their lands to local peasants.

³³ Though Kathmandu, the present day capital of Nepal had also become the new capital of the state of Gorkha in 1768, “it was the heartland of Gorkha and its peripheral territories that furnished the political leaders of the Gorkhali empire, as well as most of its high-ranking administrative personnel. These ruling families and nobility belonged to the same ethnic group, caste and cultural group as their counterparts in Gorkha. Many were also bound together by ties of kinship and marriage” (Regmi, 1995: 14).

Hence they were absentee landlords who relied on local cultivators to extract produce from the land. Devoid of any social relationships mediated by kinship and reciprocity, the tenurial relationship between the absentee hill landlords and their tenants in the Tarai were an extreme form of feudalism in which the primary interest of the landowning elite was not the soil or the welfare of their tenants but an economic surplus derived through extreme pauperization of the tenants working on the soil (see specially Regmi, 1978).

In the Tarai, this form of extractive and hierarchical relationship between the hill absentee landlords and the local tenants of the Tarai “helped develop a rentier mentality, and the hill landowners soon became an idle elite who lived off the labour of others even while despising them” (Lal, 2002: 101). These hill rulers treated the Tarai more as “a colony with subject population” (Regmi, 1971); the region, its resources and people were heavily exploited for extracting economic surplus, but the Nepali hill rulers adopted a policy of distancing the Tarai and its people politically and culturally from the hills, Kathmandu in particular, throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.

The preceding discussion helps us to understand the political and economic significance of Tarai land and resources for the formation of the Gorkhali state and for the hill Hindu rulers in particular. In the next section, I will focus on the ways in which the Gorkhali rulers effectively arrayed their vision of the Hindu geo-body of their new kingdom and the territorial sovereignty of the Hindu king to structure the social-spatial relations between the rulers/landowning elites, subjects, and land/territories through caste and land tenure hierarchies. This discussion highlights the moral and political logic that defined the territorial sovereignty of the Hindu state, and its land tenure system.

“*Asli Hindustan*”: The Politics of Geo-Body

Control over the land, as I have discussed earlier, was crucial for the expansion of the House of Gorkha. Its political-economic need to control land, subjects, and labor led to the emergence of the Gorkhali polity as a centralized and utterly extractive patrimonial feudal Hindu state (Regmi, 1995; Riaz and Basu, 2009). The new Gorkhali territorial possessions included diverse ecological regions traditionally inhabited by various social groups with their distinct cultural ways of life which were different from and often in conflict with the Hindu ways of life. Similarly, the geopolitical positioning of the Gorkhali kingdom, located between the emerging British Empire to the south, and Chinese-Buddhist Tibet to the north, also required its Hindu rulers to distinguish their kingdom and its territorial possession in terms of its distinct political and moral universe in order to claim their legitimacy and exercise their sovereignty as moral-pious rulers vis-à-vis its subjects and other political entities (see Burghart, 1984; Michaels, 1997).

The Gorkhali rulers considered their *muluk* (territorial possession) to be a “genuine lands of Hindus” (Nep. *Asali Hindustan*) sanctified by the hill Hindu rulers’ practices of maintaining the purity of their ritual realms in their territorial possessions (see specially Burghart, 1984; Gurung, 1997). Richard Burghart (1984) has brilliantly examined how 19th-century Gorkhali rulers considered their kingdom to be a territorial possession (*muluk*) and a ritual realm (*deśa*) over which the king had proprietorial and ritual authority respectively.³⁴ Similarly, there were many countries (*des or deśa*) inhabited by distinct peoples with their customs and habits

³⁴ I consider Richard Burghart to be one of the most important scholars in the overlapping fields of religious studies, caste system, cultural history, and politics of Nepal from a regional South Asian and Himalayan perspective. See Fuller and Spencer (1996) on the contribution of Richard Burghart (1944-1994).

(*deschar*) corresponding to the type of natural habitats or the *hāvāpani* (Nep. air, water; natural environment) of their countries. So the Gorkhali notion of *des* or *deśa* corresponds to “ethnic geographies” in which people cultures are shaped by their physical environments.

As a ritual realm (*deśa*), the Gorkhali *muluk* was “an auspicious icon of the universe centered on the temple of the king’s tutelary deity and demarcated on the perimeter by temples” in some cases located outside the king’s territorial possession (*muluk*) (Burghart, 1984: 104-106). At the turn of the 19th century, when the southern lowland plains, including the Gangetic basin (the central authority of the Hindus) in India, were ruled by “the insolent followers of Islam” and later invaded by the “the vile *Feringis*-the British” (Burghart, 1984: 106), the Gorkhali saw themselves to be the rulers of the only independent realm in the scared land of the Hindus.³⁵ In other words, the Gorkhali rulers imagined their hill kingdom to be the emerging center of the universal Hindu realms, and hence they also imagined themselves to be genuine Hindu kings. For the Gorkhali rulers, the caste system provided an auspicious order of the social universe in the realm such that the purity of the ritual realm was a major concern of the Gorkhali rulers, thus of their governance. They adopted the Hindu ideology of caste in order to organize and regulate the diversity of people (subjects) and their cultures in the genuine lands of Hindus.

The caste ideologies of purity and pollution were equally applied to the geographical areas whereby various ethnic regions were also ranked according to their habits or by their associations with other polluting regions. For example, the northern Himalayan (the Buddhist regions) and the lowland Tarai were considered potentially polluting to the auspiciousness of the Hindu kingdom because of their people’s habits (for example, beef eating) or because of their

³⁵ According to one Brahmanical scheme there were fifty-six universal realms in the Sacred Land of the Hindus (*bhāratavarsa*), of which Nepal was one (Hamilton 1819: 192 cited by Burghart, 1984: 103).

geographical proximity to the non-Hindu regions in the north and south.³⁶ The people from the mountain regions who followed Buddhism and animism were also considered impure and ranked as polluting castes in the 1854 Legal Code that codified Nepal's caste ranking (see Höfer, 1979; Bista, 1991). The Tarai, even though it was a valuable territorial possession, was nevertheless seen as a threat to the purity of the Hindu king's heartland because of its proximity to the British India, a space ruled by the cow-eating British and Muslims. Hence until the early 20th century, people, merchants and travellers in particular, returning from the Tarai and Tibet were required to undergo special purification rituals before they entered the capital city (Burghart, 1984) and their villages in the hills.³⁷ It can be argued that the perception that the Tarai was a polluting and thus inferior region had also influenced the hill Hindu rulers' belief that the forested malarial lowland was a 'waste land' to be exploited for economic extraction. In the official documents from the 19th century, the Tarai is commonly referred as "*Kala Banjar*" – a black barren land, hence a waste land with potential resources awaiting reclamation and exploitation; a place devoid of history and civilization.³⁸

Hence the spatial-social organizations of the Gorkhali kingdom created social geographies of inclusion and exclusion based on the regions' economic, cultural, and political or strategic significance for the rulers. By the early 19th century, the Gorkhali rulers laid the foundation for a

³⁶ The sacredness of the cow was one the most revered practices emphasized by the Gorkhali rulers (including the Ranas) to claim and justify their Hindu identity, and hence that of Nepal's, particularly in comparison to the Hindustan (land of Hindus) i.e. India (see Michaels, A. 1997).

³⁷ Based on my personal communications with various individuals who had spent most of their life in the hills, of age between 60 to 75 years.

³⁸ Why the Tarai was called '*Kala Banjar*' is not unclear. Regmi has translated the use of the word in the official documents both as "waste land" and as "virgin land." In association with the land, the word '*Banjar*' is commonly used to refer 'barren land' (BNS, 2010: 220 and 855). The term *Kala* for 'black' comes from Hindi (*Kalo* in Nepali). Hence the usage of "*Kala Banjar*" may be a colonial designation from British India. In Nepal the color black, in many cases, has negative associations such as in *kalo dhan* (wealth earned illegally), *kalo man* (heart; evil heart), or *kalo din* (black day). This information is based on my personal communications with Nepali scholars.

Hindu nation in which the relations among rulers, people, and territory were hierarchically ranked and in which the hill Hindu rulers occupied the apex of the political-social pyramid (Burghart, 1984; Höfer, 1979). The ways in which Nepal's 19th century Hindu rulers (the Gorkhali kings and the Rana regimes) used the territorial sovereignty of the king in the form of the land tenure system further illustrates how they used the politics of the geo-body of the Gorkhali *muluk* for their political-economic project of the colonization of Tarai land and political control over Tarai people.

The Bhupati King and the Moral Economy of Extraction

As I have earlier highlighted, the political-economic need to control land, subjects, and labor led to the emergence of the Gorkhali polity as a centralized and utterly extractive patrimonial Hindu state (Riaz and Basu, 2009), in which the King was the *Bhupati* (Nep. master of the land; husband of the land). All lands and conquered territories were considered to be his rightful possessions and ritual realms (see Burghart, 1984). Until recently, the King was designated as *Bhupati* in the official usages, particularly those related with the nation's law. The earlier national anthem of Nepal also praised the King as *Bhupati*. The national anthem actually begins with a wish for the progress of the "*prachada pratapi bhupati*" (gallant, courageous, sovereign landlord) king of Nepal.³⁹ Scholars including Richard Burghart (1984) have not examined the concept and use of the idea of *Bhupati* in Nepal. According to the noted historian and anthropologist Tom Trautmann:

It is commonplace in Sanskrit poetry or inscriptions that the king is called "lord of earth" or "lord of men" by joining words like *pati* with words meaning earth or men: *bhu-pati*, *prthivi-pati*, *nara-pati*, *nr-pati*, and so forth--there are dozens and dozens of simple compounds meaning, simply, "king." Now "*pati*" also means husband, and often in poetry

³⁹ On the politics of the national anthem in Nepal, see Hutt (2012).

the king is treated as the husband of Goddess Earth. It is a metaphor, of course; but it implies sovereignty” (Personal communication, Sep 14, 2012).

Since the Gorkhali rulers had imagined their kingdom to be a ‘*Asali Hindustan*’ and the pious rulers to be the true Hindu kings (Michaels, 1997), the self-designation of the King as the *Bhupati*, the sovereign owner and possessor of the land, also reflects the classical Hindu ideology and practice of treating the king as the landlord. The notion of *Bhupati* also implies the protector patriarch, and the “husband” of the Goddess Earth, hence it implies a kin relation mediated by the ownership over the land and logically with the users of that land. But I argue the political and economic contexts of the Gorkhali territorial expansion equally required the King to retain territorial sovereignty, hence the notion that he was the protector and the owner of the land. Burghart (1984: 103) has eloquently elaborated how the Gorkhali rulers deployed the notion of sovereign landlord or *Bhupati* in their state-making project. He writes:

At the turn of the nineteenth century the Gorkha rulers referred to their territorial domain in terms of a Persian loanword meaning possessions (*muluk*) In the administration of his possessions the king saw himself as a landlord (*malik*) who classified exhaustively and exclusively his tracts of land according to tenurial categories and then assigned, bestowed, licensed, or auctioned the rights and duties over these tracts of land to his subjects.

Therefore the rise of the landlord state, the sovereignty of which was bestowed with the *Bhupati* king, transformed the value of land and the proprietorial relationship between the state and its subjects. The *Bhupati* king was the *malik* of the entire territorial possession of his *muluk*, including the conquered territories. In other words, the entire bounded territory became the *de facto* property of the King, akin to his personal possessions over which he could exercise the proprietary authority to “assign, bestow, license or auction duties and rights” (Burghart, 1984: 104). Since the sovereign *Bhupati* occupied the apex of the socio-political hierarchy, it was the crown, the epitome of the state power, who could *rent away* the lands (called *raikar*) to its

subjects in their capacity as tenants or ‘give’ it to individuals and institutions (such as the temple) in the form of various land grants.⁴⁰

I argue that that any recipient of the crown’s land has a moral and legal obligation to reciprocate to the Bhupati king with payment of rent, tax and labor services and that this obligation reinforces the legitimizing notion of the Gurkhali rulers that their subjects derive their sustenance from the king’s land. The territorial sovereignty of the Bhupati king helps us to understand the Gorkhali moral economy (Thomson, 1971), which they used politically to control the land, labor and subjects of their *muluk*. Put simply, since people survive primarily by consuming what is produced in the king’s land, it is the land, not the labor, the king’s territorial possession that is essential for the sustenance of people’s life. Hence the king, the *malik* or the lord and his proprietorial ownership must be acknowledged through reciprocity of free labor, revenue and loyalty. This Gorkhali notion of moral economy is underlined by the Gorkhali king P.N. Shah in his ‘*Dibhya Upadesh*’, (which literally means the ‘divine counsel’), believed to be a historical text containing the king’s teachings.⁴¹ In *Dibhya Upadesh*, he says:

I have this earned this *muluk* with lots of pains (struggle). This is a garden of all castes; all should know this. All small (low) and big (high) castes of four varnas and thirty six jāt of this garden should take care of it (p: 50) This is a genuine *Hindustaan* (land of Hindus). Don’t leave your caste religion. You must pay back the *debt of the salt you’ve taken from your lord*’ (p: 51, emphasis added, my translation, emphasis added)

⁴⁰ Under the *raikar* tenure individual households were allowed to operate personal plots while the state remained the ultimate landlord (Regmi, 1971; Regmi, 1978a). The only exception to the state ownership of land and the lands it had alienated under various grants was the communal form of land ownership called *Kipat* which continued to exist in some parts of hill, particularly among the indigenous groups (Regmi, 1978a). The Limbus were the only *ādivāsi* group who retained the right to continue the *Kipat* land until the late 1960s as per the agreement they had with the king P.N. Shah when their ancestral territories were incorporated to the Gorkhali kingdom in the mid-1770 (see Caplan, 1970; Regmi, 1978: 540). None of the indigenous groups in the Tarai were granted such communal right to land.

⁴¹ In the official narratives and the writings of the mainstream historians before 2006, the *Dibhya Upadesh* appeared as a “sacred text” of Nepali nationalism written for future generations (see Stiller, 1968).

The first narrative of “garden of four varna and thirty castes” is a very common saying in Nepal popularized by school textbooks and official historiographies to epitomize Nepal’s ‘unity in diversity’ albeit under a Hindu caste ranking. In this narrative, the nation is naturalized with the metaphor of a garden, a territorial or geo-body which the king has earned by his labor. Thus it is he who owns and controls the garden. His subjects, of different castes “high” and “low,” are the fruit (or offspring) of his garden. Thus the narrative also naturalizes caste ranking as a constituent element of the garden. The second narrative transforms the garden into a Hindu body. Since the *muluk* is a genuine Hindu land, people cannot be related by either the substance of common consanguinity or by marriage because they are ranked hierarchically along the continuum of their presumed embodiment of ritual purity and impurity. As it becomes evident in the second narrative, it is the salt consumed from the king’s land that provides a common bodily substance for all.

The eating metaphor carries a deeper symbolic meaning here. Not only is the salt provided by the king consumed by all castes, it is an essential item people need for their daily sustenance. The subjects get the salt from the king’s possession, his *muluk*, and are thus consuming the king’s salt, a daily reminder of the indebtedness conferred by virtue of the salt or food they eat from their master’s land. The use of the metaphor “salt debt” is a common way of asking for one’s loyalty in Nepal. The royal decrees issued in the past commonly used the notion of salt-debt to demand loyalty and services to the king. Here is an example of one such royal decree issued in 1777 by P.N. Shah to the Kiranti leaders in eastern Nepal when it fell under the Gorkhali rule:

Yesterday, you were the good servants of the Makawani Raja. As long as you *ate his salt*, you remained in his service. Your king of yesterday no longer exists; that country of yours is now under our sway*the duty of a servant is to render service as long as he takes salt*. We

hereby grant you pardon on your life and property for all crimes committed to us when we conquered that country (Regmi Research Series, 1974:82; emphasis mine).

This royal decree clearly affirms the Gorkhali notion that the subjects should render service to their master as long as they use the king's land. For the *Bhupati* king and those who owned the state's land, the landlord-subject relation is a moral duty (*dharma*) not an imposition. Therefore I emphasize the need to consider the Gorkhali politics of geo-body in understanding the 19th century land tenure system as an extension of the state's moral economy centered on the Bhupati king. The land tenure system that was introduced by the Gorkhali rulers at the end of the 18th century was the most evident and effective exercise of the state's territorial sovereignty over its tenant subjects

Under state landlordism, the actual cultivators, the peasants who toiled on the land were at best considered the landlord state's subjects in the capacity of tenants without any ownership rights. They were required to provide free labor service and to pay taxes and rent, generally equivalent to half of what they produced, to the state or to other individual landlords who had been granted lands with the right to appropriate rents from the peasants using them (see Regmi, 1971, 1978). The state's rights to claim rent, levies, tax and free labor services from its subjects were derived from the fact they were perceived as "receivers" of the land from the king. Thus, it was the land and its rentable property that established the relationship between the king (the state) and his subjects.

The Gorkhali rulers effectively legitimated extractive social relations of hierarchy in which the Bhupati king was at the apex and at the bottom were the tenant subjects who were required to produce not only for their families but also for the tiers of other *malik* of the land (see

Regmi, 1978).⁴² As it has been persuasively argued by Burghart (1984), the tenurial system was “a control hierarchy in which the diverse subjects of his kingdom were brought together by virtue of *their tenurial relations to the king*” (p: 112, emphasis added) such that “submission of such payments through tiers of the tributary, civil, and military administrations indicated one’s inferiority to the recipient of such payments, and thereby defined the hierarchical structure of the tenurial system” (p: 104). In other words, to become a tenant subject in 19th-century Nepal was to accept one’s inferior position within this control hierarchy.

For the indigenous peoples, who considered land to be their “inalienable possessions” (see Caplan, 1970 for an ethnographic illustration), their subjugation under the Hindu landlord state transformed them into ‘tax paying peasants’ subordinated in the tenurial hierarchy. Even though the Hindu rulers had recognized their *muluk* as being countries of various *jāt* living in their ancestral territories (they had also accepted many of customary practices of various groups), they did not recognize the ancestral rights of indigenous groups over their territories.⁴³ The tenurial sovereignty of the Bhupati king over the conquered *ādivāsi* territory converted the indigenous lands into rentable state property and the people into dependent *ryots* who were expected, on the moral ground of salt-debt to render service to their new sovereign landlord. Legally they were required to provide labor services and land tax to the state or other landlords.

⁴² Besides the state, there were other landowning groups, particularly the *Birta* and *Jagir* landholders who enjoyed special tenurial rights (also some judicial rights) over their tenants. The power and privileges of these land grantees were always at the discretion of the central government yet *Birta* and *Jagir* “in fact meant a virtual abdication by the state of its internal sovereign authority” (Regmi, 1971: 44).

⁴³ The Limbus, indigenous groups from the far eastern hills of Nepal, were an exception. The Gorkhali king had recognized and granted the right to continue their customary practices of the communal landownership *Kipat* (see Caplan, 1970). In a royal order issued to the Limbus of the far eastern hills, P.N. Shah decreed:

Although we have conquered your country by dint of our valor, we have afforded you and your kinsmen protection. We hereby pardon all of your crimes and confirm all the customs and traditions, rights and privileges of your country.... Enjoy the land from generation to generation, as long as it remains in existence...in case we confiscate your lands...may your ancestral gods destroy our kingdom (Regmi, 1978: 540)

On the other hand, the landowning ruling elites, because of their political alliance with the Gorkhali rulers, usurped indigenous people's lands and appropriated economic surplus out of the diligent labor of indigenous communities (Caplan, 1970; English 1983, Tamang, 2008). The extractive moral economy, imposed by the Hindu landlord state on indigenous communities already politically weakened by the usurpation of their ancestral ownership over their lands, severely affected their relative egalitarian social and political organizations (see Caplan, 1970). The legal imposition of the caste system in 1854 further subordinated the indigenous communities by designating them impure and enslavable subjects (Höfer, 1979). Thus the land tenure system that the Gorkhali rulers introduced during the end of the 18th century structured relationships of landownership and the resulting relations of exclusion and inclusion along caste, ethnic and regional lines in the Tarai.

The rise of Rana autocratic rule (1846-1951) in 1846 further intensified the colonization of Tarai land as the state expanded its centralized bureaucracy and revenue administration at the village levels.⁴⁴ The Anglo-Gorkha war (1814-1816) in which the Gorkhali state was defeated with the subsequent loss of its conquered territories in the Tarai also ended its imperial expansion. Nepal's present-day territory was defined when British India returned what are now the five districts of western Nepal to the Gorkhali rulers in 1860.⁴⁵ After Nepal's defeat, British India also recognized the territorial sovereignty of the Gorkhali state as an independent nation-state. The Rana regime, its legitimacy recognized by the powerful British Raj, further

⁴⁴ Rana rule began with the rise of Jung Bahadur Kunwar (who later changed his surname into Rana to elevate his caste position as Thakuri, the same as that of the ruling Shah king of the Gorkhali state), an army commander who became the Prime Minister in 1846 through a "royal massacre." With his coming in the palace power, the Shah monarch was reduced to a figurehead and the Prime Minister and other government positions became hereditary (see Whelpton, 2005).

⁴⁵ These five districts were called '*Naya Muluk*' or 'New Territories' and were the personal *birta* of the Rana Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana (see Whelpton, 2005).

consolidated the Hindu identity of the Nepali nation-state in order to distinguish its regime’s moral outlook as well as to consolidate its political power in Nepal. In 1854, the Rana government implemented the first legal code of Nepal that enforced a caste hierarchy as a “modern” law of the nation.⁴⁶ Thus, the Rana rulers further remolded themselves as “pious rulers” (Michaels, 1997: 83) by enforcing the Gorkhali imagination of *Asli Hindustan* concretely through the legal code that brought all social groups, irrespective of their religions and non-caste social system, into the national caste hierarchy.

Table 1 The Caste Hierarchy in the Old Legal Code, 1854 in order of descending hierarchy
(After Hofer, 1979: 45-46, Figures 2 and 3)

<i>Hierarchy of Purity and Impurity</i>	<i>Caste Categories</i>	<i>Social, Regional and “class” attributes</i>
<i>High Caste Pure Caste</i>	<i>Tāgādhāri: Wearers of sacred cord (High Caste; Pure Caste)</i>	The traditional dominant-ruling groups; the landowning elites from the hill. Also included the Brahmin from the Hindu Newar and the Indian Brahmin. <i>Non-enslavable</i> .
“Touchable” by the High Caste; <i>Water acceptable groups</i>	<i>Namāsinyā Matwāli: Non-Enslavable Alcohol Drinkers</i>	Hill indigenous groups including those who were recruited in the Gorkhali Army (such as the Magar and Gurung). Conquered subjects
“Touchable” by the High Caste; <i>water acceptable groups</i>	<i>Māsinyā Matwāli: Enslavable Alcohol Drinkers</i>	Indigenous groups from the hill and the Tarai; Buddhist-indigenous groups from the mountain.
Impure Caste; physical contact avoided but if touched, ritual purification not needed.	<i>Pāni Nācalnyā choi chiṭo halnunaparnyā: Impure but touchable caste</i>	Muslim, European; non-farming-artisans groups from the hill and the lowlands.
Impure and “Untouchables”	<i>Pāni Nācalnyā choi chiṭo halnu parnyā: Untouchable castes</i>	Occupational caste groups from the hills and the Tarai

⁴⁶ I use “modern” within scare quotes to emphasize that the caste system in Nepal was primarily a governing tool or a technique of governmentality dating from a relatively recent period, not a “primordial” features of Nepali society as a collective entity.

The caste hierarchy of the Old Legal Code, in theory, did not determine one's access to the land; anyone could become a tenant or own land. Even a Bahun, the purest body, could toil on the soil (Hofer, 1979: 115-118). However, as Regmi (1978) reminds us, it was control over or access to political power (state power) that enabled these groups to accumulate land and appropriate others' labor and produce in order to enrich themselves. The ruling Hill "high" caste Hindus, who by then had become the *de facto* landowning elites, reaffirmed the purity of their social bodies by the Old Legal Code. They could become polluted or be demoted to other caste rankings but they could not be enslaved by others or killed by the state. In contrast, indigenous and other impure bodies were subject to death penalties, and many of them could be made slaves (see Höfer, 1979: 121-131), serving as 'free labor' for others. By ranking their tenants and potential tenants as lower, less pure, enslavable, and 'killable' bodies, the Old Legal Code, as Höfer (1979: 40) argues, "cemented a social order as the basis of a centralized agrarian bureaucracy and strengthened the privilege of the state-bearing elites."

As my discussions of Dhimal experience of the landlord state will show, the extractive hierarchical tenurial relationships legitimated under the territorial sovereignty of the *Bhupati* king and the caste hierarchy legalized by the Old Legal Code both intertwined to affect their territorial dispossession and landlessness. So it is important that we consider the interplay among caste, land tenure, and power relationships between the landowning elites and the indigenous communities in understanding how state interventions in the Tarai led to the dispossession of the Tarai adivasi.

State Interventions in the Tarai of Morang

As I have discussed in previous sections, the eastern Tarai became one of the most important geographies of extraction for 19th-century Nepali rulers. The Tarai of Morang was an important trade route between Nepal and the neighboring districts of British India when the region came under Gorkhali control. Yet considerable areas of land in Morang were still forested, places where cattle herders from neighboring Indian villages would send their animals for pasture during the dry seasons (Buchaman-Hamilton, 1928: 414-416; Regmi, 1979: 24). While fear of malaria had discouraged outsiders from settling in the lowlands, many of the local inhabitants had fled to adjoining Indian territory to avoid the oppressive regime imposed when Morang was conquered by the Gorkhali state in 1774 (Regmi, 1979: 24). In 1849, Brian Hodgson wrote that the Dhimal people whom he had met at the border between the Nepal and Indian Tarai regions along the Mechi river informed him that they had come there from Morang sixty years earlier in “order to escape the Górkhali oppression” (Hodgson, 1849: 131). Thus the Gorkhali annexation of the far eastern region, and the territorial disputes and wars with Sikkim, Tibet, and Bhutan had greatly weakened the political and territorial autonomy of indigenous communities such as the Kirati (Rai, Limbus, Sunuwar) in the hills (Caplan, 1970; English, 1983; Pradhan, 1991) as well as in the plains (Gaige, 1975; Guneratne, 2002; Sugden, 2009).

Dhimal ancestral territories became, in effect, an internal colony of Kathmandu -- the new capital of the Hindu kingdom of Nepal -- when the hill principality of Vijayapur, which at the time controlled the Tarai territories between the Koshi river in the west and the Mechi river in the east, fell to Gorkhali conquest in 1774.⁴⁷ After the annexation of Morang, the Gorkhali

⁴⁷ On the history of the Vijayapur, see Subedi (2005) and Chemjong (2059 V.S. [2002 A.D]). Both of these historians claim that Vijayapur was the principality of the Kirati people. The hill indigenous groups of the eastern

rulers consolidated the development of a feudal mode of production in the Morang plains and considerably strengthened the power of the bureaucracy and its capacity to appropriate surplus from Morang (Sugden, 2010: 129-146). The territories under Vijayapur were split into two administrative units with headquarters in Chainpur and Morang for the Hill and the Tarai territories respectively. At the district level, the power of the King (the state) and his territorial sovereignty was represented by a state-appointed official called *Subba* -- generally a high ranking military official belonging to the hill “high” caste groups -- who was responsible for ensuring the collection of revenue, rents, levies and fines, promoting land reclamation and settlement, and maintaining law and order.

The district territory was further divided into many revenue collection units called- *Pragana* in which a *Chaudhari* (generally a local headman) was appointed to collect revenue (land tax, rent, levies, fines, etc.) and to promote land reclamation and settlement (Regmi Research Series, 1970: 107-109). Hence the Gorkhali rulers incorporated the indigenous village socio-political institution, the village head, into the state revenue administration as an intermediary local tax collector. According to Sugden (2009: 133-134):

The expansion of the rural administration also led to an intensification of social stratification within indigenous communities, facilitating the emergence of a powerful, but diverse, local nobility and further undermining the older indigenous mode of production. On lands operated under the predominant *raikar* tenure, the hill based state employed wealthier families from the indigenous Tharu, and sometimes Rajbanshi community, to act as tax collectors. The *chaudharis* and lower level functionaries were granted salaries and land assignments for their services. This created an indigenous nobility with large taxable personal lands.

Sugden’s analysis (2009) of the emergence of class differentiation among indigenous communities and disruptions of the earlier indigenous mode of production due to direct state

Nepal -- the Rai, Limbus, Sunuwar -- are collectively called Kirat. Dhimal also identify themselves as Kirat, and hence they claim to be “brothers” of Rai and Limbu (see Chapter 7).

intervention is relevant. But class differentiation also emerged through peoples' strategies of evading the oppressive landlord state (Guneratne, 1996, 2001). I will return to this point later in the discussions of Dhimal narratives of Tarai history. Here I merely mention that not all indigenous communities in the Tarai were primarily farming communities when they became subjects of the Gorkhali state.

A shortage of labor, an insufficient number of people to reclaim land and expand agriculture by clearing the forest, was a major challenge for the Nepali state and its rulers for their Tarai land colonization project. Unclaimed and forested lands were allotted as *Birta* land grants to civil and military officials, members of nobility, chieftains of the conquered hill principalities, and other supporters of the ruling regime. Government employees or functionaries were paid for their service through *Jagir* land grants in Morang. It was the responsibility of the recipients of these land grants to recruit tenants, including some from India, to expand agriculture in their land holdings. As early as 1799-1800, the Nepali state had attempted to promote settlement programs in Morang whereby the settlers could receive "as much land as one could reclaim" (Ojha, 1983: 25). 'Waste land' or unclaimed lands could be freely allocated to any individual from Nepal or India willing to settle and reclaim these lands for farming, and tax remissions were made for an initial period that ranged from four to ten years (Regmi, 1971: 144).

Despite such seemingly liberal state efforts, the resettlement programs failed to attract the desired numbers from outside to the Tarai of Morang. The fear of malaria, the exploitative and oppressive land tenure system, imposition of high land tax, extraction of extralegal rents, levies and forced labor service, and opportunities for wage labor outside Nepal, particularly in the neighboring districts of India, had discouraged people from reclaiming land in the Morang region

(see Ojha, 1983; Regmi, 1971).⁴⁸ Hence, labor, not land, had become the most important limiting factor in the effort by the state and its landowning elites to extract economic surplus from the Tarai. Thus, Dhimal and other Tarai ādivāsi were increasingly coming under pressure to reclaim land and pay tax, rents, and levies to the state and other landed classes who claimed ownership of Tarai lands.

Here it is important to consider that the ‘malarial environment’ of the Tarai and its perceived unsuitability for hill people significantly structured the nature of state intervention in the Tarai, particularly for the non-Hindu indigenous peoples. The overall pattern of Hindu landlord state expansion was similar in the major ecological regions: the mountain, the hill, and the Tarai. However, in terms of the migration of the hill Hindus, who represented the cultural identity of the Gorkhali rulers, if not their political power, the hill indigenous groups had been affected much earlier than their counterparts in the Tarai. The hill Hindu groups did not migrate to the northern high mountain areas of Buddhist highland people. After the Gorkhali conquests of indigenous territories, the hill Hindu groups migrated to the ancestral territories of hill indigenous groups, primarily for land. Hence, in the hill regions, Hindu-indigenous interactions, which had intensified in the early 19th century, resulted in land encroachments, landlessness, adoption of Hindu worldviews, land indebtedness, and emigration of indigenous populations to India and elsewhere.

⁴⁸ Historical records dating back to 1779 show that large numbers of *ryots* (tenant peasants) had left Morang and emigrated to India due to the high level of taxation and oppression of the revenue functionaries (RRSS, 1971 Vol. 3 (1): 249-251). Even state officials were reported to have said that the eastern Tarai had been ruined because of such oppressive extraction of the revenue officials and “independent” tax collector such as *Ijaradar* who were allocated right to collect land tax on a certain area based on his contract with the state (Regmi, 1971) As such, *Ijaradar*, who belonged to the hill High caste groups, were the most effective yet oppressive revenue functionaries (not civil servants of the state) (see Regmi, 1971).

Land had already become a scarce resource in the hills by the mid 19th century (Mishra, 1983), whereas in the Tarai it was labor that was the most prized resource for the state and the landowning elites. In contrast to the hills, the dominant hill Hindu groups migrated to the plains relatively late in the recent period (post-1950s). Therefore the state-indigenous relations in the Tarai were mostly regulated through the regime of the land tenure system and its bureaucratic practices. As I have discussed earlier, the state's practice of granting *Birta* and *Jagir* land grants, and its policy of favoring the hill "high caste" groups from the Gorkhali homeland as state officials and revenue functionaries strengthened the political and economic domination of the hill groups over the Tarai peoples. The shortage of labor together with the absence of hill immigrants created pressure on the Tarai adivasi to reclaim land for the state or to become tenants of absentee landowning elites from the hills. State officials and revenue functionaries often forced the Tarai adivasi to reclaim land (Regmi, 1971).⁴⁹ The Gorkhali policy and the predisposition to treating the Tarai as a colony and its people as suppliers of labor were made further concrete through bureaucratic practices on the Tarai ground.

With the rise of Rana rule, the political-economic importance of the Tarai in funding the regime both through revenue from timber, which was sold to the British, and agrarian taxation, continued to grow (Guneratne, 2002; Sugden, 2009; Regmi, 1978). In the later part of the 19th century, the spur of economic activity in northern India, mainly because of the development of railway transport facilities, opened up new prospects for land colonization in the eastern Tarai (Regmi, 1978: 140). In order to tap these emerging economic opportunities, the state promoted more land reclamation and settlement projects (Ojha, 1982; Regmi, 1971), construction of irrigation facilities, and expansion of the revenue machinery (*ibid*).

⁴⁹ See Chapter 3 for Dhimal narratives.

In 1861, the Rana rulers introduced the *jimīndāri* system as the local apparatus for state revenue administration of the Tarai region.⁵⁰ The purpose behind promoting *jimīndār* was not only to collect land tax but also to encourage “private enterprise in the colonization of large tracts of forests and other uncultivated lands whose development lay beyond the capacity of the local farmers because of the inconvenient location or paucity of capital” (Regmi, 1978: 141). In other words, the *jimīndār* was expected to play the role of an agricultural extension agent, who was capable of mobilizing the required financial capital and labor to reclaim new lands.

The earlier system of *Chaudhari* was replaced by *jimīndār* within the *mouja* (lowest level revenue collection unit comprising many settlements). But the preference for *jimīndār* was often given not to the traditional landed gentry at the *mouja* level, but to elites with strong connections to the bureaucracy, usually from the dominant Brahmin and Chhetri castes from the hills or in some circumstances high caste groups of Indian descent (Guneratne, 2002; Regmi, 1988 cited by Sugden, 2009: 137). Despite such intervention, the situations of the tenants and small landholding peasants deteriorated in the Morang Tarai because of the increasing feudalization of agrarian social relations, higher land taxes and an oppressive regime of taxation,⁵¹ labor extractions, monetization of the land tax, increasing indebtedness and land mortgage, and lack of any welfare or other sustainable assistance from the state (Regmi, 1978b, 1971: 194).

⁵⁰ A *jimīndār* was entrusted with responsibility of collecting revenues at the level of *mouja* – the lowest revenue collection unit that included a village or many settlements in the state land (*raikar*), not in *birta* and *jagir* land. A *jimīndār* was made responsible for the cultivation of “waste land” in his area by settling new people on vacant holding or to cultivate the land by himself. The post of the *jimīndār* was inheritable and secure as long as he was able to make the full revenue collection or unless he committed an offence for which he was liable to be punished by confiscation of property. The position however could be sold and transferred to others. A *jimīndār* was entitled to receive a certain commission on the revenue he collected, and was allowed personal use of land called *Jirayat* in his *mouja*. Since there was no limitation to the numbers of *mouja* a *jimīndār* could hold, he was not necessarily a local resident of a village (Regmi, 1978: 132-139). In fact, many *jimīndār* came from the hill “high caste.” The *jimīndār* system was abolished in early 1960s. For ethnographic study of the *jimīndār* system, see Guneratne (1996, 2002).

⁵¹ Not only many tenant peasants but even *jimīndār* fled to India because of their inability unable to meet the stipulated land-tax obligations to the state (Shrestha, S, 1976 in RRS 3(1): 50-53)

Thus the introduction of the *jimīndāri* system which operated at the level of villages intensified the stronghold of the landlord state over the local villagers, led to increased class differentiation between villagers, and further reinforced the domination of the hill landowning elites over the Tarai people. The intensification of the Tarai's identity as a "state space" together with the clearing of forests forced non-farming indigenous communities such as Dhimal and Meche to become tenant peasants beholden to either the state or its landowning elites from the mid- 19th to early 20th centuries. Increasingly, the evolving state-led feudal relations and the recognition of the "property right" of peasant cultivators in *raikar* in the late 19th century further increased the importance to state and revenue functionaries of the village head and other socially recognized community leaders or economically dominant indigenous families (Regmi, 1978). They were increasingly coopted by state revenue officials as well as by the hill landowning elites for their land colonization project. Similarly, the expansion of the *jimīndāri* system also brought more hill peoples, and hill *jimīndār* into the lowlands of Morang (Sugden, 2009). This reinforced the relationships of domination based on class, caste and regionalism.

Some families from the Tarai ādivāsi communities, particularly the headmen and landlords from the Tharu communities, who had played important roles in the cultivation of the Tarai long before the rise of the House of Gorkha, also emerged as part of the landed class (Guneratne, 2001; Krauskopff and Meyer, 2000) by the early 19th century.⁵² They acted more as local village functionaries who mediated among the state rulers in Kathmandu, *Birta* and *Jagir* owners, and the local peasants (Regmi, 1971). But it is important to consider that, with increasing state intervention in land tenure governance during the mid-19th century (see Regmi, 1971), the symbiotic relationship that had developed between the Crown and the local

⁵² See Krauskopff and Meyer (2000) for the changing relationships between Tharus and the Kings of Nepal (from the early 18th century, before the rise of the House of Gorkha).

indigenous chieftains (particularly among the Tharus) before the Gorkhali conquest, and during the early period of the state-led colonization of the Tarai (at the turn of the 19th century) gradually “turned into one-side exploitation” (Meyer, 2000: 19) of the latter by the former.

As my later discussion will show, Dhimal village heads were also incorporated as local tax functionaries or used by the *jimīndār* and *birta* holders by the early 20th century. The local indigenous landed families also enjoyed some political authority and privileges over other of their community members. Since these village landlords were also themselves community members embedded in the localized social and religious lived worlds mediated by kinship, exchange, reciprocity, ritual obligations, and other habitations of communal life, the tenurial relationships between the village landlords and their subjects were less exploitative than those between the hill landowning elites and their subjects (see Guneratne, 2002; Dhakal, Rai, Chemjong, et al. 2000). In contradiction to the local villager landlords, as Regmi (1978: 39) asserts, “the interest of the non-resident landowning elites was confined to the amount of income they could collect from the lands granted to them by the state.”

A Dhimal village head, even when he was a local tax collector, could never attain the political status of *birta* holder or nor could he exercise the kind of authority that a state revenue function like an *ijaradar* could. These influential local individuals or families from indigenous communities acted as agents and representatives of the Gorkhali interests but as Regmi (1995: 141) reminds us, “their acceptance of Gorkhali authority by no means assured them a role in Gorkhali political, military or administrative leadership.” Following Bourdieu (1986: 46-58), in spite of their status as landholders, they lacked social capital (such as family and kin connection to state power), cultural capital (such as language, education, and Hindu ways of life), and symbolic capital (being non-Hindu people of Tarai origin) to transform their economic capital

based on landholdings into becoming nationally or regionally dominant landowning elites.

The Land and The State-Ādivāsi Relations

The preceding discussion focused on the predatory processes by which the Nepali state was formed and the ways in which relations between rulers and their subjects were restructured along caste, tenurial, and spatial hierarchies in order to extract labor services and economic surplus, as well as to ensure political control in the Tarai region. This chapter helps us to understand the impact of the emergence of the feudal relationships of extraction on the moral economy and relatively egalitarian nature of the indigenous communities.

Theoretically, this chapter offers an ethnographically informed analysis to approach the intricate concept of ‘state’ by taking into account the dialectical relationships of labor, territory, history, and power in our analytical framework. Since *land* is a central analytic in studying the relationship between the state and indigenous peoples, our investigative approach to the state needs to historicize how, by whom, and for what purposes its territorial sovereignty becomes objectified in a specific historical context (Abrams, 1988). The ways in which the 19th century Hindu rulers used the territorial sovereignty of the king to claim their control and ownership over the indigenous territories through hierarchical tenurial and caste ranking helped them to consolidate their political and economic domination thereby creating social geographies of inclusion and exclusions based on caste, regional identity, and class in Nepal.

As this chapter demonstrates, it is equally necessary to embed our analysis of ‘states’ in a larger geo-historical context of political pluralism in the regions in which centralizing hierarchical states coexist alongside radically egalitarian polities. The rise of the House of Gorkha, the political order that evolved into the present day state of Nepal at the turn of 19th

century, together with the emergence of the British Empire in the region, led to the formation of a centralized hierarchical polity through its campaign of territorial conquest and colonization. This hierarchical political entity attempted to dominate the egalitarian polities that had flourished in many indigenous communities of Nepal in the past. The Dhimal community, before the Gorkhali king annexed their territories, exemplified such egalitarian-oriented polities in the Tarai. Today they are making efforts, through their indigenous political movement, to reform the contemporary state in which they are now encapsulated in order to shape it along less hierarchical and more egalitarian lines. I contend that we cannot fully appreciate what motivated Dhimal to engage in what we now call indigenous politics without understanding how land shapes their understanding of their collective subjectivity (as the Dhimal *jāti*), history, and political agency.

In the next chapter, I will focus on how Dhimal understand their own historical belonging in Nepal's Tarai vis-à-vis their encounter with the landlord state. As I underlined earlier, Nepali rulers saw the Tarai as a place rich in exploitable resources. Yet they also considered it "waste land" because it had remained "barren or uncultivated," an outcome of its low population density that was exacerbated by its malarial environment and the state's own oppressive tax regimes. It is also the case that Tarai *ādivāsi* such as Tharu, Dhimal, Meche, Koch, and others had thrived at the fringes of these malarial forests, transforming this "deadly place" into their homes. By virtue of being aboriginal inhabitants and because of their distinctive historical relationship with the Tarai, *ādivāsi* experiences and understandings of their past differ from those of the Nepali rulers who colonized the region and of the recent immigrants who settled there after 1950s.

Chapter Three

From *Ādivāsi* to *Sukumbāsi*: Losing Ground in Nepal's Tarai

‘We Dhimal are *bhumiputra* (sons of the soil) *ādivāsi* but now *sukumbāsi* (landless squatters), why?’

-- A popular Dhimal political slogan

A Ruptured Sense of Place

Mr. Jharilal, a fifty-five year old Dhimal farmer from the upper Kharkhare village of Damak municipality, was plowing the field by the side of his home when I arrived there on the morning of January 9, 2008. One of my Dhimal friends had suggested that I could learn more about Dhimal history from Jharilal *warang*. *Warang* is a Dhimal kinship term for senior men; it is also used as an honorific term. So on that day, I drove my scooter along a sandy and dusty trail, passing north of the Campus Road, about a mile east of the Himalayan Tea Estate garden on the East-West Highway. On my way, even with a cursory observation of houses and peoples in the fields, roadsides and teashops, I sensed that the village, which I had anticipated to be a homogenous Dhimal village, had more hill caste groups than Dhimal.

When I reached Jharilal *warang*'s small, two-story house, I saw his wife weaving the traditional garment of Dhimali women, the *Bohna*, on a wooden loom erected on the floor in the left corner of the verandah. I greeted her, introduced myself and explained the purpose of my visit. I will call her *Boi* after the Dhimali kinship term for mother's elder sister which people

commonly use as a respectful term for senior women. When I greeted her, Boi stopped her weaving and got up from her loom to offer me a chair. Having already interrupted her work, I did not want to disturb her husband who I learned was tilling the soil for wheat. So Boi and I began to converse, talking about common things like families and what we do for a living.

At one point, as she was feeding fodder to her goats, I asked Boi: “Do only Dhimal live in this village?” To this she promptly responded, “Not any more.” Looking around the landscape with a wide gaze, she paused for a moment and said:

Yes, in the past it used to be only a Dhimali village. My grandfather, his grandfather, and his grandfathers lived here. Even when I was growing up, only we (Dhimal) were here; others had not come. And then the Chhetri-Bahun came; others came down from the hills and settled nearby.⁵³ Then they moved in and, slowly, we, Dhimal moved out.

Pointing towards a small but crowded settlement located further toward the southeast border of the village alongside a dried stream, she asked me:

Do you see that thick *basti* (Nep. settlement) down there? You see the smaller houses with thatched roofs by the *khahare* (dried stream)? That’s *Sukumbāsi tol* (Nep. settlement of landless “squatters”); many of them are Dhimal who once lived here and owned land.⁵⁴ Now, they are either rickshaw-pullers in Damak, or they do work as wage *majduri* (labor work) to live.

I only nodded. Looking at my face, she said in an elevated tone Nepali:

There are more Chhetri-Bahun in the village, and they are also the prime minister and ministers in Kathmandu. Now this place has become so different. *Hamro Jātiko itihās harai sakyō* (Nep. our ethnic history has already been lost) (Field note; January 9, 2008).

My first encounter with Boi provides a grounded instance of the ways in which *land* emerges as a central trope in Dhimal’s sense of who they are, and what has happened and

⁵³ Bahuns, with a population about 12.9% of the total population [23.1 million] of Nepal in 2001, and Chhetri, with a population about 16.1 % of the total population in 2001(CBS, 2001), are the two dominant social groups belonging to the Hill “High Caste” groups in Nepal There are more than 100 caste and ethnic groups (non Hindu groups) with linguistic, religious and regional variations but the three groups: Chhetri, Bahun, and Newars (an indigenous group from Kathmandu valley with 5.6% of Nepal’s total population), together have controlled 85% of the total governmental, judicial and parliamentary positions since the last two and half century in Nepal (see Lawoti, 2005).

⁵⁴ *Sukumbāsi* literally means “landless dwellers” often occupying public lands.

continues to happen them as Dhimal. Boi poignantly narrated a fraction of her lived history in which she had experienced how her ancestral place had changed over time.

As the above conversational excerpts clearly show, Boi's "senses of place" (Basso, 1996) vividly alludes to her ruptured sense of belonging: the irony of her people becoming squatters on their own ancestral land, the disappearing *jāti itihās* (Nep. ethno history) and Dhimal state of marginality both in the village and in Kathmandu, the capital city. She reminded me that peoples' senses of place not only index their emotional, bodily, socio-religious and historical relationships with their landscapes (Basso, 1996) but they also use it to convey "their sense of marginality and experience of unequal power relations" (Thomas, 2002: 369; Kirsch, 2006; Myers, 2002). The ways in which Boi narrated her experiences by weaving together the three social geographies -- her village, the "squatters' settlements" of her landless kin members, and the capital city, the center of Nepal's state power controlled by the same social groups as of her neighbors -- into a socio-spatial relation of dominance and marginality is very insightful. She succinctly pointed out to me the key historical events which can function as signposts for temporalizing her experiences of changes in and around the village: the coming of other peoples to the village and Dhimal emigrating out of her village, her kin members becoming *sukumbāsi* who now live at the periphery of their ancestral village, and the political dominations of the hill "high" caste groups in governance. Her telling resonates with many of the experiential narratives that I have heard from other Dhimal of her generation (age between fifty and seventy).

For example, once I walked along the East-West Highway with Raj *Dada* (Dh. *big brother*) nearby his home in Damak Municipality. In his early fifties, Dada is one of the most respected Dhimal leaders affiliated with the Dhimal Jāti Bikas Kendra, the national indigenous organization of Dhimal. As we walked, Dada showed me many patches of barren farmlands

along the sides of the highway. He could recall names of all those Dhimal who had sold these lands and the stories behind why they had to sell their lands. He also knew about the later transactions of these lands to different peoples. There was a big parcel of land by the other side of the road across from Dada's home. He told me that the original Dhimal owner of the land had left the village when his three children died of cholera (before the 1950s). Later a Newar family bribed the land revenue officer to get this land registered under their names. The Newar family was given the land entitlement based on the (false) claim that they had acquired the land by clearing a forested area. Until the early 1920s, anyone could settle in the Tarai by reclaiming what the state considered "waste land" as long as they could pay the land tax to the state.

Dada made me realize that embedded in the barren lands that surrounded me were many such stories of dispossession and displacement. And he could literally read the histories of these lands - histories of migration and land transactions from Dhimal to others. As we reached his *tol* (Nep. settlement unit), we stopped at a local teashop and ordered tea. While we waited, Dada recalled:

This whole area used to be a thick jungle when I was little. Elephant, tiger, deer and other wild animals used to roam nearby our village. Then this place was called *Charakpada*. Charakpada is the Dhimali name of a fish that used to be found in the local river. Many months a year, we used to catch and eat fish here (smile). Now it's gone. Maybe around 1960s, few *pahade* (people of hill origin) came down to our area. Other groups- Bahuns and Chhettri and then some Newar families came. This Himalayan tea garden, I think, was established in the mid-1960s. Then many other *pahade* people: Rai, Limbus, Magar, and Tamang came and settled here. One *pahade* opened a teashop here at this junction. We did not used to drink tea, then. Workers in the tea estate used to come here and drink tea. More people came. Eventually, the forest was gone; the river dried. Now you see only a small stream in that river. When the highway was built, more hill peoples came. After that...(paused) this place was named *Chiya pasal* (Nep. teashop). Now the name of this *tol* has become *Chiya pasal* (laughter); even many Dhimal do not know its original name (Field notes; taped interview, December 21, 2009).

As I remembered from my previous meeting with him, Dada had a cheerful face that always glowed whenever he smiled and laughed. As he narrated this story, his face brightened

up when he spoke of his childhood memories. But when he laughed at the name *Chiya pasal*, this glow in his face disappeared. His voice was low when he said, “even many Dhimal do not know its original name.” The silence that followed this statement was broken by the odd sipping sound we made while drinking the hot tea. But Dada’s silence, augmented by his low voice and the seriousness in his face, powerfully conveyed the deep sense of *loss* Dada had felt on the disappearance of the original name of his village.

The anthropologist Stuart Kirsch reminds us that for indigenous people, “who frequently have special ties to their lands and place, the theme of loss has echoes throughout the indigenous world, often in association with damages to and/or displacement from their land” (Kirsch, 2001: 167).” Both Boi and Dada expressed their profound sense of loss and marginality while talking about their villages and their experiences of social changes. Boi emphasized the loss of Dhimal’ ethnic history in referent to Dhimal’s landlessness, and Dada, as a way of chitchat, hinted to me that the transformation of his village name from *Charakpada* to *Chisapasal* underlines a deep history of Dhimal’s alienation from their ancestral homeland. Scholars have shown that place-names are not only toponymic markers that people and the state imprint on the territory, they also signify the relationships of power that allow or erase the use of certain names as the place-names (Murray, 2002).

Dada’s village was renamed when its forested areas became private property of Nepal’s royal family who then transformed the land into a tea estate for profit making (capitalist production) in the early 1960s. The present-day name *Chisapasal* suggests that the place became a village only recently (circa 1960s) when “tea drinking” people settled there after the opening up of the tea garden. Hence the name masks the long history of how Dhimal ancestral territories became the private property of the royal family, the epitome of Nepal’s traditional dominant

groups, in conjunction with state-led colonization of the Tarai during the 19th and early 20th centuries whereby these ruling groups, because of their control of political power, accumulated large tracks of the Tarai land.

In other words, the imposition of a new village name and the subsequent forgetting of its original name by its original inhabitants reveal a deep history of Dhimal's marginalization and dispossession from their ancestral territories. Boi's statement- "*Hamro Jātiko itihas harai sakyo* (Nep. "our ethnic history has already been lost") indicates that changes in land ownership and the renaming of their villages have had the severe effects of disembodying Dhimal's history of belonging and dispossessions from their ancestral land. Yet for Dhimal of Dada and Boi's generation, their historical wisdom firmly "sits on land" (Basso, 1996) – land is inseparable from their knowledge of their lived *jāti itihas* (ethnic history). And by retelling their stories of lands and sense of emplacement, Boi and Dada, as historical agentive actors, also used land as a way of talking about what being *ādivāsi* entails for Dhimal when they have become *sukumbāsi* in their own ancestral place.

In this chapter I examine Dhimal experiences of the landlord state to understand why the issues of land and landlessness have become so important for them. In order to illustrate the focus of this chapter, a brief sketch of the ethno-historical contexts of Dhimal becomes necessary here.

Ādivāsi and the Collective Experience of 'Losing Ground'

Dhimal were living in the easternmost lowlands or the Tarai long before the rise of the present day Nepali state. Until the early twentieth century, most of the plains of Morang and Jhapa districts (see Map 1) were thinly populated and thickly forested.

The Tarai of Morang was considered to be “extremely swampy with its pestilent climate...the most malarious and unhealthy district” (Oldfield, 1881: 61-622) till the early twentieth century. The Nepali state and its rulers had tried continuously to bring people from the hills and across India to the Tarai so that they could reclaim what the state viewed as waste lands, expand agricultural productivity, and thus increase the revenue for the state (and its rulers). The state-formation processes that began at the end of the 18th century, the rise of the landlord state and its extractive policies in particular, which I have discussed in the previous chapter, had adversely affected the subsistence economy of the hill people. The growth of population, scarcity of agricultural land, and the oppressive regimes of taxation had compelled large numbers of people from the hills to migrate, seasonally and permanently, to the neighboring districts of India for wage labor in, for example, the Tea plantations or other agricultural work.⁵⁵ Despite government incentives and the abundance of agricultural lands in the Tarai, hill people were reluctant to settle there. The prevalence of malaria, the perceived belief that the Tarai’s *hāvāpāni* (Nep. literally, air and water) was bad for the hill people, and the oppressive-extractive nature of the state’s tax regime discouraged settlement in the plains (Regmi, 1971).⁵⁶

However, after malaria eradication (control) in the early 1950s, the attitude of hill peoples toward settling in the Tarai completely changed. The abundance of land, the increasing growth of industrialization in Nepal’s plain regions and across the border in India, and the prospects of

⁵⁵ Of course, this historical shift was more complex. The severe marginalizing impacts of the state led extractive policies were further aggravated by the progressive incorporation of Nepal’s economy in the world capitalist system which weakened the indigenous productive economy and its relations of productions (Blakie and et al. 1980; Mishra, 1987). For an ethnographic account of the land scarcity and migration in the Himalayan region of Nepal, see Fricke (1984).

⁵⁶ This is akin to the geographical deterministic view that one’s biological and cultural self is conditioned and best suited to his/her native ecological niche or geography. See Burghart (1984) for a historical analysis of this concept.

jobs and commercialization of agriculture made the Tarai the most attractive destination for those people from the hills and the migrants who returned from India seeking land. The place once popularly perceived as *Kala bajnar* became the new economic frontier of Nepal.

Implementation of the state-led land reform of 1964 and settlement projects in the 1960s-70s, as well as the construction of the East-West highway (early 1970s), and the resulting infrastructural expansion of roads, schools, markets, electricity, industries, hospitals, and so on, brought more and more people into the Tarai. For example, the population of Morang and Jhapa districts grew by 46 percent, 77 percent, and 88 percent during 1920 to 1952/54, 1952/54 to 1971, and 1971 to 1981 respectively (CBS, 1952/54, Table 2; CBS, 1977, Table 1; CBS, 1987, Table 1). At the same time forest coverage in Morang, Jhapa and Sunsari -- the three present-day districts comprising Morang district until the 1950s -- decreased by 45 percent from 1927 to 1977 (Gurung, 1984: 85), while the rate of forest depletion accelerated to 55.6 percent between 1954 to 1972 (Gurung, 1999 [1983]: 23). All of this indicates the indiscriminate clearing of forests in Dhimal ancestral territories.

This “frontier settlement” (Shrestha, 1989) in the Tarai progressively dispossessed Dhimal from their ancestral territories and marginalized them politically, culturally and economically.⁵⁷ Earlier studies show that the problem of landlessness had hit hard in Dhimal communities by the early 1970s (Dahal, 1979; Regmi, R, 1985). Frederick Gaige (1975), in his pioneering study of the marginalization of Nepal’s Tarai people, succinctly and empathetically describes the impact of frontier settlements on the Tarai ‘tribal’ (indigenous communities) peoples. He observes:

Until recently, the tribal people have been able to find isolation from the subcontinent’s more

⁵⁷ Both from the state’s perspective as well as that of the migrants moving in, the Tarai was a frontier -- in terms of its location as a “border” as well as a “place for abundant opportunity for settlers” (Turner, 1920: 38 cited by Shrestha, 1989: 370), the most important being the acquisition of land, “an overriding goal of the frontier settlers’ in Nepal’s Tarai” (by Shrestha, 1989: 370).

advanced economic society in the forests of the tarai and other geographical peripheral regions. The surge of population into the peripheral regions and the clearing of forests to provide additional farmland have confronted the tribal people with the need to adjust to a new and essentially hostile society. Relegated as they are to the lowest rungs of the caste ladder, without the experience needed to compete for scarce economic resources, they have generally found the adjustment process *confusing and painful*. *Indeed, in many cases, it has been a struggle for survival* (Gaige, 1975: 20, emphasis added)

I argue that the ādivāsi “struggle for survival” that Gaige (1975: 20) so thoughtfully emphasizes should not be understood only in the sense of struggle for physical survival or only for their livelihood. It also needs to be understood as ādivāsi struggle for the continued creation and recreation of their collectivity as distinct cultural community (Turner, 1988). For Dhimal and other Tarai *ādivāsi*, their experiences of the Nepali state in the last two centuries have been about “losing ground” (McDonaugh, 1997:280), which involves the collective loss of their land, culture, and their traditional hold on local political and administrative power. Hence, when Dhimal ask themselves and others, “We Dhimal are *ādivāsi*, but now *sukumbāsi*, why?” they advance ‘land’ as a political language to which Dhimal whatever their differences of class, gender, location, or generational and party affiliations feel universally connected. Stories of land powerfully concretize their shared history of belonging and dispossession in their ancestral territories.⁵⁸ The collective experience of ‘losing ground’ is central to Dhimal political mobilization as an indigenous people.⁵⁹

In the preceding chapter, I discussed how the rise of the landlord state and its extractive policies led to the colonization of the Tarai for land, labor and political control. Drawing on the recollections of the Tarai’s past narrated to me by the generation of people like Boi and Dada, I

⁵⁸ According to one report (UNDP, 2004), 24.5 % of the total households in Nepal are landless and 7% of households are semi-landless (owning less than 0.2 acres). Disadvantaged indigenous groups are differentially characterized by landless and semi-landless status. Almost 45% of Dhimal households are landless, and 6% are semi-landless; only 3% of Dhimal households are large cultivators (cited by Adhikari, 2008, table 2.8; p: 44).

⁵⁹ Dispossession from their ancestral land and territories is a globally shared indigenous experience, and thus this shared experience has become a key force for global indigenous political mobilization (see Castree, 2003). For the relationship between land and indigenous political mobilization in Nepal, see (Caplan, 1970; Guneratne, 2002).

will discuss how Dhimal experiences of losing ground have shaped their understanding of their past, and their sense of ethnic identity vis-à-vis other social groups, particularly the dominant social groups, the hill “high caste” Hindus. The transformation of the Tarai into a state space of extraction is pivotal in understanding Dhimal’s experience of losing ground.

As I described earlier, Nepali rulers saw the Tarai as a rich region abundant in exploitable resources vital to consolidating their political power and dominance. But they also considered it ‘waste land’ because the majority of it had remained barren or uncultivated due to the shortage of labor resulting from the malarial environment and the oppressive tax regimes. Yet the Tarai ādivāsi such as Tharu, Dhimal, Meche, Koch, and others had thrived within the fringes of these malarial forests. The very lands outsiders called a ‘deadly place’ were their homes and they inscribed this territory with their own histories. Because they lived in these malarial forests, their relationship and reliance on the land was radically different from the ways in which the rulers related to it as state property rentable to the subjects with certain obligations. I argue that these differential understandings of Tarai land and its uses by its aboriginal inhabitants are central analytics for examining the disjunction between two moral economies, one imposed by the state and the other practiced by these ādivāsi communities. The disjuncture led to the dispossession of marginalized indigenous communities from their ancestral lands. In this chapter, I will foreground Dhimal perspectives to discuss how they understand Tarai histories by interpreting their experiences of and encounters with the landlord state in the past. I will focus on why malaria is central to Dhimal analysis of their past relationship with the Tarai and their use of the notion of “jungali life” (life in wilderness) in order to underline the political ecology of their belonging in the Tarai as well as their political choice for evading the predatory state. In particular, I will focus on how the interplay between the malarial ecology of the Tarai, Dhimal

differential notions of land, and their collective efforts of evading the landlord state inform Dhimal analysis of their present-day landlessness.

Malaria, Jungali Life and Dhimal Ancestral Past

In this section, I discuss how the malarial past of the Tarai shapes Dhimal understanding of their belonging in the Tarai, and how it informs their diachronic views on the changing relationship with the Nepali state. More specifically, I focus on the notion of *jungali life* (life in wilderness) that many Dhimal use to specify the temporal emplacement of their ancestors in the Tarai as well as to describe their mode of livelihood in the past.

In the popular imagination of Tarai history, malaria is the defining image of the region (Guneratne 2002: 22). Until the early 1950s, the prevalence of malaria was believed to be deadly and life-threatening in the Tarai. Nepal's hill people still refer to the Tarai as "*aul*" after "*aulo*" - the Nepali word for malaria. Prior to the 1950s, because of the life-threatening prevalence of malaria, the lowlands of current districts of Morang and Jhapa were perceived as "*Kala Pani*" (Nep. black-water) -- "dangerous places" where hill people would definitely die if they were to stay long. But indigenous groups like Dhimal, Tharus, Meche, Koch, Danuwar and others survived and continued to dwell in the Tarai when outsiders feared the place.

For the state and its landowning elites, the malarial environment of the Tarai posed a major challenge that hindered their ability to exploit the region's potential resources. To some extent, malaria helped Tarai *ādivāsi* to protect their territories and customary ways of life from outside interventions. In other words, for Dhimal and other Tarai *ādivāsi*, the malarial environment provided them relative political autonomy and a way of avoiding the Nepali state's oppressive tax regime during the early period of regional colonization (the 19th century). Hence, before the

disease of the marshy land was conquered, malaria -- both as an endemic condition and also as an image -- mediated the relationship among Dhimal, outsiders, and the Nepali state.⁶⁰

There is no available record that can help us to understand the nature and intensity of malaria in Nepal prior to the early 20th century. But malaria was not confined to Nepal during that period, and it was equally a major public health issue for the colonial administrators of then British India.⁶¹ The colonial administrative records (circa 19th and 20th centuries) on public health conditions in the British colonies bordering on Nepal's eastern Tarai can shed light on the intensity and occurrence of malaria and its impact in the region during that period. For example, the Bengal District Gazetteers (1905) describes the Tarai region of Darjeeling areas (bordering the Nepal's eastern Tarai) as "a low malarious belt striking the base of the Himalayas," and "the Terai is a tract of reeking moisture and rank vegetation that Nature has marked out as a home of fever" (p: 1).⁶² Citing the Nepali migrants who worked in the tea plantation in the region, the Gazetteers (1905: 1) write: "It is indeed common saying among the Nepalese in these parts that any child born to them will not reach the age of two years; and the infant mortality is very great, being over 38 percent, in 1905, for the whole."⁶³ The prevalence of malaria in the Tarai regions

⁶⁰ Of course, with the aid of the western science technology, and money; the support from the government of the United State was instrumental in "malaria eradication" in Nepal (see Isaacson et al. 2001).

⁶¹ Though few studies have focused on the social history of malaria in Nepal, there is a rich scholarship on the history of malaria in the Indian subcontinent, particularly in the Tarai region. Scholars have approached the history of 'malaria' in India to critically examine various aspects of the British colonial rule such as the production of colonial biomedical knowledge, the relationship between race and science, empire and colonial economy, and so on (see Kar, 2003; Arnold, 2006; Bhattacharya, 2011).

⁶² The Bengal Gazetteers are part of the provisional gazetteers of the British Indian Empire that, akin to an encyclopedia, provides general information on physical, history, economy, public health, demography and other aspects of social and cultural life of a colony state. The imperial gazetteer was first published in 1881 (http://dsal.uchicago.edu/reference/gazetteer/pager.html?objectid=DS405.1.I34.V01_004.gif, accessed January 2, 2013).

⁶³ In 1891, it was estimated that 40 per cent of the workers in the labor force in the Dooras (the Tarai) region, especially in the northern-western fringes of Bengal district bordering Darjeeling districts were *Nepalis*. These were the regions where malaria was the number one killer (Ray, 2002: 89). The presence of the Nepali immigrant

of India, which border Dhimal ancestral territories (Morang and Jhapa) were “hyper-endemic of malaria” during the early 20th century. Similarly, the Bengal District Gazetteers on Darjeeling (1947) report that “...in the Terai malaria is hyper-endemic (90 per cent), and in the hill valleys (specially the Tista valley) the rate is below 20 per cent” (Dash, 1947: 7). Drawing from these colonial records of neighboring regions in India, we can infer that the prevalence of malaria must have been endemic in Nepal’s easternmost Tarai as well during the 19th and the early 20th centuries, the historical period that concerns this chapter. According to the United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID) recent memoir (2001), *Half-a-Century of Development: A History of US Assistance to Nepal: 1951-2001*:

In the early 1950s, malaria was Nepal’s most serious health problem afflicting roughly 25 percent of the total population. Cases numbered over two millions per year, with a 10 percent mortality rate that took an especially high toll among young children... Endemic malaria threatened the roughly 50 percentage of Nepal’s population living below 1,300 meters altitude” (Isaacson et.al, 2001: 45).

According to this USAID report, malaria was a serious threat to people’s survival in the Tarai until the late 1950s. Hence the popular imagination of the pre-1950 Tarai as *Kala Pani* may have been derived from the region’s history as a malarial environment. But I argue that this popular image of the Tarai acts against the region, its people and their history. As I have discussed earlier, this image of “deadly place” reiterates the dominant geographical imagination marginalizing the Tarai as merely, until recently, a swampy, malaria-ridden, unhealthy, and wild place without history and civilization. Its corollary implication is that only “inferior” people could have lived in such “uncivilized” places. That both Nepal’s dominant groups and British colonial scholars often discriminately referred to the Tarai ādivāsi as “primitive” and “wild

workers in these malarial regions of India shows that the malarial environment of Nepal’s Tarai was not the sole reason discouraging hill people from settling in Nepal’s own Tarai. The political environment -- that of exploitative and oppressive tax regimes in Nepal on the one hand, and the prospects of cash-based wage labor in the colonial plantations located in the bordering regions of India, on the other hand -- seemed to have motivated Nepali migrants to choose the malarial Tarai of India over Nepal’s Tarai.

people” (*jungali people*) bolsters the image of the Tarai as Kala Pani (see Guneratne, 1998; Müller-Büker, 1997; Regmi, R. 1986).

The travel journal of Major L.A. Waddell (1854-1938), a British surgeon stationed in India who travelled extensively in the Himalayan region, echoes the perception that the malarial “immune” ādivāsi were like “wild beasts.”⁶⁴ In his travelogue, *Among the Himalayas* (1899), Waddell describes the landscape of the Tarai as seen through the window of a small train that he rode from Siluguri to Darjeeling (bordering Nepal’s easternmost region):

We’re soon rattling gaily across that dreaded belt of fever-laden forest --- the *Terai*, which separates the plains from the foot of the hills.... [W]e streamed through some deserted tea-plantations in clearings in this deadly forest. For this poisonous environment no labourers can be induced to settle. Each fresh batch of imported coolies soon flees panic struck before the “Black-Death” (*Kala-anzar*), “Black-water Fever” and other malarial pestilences which lurk in every brake and lay their avenging hands on every intruder who invades there seeking solitude.... Still it is possible to get acclimatized even to such an unhealthy place as this. *The few wild aborigines, the Mech and Dhimal*, who live in the depths of these forests, and who will undertake no hired service, have acquired almost as *much immunity from the deadly fevers of these forests as the tigers and wild beasts who make this their home* (p: 5-6)” (emphasis added).

Waddell’s description of the Tarai’s “poisonous environment” helps us to imagine the challenges outsiders faced working in the tea plantations located in the Tarai regions of Darjeeling. Waddell was surprised that aboriginal people like Meche and Dhimal could acclimatize to the malaria-infested forests. Nevertheless he used their adaptive ability to suggest that these aborigines making the malarial forest their home were “wild beasts” akin to tigers. I should point out here that Waddell’s emphasizing that these “wild aborigines... will undertake no hired service” suggests that the indifference Dhimal and other forest dwellers had toward wage labor (their refusal, in other words, to become wage labor subjects within the colonial

⁶⁴ Even though Waddell was referring to the aboriginal subjects of British India rather than not Nepal, I find it an apt example of the dominant view on the perceived “primitiveness” of such indigenous groups as Dhimal whose ancestral territories transcended the national boundaries between Nepal and India.

economy) may also have made them appear “wild” (in the sense of not domesticable) in the eyes of colonial officers.

In South Asian contexts, the idea of ‘*jungali*’ or ‘*jangli*’ (in Hindi) is widely used to describe people mostly belonging to the ‘tribal’ or ādivāsi community who subsist by foraging or who live in the fringes of the forest, (Guneratne, 1998, 2001; Fortier, 2012; Shah, 2010). The concept is deployed as a “keyword for prejudice” (Ramos, 1998: 13-59) against ādivāsi in order to discriminate against them as “uncivilized,” “primitive” or “backward” in Nepal (see Guneratne, 1997) and in the other regions of South Asia (Dove, 1992; Shah, 2010). For example, the *Nepali Brihat Sabdhakosh*, a national dictionary published by the then Nepal Royal Academy (a state institution), defines “*janajāti*,” the term now used synonymously with ādivāsi, as:

the backward caste groups like *Naga*, *Kusunda*, *Meche* who clear forest and survive by scavenging, and who lack behind in education and who are indifferent even to their immediate surrounding (of progress) (cited by Bhattachan, 2005: 106).

Hence the official dictionary associates the forest-based foraging practices of some ādivāsi communities with their perceived stage of “backwardness” implying that *janajāti* are the equivalent of “wild people” (Skaria, 1999). However, in the South Asian context, scholars have also shown that categories such as ‘*jungali*’ and even the meaning of the word ‘*jungal*’ which now denotes ‘forest’ are historically contingent; their meanings and the social use of such meanings have changed over the years in dialectical relationship with peoples’ colonization of nature, and the changing power relations between people, the state, and the colonial regime (Dove, 1992; Skaria, 1997, 1999). According to the anthropologist Michael Dove, the cognate term for the contemporary word ‘*jungal*’ in classical Sanskrit is ‘*jangala*’ which means “an open arid savanna stage of vegetation” (Dove, 1992: 23). In ancient India, “most importantly the

jangala was “pure” and the home of Brahmins, where as the non-jangala area was “impure” and the refuge into which the Brahmins drove the barbarians (pastoralists)” (Dove, 1992: 234).

During the succeeding millennia, with the intensification of human colonization of ‘nature’ by ‘culture,’ the contemporary concept of ‘jungal’ came into social usage but with a meaning contrary to the ancient meanings implied by jangala. The present-day notion of ‘jungal’ is associated with “nature” and “barbarism” in opposition to the non-jungal associated with “culture” and “civilization” (Dove, 1992: 232).

Although Dove’s focus is to explicate the dialectical history between nature and culture by examining the shifting semantics of the concept of ‘jungala’ to ‘jungle,’ his analysis can be used to understand the historical contexts within which the present day association of “jungali people” with “uncivilized” and “barbarous” became socially dominant. Weaving power relations into the analysis of such changes of meaning and their popularization adds to Dove’s important historical analysis (see Skaria, 1997 and 1990 for how the social meanings of ‘jangli’ changed from rebellious group to “primitive people” in colonial India). The case of Dhimal, the ways in which they use the notion of *jungali life* and *jungali yug* (era of the life in the jungle) to describe their ancestral past in the malarial environment of the Tarai challenges the popular association of “jungali people” as “primitive.” As my analysis in the next section shows, the uses by Dhimal of these notions brings into relief their own distinct history of belonging, moral economy, and political autonomy as they characterize their life in the Tarai before they become tenant subjects of the Nepali state.

Jungali life: Forest of Belonging

Many Dhimal, particularly senior community members, use the notion of *jungali life* to refer both to themselves as people and to the place, in specific reference to the historical period before and during their encounter with the Nepali state (before and around the early 19th century). At the onset of my analysis here, I emphasize that my use of the Dhimal self-conception of “*jungali*” is not intended to invoke the “return of the primitive” that the anthropologist Adam Kuper (2003) so vehemently argued against in his discussion of the category of “indigenous peoples.” As I will discuss in Chapter 5, Dhimal indigenous activists, particularly youth activists, claim that in the past Dhimal had their own independent kingdom in the Tarai Morang and that they bravely resisted the Gorkhali invasion of their territories.

There are multiple historical understandings among Dhimal, and which historical understandings they choose to advance depends on the narrators and the contexts of their storytelling. In this section, I have chosen to emphasize the narratives by senior Dhimal of their ancestral past in relation to the question of how they understand their experience of losing ground during the 19th and early 20th centuries. My analysis of ‘*jungali life*’ also shows, in essence, Dhimal political agency in resisting the landlord state and thus adds to their contemporary claim of ancestral resistance to the Gorkhali invasion. The idea of ‘*jungali life*’ as emphasized by senior Dhimal is a way to relate their conception of Tarai history in terms of its malarial environment and is crucial to their understanding of the dialectics of political struggle in the region.

In the past, control over land was the major regulatory force mediating the relationship between Dhimal and the landlord state. In this regard, I argue that Dhimal notions of ‘*jungali*

life' help us to understand Dhimal explanations of why their ancestors appeared indifferent to the state project of clearing the Tarai forests and reclaiming land for tenants. Dhimal use their self-conception of 'jungali life' to emphasize how their ethics of egalitarianism and reciprocity structured their use of land, forest, and other resources on which they relied for their continuity, both as individuals and as a collective people. They deploy the concept of jungali life and malarial environment to advance their historical understanding of the geopolitics of the Tarai as well as to reassert their history as the *ādivāsi* of the region.

“In the past, these whole areas were covered with jungle. Our ancestors used to wrestle with wild animals; they survived the diseases of *aulo* (Nep. malaria) and *haija* (Nep. cholera).” All senior Dhimal whom I interviewed repeatedly used these words when they spoke about how their ancestors lived in the Tarai. In their retellings of the past, they invariably mentioned the threats of *wild animals*, *malaria* and *cholera* to emphasize the everyday challenges their ancestors encountered when they transformed the dense forested Tarai into their dwelling places. Dhimal believe that the power of their deities and *Dhami*, the priest, protected their ancestors in such a harsh environment. I should emphasize here that Dhimal religious worldviews and ritual practices are shaped by their historical experience of the challenges of living in the Tarai. A fundamental aspect of Dhimal ritual is the recognition of all the agents and material objects that contribute to their sustenance and well-being throughout the year. Forests, rivers, soils, wild animals, and other beings in “nature” are reckoned and honored during their rituals. Dhimal explain that their ancestors began these ritual practices in order to survive malaria, wild animals, and other possible threats when they were living a jungali life (see Chapter 6).

Similarly, Dhimal also claim that their daily intake of Chiraito (*Swertia chirayita*), an herbal plant that they mix in all of their food, helped them resist malarial affliction in the past.⁶⁵ They also assert that their food habits such as drinking beer (*Dh. gora*) brewed from herbs like *ha'oo* (*Terminalia chebula*) and *ba'oo* (*Terminalia belerica*) and their special consumption of “*gohoro ko masu*” (meat of *gohoro*, a species of Yellow Monitor lizard, *Varanus flavescens*) helped them to “kill” the malaria inside their bodies. Regarding the curative and preventive property of the Gohoro’s meat, one Dhimal told me: “Gohoro eat snake, scorpion, deadly wild ants, and other poisonous insects. It can digest all kinds of poison. So its meat will help us kill the bugs of malaria in our body.” So Dhimal credit the power of their ritual mediated by their priest and their traditional food habits for developing their bodily resistance against malaria.

I should emphasize here that the Dhimal collective belief that their ancestors survived and stamped these malarial forests with their culture and history has profoundly shaped their sense that they are the original inhabitants (*ādivāsi*) in the Tarai. I argue that their culturally mediated capacity to adapt and survive in the malarial ecology of the Tarai informs their sense of ‘relative autonomy’ from state intervention in the past. Recall that after the eradication of malaria in the early 1950s, the pace of losing ground to outsiders accelerated rapidly with the unprecedented influx of land hungry settlers from outside. Dhimal often refer to the end of the Tarai’s malarial environment as the catalyst that propelled their political-economic and cultural marginalization. “It was not just the eradication of malaria. It almost eradicated us: Dhimal Jāti and our culture,” the chairperson of Dhimal Jāti Bikas Kendra remarked at a village level meeting that I attended in 2008. Hence the Dhimal notion of *jungali* life, I propose, is an important analytical category that needs to be examined by privileging Dhimal’s analysis of their

⁶⁵ Chiraito is widely used by people as an anti-malarial and anti-fever herb across Nepal.

own lived history as understood through their present-day collective experience and the present-day struggle of reproducing themselves as Dhimal.

Differential Understanding Of Land

The Tarai of Morang was considered to be extremely swampy and the most malarious and unhealthy district (Oldfield, 1881: 61-622) until the early twentieth century. In the past, Dhimal lived in the fringes of the dense forests along the foothills of the Siwalik Hills. Dhimal's recollections as well as the earliest scholarly account of them by Brian Hodgson (1847) tell us that Dhimal lived more of a semi-“nomadic” life following an ecological niche that availed them plentiful resources: fish, wild animal and plants to survive without much competition with other human beings.⁶⁶ They relied more on gathering, fishing, hunting, periodic cultivation, and barter of grains, herbs, wool, cotton, and other items with people from the hills and across the Indian border. In our discussions of their mode of livelihood in the past, senior Dhimal stressed to me that the threat of wild animals and the destruction of crops by wild animals made farming less practical in the past. Babai, a sixty-two year old Dhimal, whom I will introduce in more detail in Chapter 4, and who can be aptly called an ‘indigenous historian’ for the depth of his knowledge and storytelling skills about Dhimal ancestral history, helped me understand how Dhimal ancestors adapted to the ecology of the Tarai. Babai told me in 2009:

First, earlier Dhimal were not much of a farming people. They lived a *jungali jiwān* (jungali life). They could not rely on crops that they used to grow. Wild animals would eat most of it; whatever would have been left after its damage by the animals would not be sufficient. The yield was never high. Unlike today, farming could not sustain our lives. My grandfather used to tell us that our ancestors used to carry dried seeds of *jayā* in a container made out of the dried

⁶⁶ Ramos (1998: 33-40) argues that “nomad” is one the key words of prejudice against indigenous peoples. With a different analytical focus, James Scott (2009: 1-39) argues that “nomadic” people were “non-state people” in the sense they could enact the “art of not being governed” by moving into *non-state spaces* where the centralizing force of the state was less penetrative.

squash. They used to plant these seeds in some areas in the forests, and after some months, they would collect them. In Dhimali, it used to be called *Jayā Kherakā*; *jayā* means *Kaguni* (Nep. a species of wild millet), *kherakā* means ‘to plant by clearing the bushes’. Wild animals don’t like *jayā*; they don’t eat the crop. So people could freely plant these crops without much effort. Back then, fishing, hunting and wild fruits must have been our major sources of food (Interview transcript; January 9, 2009).

As becomes evident in this interview excerpt, Babai used the notion of *jungali life* to emphasize that Dhimal ancestors relied less on farming (i.e. on land) as their primary means of livelihood. The threat of wild animals figures prominently in Dhimal narratives (also in their village rituals, see chapter 5) about the challenges their parents and grandparents faced while living in the fringes of the Tarai forests. More than malaria, I discovered that, albeit unexpectedly, senior Dhimal such as Babai recalled that it was the outbreaks of *Haijā* or cholera that affected people most severely in the past, often wiping out entire villages when it struck.⁶⁷ In the event of the spread of cholera and the resulting deaths of the people, I am told, Dhimal would abandon their villages and move to a new place in order to avoid contamination. They explained to me that since people were forced to move from one place to another due to the outbreaks of *haija* and threats of wild animals, their ancestors continued to live a semi-nomadic life until the recent past.

Since resources were plentiful, Dhimal ancestors lived in semi-permanent settlements, moving from place to place within a closed ecological niche. Farming along and inside the forested areas was undesirable and less attractive; more than the people, the other cohabitants of the forests, the wild animals, would consume all their crops. Thus Dhimal ancestors subsisted by foraging, hunting, fishing, periodic farming, and engaging in exchange relationships with the neighboring hill groups. At that time, the Dhimal sense of territorial belonging was not strongly

⁶⁷ I was unable to collect additional information on how Dhimal remembered the epidemics of *haija* and its social history. Some available sources show endemic cholera in Kathmandu and elsewhere including Morang district (Gimlette, 1885; Abou-Gareeb, 1961).

based on cultivation of crops. They derived their sense of territorial belonging more from the components of their ecological niche -- earth/soil, forests, rivers, animals, sacred places, and others.

In the past, when they were living a jungali life, Dhimal did not think of land as something that could be owned. Later I will show how their different ideas about land made Dhimal indifferent to the state-led project of reclaiming land in the Tarai. In the first scholarly account of Dhimal (in India), published in 1847 by Brian Hodgson (1880 [1847]), they are described as “erratic cultivators of the wild (p: 117).”⁶⁸ Hodgson further notes that Dhimal are “migratory cultivators of a soil in which *they claim no proprietary or possessory ownership*, but which they are allowed to till upon the easy terms of quit-rent and labor tax, because no others will or can enter the malaria guarded unit (p: 119, emphasis added).” Hodgson mentions that at that time Dhimal possessed no word for “plough,” and “agriculture” was described by the term “felling” or “clearing the forest” (p: 103). Hodgson’s discussions indicate that Dhimal, during the mid-19th century, had no conception of land as a proprietary possession.

Land: Bhonai And Meeling

Dhimal use two different terms, *bhonai* and *meeling*, to refer to land. Though these words can be used interchangeably in everyday usage, *meeling* is more strictly used to refer to land in the sense of its proprietorial possession and ownership, and *bhonai* is used in a broader sense that encompasses the notion of soil or earth. Dhimal use the Nepali word for land “*jagga*”

⁶⁸ Brian H. Hodgson was a prolific scholar and civil servant of British Empire based in Kathmandu and Darjeeling during the 19th century (1820-1858). He has written on a wide range of topics on the Himalayan peoples. Hodgson is considered as a pioneering ethnologist in the origin of ‘Himalayan Studies’ (see Walterhouse, 2004). Hodgson’s observation was based on the Dhimal who were living in the Indian plains across Nepal’s Mechi river. This region, unlike Nepal’s Tarai, was more integrated into the colonial market economy by the early 19th century.

to designate a meaning equivalent to *meeling*.⁶⁹ The word “*jagga*” is used specifically to denote personal property and ownership of a piece of land. On the other hand, the Dhimal notion of *bhonai* hews closely to the Nepali/Sanskrit concept of *bhumi* (earth/soil) and the indigenous articulation of land as inalienable wealth (see, for example, Castree, 2004; Caplan, 1970). As examples of the ritual use of *bhonai* as a symbol of purity, the protective power of the altar made of *bhonai* used for the most powerful household deity (Dh. *Sa Di Berang*, a female deity), and the offering of *bhonai* to the deceased during the funeral ritual suggest that *bhonai* invokes an elemental aspect of life for Dhimal. “*Māto le baneko jivan tyai māto mai jāous* (life made of soil should go back to the very soil). That’s why we offer soil to the dead ones before they are taken to the forest for burial,” many Dhimal explained to me regarding their practice of *bhonai pilikā* (*Dhi: giving soil*) during their funeral ritual.⁷⁰ I suggest that *bhonai* helps to mediate Dhimal’s relationship with their deities and spiritual forces.

The concept of *bhonai* as an embedded relationship among humans, deities, and soil suggests that Dhimal in the past did not consider land as a commodity or a property to be owned by an individual. Therefore when Dhimal characterize their ancestral past as *jungali* life, they emphasize that they did not rely on cultivation for subsistence, and as such their relationship to the land was mediated through their notion of ‘*bhonai*’ rather than ‘*meeling*’. In contrast, the state was encroaching on the Tarai with the sole purpose of transforming the land into ‘*meeling*.’ And given the oppressive and extractive nature of state interventions, Dhimal preferred to maintain their *jungali* ways of life as a political choice (Scott, 2009) in order to maintain their control over both their ways of life and, arguably, their territories. I will illustrate my argument

⁶⁹ In their everyday conversation, Dhimal use *meeling* to refer to their possession or lack of land (*jaggā*). For example, they say, “*E Chakari samma kelai ko meeling manthu*” [I don’t own land of even the size of a small piece of flat straw mattress.]”

⁷⁰ I did not observe any funeral ritual of Dhimal during my fieldwork period.

with a story that I was told by a prominent and politically active Dhimal indigenous leader (fifty-eight years old) at the end of a long interview that I had with him in 2008.

At one time, during the Rana rule one high-ranking Rana official, or maybe he was the Prime Minister, had come to our area for supervision. The next afternoon, he set out in the forest for hunting. Military personnel and a local guide accompanied him into the forest. While roaming in the forest, he saw a weird creature on top of a high tree. Holding a branch of that tree with its hands, that creature had tightly wrapped the tree with his feet. Only its backside (buttocks) was seen from the ground. The Rana man became curious; then he aimed his gun at this creature. Suddenly his local guard requested: '*Sarkar (your highness, lord; the state), that is a human, please don't shoot him.*' That person was our Dhimal ancestor (loud laughter!). He was looking for bird's eggs or something. He was a short guy with black tanned skin. He was almost naked, wearing a thin piece of cloth wrapped around his hip, only to cover his male organ. He looked like a wild animal to the Rana minister.

I was perplexed when I heard the story. First I thought the narrator told me this story as a way of adding humor to a discussion that had already lasted for more than ninety minutes. We did laugh loudly but this story forcefully struck me. Babai, the narrator of this story, is one of the most committed, engaged, and inspiring Dhimal indigenous leaders whom I had met and worked with during my fieldwork. Since the early 1970s, Babai had been involved in the communist political movement in Jhapa, and he had been jailed for two years (in the mid-1980s) for his "anti-nationalist" activities. He was one of the founding members of the Dhimal Jati Bikas Kendra in the early 1990s (see Chapter 4). Both as an indigenous activist and a leftist politician, Babai championed the issue of land rights for Dhimals. Why would a politically conscious individual such as Babai tell a story that seemingly exoticizes Dhimal ancestor as if he were "wild" creature who would be mistaken by a hunter for a game animal? In societies in which people experienced severe racism, colonial subjugation, and other forms of structural discriminations such as casteism, these subjugated people can appropriate the representative schemas and signs, such as racist images, historically used against them in order to challenge and

subvert such marginalizing forces (see Errington and Gewertz, 1994 for an ethnographic example). I take this story to be one of such subversive performance of “auto orientalism” (Errington and Gewertz, 1994: 106) in which the image of an almost naked “wild” ancestor, by way of locating the events in the template of experiential history, disrupts the unequal power relations between the palace and Dhimal in the Tarai forest.

The story includes many key symbols: the visit of the high-ranking Rana (state official) in the village for supervision, the state ritual of hunting (aided by the military and the local guide), the “wild” Dhimal (engaged in foraging activity), the intended act of violence (the Rana minister almost shot the wild creature), and the defiant Dhimal ancestor unaffected by the presence of the Rana and his military force, even to the wryly included detail of his revealing his buttocks to them. All illuminatingly historicize the indigenous-state encounter in the Tarai during the Rana regime (1848-1851). I argue that the story powerfully conveys several important themes that Dhimal highlight in their own accounts of the Tarai past as they incorporate their encounters with the state, outsider images of their identity, their past livelihood pattern, and their indifference to the state policies of land reclamation in the Tarai.

The chronotopic nature (Bhaktin, 1981) of this story, the meeting between Dhimal and the Rana officer in the *Tarai forest*, is tellingly significant. The Tarai forest was a critical space for the encounter between the Tarai ādivāsi and the state during the formative period (early 19th century) of regional land colonization. In the story, the state official had come to the Tarai for the purpose of supervision, an important state-making practice adopted by the Nepal’s rulers during the 19th century. During this period, due to its inadequate administrative expansion, it was difficult for the royal palace in Kathmandu and its rulers to effectively make the panoptic gaze of the state visible and felt across the topographically diverse regions where the majority of

their subject population resided. They governed the villages from Kathmandu by relying on the loyalty and services of the thinly present state officials stationed in the district headquarters, local revenue collecting functionaries, and landlords. From time to time, the Kathmandu based government would receive written complaints from their subjects, issue royal decrees or write back to the district level state representative or the local state functionaries with state directives and orders.

During the Rana regime, the state regularly used to send state officials or ordered the chief of the district, *Bada Hakim*, to undertake what was called ‘*daudaha*’ (Nep. *daudanu* means ‘to run’) – an inspection visit to villages in order to supervise the revenue administrators and their performance, dispense justice, hear complaints against the local tax collectors and landowners, and so on (see Edward, 1976 on the history of the *daudaha* system). Sometimes, even the Rana prime ministers would undertake such “inspection tours” of the Tarai villages along with their hunting trips.⁷¹

Hence, by making these officials from Kathmandu physically present in villages, this pedestrian mode of bureaucratic practice helped the 19th century Nepali rulers to periodically circumvent “the state’s verticality” (Gupta and Ferguson, 2002: 982-984), i.e. the administrative and spatial distancing between the palace and its subjects as well as to legitimize the state’s

⁷¹ In December 1891 (In Marg 1948 V.S.), Prime Minister Bir Shumshere Rana left on a hunting tour of Morang through Sindhuli. On September 1891 (Aswin Sudi 2, 1948 V.S.), the following order was sent to the officials of Sindhuli-Gadhi (a hill fort east of Kathmadu valley):

The Prime Minister's party will include 10,000 troops and 200 horses. Rice, pulses, salt, oil, vegetable, ghee, spices, tobacco, ducks, sheep, goats, ducks, eggs, and feed for horses will be required for them. Issue orders to the inhabitants of villages situated in that area for the procurement of these supplies. Make arrangements to stock them at each camp four or five days in advance. Construct roads strong and wide enough to ensure that horses of Arab bread pass through without any obstruction. Construct dirt bridges on streams and rivers, or make arrangements for boats in adequate numbers, as appropriate.' (RSS, vol. 50, pp. 625-38).

It is unclear if this hunting tour actually took place. But this information helps to imagine that this tour would exert considerable pressure on the local villagers to provide additional free labor services, and economic burden in order to host the visiting officials of 10,000 troops and 200 horses.

sovereignty over its subject population and its territorial possessions. In the above story, the local guide refers to the visiting Rana official as “*sarkar*” which also means “the ruler or the government,” an indication that the *daudaha* system was used to further reinstitute the hierarchal power relationships between the rulers and their subjects. The visiting Rana official, accompanied by military guards, personifies the landlord state and marks its spectral presence in the Tarai forest while undertaking the state ritual of hunting. I suggest that the way in which this story uses the two very different acts of hunting (the elaborate Rana hunt contrasting with the more subtle Dhimal) to set the scene for the encounter between the Rana official (the state) and the Dhimal ancestor equally signifies the history of the forceful invasion of state power in the Tarai forest that was an inalienable part of *ādivāsi*’s ways of life.

Until the early 20th century, some parts of Tarai forest areas were used by the Nepali rulers as hunting reserves for the exclusive use of the Royal palace and their important guests, including British colonial officers from India and members of the British royal family.⁷² The memoirs of the British colonial officers (Oldfield, 1880) who participated in the hunting expeditions of the Rana rulers show that these royal hunting tours were important state-making practices that produced state power and the dominant-subordinate relations between the rulers and their subjects (see Bhatt, 2003). When we consider royal hunting as a state making practice, the way in which Babai narrated the militarized presence of the Rana official inside the forest and his aiming of a gun to shoot the “wild” Dhimal vividly enlivens the invasive state intervention on Dhimal’s ancestral territories. Yet the Dhimal ancestor, completely focused on his foraging activity on the top of a tree, his back and buttock facing towards the high-ranking state officer, a reversal of the hierarchy between the two, is depicted as defiant and unconcerned

⁷² King George V took part in a large organized hunt in the Tarai areas of Chitwan, Nepal from December 18 to 28, 1911 (Rookmaker, Nelson and Dorrington, 2005).

with the presumed power and authority of the Rana ruler below him. By way of invoking an image of his ancestor as “jungali,” Babai emphasized that his ancestors were still engaged in their forest-based mode of subsistence or what he called “*jungali jivan*” when the state had begun enforced reclaiming of the “waste land” in the forested areas of the Tarai in Morang throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries.

As early as 1790, the Nepali state had promoted land reclamation and settlement programs in Morang where settlers could grab “as much land as one could reclaim” (Ojha, 1983: 25) if they could pay the tax after a few years (Regmi, 197: 144). If we consider the history of state-led efforts of resettlement in Morang (see Ojha, 1984) the state-Dhimal encounter narrated in the above story can be read as an example of Dhimal indifference to the opportunity for grabbing “as much land as one could reclaim” available to everyone. Dhimal lack of interest in land acquisition can be explained in terms of their differential livelihood patterns and conceptions of land that I have discussed earlier. But this explanatory frame is not sufficient to explicate why Dhimal preferred not to own land under their names when they eventually became tenant subjects of the Nepali state. They continued to follow their non-farming ways of life even after the state promoted land reclamation in the Tarai by offering various incentives such as the provision of loans, and tax exemptions for a few years, and sometimes through coercive means (see Regmi, 1971). I suggest that Dhimal preferences not to own land and to continue their forest-based mode of subsistence in the past (prior to the early 20th century) needs to be seen as their “political choice” (Scott, 2009: 178-219) in order to resist the oppressive and extractive agrarian bureaucracy of the landlord state during that 19th and early 20th centuries (see Regmi, 1971).

As I discussed in the previous chapter, throughout the 19th and early 20th century Nepali peasants lived on the margin between subsistence and destitution. Yet they were made to support the affluence of the ruling groups, landowning elites, other state functionaries and village landlords by paying them rent and taxes in the form of money, commodity and labor. The entire state apparatus and its legal and administrative policies were geared to the task of extracting economic surplus from the peasantry for the benefit of these groups to such an intolerable extent that peasants were often left with no option but to emigrate to India (Regmi, 1978: 153; Regmi, 1971). Given the existence of such exploitative political-economic relationships which structure the land tenurial system, the Dhimal politics of indifference to reclaiming land was a subversive strategy of avoiding the oppressive landlord state (Scott, 2009) although they could not evade the state for long.⁷³

Hence, the above story, disguised as apparently funny and perhaps exoticizing, is nonetheless a clear political statement of noncompliance. The significance of this story and how politically shrewd people like Babai used such storytelling to assert their political agency (Jackson, 2002) helped me to realize that we need to pay close attention to the ways in which people produce historical knowledge by privileging the concrete and lived practices which make their daily lives possible and meaningful. For instance, all senior Dhimal with whom I discussed

⁷³ The Dhimal strategy of resisting the state's tax regime is akin to what James Scott (2009: 178-219) describes as "escape agriculture" as an art of "not being governed." According to Scott, non-owning of land by many communities in the highland of the South East Asian states was a historical choice and political strategy, what he calls "state repelling" techniques (p: 180), adopted by these groups to 'escape' the oppressive state. However, Dhimal were not the "Zomia" population in the ways in which Scott uses the concept to describe the Southeast Asian highlanders who resisted the complete assimilation into the state governance by fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valley- slavery, conscription, taxes, corvee labor, epidemics, and warfare. Scott's analysis is insightful, however it is less applicable to describe the Tarai ādivāsi. Similarly his sweeping characterization of the Zomia as "runway," "fugitive" and "stateless" people can potentially misrepresent the ways in which indigenous peoples exercised their political autonomy (including territorial autonomy), and resisted the Hindu landlord state in Nepal (Dambar Chemjong, 2010, personal communication). See Shneiderman (2010) for a critical analysis of James Scott's notion of "Zomia" for the Himalayan region of Nepal.

land, landlessness, and their history emphasized the hardship of owning land in the past. They often used the Nepali term “*dukkha*” (Nep. pain, sorrow, hardship) to highlight the challenges of owning land in the past. If land had become the major means of economic production for Dhimals by the 19th century, then why was owning land so difficult when it was plentiful for everyone in the Tarai? Why would land that Dhimal consider a constituent part of their selves and their social worlds, as evident in their notion of *bhonai*, become a source of *dukkha* when it was transformed into *meeling* i.e. a proprietorial possession? In what follows, I draw on my discussions with senior Dhimal and the available published historical information to expand on why owning land was so much of a hardship for Dhimal in the past.

Dhimal’s experience of *dukkha* is central to their understanding of how the extractive feudal state and its land tenurial policies led to the present-day landlessness in Dhimal communities. As I have indicated earlier, Dhimal progressively lost their landholdings in the post-1950s period: many small land holders lost their lands through mortgage and selling, while the state took away lands from the big landowners when it imposed a ceiling on land holdings in the 1964 land reform. By the mid-1970s, many of these former Dhimal landlords also became landless or near landless. In general, Dhimal blame the state, hill immigrants) the “high” caste groups in particular), the expense of maintaining such customary practices as rituals and feasts, and “lack of awareness and concerns about future” for their landless condition. Moreover, scholars have also reiterated similar explanations focusing on increasing expenses against the lower household income, and the resulting compulsion to mortgage or sell their lands to non-Dhimal (Dahal, 1980: 75-91; Regmi, R. R, 1991: 104-119). Yet these explanatory frameworks assume that Dhimal’s landlessness is a post-1950 phenomenon and thus foreclose the larger

political-historical contexts of the rise of the landlord state in Nepal and the penetration of capitalist expansions in dispossessing Dhimal from their ancestral territories.

The transformation of land into capital, a private property to be accumulated, sold and purchased, is a recent development for Dhimal. In his study of the impact of revenue collection on Tharu subsistence strategies of, Arjun Guneratne (1996) has challenged the dominant scholarly view that the control of land is the most important guarantee of subsistence in the peasant economy. His historically grounded analysis of the changing relationships between the Tharu of Chitwan Tarai and the Nepali state over land control and tenure shows how the burden of the land tax, the oppressive nature of the revenue administration at the village level, and the emerging class differentiations based on landholding and access to state power actually discouraged many Tharu peasants from owing land even when it was readily available. Instead, these Tharu peasants elected to work for the landlord families, and thus exchanged their labor in order to guarantee their subsistence and shelter. In other words, these Tharu peasants became landless by choice.

In this case of these Chitwan Tharus, it was not the scarcity of land, but specific historical and material conditions such as the shortage of labor in the Tarai, the extractive relationship of the state with peasants, and the local manifestations of the oppressive revenue regimes in existing village social relations (landlords and peasants of the same community), that combined to lead many Tharus to opt for “voluntary landlessness” (Guneratne, 1996: 31). Yet they still secured their subsistence from the land through the exchange of their labor. Guneratne’s pioneering work in the case of Tharu adds an insightful comparative perspective to my analysis of Dhimal notions of *dukkha* in owning land in the past.

The Dhimal case, as I will show, also affirms Guneratne's (1996) overall conclusion. However, Dhimal, unlike the Tharu, became peasants relatively late (circa after the mid-19th century) in the history of land colonization in the Tarai. The Tharus, especially their village chiefs, had a longer history of alliance with the state rulers in Nepal (see Shrestha, Krauskopff and Meyer, 2002) with the consequence of influencing "the form and organization of the Tharu society, even to its nature as a moral community" (Guneratne, 1996: 32). Class differentiation based on land and political power had also emerged among Dhimal after they became incorporated in the state land tenure system by the mid-19th century, but they lacked the kind of stratified and hierarchical social relations that Guneratne has described for Tharu society.

Guneratne's analytical model is based on the concept of peasant and state-peasant relationships over land. I approach Dhimal explanations of why many of their ancestors did not own land in the past by first considering the fact that Dhimal were not peasants. Dhimal notions of land differed from those of the state before they were forced to reclaim the Tarai land. Dhimal were not landless in relation to the people who owned the land on which they lived, because that land was not historically subject to ownership – it was not yet *meeling* for them. Thus when they were forced to become tenants for the Nepali state, Dhimal had to struggle to secure their subsistence as well as to reproduce the moral economy that sustained their customary use of land and other resources. Hence, my analysis of the Dhimal case will add the *ādivāsi* perspective to Guneratne's very rich analysis.

‘Owning Land Was So Much *Dukkha* in the Past’

At the beginning of my fieldwork, many senior Dhimal repeatedly told me that their great grandparents did not want to own any land under their names. If Dhimal had been peasantized by the early 19th century, why would they be “landless” when anyone could grab as “much as they can own” in the Tarai? Through several interviews and discussions, Dhimals emphasized that their ancestors preferred not to own land even when they were forced (by the state) and compelled (under the evolving political-economic conditions) to settle as peasants.⁷⁴

At the end of 2008, as Dhimal became more involved in the ādivāsi politics for ethnic federalism in Nepal (see Chapters 4 and 7), the issue of land resurfaced in their indigenous movement. Not only senior Dhimal, but youth of twenty to thirty years of age, who had spent more time in their studies than in working on their family farms, had begun expressing an urgency to write and understand the ‘history of land’ (see Chapter 7) in their political organizing and campaigns. During this period, Dhimal activists were writing and publishing newspaper articles on their ethnic history and landlessness. So these emergent ethnographic contexts also motivated me to revisit my previous field notes and follow up what I had been told about the challenges Dhimal had faced in the past as land-owning peasants. In one random *bhet-ghat* (Nep. casual meeting) in the late January of 2009, Babai even specifically asked me to meet him so that he could tell me how Dhimal became landless over the course of time. That is, Babai himself had joined in the sense of urgency and transferred it to me, the need that I “write down” this particular history in my work. This is how the Dhimal collective sense of the *dukkha* of landownership rose to ethnographic prominence in the final year of my fieldwork (2009).

⁷⁴ I had read Arjun Guneratne’s (2002) book before my fieldwork. However he does not discuss the issues of “voluntary landlessness” in the book, but does so in an article (Guneratne, 1996) I read only after the completion of my fieldwork.

For Nepali people, the notion of *dukkha* is an “embodied metaphor” (cf. Low, 1995: 138: 162) widely used to underline the experiences of pain, suffering and hardship that they face in their lived social worlds. Scholars have shown that the idea of *dukkha* permeates people’s narratives of their life histories throughout Nepal (Des Chene, 1996; McHugh, 2001; Desjarlais, 2003; March, 2002; Leve, 2007).⁷⁵ *Dukkha* is “not simply a biologically rooted experience that humans naturally and necessarily wish to overcome. To the contrary, it is also shaped by and rooted in particular social contexts, some of which can make it profoundly meaningful” (Asad, 2003 cited by Leve, 2007: 152). And analysis of how people deal with their experience of *dukkha* can also help us to understand how people exercise their individual and collective agency to overcome such conditions of hardship (Leve, 2007).

Thus, with my focus in this chapter, I analyze Dhimal’s use of the metaphor *duḥkhá* in terms of their historically located social experience of subordination and the results of becoming land owning tenants during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Drawing from available historical information and Dhimal historical understandings of that period, I argue that the Dhimal notion of *duḥkhá* is interwoven with three major structural challenges associated with that period’s state-led extractive project of Tarai colonization. These intertwined challenges included: (a) practical constraints of reclaiming land in the forested ecology of the Tarai, (b) bearing the brunt of an extractive state and its regimes of taxation, and (c) the emerging new moral economy based on the feudalization of the tenurial relationship.

⁷⁵ The theme of ‘suffering’ is central to the Buddhist religious world-views, but this is not the focus of my discussion here. Ethnographically the concept of ‘*dukkha*’ has been most explored and examined in the study of life experiences of Nepali women from various communities. For example, in her study of the Tamang women in an area she calls Stupa hill, Kathryn March writes that “every woman I interviewed located her life overall, and the events in her own narrative, in relation to *dukka* and *sukha*. ...*Dukka* is suffering: it is the physical hurt of illness, hunger, cold, or injury; it is the weight of knowing the fears, worries, wrongs, and obligations of life; and it is the sorrow, sadness, melancholy, or grief at being unable to forget hurt and hardship. *Sukha* is the opposite: it is the ease and comfort of health, food, warmth, clothing, and companionship; it is the feeling of uncomplicated pleasure; it is the purest as a happiness unaware even of its own good fortune” (March 2002: 36).

The characteristic feature of 19th century agrarian relations, the subordinated (pauperized) position of the peasant in the hierarchical structure of the extractive political economy, is important to understanding why the ancestors of the present-day Dhimal preferred as much as possible to avoid coming into a tenorial relationship with the state and the landowning elites in the past (prior to the early 20th century).⁷⁶ From the perspectives of the *Bhupati* king, the tenant Dhimal were seen to be accepting the tenorial sovereignty of the king (the state), and agreeing to become morally and legally accountable to pay the required taxes, rents, and levies and to provide free labor services to the ‘*malik*’ of the land. When Dhimal reclaimed land for the state and became its tenants, they were required to produce not only for themselves but also for the state and other “parasitic groups” (Regmi, 1978: x) who had rights to extract rent and levies because of these groups’ tenorial ownership of the land on which Dhimal labored so diligently. This was a contradictory political economic relation imposed upon Dhimal whereby they, by virtue of reclaiming the land that they had always used, also became a subordinated peasant class subjected to payment of tax and labor services to those who claimed ownership of their ancestral territories. It restricted the relative autonomy that they had enjoyed when they were pursuing a non-farm based jungali life, enforced a new moral economy based on the ideologies of state landlordism and caste hierarchy, and thereby restructured village-level social relationships into an unequal and exploitative feudal social order. The following ethnographic examples will help us to expand my arguments.

⁷⁶ Regmi (1978b: 33) has put 19th century agrarian relations in this way:

The ownership of land was usually vested in the state. For political and administrative reasons, large areas of state-owned lands are granted on freehold tenure to members of the aristocracy and the bureaucracy, religious and charitable institutions, etc. The actual cultivator, therefore, usually held his land on tenancy. He paid rent either to the government or to individuals or institutions who were beneficiaries of state land grants.... In effect, the system that meant that the surplus produce of the land belonged to the surplus produce of the land belonged to aristocratic and bureaucratic groups in the society, where the peasant was *a mere instrument to work the land and produce for their benefit* (emphasis added).

In late 2008, I met a sixty-five year old Dhimal farmer from Kari Koshi village of Morang. I will call him *Aaju* after the Dhimal kinship term for ‘grandfather,’ which everyone present in our discussion used to refer to him. *Aaju* belonged to the *Majhi* (village head) family of one Dhimal village in Kari Koshi. After the institutionalization of *jimīndār* as the local functionary for the state revenue administration of the Tarai region in 1861, some Dhimal village *Majhi* emerged as *jimīndār* while many of them became large land-holding families mainly due to the state’s revenue administration policy of entrusting the responsibility of tax collection to the local village heads (Regmi, 1971; Guneratne, 1996; Sugden, 2009). Since *Aaju*’s family used to own large tracts of land until the early 1940s, he had himself experienced and observed the pre-1950 land tenurial system, changes in the state land tenure policies, and the loss of their lands by Dhimal in his village and elsewhere.

I asked *Aaju* why Dhimal were landless in the past when there was plenty of land in the village. Upon hearing my question, he first gave me a conspicuous smile and provoked me with this very question: “In those days? Why would Dhimal need to own land?” He paused for a while and continued: “*Tyo bela Jaggā hune manche ta kangāl hunthiyo* (In that time, people owning land would be like a *kangāl* [which literally means a skeleton without flesh and blood, but used here to mean poor people without anything]).” His comical use of the image of a *kangāl* to describe what would happen to the people who owned land in the past was very interesting and expressive. “The main thing was that people did not want to own land,” he emphasized. “But why?” I insisted to express my desire to go for a detailed discussion. He explained:

There were many reasons. *Ek dam dukkha jamin rakhna afno naam ma* (It was too much hardship to have land under one’s name). At that time, there were fewer people, but land was plentiful. For example, you have land but no people to plow your farm. This would drown you. So what do you do? You need to find and please people to plow your farm by offering them

money in advance, a place to live, cattle to herd, and so many other things. You need to take care of these people more than your own children. And then there was this problem. People could not sell their crops in the market. There were no demands for crops in the market. People could not pay the land tax, and then their lands were taken by *jimīndār* and *patuwarī* and given to others.⁷⁷ Not that the land tax was high. But where would people get money from? There was a shortage of money (cash). They could not even sell their crops. There were few *desi* (read Indian) traders who used to come to Rangeli (now a town located in the southern part of Morang, bordering with India, former district headquarters of Morang). Not all of them could take their crops there to sell. Not many people knew how to make connections with these traders. *Dherai Jhanjhāt thiyo* (It was lots of trouble) (Excerpt from taped-interview, October 13, 2009).

Aaju's explanation of the nature of the hardship of owning land testifies to how practical constraints such as the shortage of labor, difficulty of selling crops in order to pay the land tax, and vulnerability to losing land ownership title due to non-payment of taxes discouraged Dhimal from keeping land under their tenancy until the early 20th century. Instead many Dhimal preferred to cultivate lands for landowning families; Aaju's family was one of them. I will expand on the emergence of the Majhi family as a land owning class in Dhimal society in the later part of this discussion. For now, it is sufficient to underline that the shortage of labor and the taxation regime were major challenges for reclaiming land, particularly if a family wanted to own large tracts and pay the required taxes, levies, and rents to the state.

For individual families who held land as tenants of the state or of the landowning elites, the burden of tax and the oppressive ways in which revenue and compulsory labor services were extracted (see Regmi, 1971) greatly discouraged their owning it. Hence we can infer some of the reasons why Aaju emphasized his point that “the main thing was that people did not want to own the land” because “it was too much of hardship to have land under one's name, *Ek dam dukkhâ*

⁷⁷ A *patuwarī* was the village functionary appointed by the state to assist the *jimīndār* in collecting land taxes and maintaining records and accounts. A *patuwarī* needed to be a local resident of the village as well as a Nepali citizen, and he was provided remuneration of a commission, generally at the rate of Rs 0.015 for every rupee of land revenue collected and deposited in the Mal office. The position of *patuwarī* could not be sold or transferred (Regmi, 1978: 134-35).

jamin rakhna afno naam ma.” That people lost their land holdings when they could not sell their crops in order to pay the land tax is very important. However, we should not interpret this statement of hardship simply to suggest that Dhimal ancestors became dispossessed of their lands because they failed to submit the required revenue. The land tax was more than an economic burden imposed on Dhimal by the state. In the very act of defining the right to use land in terms of monetary payment, the state transformed Dhimal ancestral territories into rentable property that anyone could take if he could submit the stipulated tax and labor services. Thus, by monetizing tenancy rights, the state simultaneously pulled the rug out from under the Dhimal’s historical and cultural relationship with their own land by introducing a moral economy that was radically contrary to their indigenous ethos and practices. I will once again rely on what I have learned from Babai, whom I have already introduced, to illustrate my arguments.

In January 2009, Babai asked me to meet him so that he could tell me more about how the state intervened to make Dhimal landless in the past. As I indicated earlier, Babai and other Dhimal were themselves making efforts to publish articles and books on Dhimal history, place-names, and relationship with land (see Chapter 5) during the period of my fieldwork. Hence, Babai’s retelling of “how the state intervened on Dhimal land,” to use his actual phrase, strongly reflects the political standpoint that Dhimal articulate in their indigenous activism.⁷⁸ He explained to me:

After 1777, when Prithivi Narayan Shah won Morang and made it a part of Nepal, Dhimal began encountering intervention on our lands. First, this whole area was covered with forests. The state and its rulers could not clear the forests on their own; the fear of malaria chased them away. Then they forcefully (*jabardāsti*) made us to clear the forests, cultivate land and pay tax for them. *First, reclaim land and then pay money to them (laughter). Hāmi le aniwaṛyā jaggā*

⁷⁸ “*Rajya le Kasari Dhimal Bhumima hastachep garyo*” (राज्यले कसरी धिमाल भूमिमा हस्तक्षेप गर्‍यो).

linai parne (we were *compulsorily* required to take the land). From there (the palace; Kathmandu), they (the rulers) sent them, the *jimīndār* and *patuwāri*, here. Then they caught people like us Dhimal living in the forest (*Hami haru, jungal ma basne Dhimal harulai pakadāi bhanyo*) and told our *Majhi* (the village head), “You! Look! Either you register these lands around your place or be prepared for the punishment!” They, the military people, beat our ancestors and made them take the land. *Aniwayā rupale* (compulsorily), Dhimal were made to take land under their names.

After taking the land compulsorily, then they (Dhimal) needed to pay the *mālpot* (land tax), one rupee *re* (they say). The price of paddy was fifty *paisa* but the land tax was one *rupee*, they (our ancestors) used to say!⁷⁹ In order to sell the paddy, they had to carry it from here all the way to Rangeli through the thick forest. They had to travel in a group because of the fear of tigers and bears (wild animals). On the one hand there was this kind of fear, but on the other hand, not much in the way of crop yields used to be here. Most of it used to be eaten up by the wild animals. Then how could Dhimal pay the tax? And then after, when they could not pay the annual tax, they (the local tax functionaries, non-Dhimal) would beat them. Our grandfather used to tell this: the tax collectors used to make a flat wooden plank. Then people who had failed to pay the land tax needed to stand on that plank, only with their lower bodies covered with clothes. Then they would be beaten up with a leather whip.⁸⁰ This was not actually done for reclaiming the land but *to chase away Dhimal* once they had cleared the malarial forest. So either you get beaten with a whip or you run away to new places (Interview, January 9, 2009; emphasis added).

This interview excerpt is a substantive illustration of how Dhimal use the notion of the *dukkhā* of owning land as a way to explicate their experience of state intervention in their ancestral territories. Babai claimed that their ancestors were forced to reclaim land for the state and then to become its tenants.⁸¹ Babai’s use of the commanding voices of the state representatives, amplified by words such as *jabardāstī* (forceful), *aniwayā* (compulsorily) and *pakardāi* (Nep. forceful capture), and the painful descriptions of the physical violence used against non-payers of the land tax strongly animates the violent means and processes through which Dhimals were made to take land and become tax paying subjects. Even as they were

⁷⁹ *Paisa* is a monetary unit, equivalent to 1/100 of a *rupee*. In general usage, *paisa* is used to mean ‘money’.

⁸⁰ The anthropologist Dilli Ram Dahal, in his ethnography of Dhimal conducted in Damak region of Jhapa in the late 1970s, had recorded a similar historical narrative of physical punishment used against those who failed to pay the land tax (Dahal, 1979).

⁸¹ The history of such enforced land reclamation is also corroborated by M. C. Regmi in his study (1971) of history of the land tenure system in Nepal. According to him, “In the early stage, the government undertook the reclamation of waste lands through forced labor under its direct supervision and control” (Regmi, 1971: 144).

forced to do so, Babai also asserted Dhimal historical agency in helping the state to reclaim the malarial Tarai land. He invoked the power of malaria to chase away the powerful ones: the state and its rulers who were unable to clear the Tarai land on their own. Because there was an ongoing shortage of labor force needed to reclaim Tarai land, the Nepali state and other landowning elites had to rely on malaria-resistant Tarai ādivāsi to cultivate the malarial land (see Shrestha, Kruaskopff and Meyer, 2000: 1-56). But once Dhimal had assisted the state, the rulers, instead of reciprocating Dhimal contributions in meaningful ways, forced them to pay money for the reclaimed land.

The laughter that followed Babai's statement, "First reclaim land and then pay money for it (first they made us reclaim the land, and then they forced us to pay money for that land)" vividly captures the contradictory experiences Dhimal ancestors had to face in reclaiming the land. The lands that Dhimal reclaimed were part of their ancestral territories which they had been using since "the time immemorial," as they often claim. As I have discussed earlier, for Dhimal, *bhonai* (land) was not a bounded entity to be owned by individuals but a constituent part of their selves and their lived socio-religious worlds. When Dhimal were deriving their subsistence from non-farming activities, they still relied on land and its productivity for their livelihood. During their village rituals such as Shrejat (see chapter 4) Dhimal acknowledge their use and reliance on land and other resources. They reciprocate with their expressions of gratitude of gratitude to soil, river, trees, forests, wild animals, and other beings in their territories through ritual offerings. A distinctly Dhimal ethics of responsibility, exchange and reciprocity, what they consider part of their *dharma* (Nep. duty and also religion), structured the moral economy of Dhimal jungali life and mediated the use of land and other resources they depended upon for their livelihood. Unlike the tenurial system of the landlord state that

embraced the superiority of the “giver” over the “receiver” of the land, the Dhimal cultural ethos of exchange and reciprocity structured their use of the land before they were forced to become tenant cultivators.

When they became tenant subjects of the landlord state, Dhimal rights to use land depended on their payment of taxes, levies, rents, and periodic labor services to the state and its functionaries. Babai’s description of the physical punishments used against non-tax payers attests to the true parasitical nature (Regmi, 1971) of these groups receiving those taxes; they only extracted economic surplus and labor service from Dhimal without any consideration for their welfare. Thus Babai’s statement “first they made us reclaim the land, and then they forced us to pay money for that land” describes to us Dhimal perceptions of the paradox contained in the novel moral economy imposed upon them by the land tax system and its transformation of *bhonai* into *meeling*.

Babai emphasized that this was a deliberate strategy by the land-owning elites and state officials to compel people to clear the land, and then to take it away from them. His claim that the abrupt increase in the land tax and the taking away of the reclaimed land when they failed to pay that tax were strategic acts “*to chase away Dhimal* once they had cleared the malarial forest” can be challenged on the available historical evidence which documents that not only tenant farmers but even many *jimindār* and other landowning families periodically escaped to India when they failed to pay the required land tax (see Regmi, 1971). Babai cited many examples of how the land once claimed by Dhimal was converted into *birta* lands for powerful people and their families. I read this particular claim of Babai as revealing how people’s dispossession from their lands depended on their access to and control over political power or their lack of it.

Many Dhimal told me that the idea of paying tax for the use of their own land did not make much sense to their ancestors. They said that during the early period of state-led land reclamation in the Tarai, when there were fewer people but many lands to reclaim, their ancestors could simply move on to new places in order to avoid possible state repression. As both Aaju and Babai emphasized, the low level of agricultural productivity, inability to bring crops to market, and the low price of crops made the obligation to pay the land tax in cash a troublesome burden for Dhimal. All the senior Dhimal that I interviewed invariably claimed that the imposition of a monetary tax system at a time when the Dhimal subsistence economy was still at a low level of monetization (until the early 20th century) intensified their experience of *duḥkhá* in owning land.⁸² Recall that when Dhimal ancestors lived the *jungali jivan*, outbreaks of cholera forced them to move from place to place. Like cholera, the state, particularly because of its virulent burden of land taxes, evicted Dhimal from their villages once they had become tenant cultivators, thereby abandoning the material, labor, and emotional investment they had made in clearing the land.

In Dhimal narratives of *dukkha* the state (and its representatives) appeared to be excessively violent, outsiders associated with “high” caste people. Babai’s analysis also highlights how the local state functionaries used to deploy their authority oppressively to dispossess individual tenants from the land they had reclaimed. Since owning land under tenancy rights was a contractual acceptance of the stipulated requirements by tenants, the failure to comply with their tenorial obligations could bring serious consequences for them. So in some

⁸² In the Tarai region, the land tax was usually assessed and collected in cash, and it is estimated that during the early 1840s, people used about 40 percent of their produce for the land tax (Regmi, 1978: 44). While narrating how things were different when she was growing up in the village, a sixty-seven year old Dhimal mai, the mother of my host Dhimal family, once alluded to the lack of market in the village by saying: “In those days, this village was a place where not even a mana [measurement unit; one manna equal 0.05 kg] of uncooked rice would sell in a month.”

cases the local functionaries would actually add more lands under some Dhimal's name (ownership) in the expectation that Dhimal would be unable to meet the tax burden of owning large tracks of land and they could be punished. The case of Mr. Karu Dhimal's grandfather is an interesting example of how owning land came with 'punishment'.

Mr. Karu Dhimal belongs to a family of some repute in the Damak area of Jhapa. His elder brother is an active political leader, who was also an elected member of the Damak Municipality in the early 1990s. Mr. Karu and his elder brother, are both also actively engaged in Dhimal Jati Bikas Kendra. People told me that these particular family members owe their achievement in maintaining their economic affluence and political influence to their grandparents who had been able to accumulate large landholdings in the past. In 2009, during our participation in the annual *Shrejat* ritual journey organized by Dhimal Jati Bikas Kendra on the eve of the Nepali New Year (see Chapter 4), I asked Karu how his grandparents had owned so much land in the past. He told the following story of how his grandfather became a landowner:

What had happened is this. Then, my grandfather was a Majhi. He had already owned some land, maybe 40 bigah or so. Many Majhi used to have land. You know that, yes? (I nodded). Then at one time, the *Badahakim* (the district administrator) came to our village in order to supervise the land tax and other things. This was a Thapa (hill "high" caste) Badahakim, younger than my grandfather in age. I don't remember his name now. Then, Badahakim generally used to stay (Nep. *bās bashnu*) in the Majhi's house. With a big man as *pahunā* (guest), my grandfather had to treat him very well. He asked our grandmother to prepare a good meal of roaster's meat, and a special *teen pani rakshi* (alcohol made by distilling three times).

In the evening, they all ate and drank. The Bada Hakim and his *patuwāri* were busy keeping the *hisab-kitab* (record update; audit). They drank more rakshi. *Sabai lai ali ali lagyo* – all of them got bit drunk. The Badahakim was sitting on a small stool on the floor, and looking over the *patuwāri*. My grandfather was standing behind the hakim; he also became curious, and looked over to see what the *patuwāri* was doing. Then he -- maybe accidentally or maybe he just did it -- put his hand over the shoulder of the Badahakim. The Badahakim did not like my grandfather putting his hand over the hakim's shoulder. The drunk Badahakim got furious

and said: ‘How come this *muji* Dhimal put his hand over my shoulder?’⁸³ What does he think of himself? He called on his assistant: Oh! Mr. *Patuwāri!* Listen here!

And then the Badahakim ordered angrily, “That 20 bigah of vacant paddy fields. Register that 20 bigah of land under this Dhimal’s name. He wants to be too *battho* (Nep. smart/clever). He will see it!”

That’s how my grandfather added another 20 bigaha (laughter). He had three sons; they each got 20 bigah. Our father got 20 bigah too. Our father did not add any land. We were three brothers so we each got about 6 bigah of land. Most of it, I have already sold for my children’s education.” (Interview Transcript, April 14, 2009)

Mr. Karu’s explanation of how his grandfather accumulated the additional 20 bigah of land also supports the Dhimal claim that owing land was full of hardships in the past to the extent that they deemed the land tenancy to be a state imposed punishment. Similar to Babai’s analysis, this particular story, based on a lived historical event, also highlights Dhimal past experiences of the abusive use of state power by local state functionaries for various reasons related to land and revenue administration before the 1950s. It further accentuates how the interplay of caste ranking and tenurial status mediated the Dhimal relationship with state representatives who mostly belonged to the dominant hill “high” caste groups. As a village Majhi, Kuru’s grandfather occupied an important and respected social position in his village. In this event, as a Majhi, Kuru’s grandfather hosted the visiting Bada Hakim as a village guest, and extended warm hospitality accordingly. But the Bada Hakim, without respecting the kindness the host family had offered to him, demeaned Kuru’s grandfather, an aged person, by using vulgar language when he patted his shoulder as if that physical touch “polluted” his body and disgraced his honor.

Thus, the act of touching the state official’s shoulder, perhaps with a gesture of equality, if not of juniority (by age), seemed to have subverted the existing subordinate-dominant relationship between the two whereby Karu’s grandfather, despite his respectable social position

⁸³ Literally means ‘pubic hair of’ but it is commonly used as a swear word akin to “asshole.”

as a village head and his seniority in age, was expected to be submissive. Since the Bada Hakim knew that owning additional land would likely intensify hardship for the host Dhimal family, he added more lands under the tenancy of the Karu's grandfather, not as a favor but to punish him for the perceived disrespectful acts he committed against the representative of the landlord state.

The explanations provided by Babai, Aaju and Karu Dhimal regarding the hardship of owning land help us to understand why Dhimal preferred to avoid coming into tenurial relationships with the state in the past. Increasingly, however, they had no other options than to rely on cultivation of land for subsistence. Moving out of their villages and resettling in new places was perhaps the last resort, not the alternative Dhimal would have preferred in order to ameliorate the brunt of the oppressive landlord state and its representatives. They were less likely to work at wage labor in the colonial plantation economy in neighboring districts of India (Hodgson, (1880 [1847]: 119; Waddell, 1899: 4-5). As becomes evident in the narratives of the three Dhimal that I have used here, while many individual families preferred not to own land under tenancy, Dhimal village Majhi such as the grandfathers of Aaju and Kuru had become landowning families as a result of state policies of revenue administration during that period.

Dhimal Majhi And The Landlord State

As an alternative to becoming tenants of the state or of the landowning elites, many Dhimal cultivated the land holdings of their village Majhi as sharecroppers or recipients of a fixed share of the yield. According to Dhimal, the village Majhi would hold the village land under his name and thus he would deal with tax officials and other state functionaries, while other villager members would cultivate the land and share the produce with the Majhi. In other words, the hardship of owning land as individual families and the state's cooption of indigenous

institutions, such as the Majhi system, for land colonization and revenue administration in the Tarai impacted the existing customary social relations between Majhi and villagers. Thus the Dhimal traditional cultural ethos and practices implied in the Majhi system were molded into a new relationship based on the state's imposed ideology of the hierarchical landlord-tenant system as a means to address the continuing challenges for Dhimal of gaining subsistence on the land. I argue this development was an effect both of the state's land tenure and revenue policies and also of Dhimal efforts to use their cultural institutions to blunt the effects of the oppressive state tax machinery. Dhimal insistence that the hardship of land tenurial relations in the past compelled them to be non-owners of land and that they found it convenient to work for or to cultivate the village Majhi's lands needs an empathetic analysis.

The dominant explanation espoused by many Marxist scholars that the village heads in indigenous communities were essentially a 'landed elite class' at the village level reduces the institution of Majhi to an instrument of class exploitation and subjugation. But the Majhi role cannot be reduced to that of landlord in any elemental sense – he was not merely a creation of the feudal mode of production dominated by Nepal's ruling elites. On the contrary, Dhimal claim that their Majhi institution predates the formation of the present-day state of Nepal. For them, the Majhi of the past represented an important customary institution, indispensable to the governance of Dhimal communal life including village ritual, marriage, and maintenance of social order.

Like the *Dhami* (priest) whose spiritual power used to protect Dhimal from malaria and other afflictions, the village Majhi, also called *deuniya*, a patriarchal hereditary social position, was entrusted with responsibilities such as: maintaining social order in the village, organizing and managing the annual village Shrejat ritual, representing the village during the marriage

processes, and mediating in quarrels or disputes among villagers, divorces, and other incidents that could potentially create conflict between villagers and villages (see S. Dhimal, et al. 2010). Though the Majhi could exercise social power to make and impose decisions on behalf of the villager, it was not a vertically ranked social position nor was it a permanent position that one could continue in without enacting and being part of locally embedded social relationships and a moral economy mediated by kinship, ritual obligation, reciprocal exchange, and other community making practices.

As Babai explained to me, with increasing intervention in their ancestral territories, state officials and intermediary revenue functionaries like *jimīndār* and *patuwāri* held the village Majhi accountable for reclaiming waste lands in their territories. Since the landowning elites (*birta* and *jagir* land holders) who controlled a substantial part of the Tarai land seldom lived in the villages where they held their lands, they also needed the services of local village leaders such as Majhi. Because the state had no tax collection offices in the village during the 19th century, the state and the landowning elites *relied on* these village heads to collect agricultural rents and taxes on their behalf (see Regmi, 1971; 1978a, 1978b: 70-88; Guneratne, 1996). These village heads thus played an “intermediary role between the landowning elites or the government and the peasant” (Regmi, 1978b: 70) without any formal emoluments for their services. Rather they were given special status and privileges vis-à-vis the peasantry that made it possible for them to take a share of the agricultural surplus in lieu of emoluments (*ibid.*). Thus the state’s cooption of the indigenous institution of governance for its land colonization project delegated some state-sanctioned authority such as collecting taxes to Majhi, who added this role to the communal power he enjoyed as village chief. But these new roles did not replace the relevance of the Majhi position as embedded in Dhimal social relationships mediated through kinship,

marriage exchange, ritual obligation, reciprocal labor exchange, and other community making practices.

Many Dhimal preferred to cultivate their village Majhi's lands, not because the village head represented state power or controlled all village lands, but because the Majhi-villager relationships, unlike the tenancy relationship with the state or other landowning elites, were relatively egalitarian and mediated by the ethic of exchange and reciprocity embedded in Dhimal moral economy. These new "class" like relationships between the Majhi and his tenant Dhimals still maintained the reciprocal relationship of production and distribution mediated through their kinship and ritual obligations. One Dhimal farmer whose families in the past had cultivated the lands of the Majhi, the brother of his grandmother in Karikoshi village, explained to me: "During that period, we did not need much land. Then we did not need many things and money. Our biggest *pír* (Nep. worries, concern) then was the marriage of our children. However, we used to get support from Majhi and others to marry off our children. We could always rely on the Majhi if we needed any money and rice. We could pay him by plowing his fields. He was our own kin." Kinship ties, ethics of reciprocity, and the assurance that they would be helped in times of need (for example, for the marriage of their children, the most important duty of Dhimal parents as well as a matter of family and village honor, see Chapter 5) equally defined and structured individual families' tenurial relations with Majhi. Accumulation of wealth for future investment (or expenses) was not a salient feature of Dhimal's household economy.

As I have emphasized, the lack of market access had discouraged Dhimal from cultivating crops as commodities.⁸⁴ Tenancy under the village Majhi served to collectivize

⁸⁴ This does not mean that Dhimal social life during that period remained outside the market. Dhimal would engage in barter or sell of their crops in periodic *haat bazaar* (petty village market) near by their villages to buy other household needs like salt or *chiraito* (to be exchanged with the hill people for rice), clothes, etc. Unlike the state and the absentee landowning elites, Dhimal did not cultivate land for the purpose of selling the crops in the market.

village labor and redistribute agricultural production among the villagers, though not necessarily on an equal basis. But given the hardship of owning land for an individual family and the social embeddedness of their village Majhi, many Dhimal found their tenancy relationship with the Majhi more convenient and less troublesome during that period.

It was obvious that Majhi benefitted more from retaining large tracks of land. Yet they also risked the challenges of meeting the stipulated tax requirement and pleasing the state functionaries and revenue collectors. Recall the Aaju's use of the metaphor of *kangāl* to emphasize what would happen to landowning families in the past. He said to me, "For example, you have land but no people to plow your farm. *This would drown you*. So what do you do? You need to find people and *entice* them to plow your farm by offering them money in advance, a place to live, cattle to herd, and what not. You need to take care of these people more than your own children." If we were to reduce Aaju's explanation to the logic of cost-benefit analysis, given the shortage of labor and relative absence of immigrants from outside, the Majhi, even for a purely instrumental purpose, needed to be caring and providing. Otherwise, he had a higher chance of losing the locally available supply of labor and its loyalty, the loss of which could potentially deprive him of his land entitlements. On the one hand, this also implies that, in the absence of immigrants from outside, he provided more leverage for the tenant Dhimals to make their "tenancy" relationship with the Majhi less exploitative.⁸⁵ On the other hand and most

⁸⁵ The six village Majhis who I interviewed for my research emphasized that their relationships with their fellow Dhimal villagers who used to cultivate the Manjhi's lands (as tenants) were like that of kin and family members. "We treated them like our own sons. We helped them in times of their family members' wedding or funerals. We were kin members from the same village; it was not like a *kamaiya* system (Nep. exploitative bonded labor system; see Dhakal, Rai, Chemjong, et al. 2010)," one village Majhi told me. Other Dhimal also emphasized that it was more beneficial (read, less troublesome) to become a tenant under the Majhi than having land registered under one's name. The Majhi were required to provide 'everything': land, cattle, seeds, and other needed materials to cultivate the land by his "tenants." The agriculture produce, I am told, used to be equally distributed between the Majhi and his tenants in the beginning but later it changed to certain fixed amounts. See Guneratne (1996) for similar practice among the Tharus in the past.

importantly, in the absence of the immigrants Dhimals were able to keep village land, though it would registered be under the names of a few individuals in the state records.

I do not underestimate the issue of “tenant exploitation” in the tenancy of land under the Majhi (see for example, Guneratne, 1996). As Dhimal themselves emphasized, Majhi-villager relationships transcend the political economy of land tenure and economic production.

In order to understand how the interface between Dhimal moral economy and the state’s extractive political economy reconfigured the customary Majhi-villagers relationships, we need to consider the indigenous system of Majhi as, first and foremost, a culturally structured set of practices for reproducing community. Even in the present-day context, the Majhi system is a respected, even revered, institution in Dhimal society. Dhimal use term ‘Majhi *warang*’ to express their respect for and acknowledgment of their village head. The title *warang* or *warange* is used as an honorific for senior males in general and also for Dhimal male deities. Despite the class difference between the Majhi and other villagers in the past, these groups not only participated in and shared the same communal social and cultural life, they were also united by their common political subjugation and their common experience of losing ground. In the post-1950s, both families from the former landlord Dhami and their Dhimal tenants had become *sukumbāsi*. My analysis of Dhimal explanations for the *dukhā* of owning land, and how they worked to lessen that hardship shows that it was the weight of the landlord state and its oppressive tax regime that created ‘landed’ and ‘landless’ social groups among Dhimals.

People such as Babai with a long history of political activism argued that it was the state that “ate up our lands” by the political tactic of dispossessing Dhimal through its land tenure policies. In the same interview, Babai claimed that once Dhimal had reclaimed the Tarai land and toiled so diligently to enhance its productivity, the ruling groups, the hill Hindu “high caste,”

because of their political domination, were able to use the state's tenurial power manipulatively to "chase Dhimal away from these lands." He cited examples of frequent increases in land tax and the consequent eviction of Dhimals for failure to pay these taxes, state granting of lands that Dhimal had reclaimed as *Birta* and *Jagir* grants to the families of the ruling groups, the control of land administration by members of the landowning elites, and in more recent times, the implementation of the land reform (1964) to argue that the state had always acted predatorily to make Dhimal *sukumbāsi*.

Refusing to own land was a political choice (Scott, 2007) that many Dhimal cultivators made in order to avoid the hardship of being tenant subjects. But this political choice became counterproductive for Dhimal when property rights in land were ensured at the turn of the 20th century and when land became the most important proprietary ownership -- a *meeling* – a capital that one could use to access other resources. At the end of the 19th century, economic expansion in India due to the "spurt in economic activity in northern India, mainly because of the development of railway transport facilities" (Regmi, 1978b: 140), opened up "unprecedented prospects for agricultural expansion in the Tarai region" (ibid). The Nepali rulers emphasized the private reclamation of land through fiscal concession and *birta* allotments for any land colonizer, made rights to reclaimed land inheritable, encouraged the hill people to cultivate the Tarai land, promoted irrigation developments in the Tarai, encouraged colonizers to procure settlers from India and introduced the *jimīndāri* system (1861) in order to facilitate private enterprise in the colonization of large tracts of forests and other uncultivated lands in the Tarai during the mid-19th century (see Regmi, 1971; 1978). These renewed state interventions in the Tarai brought more people to the Tarai, and increasingly land ownership began to shift from Dhimals to non-Dhimals, particularly to the hill "high caste" groups.

After the fall of the century-long autocratic feudalistic rule of the Rana family regime (1846-1950), 'land reform' emerged as a national political project for making "modern" Nepal. Since many Dhimals did not have land registered under their names and many of them lacked the necessary documentation (or access to the political power to produce such documentation), Dhimial dispossession from their land accelerated after the 1950s. When malaria was 'eradicated' in the Tarai during the late 1950s, the region was 'opened' for legal and extra-legal land grabbing and settlements by clearing more forests. A huge influx of immigrants, particularly from the hills, poured into the Tarai regions. More and more Dhimial lost their land through mortgage and indebtedness, sale by unfair means, development of public infrastructures like roads, schools, administrative offices, 'modernization' of agriculture (for example, the development of the tea-gardens) and other forms of 'developmental' encroachments in their territories. The Land Reform of 1964, which was implemented to impose a land-holding ceiling and to distribute the surplus land equitably to landless peasants (see Zaman, 1973) disproportionately benefitted the hill immigrants, particularly the hill "high" caste groups in the Tarai (see Gaige, 1975; Chaudhary, 2007 [B.S. 2064]; Guneratne, 2002). The land reform worked against the landowning Dhimial Manjhi landlords, who because of their lack of political connections, lost most of their landholdings. And many Dhimals who used to till the Majhi lands also could not secure their legal ownership of the land and became landless.

The preceding discussion of the colonization of Nepal's Tarai shows that the rise of the 'modern' Nepali state led to the dispossession of Dhimals from their lands and ancestral territories. The state project of territorial colonization also paralleled the making of Nepal as a Hindu nation and the imposition of the hill nationalism that I have described in chapter one. In the post-1960s, the local Dhimial social world increasingly became multiethnic, and in that world

Dhimals became progressively marginalized. Their historical experiences of ‘losing ground’ also prompted Dhimal to collectivize their efforts and agency in challenging their state of marginality.

The next chapter will discuss the history and spaces of Dhimal’s indigenous organizing from 1950s onward. The chapter will further illustrate the importance of understanding why the issue of land remains central to the Dhimal sense of identity and how it forms the moral ground for demanding their rightful belonging as a unique Tarai ādivāsi with an inalienable relationship to their ancestral territories.

Chapter Four

‘I’ve Been Walking And Walking Into It’: Indigenous Activism As A Moral Practice

‘This Samaj Seva Is Like An Addiction!’

In the last week of December 2009, the three-day-long nationwide ‘shut down’ (Nep. *bandh*) called by the Maoist party left me stranded in Damak municipality where I had come to participate in the national convention of a political organization led by Dhimal youths. Unable to get to Karikoshi village, my primary field site, or to my hometown, a three-hour bus ride towards the west from Damak, I had taken refuge at one of my Dhimal friend’s one-room apartment in Damak bazaar, which by that time had become my second home in the field. Since the city was literally shut down and I was tired of watching and observing the jubilant protestors and their actions on the street, I decided to walk to Dada’s home, about two miles west of Damak, expecting that he would be there because of the strike.

Dada, to whom I have briefly alluded in Chapter 2, was a central-level leader of the Dhimal Jāti Bikās Kendra, Dhimal’s national indigenous organization, at the time of my fieldwork. For the last thirty years or more, Dada had been wholeheartedly engaged in organizing the Dhimal community for what he calls *jāti bikās* or ethnic development and *jāti adhikār* or ethnic rights, which I have translated as activism.⁸⁶ He played a key role in

⁸⁶ According to Sciences, “activism refers to action by an individual or group with the intent to bring about social, political, economic, or even ideological change” (Embrick, 2008: 18). Indigenous activism centers on the claim of

establishing and strengthening the Kendra. A very respected member of his community, Dada also actively participates in the regional-national indigenous political movement as well as in other public alliances to represent the Dhimal community. However for most of the time, Dada lives in Morang and Jhapa, and, like many other Dhimal activists who I know, he relies on farming for his family's livelihood.

Dada and Bhauji (*Dh.* elder's brother wife) have a daughter who now lives with her husband's family in another village in Morang district. Having grown up in the post-1950 period of social and political-economic changes in which Dhimal's experiences of "losing ground" (McDonaugh, 1997) had amplified exponentially, Dada and Bhauji have witnessed and experienced what the opening up of the Tarai after the eradication of malaria meant for Dhimal and other Tarai *ādivāsi*.⁸⁷ As a high school student in the early 1970s, Dada found himself in an economically challenged family as his parents had to sell much of their family land in order to support him, his siblings and other family members. At that period, education, particularly college education was a "scarce resource" (Appadurai, 1981) for Dhimal; not everybody could have access to it despite the state's rhetoric of education as a universal right. However, Dada was able to complete two years of college thanks to the scholarship he got from the local government.⁸⁸

ethnic identity, and the self-consciousness of their ethnic identity as members of a collective is the defining attribute of indigenous activists (Rappaport, 2004), which makes their activism meaningful for them and their community.

⁸⁷ On the concept of "losing ground" see my discussion on Chapter 2. The eradication of malaria in the early 1950s opened up the Tarai for others.

⁸⁸ Until 1950, the Rana regime restricted public education; families belonging to the nobility and "high" caste groups with access to the state power were allowed to pursue education in Nepal, and mostly in India for higher education. Public education was introduced in the early 1950s. However, despite the linguistic and cultural diversity of people, *Nepali language*, the dominant group's language, was made the medium of education in order to foster a sense of "national identity" and to erase people's loyalties to their mother tongue.

This scholarship was made possible by the efforts of one village elder who met the king during one of the royal visits (1969/1970) to eastern Nepal. Realizing that Dhimals' lack of education had denied them important access to state power, administration and bureaucracy which had further diminished Dhimal ability to subvert their political and economic marginality, the loss of lands in particular, the village elder requested the head of the state to provide scholarships for school and college level education for Dhimal. He had hoped that college educated Dhimal youth would be in better positions to negotiate with state officials and the dominant groups both as individuals and members of Dhimal community. Hence Dada became educated in part because the village elders or *warang-berang* had acted out their social responsibility of helping Dhimal youth to have access to the important entitlement of education. In that sense, the college scholarship that Dada received also symbolizes the moral action his village elder enacted with his felt sense of responsibility and duty for the community.

Educated Dhimal youths, with the help of their village elders, were instrumental in collectivizing Dhimal efforts at ethnic organizing beginning in the late 1970s, which were later consolidated into the present-day Dhimal Jati Bikas Kendra in the early 1990s. When I began my fieldwork and came to know Dada in mid-2007, he was leading the Kendra in the national indigenous political movement during the period of radical political transformations in Nepal that I have highlighted in Chapter 1. Thus with three decades of continuous contributions to community organizing, Dada embodies a rich history of Dhimal indigenous activism. His unceasing voluntary involvement in activism had taken Dada away from his family responsibilities, Bhauji would occasionally complain. At the family level, activism had severely affected Dada's household economy. Their daughter, who was employed by a local NGO, was supporting the family. But after her marriage, they could no longer depend on their daughter's

income. In mid-2009, Dada and Bhauji sold their family land, demolished their old traditional Dhimal house and built a new, cemented house, which they planned to rent out for needed monetary income.

On that day of the ‘Nepal shut down,’ when I arrived at their place in the afternoon, the new house was still under construction; Dada and Bhauji were using their old kitchen to shelter themselves and the construction materials. They were surprised yet happy to see me on that day at their home. I handed Bhauji a small bag of *jalebi* (South Asian sweet) that I had bought on the way from a street vendor. After a brief conversation about the Maoist strike, I asked Dada how things were at the Kendra. Bhauji interrupted by saying that it was only because of the strike that Dada was at home. Dada smiled and asked Bhauji if we could have some *khaja* (Nep. snack).

At one point, I asked Dada why he continued to be involved in the activities of the Kendra even after so many years. Bhauji, who was frying some chicken meat in a pan, gazed at Dada’s face with a curious look. Perhaps more than me, she wanted to hear Dada on this topic. With a sign of seriousness in his face, Dada first faced towards the floor and slowly spoke looking at me:

Janak *bhai* (Nep. younger brother), this *samaj seva* (social service, activism) is like a *nashā* (Nep: addiction)! Thirty years, more than thirty years, I have been walking into it (pause)- for the community, and for the development of our *jāti*. So much time, I’ve invested for this. What did I get for myself? Nothing! I earned no money out of it. Instead, I had to sell my land to support my families. The biggest lost (pause, low voice)... I lost my son, only son. *Ke garne!* (what to do?) Always, I say to myself, I should quit now. But I get involved anyway. Everybody comes and asks me to continue. Yes, I tell you, this is a *nashā*! (Interview with Dada, December 20, 2009).

As Dada spoke, Bhauji listened quietly. Perhaps Dada’s mentioning of their son who had died, I was told because of high fever when he was a college student, made her emotional. A silence fell on our conversation. Bhauji added some water to the pan. Dada stood up and

suggested that we should have some *janajāti chiyā*, which literally means ‘indigenous tea’ but here he used it to refer to the locally brewed alcohol.⁸⁹ He went out of the room to get some *janajāti chiyā*; perhaps he needed to be alone for a while. When Dada left, I asked Bhauji what she thought of Dada’s contribution to the Dhimal community. “People respect him a lot. I have seen that.” I expressed my own respect for Dada. Adding some *lafā* (*Dh.* green leaves) and slowly stirring them in the boiling soup in the pan, Bhauji responded, “Yes, he has done a lot.” Then she paused for a while and said:

Ijāt ta chha- yes, there is the honor and prestige. But one has to look for the family as well, isn’t it so? He is always out, never around home. Who’s going to do work here? We don’t have our son; now our daughter is gone [married]. Who’s going to plough the fields? This monsoon, we were the last family to plough our fields for paddy plantation. I cannot do all things by myself. It isn’t that easy, is it so? (Interview with Bhauji, December 20, 2009).

The brief account of Dada and Bhauji’s reflections help us to imagine the complex lived realities of the senior Dhimal activists whom I know and interviewed for this study.⁹⁰ Why do people such as Dada, who encountered particular political-economic and historical conditions of marginality, dispossession from his lands in particular, become devoted to activism to such an extent that it became inseparable from their sense of selves? Informed by this question, the central goal of this chapter is to offer an understanding of indigenous activism by privileging the experiences and reflections of people like Dada.

In this chapter, I will provide an ethnographic introduction to Dhimal indigenous activism, its history and social geographies of activism by drawing on my observation and interviews with the Dhimal activists. In order to elucidate why people like Dada become

⁸⁹ Since alcohol is an integral part of ādivasi (*janajāti*) cultural ways of life, Dada’s use of the term ‘*janajāti chiyā*’ for alcohol is interesting for positioning alcohol as a regular drink such as ‘tea.’

⁹⁰ “Activist” is a label I have imposed on them for the purpose of my study. Dhimal don’t use any particular term to mark their distinction as activists. Some of them use term as *samajik karyakarta* (social worker) or refer to their positions in the organizational structure of the Kendra such as *sadhasya* (member).

involved in indigenous activism, we need to locate their activism in its historical contexts. Hence I will also briefly sketch the general political-economic conditions between 1950 and the 1980s to highlight how these historical circumstances influenced these activists' understanding of ethnic identity, political subjectivities and agency, and their sense of responsibility to act on the conditions which had "disempowered their ability to socially produce themselves as collectives" (Turner, 1999: 132).

The primary goal of this chapter is to provide an understanding of Dhimal indigenous activism by focusing on the life experiences of the senior Dhimal activists whom I know and worked with for this study. In doing so, this chapter will challenge the 'spatial-economic' framework, popular in the study of ethnic and identity politics in the South Asia and Himalayan regions, which depicts "ethnic activists" as middle-class and urban intellectuals (Shah, 2010; Fisher, 2001). As an alternative, I approach indigenous activism by centering on how peoples' understanding of themselves as moral social actors with a felt sense of social responsibility and duty towards their community motivate them to become activists. My approach to indigenous activism as a moral practice with emphasis on people's felt sense of embodied duty and responsibility is informed by my ethnographic data.

Activism And The Production Of Social Collectives

In the interview passage cited above, Dada used the notion of *samaj seva* to refer to his continual involvement to work for the collective good of Dhimal community. I have used the term 'indigenous activism' to refer to what Dada described as *samaj seva*, in order to emphasize his enduring embodiment of and commitment to his ethnic identity as the basis of his community

organizing actions (see Rappaport, 2004).⁹¹ In Nepal and India, the concept of *samaj seva*, though very fluid and elusive, is widely used to mean service (*seva*) for the welfare and benefit of community or society (*samaj*) (Srivastan, 2006: 427) and evokes the sense of people's selfless action and involvement. Related to the Hindu ideology and social practices of caste (Watt, 2005), the notion of *seva*, according to Srivastan (2006: 146) "may traditionally have been associated with a normally menial, demeaning or polluting act of service" such as "as pressing another's feet or legs to relieve suffering." But the meaning of *seva* changed when it was used as an idiom of political action and mobilization in the freedom movement during the colonial period in India (Srivastan, 2006). It gained its present popular meanings of 'service' and 'selflessness' when the nationalists and political leaders used the concept of *seva* to elicit people's participation in "serving the nation" (Watt, 2005) in their attempts to create an active and responsible citizenry in the post-colonial period in India.

Similarly, in Nepal the concept of *samaj seva* became popular after the advent of the party-less, autocratic Panchayat regime (1960-1990) which defined the right of peoples to form political parties and political associations as anti-nationalist and thus legally punishable actions. The Panchayati rulers popularized the notion of *samaj seva* in the sense of 'serving the nation' as secular "principles of selflessness and sacrifice" (Ciotti, 2012: 149) in order to produce a depoliticized citizenry. Thus, the state discourses of *samaj seva* and encouragement of people's participation in 'social services' offered ethnic and political activists an important public space to organize their activism without being seen as 'doing politics' by the state authorities. This particular historical context can explain why Dada deployed the term *samaj seva* to describe

⁹¹ The anthropologist Joanne Rappaport (2004: 116-117) reminds us that consciousness of their ethnic identity, their sense of identity as members of a collective, is the distinctive attribute of indigenous activists which makes activism meaningful for them and their community.

what I have called ‘indigenous activism.’ What struck me most in Dada’s explanations is his use of the idea of *nashā*, which I have translated as “addiction,” to describe why he would continue to devote to himself indigenous activism despite the many hurdles and challenges he had encountered.⁹²

According to the *Nepali Brihat Sabdakosh* (2010 [1983]), the official dictionary of Nepali language, the word *nashā* has five meanings, and three of these are associated with conditions of or materials causing intoxication that negatively affects an individual’s mental and physical conditions. *Nashā*’ also means ‘proudness’ or boastfulness’ as in *sampati ko nashā* (being boastful of one’s wealth). However, it also refers to “the mental attitude to be continuously involved in one particular work, thing or event, no matter whether good or bad” (NPP, 2010: 672). Hence the word also implies undeterred devotion and dedication towards one particular compulsion. Dada’s use of the metaphor of *nashā* to characterize the inseparability of activism from his body, his sense of self, further becomes evident by the idea of ‘walking’ he invoked to underline his undeterred continuity in activism despite the enduring pain caused by the loss of his son and the weakening effects activism had on the sustenance of his family. Like Dada, many other Dhimal activists use Nepali terms such as *hidnū* (to walk or *hidēko* to mean “having walked”) and ‘*lāgnu*’ (*lāgēko*, past participle of *lāgnu*) – which Turner’s *Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language* (1931) translates as “to be attached to, cling to; persevere” – in order to emphasize their continual involvement in activism. In a later part of this chapter I will return to the significance of *hidnū* and ‘*lāgnu*’ for elucidating Dhimal activists’ understanding of their activism as an embodied practice. Here it is sufficient to

⁹² Interestingly, the etymological root of the English word ‘addiction’ is similar to the meaning of *nashā* in Nepali. According to Oxford English Dictionary (1996, 2nd edition), the verb “addict” was used to mean “to attach (anyone) to a pursuit” and “to devote, give up, or apply habitually to a practice” in the 17th century.

emphasize that these terms convey Dhimal activists' deeply felt sense of social responsibility and duty, which they embody and enact as moral practices.

At the family level, as Bhauji poignantly expressed, Dada's commitment to indigenous organizing had kept him detached from his necessary familial duties and responsibilities. It is not that Bhauji disapproved of Dada's activism; she appreciates the contributions that her husband has made for the Dhimal community. However, as her statement "one has to look for the family as well" lucidly explains, they cannot sustain themselves by leaving the family fields barren. Perhaps she wished that Dada could have approached his family responsibilities with the same level of dedication that he had devoted to his activism. Bhauji is not directly involved in organizational leadership positions in the Kendra, but she is equally an "indigenous activist" (Rappaport, 2004), a point I should make explicit here. She actively participates in and contributes to the Kendra's activities in her village, particularly with Dhimal women through their gendered spaces of activism, which I will discuss in the next two chapters. Despite her involvement in activism, Bhauji did not give me the sense that she is addicted to it as Dada is, which is not to suggest that she is less concerned with or indifferent to the issues raised by the Kendra.

It is important we recognize that who could become completely 'addicted' to activism is equally shaped not only by people's social positions such as class, education attainment, political participation, and other things, but most importantly the normative gender roles and responsibilities people socially inherit in specific social-historic periods. Unlike Dada, Bhauji was deprived of educational opportunities during the 1960s and 1970s, as were many other Nepali women at that period, and there was no social encouragement for women to participate in formal political activities (ibid). Moreover, her roles as mother and wife, and her felt

responsibility and duty towards her family equally restricted her social geographies for activism while it simultaneously provided the needed family support for Dada to devote himself to work for their community. So when Bhauji asked me, “It isn’t that easy, is it?” she was also alluding to the challenges they encounter in maintaining the delicate balance between one’s felt sense of responsibility towards the continual making of Dhimal as a community and sustaining one’s own family without having to sell one’s ancestral lands for individual survival.

The preceding reflections of Bhauji and Dada equally relate to the social experiences of other Dhimal indigenous activists whom I closely followed and worked with in Morang, Jhapa and Kathmandu, Nepal’s capital city, during my fieldwork period. My “friendship” (Fricke, 2006) with them enabled me to understand indigenous activism with a more empathetic gaze by paying close attention to their life experiences and the challenges they face not only as activists but also as father, husband, wife, daughter, son, village head, priest, and so on. These Dhimal activists whom I know do not fit the images of ethnic activists that circulate in scholarly and popular critiques of ‘identity politics’ in Nepal (see Mishra, 2012).

Many scholarly works on ethnic and identity politics in Nepal and South Asia describe ethnic activists as educated and middle class individuals who live in cities detached from the reality of the rural people they claim to represent and speak for (Shah, 2010; Fisher, 2001). Or they are the ‘elite’ members of their community (Guneratne, 2002), who, with supports from the state, international donor community, and mainstream political parties, set the movement agenda in order to gain economic and political opportunities for their personal benefit (Mishra, 2012). In her recent work among the ādivāsi in Jharkhand region of India, Alpha Shah (2010) exposes what she calls the “dark side of indigeneity” (p: 9) to show how “global discourses of indigeneity can reinforce a class system that further marginalizes the poorest people” and how “this class

dimension to the indigenous rights movement is likely to get erased in the cultural-based identity politics it produces” (Shah, 2010: 12).

I acknowledge the value of these scholarly works and their arguments. They point to the need for a critical approach in which analysts/scholars pay equal attention to the ways in which social movements generate their own internal contradictions and struggles in terms of class, gender, regionalism, generation, the urban-rural divide, and so forth.⁹³ But the claim that only urban or elite members of a community have a stake in indigenous political movements (Shah, 2010), and that “the poor (in Nepal) are more interested in making a living than in their ethnic identity (Gellner, 2012: 98) simply reduces activists like Dada to ‘homo economicus’ and tags his enduring engagement in activism as a middle class politics of resource and power appropriation. In this chapter, I offer an alternative approach to indigenous activism that moves beyond the narrow spatial-economic framework based on class positions and the urban-rural divide of activists.

I argue that for Dhimal activists, indigenous activism is a moral practice based on their sense of embodied duty and responsibility towards their community. My approach to activism as a morally embodied practice is informed both by my ethnographic data and Terence Turner’s (1999) formulation of indigenous activism. He has persuasively argued that the essence of indigenous activism is “the struggle for the continued production of collective identity, the self-reproduction of the social group, with its values and forms of personhood. This is a struggle for social production in the broadest sense” (Turner, 1999: 132; see also Holmberg, 2011). I find

⁹³ The claim that indigenous politics silence or marginalize class politics is a recurrent theme in anthropological debates on ‘indigeneity’ (see Veltemeyer, 1997; Beteille, 1998; Warren, 1998; Friedman, 1999; Rata, 2000 Kjosavik, 2005), and this has been vocally championed by Marxist scholars in Nepal as well (Mishra, 2012; Fisher, 2001; Sakar, 1995; Toffin, 2009). For a productive engagement between Marxism and indigeneity, see Turner, 2007; Veltemeyer, 1997).

Turner's emphasis on the "social production of collectives with its distinct values and forms of personhood" useful to approach activism as one form of social practice people enact in order produce their social collectives as Dhimal, not simply as a generic Nepali (Holmberg, 2011).

But I also take cautiously scholarly emphasis on 'struggle' and 'resistance' as the defining attribute of indigenous activism. Turner (1993: 132), rightfully so, emphasizes that indigenous political movement is a struggle to respond to "the global-national political forces that disempower peoples' ability to socially reproduce their social collectives" (Turner, 1999: 132). His emphasis on struggle against the global-national political forces captures the defining feature of global indigenous politics (Niezen, 2004), and it is relevant for considering the centrality of power relations between the state and Dhimal in our analysis of their activism. However, an overt emphasis on 'struggle' and 'resistance' without taking into account how people understand these practices can potentially miss the embedded meanings that motivate people to become activists (Mahmood, 2005).

In Nepal, the possibility of waging an overt organized resistance based on ethnic identity and the claim of indigenous rights was severely limited under the oppressive, and utterly assimilative and homogenizing Panchayat regime (1960-1990). Similarly, the omission and muting of ethnic issues in the oppositional political movement, based on liberal ideals of democracy and civil political rights, and leftist politics, based on ideologies of class struggle, had further curtailed the space for organized ethnic struggle during that period. Given the dominance of such marginalizing political environments, we need to pay closer and more sensitive attention to the kinds of political options and resources which were available to Dhimal during the period, and how they used these options in their struggle for claiming their ethnic identity and continual production of their community. Similarly, in order to ground activism in its historical contexts, it

is equally important to focus on the meanings these practices of struggle carry for the activists and their community. My discussions of the Dhimal embodied sense of duty and responsibility will help to illustrate why they consider activism an embodied moral practice.

Therefore when senior Dhimal activists like Dada and many others whom I know explained to me their involvement in activism as a *nashā*, they did not simply convey their enduring altruistic involvement for the betterment of their community. They emphasized the inseparability of activism from their sense of self, hence activism as enactments of their obligatory duty and responsibility. Related to this understanding of activism by these activists is the self-positioning of themselves as ‘conscious’ social actors cognizant of their political agency to act on the world that acts on them. The understanding that they were political actors during the period of temporal urgency for their community is central to Dhimal activists’ explanations that they acted out of their realization of duty as aware and righteous members of their collective. Hence in their retellings of why they became involved in activism, senior as well as youth activists emphasized their felt sense of temporal urgency to act on the existing political-economic circumstances in order to positively influence the empowerment of their community.

But what is equally illuminating in these Dhimal activists’ views of themselves as agentic social actors is their acknowledgement of Dhimal predecessors as morally embedded political actors who laid the path for future generations to engage with the forces affecting their community. Dhimal activists understand their political agency and embodied duty towards their community by relating their social biographies of belonging to a particular historical period (1950s-1980s) -- a time in which the Dhimal community faced devastating political, economic and cultural marginality. And while locating themselves as political actors confronting these historical conditions, these activists also connect themselves with their predecessor activists and

render their ancestors' contributions and political agency visible to new generations. To put it another way, my use of the term 'moral' to qualify Dhimal activism is strongly informed by Dhimal activists' emphasis on the social relations of responsibility and duty that their embodied practices of activism reproduce across generations. I argue that this sense of embodiment is vital to understanding Dhimal explanations for their becoming involved in indigenous activism, explanations that call to mind moral practice and their understanding of responsibility and duty.

The Social Geography Of Dhimal Indigenous Activism

Dhimal's indigenous activism that I observed during my fieldwork was not an isolated phenomenon; it was intricately tied with and influenced by larger political transformations and similar indigenous mobilizations at the local, regional, national and global levels.⁹⁴ However there exists no single or homogenous indigenous political movement of Dhimal. Instead, they are engaged in indigenous political activism through various organizations and political alliances. Apart from their national indigenous organization, Dhimal Jati Bikas Kendra, there were five ethnic associations of Dhimal affiliated with various political parties at the time of my fieldwork. Yet the Kendra still stands out as the most important and influential pan-Dhimal indigenous organization that can encompass all Dhimal irrespective of their political ideologies, party-affiliations, class, and gender backgrounds.

Since the majority of Dhimal still live within their ancestral territories, their indigenous activism and the activities of the Kendra are mostly concentrated in Morang and Jhapa. In

⁹⁴ I use these spatial scales as heuristic frameworks to highlight Dhimal's different yet sometimes overlapping geographies of activism, their intended target groups, and participants in the movement activities. They are not discrete and independent spaces. However, for my analysis, it is also important to distinguish between Dhimal's activism, for example, in Morang and Jhapa with that in Kathmandu where only 8 % of the total population of Dhimal reside (Gurung, H. et al., 2006, Table: 33, p: 100).

Nepal, the majority of the representative indigenous organizations (*jāti* organization) of other indigenous groups are based in Kathmandu, with their district chapters in their ancestral territories. However, Dhimal have reversed the prevalent “state spatialization” (Gupta and Ferguson, 2002) by centering Morang as the ‘headquarter’ of the Kendra, while making Kathmandu, the epicenter of Nepal’s state power and political activism, its district chapter. Hence the urban-rural dichotomy becomes obsolete in examining Dhimal indigenous activism. It is the local embeddedness of the Kendra and its activists that defines Dhimal indigenous activism.

The majority of Dhimal indigenous activists live in their communities, and no matter what class or profession they belong to, their everyday lives are shaped and mediated by similar textures of social and cultural worlds that their fellow Dhimal community members share. You can meet these Dhimal activists organizing the blocking of the East-West Highway in their solidarity, for example, with the Limbus, to demand the establishment of ‘the autonomous state of Limbuwan.’⁹⁵ Next week, you can see them in their farms plowing or helping their Brahmin neighbors to harvest their paddy or you can find them performing their communal ritual, *Shrejat* or attending funerals, marriages, and so forth. Moreover, as members of the actually existing localized Dhimal community, these activists cannot escape and are expected to abide by the ties of kinship, marriage, rituals, reciprocal exchange and other shared practices that Dhimal enact to socially reproduce themselves as a members of a Gramthan, the village shrine or a village (see Chapter 5). Their locally embedded cultural practices of community making such as clan membership, marriage, village ritual, and annual fairs in which people suspend their differences,

⁹⁵ Limbus have been demanding that the regions between the present day Arun river and Mechi river, which also include Dhimal’s ancestral territories, should be declared as an autonomous federal state of Limbuwan (see KYC, 2007).

even though temporarily, are also the very spaces of everyday practices which provide the sources of moral authority for Dhimal indigenous activism and activists (see Chapters 5 and 6).

A span of three generations of Dhimal, each bringing with them different as well as shared experiences, worldviews, knowledge, skill, and tactics of activism, is involved in the making of Dhimal indigenous activism in Morang, Jhapa and Kathmandu. Many of the senior activists, fifty years and above, have a longer history of activism; some of them, who are also the founding members of the Kendra, have been involved for more than three decades. All the senior Dhimal activists are male, predominately from farming families based in Morang and Jhapa. And it is important to mention here that none of them lives in Kathmandu. For Dhimal living in Morang and Jhapa, the capital city is not a ‘local’ for the simple fact that Kathmandu does not constitute a ‘village’ as it is understood and lived by Dhimal in their everyday life (see Chapter 5).

Many of these senior activists are also involved as regional level leaders or workers of various national political parties; some of them have been involved in ‘party politics’ since the early 1970s, within the period when party politics was still banned in Nepal (1960-1990). Thus these senior activists also have grounded experiences of political activism. The category of senior that I have used here also includes the important social actors affiliated with Dhimal’s customary institutions such as *Manjhi* (the village head), *Dhami* (the village priests), *Oja* (shaman), and *Hanuwa* (assistant of Dhami) who are indispensable to the constitution of any Dhimal village. The importance that the Kendra has accorded to this group of seniors, whom I call ‘cultural activists’ (Warren, 1998), and their active involvement in the organization’s cultural and political activities strengthen the moral authority and social legitimacy of Dhimal Jati Bikas Kendra (see Chapters 5 and 6).

The other important category of Dhimal activists is the “*Yuva*” or the youths.⁹⁶ Based in Morang, Jhapa and also in Kathmandu, these Dhimal youth activists are youth between the ages of fifteen and thirty five years, who mostly come from high school and college students. Other professionals such as journalists and teachers of these age groups are also the leading members of this group. However, more than age, it is the group’s orientation, their modalities of activism and their organizational approach that mark these youths as a distinct category of Dhimal activists. One of the most important marks of this distinction is that they have formed their own political party based on indigenous identity. They reject the mainstream political parties in which their parents and senior Dhimal activists are involved. The youth activists are also distinct in terms of the remarkably higher participation of Dhimal women, including in leadership positions within their organizational structures. The conflict between the youth and other groups of activists, and how they mediate these generational divergences is the major focus of my discussions in Chapter 5.

There are other activists who do not fit either of these two categories, *warang-berang* and youth activists. Even if they belong to the same age group as ‘youth,’ they are not part of the youth activists because of their affiliation in the mainstream political parties. And since many of them are under fifty, and are not the founding members of the Kendra and its Manjhi-Dhami committee, they do not fit the category of ‘seniors’ that I have used here. Nevertheless, as an intermediary group, these activists are in the forefront of the Kendra’s leadership in all levels -- the central, regional and the village committees -- and in all three districts: Morang, Jhapa and Kathmandu. They include people from all walks of life, but again men outnumber women.

⁹⁶ On the notion of “youth” as an analytical political category in Nepal, see Snellinger (2009).

The categorization of Dhimal activists that I have presented here, though a tentative typology, is ethnographically relevant in understanding the dynamics of Dhimal indigenous activism. The diversity of activists and Dhimal's social geographies of activism challenge the simplistic academic trope of 'spatial-economic' distinction that many scholars use to characterize indigenous activists simply as urban and middle-class people. Instead Dhimal indigenous activism is both heterogeneous and complex. It is important to emphasize here that their differences in terms of generation, gender, political ideologies, spatial locations of activism, and modalities of activism often rupture the needed cohesiveness and cooperation among Dhimal activists.⁹⁷ But this important academic concern with the "dark side of indigeneity" (Shah, 2010) also needs to focus on how people, activists and non-activists alike, confront and subvert the structural relationships of domination which get perpetuated in the community through social movements. At the same time, our focus on conflicts and contradictions among movement actors should not divert our analytical gaze from what brings these divergent activists together as a collective in their indigenous activism. My subsequent chapters will illustrate in detail how Dhimal activists also strive to come together as a community through concrete practices and efforts.

In her important ethnographic work on Mayan indigenous activism in Guatemala, Kay Warren (1998:177-193) has demonstrated the significance of focusing on 'activism across generation' in order to understand how political struggles are reproduced over time. Informed by her analysis, I argue that in order to understand why Dada and other Dhimal indigenous activists felt compelled to become involved in organizing their community, we need to grasp the particular historical-political conditions that shaped their life experiences as Dhimal, rather than

⁹⁷ See my discussions on Chapters 4 and 5 for illustrations.

approach them as merely some generic Nepali individual social actor. Hence, taking the present Dhimal activists as the protagonist narrators of Dhimal's history of ethnic organizing, I will briefly discuss the general political-economic conditions between 1950 and 1980 in order to highlight the interplay among historical contexts, Dhimal activists' understanding of their political agency and political subjectivities, and their history of ethnic activism.

Narrating the History of Dhimal Ethnic Organizing: Activism Across Generations

“It's a very jumping interview. It moves forward and backward along five decades in time!” I wrote a reminder to myself in the notebook after Babai and I finished our ninety-minute long conversation on the morning of April 9, 2008, at their beautiful traditional Dhimal house in Damak region of Jhapa. Babai, then sixty-two years old, whose help and knowledge have been instrumental in shaping my research, is one of the senior Dhimal indigenous activists and a political leader now affiliated with the United Communist Party of Nepal, Maoist (UCPNM), the political party of the former Maoist insurgents who waged a violent “people's war” in Nepal from 1996 to 2006. Like Dada, Babai has lived most of his time in Morang and Jhapa, and he too has been involved in indigenous activism for the last four decades. Our conversation on that morning focused on the history of Dhimal's ethnic organizing – a topic that Babai has lived and made a major part of his life history. It is a past that he himself, like Dada, represents and continues to live in in the present (Tonkin, 1992: 2).

As he opened up some pages of his experiential history of activism for me, Babai himself undertook an emotional “memory walk” (Bonilla, 2011) through which he connected his actions with those of his ancestors, and with the events and political contexts that had influenced him and his warang-berang in the past. What astounded me as Babai begin to relate the history of

Dhimal ethnic activism is the centrality he accorded Dhimal ancestors and their experiences as the subject and focus of his reflections. “Things were different in the Tarai before 1950.⁹⁸ Our *purkhā* (Nep. ancestors, seniors) were happy with their life in the forest,” Babai unwrapped his reflections suggesting that Dhimal had more control over their ways of life when their ancestral areas were densely forested and thinly populated. And he added, “then our ancestors did not know much about politics,” which I read as his emphasis on the past, prior to 1950, when Dhimal were not required to deal with the state on an everyday basis. Even though Dhimal *purkhā* may been less interested in politics, Babai did not forget to emphasize how some of their grandparents actively participated in and contributed to Nepal’s first people’s revolution that overthrew the century-long oppressive Rana Regime (1846-1950) in 1950. Babai’s emphasis on this particular history of Dhimal’s participation in the “epoch-making event in Nepal’s history” (Joshi and Rose, 1966: 175) is tellingly illustrative of how Dhimal activists understand their ancestors as political actors, and how they commemorate these ancestors, for example those who participated in the revolution of 1950, in their activism in order to spur political action today.

The social history of the 1950 revolution is beyond the scope of this discussion, but it is important to emphasize here that the Tarai, particularly Morang (and Jhapa), had become a major zone of oppositional politics since the late 1940s, including an armed revolution against the Rana Regime (see Bastola, 1996). According to the Nepali anthropologist Rishi K. Regmi (1991: 175) who studied Dhimal in the late 1970s, “*no* Dhimal took part in it (in the 1950 revolution).

⁹⁸ By the mid 19th century, Nepal, under the autocratic and oligarchic Rana Regmi (1846-1950), had turned into a highly centralized, hierarchical and extractive ‘patrimonial’ Hindu state in which few social groups controlled the political power and economic resources (Chapter 2). The Rana Rulers, with support from the British colonial regime, had attempted to seclude its polity from the outside world. There were sporadic indigenous resistance against the Hindu state and the Rana polity during this period (see Tamang, 2008), however, the Rana regime to large extent, suppressed the popular as well as everyday resistance through various means. However, the global and regional political transformations that followed the Second World War, particularly the processes of decolonization and liberation movements in India and the socialist uprising in China fueled the increasing anti Rana uprising in Nepal that had cumulated and consolidated during the 1940s (Joshi and Rose, 1966).

Sometime after the revolution, they had heard that the Rana's reign was over and a People's Government has been established" (see also Dahal, 1979: 102; emphasis mine). But Regmi asserts, "the revolution of 1950 brought a new consciousness among the Dhimals" (p: 176). In other words, the epoch-making political event of 1950 made Dhimal politically aware, but they remained outside the revolution. Given the invisibility of non-dominant social groups in Nepal's official historiography (Tamang, 2008) and popular presumptions that "backward" communities are unlikely to participate in nation-making politics (Panta, 1984; see Chapter 7), such representation of Dhimal as a 'politically unaware' social group is hardly surprising. However, contrary to the claims of earlier Nepali scholars (Dahal, 1972: 102; Regmi, R. K., 1991: 175), many Dhimal had actually participated in the revolution including the armed rebellion under the People's Liberation Army (PLA) formed to fight against the Rana regime (Dhimal, Som et. al. 2010; Bastola, 1996).⁹⁹

In this interview, Babai provided me the names of Dhimal such as Sikaru Dhimal and Nar Bahadur Dhimal who had participated in the revolution of 1950. Interestingly, he called them "our purkhā who raised guns against the Rana" but who were later forgotten and ignored when their party leaders "became minister and prime ministers" after the revolution. The silencing of Dhimal political history (Trouillot, 1995), the question why their grandparents who 'raised guns against the Rana regime' have been forgotten and why they ended up becoming landless squatters

⁹⁹ A people's army called 'People's Liberation Army' was formed under the Nepali Congress Party in 2006 in order to initiate an armed revolution, along with the popular protest, against the Rana regime. People from various indigenous communities who had served in the British Indian army, because of their military skill and knowledge played crucial role in the leadership and operation of the People's Liberation Army in the 1950 revolution (see Tamang, 2008). According Mr. Narendra Nath Bastola (born in 1919), who was responsible for leading the armed revolution under the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in the easternmost region of the Tarai in 1950, the Tarai ādivāsi supported the PLA by providing food, shelter, elephants for transportation, and additional military strengths by physically participating in the attacks with simple but deadly bow and arrows (see Bastola, 1996: 38-41). In the preface of his memoir, Bastola acknowledges the contribution of Dhimal families in the revolution. He writes, "*we people living in the Aath Rai region (eastern Nepal) have not forgotten what they (Dhimal and others) had done for the success of the 1950 revolution in Jhapa*" (Bastola, 1996; preface).

after the 1950 revolution, have re-emerged as emotionally charged narratives in their present day activism. It was Babai who first told me how they were making the new generation aware of this history, and how this retelling of history and its forgetting had produced tangible political impacts. Babai illustrated this with a story about the election campaigns for the Constituent Assembly in 2008.

In this election, there were two Dhimal candidates on behalf of the Maoist party. One of the candidates was Mr. Bishma Dhimal, born in 1954, who was a political prisoner for 17 years (1972-1989), one of the longest in Nepal's political history, for his involvement in the Jhapa Insurgency of the early 1970s. After his release in 1989, like the revolutionary Dhimal of 1950, Bishma Dhimal had also suffered non-recognition from the political parties and the democratic state, and had faced severe economic hardship. Babai, who had actively participated in the election campaign, recalled what he used to tell to Dhimal:

Our ancestor Sikaru Dhimal raised his gun and fought against the Rana. But what had happened to him afterwards at the end? He came from a simple peasant family. And he was ignored by his party. The Nepali Congress completely ignored him while its leaders became *māntri* (Nep. minister) and *pradhan māntri* (Nep. Prime Minister) after the revolution. There was Nar Bahadur Dhimal who joined the communist party in 1949. He later became a *sukumbāsi* (Nep. landless squatters) and left his village. Bishma Dhimal spent 17 years in prison fighting for the rights of landless, peasants, and Dhimal. Now he is at Ghottetār. Others are in Baluwatār.¹⁰⁰ Why? (Interview with Babai, November 5 2008).

Hence the story of Mr. Sikaru and Nar Bahadur Dhimal, when used in the election campaigns, resonated well with Dhimal in favor of the Maoist party that seemed to have recognized political activist such as Mr. Bishma Dhimal. In other words, for present-day activists, their revolutionary Dhimal of 1950s and 1970s not only represented the political agency of their ancestors and their overt resistance against the oppressive regimes, hence their

¹⁰⁰ Ghottetār is a place in Kathmandu valley (Bhaktapur) where Bishma Dhimal was living with his wife by doing commercial farming. Baluwatār is the place in Kathmandu where the official residence of Nepal's Prime Minister is located. The use of place names signify the continuity of Bishma Dhimal as the diligent tiller of land in contrast to his many comrades who had lived in Baluwatār.

historical coevalence (Fabian, 1983). They also indexed Dhimal's experiences of non-recognition and marginalization from Nepal's mainstream political parties and the state. Thus by enacting an emotional "politics of memory" (Rappaport, 1998), contemporary activists are reintroducing their ancestors as political actors, who in the past were unrecognized and ignored by the nation, but who now must be commemorated by the present-day Dhimal so that they would not have to face a similar experience of rejection and marginalization in the future.

In their retellings of the history of Dhimal ethnic organizing, all the senior activists whom I interviewed portrayed their ancestors, to whom they referred in the possessive honorific Nepali pronoun 'hamro purkhā' (our ancestors), as the protagonist historical actors until they themselves become one of them in their narrated history. In doing so, these senior activists assert their political agency and their felt sense of responsibility to act for their community in relation to the political-economic conditions in which they grew up, experiencing what it meant to be Dhimal and the challenges they had faced in order to continue as a jāti. Hence I will discuss these historical contexts here in order to highlight how Dhimal activists locate themselves as morally embedded social actors acting on these political-economical conditions of marginality.

'The Responsibility Has Fallen On Our Shoulder': Sense of Temporal Urgency and Activism

Dhimal had felt urgency to 'preserve' their culture and ethnic identity, and to expand their access to political power and state resources since the early 1950s. Following the 1950 revolution, Dhimal made efforts both individually and collectively to form ethnic associations and to expand their political alliances with other indigenous groups, for example, with the

Limbus, to contest Nepal's first parliamentary election in 1959.¹⁰¹ However, these efforts failed to materialize into a social movement after the king took state power through a military coup and imposed a party-less political system called *Panchayat* system in 1960. The Panchayat regime (1960-1990) fostered a monolithic notion of 'Nepali identity' based on the cultural ethos of the hill Hindus, and it severely repressed ethnic associations, particularly those with 'political' nature (for the state) and ethnic politics.

While the post-1950 political transformations stirred new political consciousness among Dhimal (Dahal, 1979; Regmi, 1985, 1991), their experiences of 'losing ground' further deepened when these political changes propelled new forms of state-led colonization of land, resources and political control in the Tarai, albeit under the umbrella of economic development, modernization and prosperity to build a 'modern' Nepal. 'Land reform' was one of the most prioritized political agendas put forwarded by the political parties that had fought against the Rana regime to establish a democratic system in 1950 (Gaije, 1975). In order to realize the full economic potential of the Tarai, malaria in the Tarai had to be 'eradicated.' Following malaria 'eradication' in the mid 1950s, the state-led land reform of 1964, the settlement programs bringing hill people into Morang and Jhapa, and the construction of the east-west highway in the late 1960s, and other infrastructural developments transformed Dhimal ancestral territories into a new economic frontier for *others* (see Shrestha, 1989). An unprecedented influx of hill migrants poured into the plains of Morang and Jhapa that resulted in the clearing of forest, indiscriminate land grabbing, and social and political-economic transformations which further marginalized the

¹⁰¹ One of the earlier efforts of fostering pan Dhimal solidarity were initiated by Dhimal Manjhi (village head) in the aftermaths of the revolution of 1950 by convening a week long all Dhimal Majhi meetings in Jhapa which attended by more than fifty six villages in 1951 and 1962. This alliance between Dhimal and Limbu are aimed at strengthening their ethnic identity. And it also later developed into political form (Dahal 1979: 103).

Tarai ādivāsi to such an extent that many of them had to “struggle for survival” (Gaige, 1975).¹⁰²

The reflections of the American anthropologist Robert Rhoades (1942-2010), who was involved in the US government assisted agricultural extension program as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Tarai in the 1960s provides a succinct illustration of how the clearing of the Tarai forest adversely impacted the local ecology and the Tarai ādivāsi.¹⁰³ He reflects:

After my first year of service, I was transferred to Chitwan (we called it Rapti valley) where I assisted in the extension activities of the newly established Rampur farm. Along with my Peace Corps colleagues, Nepali counterparts, and USAID works, we operated International Harvest tractor crawlers and large moldboard plows to break up the elephant grass and tame the beautiful and wild Chitwan for settlement of migrants from the hills. We did not give much thought to our impact on the environment as we drove the tiger, leopards, and other wild life to the brink of extinction and the indigenous Tharu to the margins of their native lands. Reflecting back, I was a naïve but yet dangerous agent of the dominant post war “development” paradigm which promoted growth at the cost of environmental and cultural integrity (Rhoades, 1999: 13).

As Rhoades indicates, the interplay among the post war development paradigm, the Nepali rulers’ need to settle the hill people in the Tarai, and the agricultural extensions drove Tarai ādivāsi such as the Tharu and Dhimal to the margins of their homeland. The Rapti valley project was initiated in 1955 with US aid in order to “alleviate a food deficit in the Kathmandu valley and surrounding hill areas and to accommodate and provide employment to “poverty stricken” farm workers including flood refugees” (Government of Nepal 1956: 65 quoted by Ojha, 1983: 27-29). It tellingly illustrates how the aboriginal inhabitants of the Tarai, already marginalized by state landlordism and the Hinduization of the polity during the 19th century, increasingly became the “victims of progress” (Bodley, 1982) in order to feed Nepal’s capital and the hill

¹⁰² One of the earlier technical surveys of forest cover in the Tarai conducted in 1963/64 reported that Morang had the least forest coverage (32.3 percent of the total area) whereas Dang, located in the far western Tarai had its 75.4 percent of the total area covered with forest (Department of Forest, Government of Nepal, 1967, Table.1, p: 17). According to another report, Morang lost about half of its forest area during the period between 1921 and 1977 (Gurung, 1984: 85). This comparative figure on the conversion of forest into cropland indicates that demographic and environmental shifts in Morang and Jhapa that directly impacted Dhimal and other Tarai.

¹⁰³ On Rhoades, see: <http://sfaanews.sfaa.net/2010/08/19/robert-e-rhoades/>, accessed March 28, 2013.

people after 1950s.

Paralleling this political-economic marginalization was the hard-hitting state-led policy of cultural assimilation imposed by the Panchayat regime under the rubric of '*bikās*' or development (Pigg, 1993) and 'national integration' (Gaige, 1975). The Nepali state and the ruling elites had aggressively promoted the cultural ethos of the ruling hill "high caste" Hindu groups as the "national culture" through state institutions and governance (Gaige, 1975; Gurung, 1997). This making of 'hill nationalism' in the post-1960s also impacted the evolving inter-ethnic relationships in Dhimal villages. Dhimals encountered tremendous social and political pressure to assimilate into the dominant culture. They needed to learn and acquire new "forms of capital" (Bourdieu, 1986) to become modern Nepali citizens not only to achieve individual social mobility but also for the continual production of their collective selves as Dhimal. They had to learn new ways of life such as learning to speak the Nepali language, wearing 'national dress,' celebrating the Hindu rituals as part of national festivals, and so on, in order to be accepted by the dominant others, state officials in particular. They needed new skills and social organizations to cope with the challenges of a cash economy. Similarly, 'education,' political participation in state-sanctioned institutions and access to administrative bureaucracy and state officials became an essential to resisting their conditions of marginality and to appropriating new opportunities for the continual social production of their community.

All the senior Dhimal activists whom I know and interviewed were born between the 1950s and 1960s. They confronted radically different socio-economic and political environments than did their grandparents. These senior Dhimal activists understand their political agency and their embodiment of a sense of responsibility toward their community in

terms of their social biographies of belonging in these historical periods. When these senior Dhimal activists were growing up, their shared experiences of marginality, the loss of land and culture in particular, cemented their realization that the responsibility to collectively act for their jāti had “fallen on their shoulder,” as they put it to me. Their collective understanding of temporal urgency, and their felt social responsibility for collective action is well captured by Babai when he explained why he and other Dhimal in the late 1960s become involved in activism. He told me:

When Panchayat came and opened the forest after the malaria eradication, people from all over came here. Then our land began to vanish away. More and more Dhimal became landless. Our culture was changing; people were taking cultural practices of other groups who settled here. Our society was facing economic and cultural crisis. Our festivals, wedding and ritual were becoming expensive. Dhimal were weakened politically, economically and culturally.

Our purkhā knew many things. Many of them also became *Pradhan Pancha* but they did not know how to deal with the CDO (Chief district officer) and *Anchalādhis*, the administrative head of the zone.¹⁰⁴ They did not have access to *sarkar* (the state, and also the king). In the early 1970s, when we were youth, we were also a little bit *padhe lekheko* (literate, educated). Then we youths used to meet and say, “Oh, our land is almost gone now. Our language and our culture are about to be vanished. The responsibility has fallen upon on shoulders. We must do something for our *samaj* (society).” At that time, we were also caught up by the wave of the communist movement that had come in Morang and Jhapa, (laughter) [Interview with Babai, April 9, 2008].

The passage cited above shows that the experience of loss, particularly the loss of land and culture, permeates Babai’s recital of the political-economic and social challenges his predecessors and the people of his generation had faced after the 1950s. As the results of demographic shifts toward an increasing multi-ethnic sociality, the arrival of dominant other groups in their villages, and the state’s embracing of a monolithic national culture in all spheres

¹⁰⁴ After the advent of Panchayat regime, Nepal was divided into 14 zones (*Anchāl*), 75 districts (*jilā*) 5 development regions (*bikās chetrā*). Each district was divided into many Panchayat- the village level elected governing unit for development, hence it was called Panchayat Bikas Committee (Panchayat Development Committee).

of national life after 1960s, Dhimal had to mediate the challenges of continuing their customary ways of life while adjusting to the new pressures of Hinduization and modernization (see Regmi, 1985; 1991). As Babai's reflections show, Dhimal youths were also becoming assertive about the increasing Hinduization of their cultural ways of life at that period (see Regmi, 1985: 192). They were worried that the conditions of political and economic marginality might cause Dhimal ethnic identity and culture to vanish away in the same way that many of their ancestral land holdings had disappeared after the 1950s. Hence their sense of ādivāsi identity and shared experiences of marginality had made them conscious of their responsibility to act collectively for their jāti

Babai acknowledges the efforts that his predecessors made in order to subvert their emerging conditions of marginality. But he also points out that the political agency of Dhimal ancestors was limited because of structural constraints imposed by the power relations between Dhimal and the dominant group vis-à-vis the new forms of bureaucratic and governing power of the exclusionary centralized state. Dhimal had no access to nor control over these new power structures, even though many of them had become politically active at the village level. It indicates that activists like Babai understand, drawing on their own lived experiences, that political agency is always limited and people mediate within the political options and resources available to them in order to act on the world in the specific historical-political conditions (Marx, 1852). His understanding of the constrained nature of political agency becomes apparent when Babai infers how access to 'education,' an entitlement that his parents and grandparents were deprived of, and then the emerging oppositional leftist politics opened up new possibilities for him and other Dhimal during the early 1970s in order to collectively work for the empowerment of their jāti.

But it was their shared experiences of loss of land and culture which ignited the realization of these Dhimal youths of the 1970s that the social responsibility of “doing something” for their *samaj* (community, society) had now had fallen from their predecessors to their own shoulders. I argue that Babai’s statement “Oh, our land is now gone. Our language and our culture are about to be vanished. The responsibility has fallen upon on our shoulders” clearly illustrates how they as youths perceived the collective need to respond to their conditions of marginality as an embodied responsibility, not a free choice, the weight of which they felt on their shoulders. Thus this social responsibility became a moral duty that the youths were required to carry on both by continuing the efforts of their predecessors and also by making new subversive efforts for their collective empowerment.

Similarly, for Dhimal, the land reform of 1964 epitomizes the most devastating state intervention the force of which, as one elder commented, had severely “torn apart” the Dhimal community.

The Land Reform And The Tarai Ādivāsi

Land reform had been a major political agenda since the late 1940s during the formative period of Nepal’s two leading political parties, the Nepali Congress, a liberal democrat party, and the Nepal Communist Party (Gaige, 1975). After 1950, a series of legislative measures was initiated in order to reform the existing unequal land tenurial relations, and ensure the property rights of the tenants (Regmi 1976: 176-191), though without any consideration for collective and customary land rights of the indigenous communities (Caplan, 1970). Of all these efforts, the land reform of 1964 was the most important legislation; it imposed a ceiling on landholding size and abolished the jimindary system; it promised to redistribute land to the landless and advocated

lessening the burden of peasants' indebtedness by lowering interest rates and institutionalizing a compulsory saving scheme at the village level (Zaman, 1973: 12).¹⁰⁵ Here my concerns are not with the history, the overall impact, or the failures of the land reform program of 1964 (see Zaman, 1973), but specifically with how Dhimal experienced the land reform of 1964, and what it meant for them.¹⁰⁶

The land reform was completely insensitive to the preexisting land tenurial relations in Dhimal and the moral economy of reciprocity and redistribution supported by these relations of production; most importantly it failed to understand the ways in land was more than a commodity or an 'economic' property but an integral and generative part of Dhimal culture and history (see Chapters 2 and 5). The land reform had devastating impacts for Tarai ādivāsi (see Guneratne, 2002; Gaige, 1975); all Dhimal irrespective of the size of their landholding were affected.

In the previous chapter, I discussed why many Dhimal in the past, before 1950, had preferred not to own land as tax-paying tenant landholders of the state. Instead they had established tenurial relationships with the village Majhi which had ensured a reciprocal relation of agriculture production and resource distribution among themselves. When the ceiling of 25

¹⁰⁵ The land reform of 1964 was implemented as a major political project of the Panchayat regime after the king Mahendra came into power through a military coup. Federick Gaige (1975) has pointed out that Nepal's land reform of 1964 was equally caught up in the geo-political relations of Nepal with the larger world. The Indian government opposed the land reform for the potential dispossessions "the Tarai plain people who owned 50% of the rich Tarai land." Where as the US government made it clear that Nepal's chance of receiving foreign aid and assistance would depend on the implementation of the land reform. The US had worried that the communist insurgency would escalate in Nepal without reforming the disparity of land ownership (see Gaige, 1975: 172-178).

¹⁰⁶ The land reform of 1964 aimed to " (a) impose a ceiling on land ownership, acquire land in excess of the ceiling and allot such land to others; (b) abolish jimindary (local landlord as tax collector) system; (c) give security to tenant-farmers, and to regulate the rent payable by them, and (d) to collect savings compulsorily, intercept outstanding loans and make institutional arrangements for credit operations" (Zaman, 1973: 12). Landholding ceilings were fixed at 16.4 hectares (25 *bigah*), 2.7 hectares and 4.1 hectares per family for the Tarai and inner Tarai, the Kathmandu valley, and the hill and other regions respectively. A family was defined as husband and wife, their sons *below* 16 and unmarried daughters under 35 (Zaman, 1973: 12, Ft. 1).

bigah of land holding per one family in the Tarai was imposed by the state in 1964, many of Dhimal village Majhi and landholding families lost their ‘excess’ lands. This dispossession of Dhimal Majhi and landowning families also impacted the existing redistributive economy on which many villagers had become interdependent. The situation further deteriorated when the intervening state failed to provide any alternate forms of redistributive economy and supports.¹⁰⁷ Many of these tenant families did not receive their tenancy rights nor did they get land from the state. Those who received lands from the state in other areas eventually became landless by selling or mortgaging the land for subsistence.

On the top of their devastating experiences of dispossession produced by land reform, what seems to have angered Dhimal the most was the ways in which the actual implementation of the land reform produced differential impacts for caste and ethnic groups based on their relative control over and access to political power. In contrast to their own experiences, Dhimal saw how the big land-owning families belonging to the hill “high” caste groups did not lose land, and it was the people from the hill who disproportionately benefitted from state redistribution of the land (see Gaige, 1975: 175-197). While these land-holding groups from the dominant social groups consolidated their economic and political power even after land reform, Dhimal village landlords, whose excess land was taken away by the state, progressively joined the class of proletariats. Hence what happened to their village landlords after the land reform clearly signaled to Dhimal that even with their landholding, and hence economic power, rich Dhimal

¹⁰⁷ For example the land reform had introduced new practices of ‘compulsory saving’ program in 1965 in which “every farmer was required to deposit a small percentage of his crops with the government each year, and the capital required in this way would be loaned back to villagers” (Gaige, 1975: 175). There were widespread resentments against this scheme, which the villagers saw as another form of state taxation (ibid). The villagers were required to manage such compulsory saving groups. Dhimal mentioned me that such state schemes required new knowledge and skill such as accounting, auditing and technicality of the group management. They only felt it as an imposed burden, incompatible to their ways of life. Such saving scheme did not replace the role of village money lender who would still charge, for instance forty kilograms of paddy per year as interest to one hundred rupee borrowed by people.

were as vulnerable to political and economic marginality as any other Dhimal due to their lack of control over and access to the state power bureaucracy, and political alliances with the dominant groups. For instance, when I asked Babai why he became a leftist political activist (communist) in the early 1970s, he told me:

When the Panchayat came, what did the Chhetri-Bahun [the hill “high” caste people] do? They brought this land reform, and they said it was a ‘revolutionary land reform.’ But for whom? They said they would take away the excess land people hold and give it to the landless or to those who have few landholdings. How did they do it? No landlords from their community (Chhetri-Bahun) lost their extra land holdings. They are the clever people; they have connections with the palace, Kathmandu, administration-bureaucracy, police, military, and what not. So some of them registered their lands under industry, tea garden, factory, and so on.¹⁰⁸

Those Dhimal who had more than 25 bigah of land, they could not do like this. They did not know people in power. They were innocent and did not lie.¹⁰⁹ Their excess lands were taken away, and they also gradually became landless later. And many of the tenant Dhimal, who were supposed to get land from the state, did not receive any land. Those who received land from the state eventually became landless when they had to sell land to subsist, and meet their expenses such as the education of their children, marriage, etc. [*Babai provides a detail and long explanations of how Dhimal further became landless and marginalized*] ...It was not the Panchayat per se, not even the feudalism, but it was the *Bahunbad* (Brahmanism, the high caste dominance and its institutionalized forms in the state) that affected us the most.¹¹⁰

Did you understand Janak bhai? We, Dhimal, are the *ādivāsi bhumiputrā* (descendants of the earth/soil) of this area, but we became the first *sukumbāsi* (landless squatters), the first proletariat. Then, what could we have become if not the communists? *Tyasaile hami communist ma lāgēko*- therefore we became (in the sense of “to clinch to, to attach to” or embody) communist (Interview with Babai, April 9, 2008).

¹⁰⁸ With this statement, Babai is referring to the provision in the land reform that allowed people to register their excess landholding as ‘commercial or industrial lands.’ But only people with capital and power, hence the dominant group could take advantage of such provisions.

¹⁰⁹ Such self-perceptions of *ādivāsi* as candid and innocence people are common in Nepal and South Asia (need to cite). Beside the fact that it was how Babai and other many Dhimal think of themselves and their ancestors, my intentions is not to privilege these perceptions. But I do believe that as historically constituted ideas; these perceptions, like the colonial category of “primitive,” also make visible the power relations that shape the social and political life of these categories. See Deloria (2004) on how unequal relations of power produce and sustain social stereotypes.

¹¹⁰ In Nepal, the idea of ‘Bahunbad’ was first introduced by anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista (1992) and later popularized by indigenous and Dalit activists. See Bhattachan, 2003, 2005; Kamata, 1992; Malla, 1992. For critique of the concept of “Bahunbad,” see Pahari, 1992).

Thus Babai clearly states that the land reform disproportionately dispossessed Dhimal community while the traditional dominant groups were able to use it for their benefit. I argue that Babai's critiques of the land reform program as an expansion of the "high" caste domination should not be seen as his expression of hatred against the hill groups. It needs to be understood as his critique of the exclusionary state practices and the political economy of power relations which continually perpetuated the historically produced structural relations of domination and subjugation based on caste, ethnicity and regional affiliations. By the late 1960s, the hill groups, the "high" caste groups in particular had outnumbered the other groups demographically, and they had also become the dominant social groups in Dhimal ancestral territories.¹¹¹ The ideologies of caste hierarchy continued to shape the social relations between Dhimal and the hill Hindu groups (see Regmi, 1985). Their control of the economic and political power, both at the national and the local level, enabled the hill "high" caste groups to appropriate lands from Dhimal through sale, mortgage, and by "unfair means."¹¹² As R. K. Regmi (1985: 193) succinctly observed that "the friendship between the Brahmins and Dhimals were based on the relationships between the tax collector and the tax-payer ties at the best, and creditor-debtor relationships at the worst," the relationships between Dhimal and their hill "high" caste neighbors were less egalitarian and respectful. The land reform only poured more salt on this wounded social relationship between the two groups.

The land reform once again validated for Dhimals that their collective subordination as a Dhimal jāti mattered more politically in relation to the state and the other social groups. In other

¹¹¹ For instance, one study conducted in Budhbare village Panchayat of Jhapa in 1973 found that out of the total 1844 household, 60% belonged to three groups: Brahmin, Chhetri and Newars. And of all the owner cultivators of the land 70% were Brahmins and only 7% were the "natives" population- Dhimal and Rajhbansi (Sainju, Shrestha and Shah, 1973: part II, p: 1).

¹¹² Many Dhimal would keep telling me stories about how they were "cheated" by their Bahun-Chhetri neighbors. Also see Caplan (1972), Guneratne (2002).

words, their experiences of land reform and their increasing loss of land to the hill immigrants after 1950s strengthened Dhimal's conviction that despite the change in regime, the state is at best under the spell of the political power of the hill "high" caste groups, and it exists only to benefit these dominant groups, not them. Dhimal also experienced land reform as a state-sanctioned political weapon, which the dominant "high" caste hill groups used, to borrow Harvey' (2009) concept of "accumulation by dispossession," to accumulate political and economic power at the expense of the Tarai adivasi. Thus it is important to emphasize here that like the Limbus (Caplan, 1975) of the hill, and the Tharu of the lowlands (Guneratne, 2002), the "shared experience of losing land" is central to Dhimal sense of ethnic identity and their ethnic and political mobilization after the 1950s

Leftist Political Movements And Ethnic Activism (1970s-1980s)

By the 1970s, Dhimals' political and economic marginality had manifested itself in further landlessness, land mortgage through indebtedness, and the weakening of their customary social institutions of the Majhi system (Dahal, 1979).¹¹³ The oppositional politics that intensified after the rise of the party-less Panchayat system in the 1960s offered an important space for Dhimal to resist their political marginality. After the 1960s, Morang and Jhapa districts had become strongholds of communist mobilization against the Panchayat regime and the feudal relations production that had continued in the Tarai despite the land reform of 1964. The failure of land reform of 1964, the pauperization of the peasantry, the periodic peasant uprisings in the Tarai (Mishra, B. 2001; Gaige, 1975; Thapa, 1996), the expanding underground

¹¹³ According to Dahal (1979: 24), 24 % of the Dhimal households were landless and there were very few households with large landholding in his study area. It shows that within two decades of land reform, landlessness had become a major a problem among Dhimal.

communist organizing in the villages of Jhapa and Morang, and the resurgence of the violent peasant insurgency, popularly called the *Naxalite* movement (Singh, 1995) in the bordering areas of India, had stirred new political consciousness for Dhimal, particularly the newly educated youths at the end of the 1960s.

Even though the leftist movements at that time had not addressed the issues of domination and oppression based on caste and ethnic identities, the communist agenda of ‘land rights,’ ‘lands to the tiller,’ and ‘liberation of oppressed class’ (see Mishra, B. 2001) resonated well with Dhimal; they found a common ground between leftist political ideologies and their state of marginality, particularly their shared experiences of loss of land and proletarianization. Moreover, the communist leaders and activists, who had to be underground during the period, sought shelter in Dhimal villages and held interactions with Dhimal youths in particular. Institutions of higher education were the major centers of Nepal’s oppositional politics during the Panchayat regime, and it was where many Dhimal students became involved in student-led political mobilizations. At that period, Dada and other Dhimal youths joined or supported the underground leftist movements. Some of them also become involved in the first post-1950 armed communist insurgency movement, popularly called the *Jhapa Insurgency* of the 1970s.

Dhimal’s participation and support for the leftist political movements during this period did not stem only from the narrow Marxist ideas of class based on economic criteria or relative position in the relationships of production. As Babai explained, they understood it was the domination of the hill “high” caste group in the state power, the merging of caste and class in the hegemonic production of the political-economic relationships of exclusion and resource control which transformed Dhimal, irrespective of the size of their family landholdings, into an oppressed class. To paraphrase Babai’s question, what else could they have become then (in the

early 1970s) if not communists, when the ādivāsi community had become the first *sukumbāsi* (landless squatters) in their own ancestral place? It explains that for Dhimals, their political participation in the leftist movement was especially motivated by their need to place themselves back in their lands again. Being *sukumbāsi* (landless squatters) was about being dispossessed not only from their means of economic livelihood but also from the inalienable relationship with their ancestral place (Caplan, 1970), which is indispensable for Dhimal's collective ability to socially create themselves as a community with its distinct cultural ways of life and history. The centrality of the claim of indigenous identity and the collective experiences of loss they had encountered as an ādivāsi, not simply as a generic poor peasant, helps us to understand why Babai and other Dhimal frame the history of their involvement in leftist politics as part of their ethnic activism.

Dhimal participation in the leftist movements during the 1970s and 1980s did not directly contribute to advancing their ethnic organizing nor did it help them counter the conditions of Dhimals' landlessness. However, it certainly helped them to radicalize their political assertiveness and to challenge the everyday forms of cultural and political dominance of the other social groups in their villages. In the early 1980s, the anthropologist R. K. Regmi (1985: 129-130) observed that:

The author had evidence that many young Dhimal aligning with the Marxist group... In the general election on 1981 (for the Panchayat parliamentary system) many youth Dhimal youths canvassed for the Dhimal candidate, who contested and won from Morang constituency. There are Dhimals, as well as Rajbhansi and Tharus (both are the Tarai indigenous groups) who have helped this Dhimal member to be elected.

Furthermore, he also writes:

“the young educated Dhimals are not ‘Sanskritization’ in the same sense that old Dhimals are doing...¹¹⁴ The conscious educated revolutionary youth of Dhimal society neither see

¹¹⁴ The concept of “Sanskritization” was developed by the noted Indian social anthropologist M.N. Srinivas to describe the social processes by which a “low caste” and other non-Hindu groups adopt the cultural ways of life and

themselves within the caste hierarchy nor unlike their elders find any religious meanings in Hindu religious practices” (Regmi, 1991: 145)

Hence R. K. Regmi’s observations tell us that the “educated and revolutionary” Dhimal youths of the early 1980s were rejecting the caste hierarchy and Hinduization of their social and cultural practices, and forming an inter-ethnic political solidarity to elect the Dhimal candidate to represent their concerns at the national level so that their voices could be heard (see Regmi, 1985: 129-131). Similarly, in his study of Dhimal undertaken in the late 1970s, Dahal (1979: 120) succinctly captured Dhimal’s mistrust of the Nepali state and their feeling of ethnic solidarity. He writes: “Dhimal still thinks the state to be rigid and authoritarian” and “they have cultivated the feeling that they should not let other groups win the election in their own place.” He asked one 70 years old Dhimal woman why she did not go to vote when her own son was the candidate in the village Panchayat election. She told him: “Why wouldn’t I go to vote for my own son? I am too old. I cannot even walk with the help of a stick. I cannot travel by bus; the crowd (in the bus) would kill me. What to do? Everywhere the hill people dominate” (Dahal, 1979: 120). It shows that Dhimal were very vocal about their marginality and domination by the hill people in every sphere of society, including the crowding of a public bus. However the existing political regime was too powerful to allow for a community mobilization based on claim of ethnic identity and rights. Similarly, it was not possible for the Dhimal youths involved in the leftist political movements to organize Dhimal as a community solely on their Marxist inspired political ideologies alone.

A middle ground option they sought was to appropriate the dominant state-led discourses and practices of *bikās* under the seemingly non-political idea of *jāti bikās* (ethnic improvement)

values of the “high” caste Hindu groups (Brahminic values and ways of life) (see Srinivas, 1956). The concept has widely been used in earlier ethnographic studies (1950s-1980s) in Nepal in the study of the Hindu-tribal relationship and social-cultural change (Jones, 1976; Sharma, 1977).

to advance the processes of ethnic organizing as a community.¹¹⁵ The Nepali state and its rulers had aggressively promoted *bikās* as an inherently non-political nation-building practice such that to do ‘politics’ in *bikās* or to use *bikās* for political goals was deemed morally wrong and anti-nationalist act. Therefore, for Dhimal, organizing their community through *jāti bikās* would make their ethnic mobilization less suspicious to the state and others. Furthermore, it also had the advantage of accommodating people from different backgrounds, particularly those with access with the state power, in community organizing. The story of Mr. Naya Dhimal, a seventy three year old farmer from Karikoshi village of Morang illustrated how Dhimal elders and educated Dhimal youths appropriated state resources for ethnic organizing during the 1980s.

Appropriating The State For Ethnic Activism

Remembering his meeting with the king Mahendra (1955-1972) in 1970/1971, Mr. Naya Dhimal told me, “when I came out of the room and walked outside, I realized that my whole body was soaked with sweat as if someone had poured one *ghailā* (earthen water pot) full of water on me. I have never seen and met the king before! Even my trouser was wet as if I had urinated in it.” The meeting between the king, Nepal’s most powerful person at that period, the self-proclaimed incarnation of the Hindu deity Vishnu, and an ‘ordinary’ farmer from a peripheral village of Morang, perhaps explains why Naya Dhimal’s body was soaked with

¹¹⁵ The idea of *jāti bikās*, though it reiterates the notion that Dhimal are “backward,” hence “undeveloped” community, people can also transform their sense of “backwardness” into political subjectivities and mobilize their community in order to subvert their state of marginality (see Guneratne 1998, 2001; Fujikura, 2004).

sweat.¹¹⁶ “I was damned nervous as the king asked his secretary to note down many of things that I said. I thought I was in trouble,” he recalled bursting into a loud laughter.

The narrator of this story is a seventy-three year old farmer from Karikoshi village, who comes from a Manjhi (village head) family and whose family was politically influential in the past.¹¹⁷ Naya Dhimal had not attended any school nor had he held any position in the village level governing bodies, but because of the economic and political status of his family, he had more “time, resources, and social standing in the society to be persuasive” (Guneratne, 2005: 125) in order to work for the community’s welfare and social change. However his motivation to “work for the Dhimal jāti,” as he always used to say to me, derived more from the experience of humiliating encounters he had with dominant groups, particularly the state officials, and from his realization that lack of education had accelerated Dhimal loss of land and deepened their political marginality.

Upon hearing that the king was to visit Dhankuta, the regional headquarters in the eastern hill located to the west of Karikoshi, Naya Dhimal traveled there in order to, as he said to me, “put down Dhimal’s concerns” to the king. After six days of waiting, when he finally met the king, he requested that the head of the state provide free scholarships for school and college level

¹¹⁶ During the Panchayat regime (1960-1990) in which the sovereignty of the nation was vested in the king, these royal public audiences or *dharshan bhet* used to be important performative events in which public could ‘talk’ to the king in person and express their concerns or demands, thereby acknowledging the king’s sovereign authority as well as their own subordinated positions as subjects. See Bista, 1998

¹¹⁷ His elder brother, the village Manjhi, a local tax collector before 1950) and also served as the Padhan Pancha, the head of the locally elected village council, for many years during the Panchayat system (1960-1990). Hence Naya Dhimal and his family have a long experience of dealing frequently with the state and its officials before and after 1950s. However I would not characterize him as the “Dhimal elite” (cf. Arjun Guneratne, 2002). During my fieldwork period, of which I spent more than five months in Karikoshi village, none of the villagers indicated that he was an “elite” detached from the rest of others. In contrast, he was, like other village elders, well respected and embedded in the village social relationships.

education for Dhimal, and a ‘weaving and tailoring’ training program for Dhimal women.¹¹⁸ On my asking if he remembered what he said to the king, he reflected:

It’s been so many years. I don’t remember all of what I said. But I said something like this. *Sarkar* (the king, state)! We Dhimal used to own *jagga-jamin* (land), shelter, and cattle. We used to have all these. We used to protect *ban-jungal* (forest). We have not indulged in any kind of *jhoda padhani*.¹¹⁹ But when the land reform was implemented, it completely messed us up, sarkar [*Yasle hamilai lathaa lithinga banayo sakrar!*]. People from 14 zones and 75 districts came to our place. Now we have become *bhumihin* (landless), sarkar. Now, we need education, and Dhimal jāti should get higher education. We need free education from grade one to grade ten (high school), and in the college level as well. Our kids need education. Our youths need education. Unless our society become educated, we cannot reach to the same level as other groups, sarkar (Interview with N. Dhimal, April 5, 2008)

What I find insightful in the passage cited here is that it powerfully resonates with the emphasis by Babai and other Dhimal on the shared experience of loss of land that defines Dhimal’s sense of marginality and their critiques of social changes resulting from state-imposed policies and programs such as the land reform (see also Guneratne, 2002: 138-140). The fact that it was the king Mahendra who had implemented the land reform and settlement programs in the 1960s makes this conversation further insightful, because it illustrates how subaltern subjects can enact subtle yet subversive politics by appropriating the dominant relations of power. By telling the king to his face that Dhimal, who used to own land and protect the forest in the past, had become completely “messed up” and landless after the land reform program, Naya Dhimal

¹¹⁸ The scholarship was meant for Dhimal men and women, the girl child in the school in particular. According to him he requested ‘weaving and tailoring’ with a hope that the training and introduction of the modern loom would enhance Dhimal women’s traditional weaving skill into an income generating means. However, his emphasis on ‘weaving’ training also signals the dominant development ideologies of the 1970s- ‘Women in Development’ which emphasized on modernizing women’s traditional skill for their development.

¹¹⁹ Illegal clearing of forest for cropland or for settlement; People mentioned to me that *Jhoda Padhani* had become a widespread practice in Morang and Jhapa during this period.

politely critiqued the state and held the king morally responsible for dismantling the inalienable relationship between *bhonai* (land) and Dhimal culture.¹²⁰

Yet despite his critique of the land reform and how it adversely affected them, Naya Dhimal, instead of demanding ‘rights to land,’ asked the king for scholarships and weaving training. These demands such as ‘education’ and ‘vocational training’ resonate well with the dominant discourses of *bikās* and modernity that the state had fervently promoted during this period.¹²¹ Naya Dhimal did not demand scholarships for Dhimal simply to make his community educated, hence ‘modern’ (cf. Ahearn, 2001). His realization of the empowering force of education equally derived from his lived experiences of mistreatment and discrimination he and other Dhimal faced from “educated” people, particularly the state officials in the district headquarter and administrative offices. This becomes evident in his reflections:

Too much of domineering to us! No matter which offices I used to go, they (the hill “high caste Hindus) were the ones who were sitting in the chair. Not a single Dhimal or Madhesi (people of the Tarai origin). And they treated us like we were nothing. *Ke garne, harmo pada lekheko manche thiyena* [What to do? We did not have people who could read and write (educated)]. They were everywhere!

At that time, Naya Dhimal believed ‘education’ was even more important because the power of writing and reading which the dominant group held and the state power that such ‘educated’ people controlled was instrumental in dispossessing Dhimal even when they had ‘plenty of land’ in the past. Naya Dhimal’s belief in education as an empowering force was shared by other Dhimal, as well as by other indigenous community such as Tharu (Guneratne, 2002). In his study of the history of ethnic identity formation and ethnic politics among the Tharu, the largest indigenous group from Tarai, Arjun Guneratne (2002: 139) also describes how

¹²⁰ See my discussion on Chapter 2 on Dhimal’s notions of land.

¹²¹ The issue of ‘indigenous land rights’ was certainly not the language of the state that the king would understand or prefer to hear at his royal audience.

Tharu blamed their “lack of education for the ease with which they were exploited” and thus they focused on the promotion of education through their ethnic organization. Many Dhimal reiterated their conviction to me that their lack of education was one of the reasons that Dhimal lost lands through unfair means in the courts or in the district administrative officers. They also cited their lack of education as one of the fundamental factors that had “lagged them behind” other groups politically and economically. Hence, for these senior Dhimal such as Naya, ‘education’ symbolizes a collective hope for moving their community forward, an essential means for challenging their political marginality.

I differ with Guneratne’s understanding that emphasizing education in the Tharu community in the early 1950s was part of “the concerns of a modernizing elite” (2002: 142). Instead I argue that Naya Dhimal, despite being from a landed family, was equally motivated by his sense of responsibility and duty, hence his understanding of himself as working for the collective good of his community. He was instrumental in motivating and mobilizing the present-day senior Dhimal activists to form ‘jāti sānsthā’ (ethnic organization) in the early 1980s. In 1973, Naya Dhimal sent another petition to the office of the Prime Minister requesting ‘leadership development training’ for Dhimal youths so that they could constructively, to use his words, “contribute in the nation’s development and for the welfare of their own society.” His petition was heard, and a total of forty-six youths from Jhapa and Morang were provided three months long residential training on ‘leadership development’ at the Panchayat Training Center in Jhapa in 1973 (Dhimal, S. et. al. 2010: 32-33).

This training event is important for Dhimal history of ethnic organizing for several reasons. First, all of the present-day senior Dhimal activists, including the founding members of the Kendra, were participants at this government sponsored training program. This suggests, and

the senior activists also acknowledged to me, that the training program provided them knowledge and skills in ‘community organizing’ which they later used to advance their ethnic organization in Dhimal community. The Panchayat Training Center, a government institution as its name suggests, was supposed to impart not only “modern” skill and knowledge deemed necessary for social change or *bikās* but also to produce loyal subjects for the state, the Panchayat regime in particular. Interestingly, many of the participating Dhimal youths such as Babai were already involved in leftist political movements, and some of them participated in the training program in order to avoid their arrest by the police. For these leftist Dhimal youths, it was not possible to formally organize Dhimal community on party ideologies nor even on ethnic issues. Hence, the training provided them the much-needed skills, knowledge, and most importantly the government’s approval to form organization along the ideals of ‘*jāti bikās*.’

Throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, along with their leftist political activism, the educated and other politically active youths collaborated with village elders including former landlords such as Naya Dhimal, many of whom had themselves become landless or nearly landless by that time, to collectivize Dhimal’ distinct cultural identity through community organizing. They used all available state resources as well as their zeal for leftist politics to advance collective efforts of community organizing under the banner of *jāti bikās* by appropriating the dominant state discourses of development and modernization. After the training, there was a series of efforts to form ‘community development’ organizations which combined development ideologies of *jāti bikās* such as education, particularly girl’s education, and income generating skills with cultural reforms such as de-Hinduization, lowering ritual and marriage expenses, and cultural “preservation” in terms of continuity of Dhimal language, religion and customary practices. These efforts at community organizing solidified into the

present-day Dhimal Jati Bikas Kendra in the early 1990s, retaining the idea of ‘jāti bikās’ in its name.

The history of Dhimal’s ethnic mobilization from the early 1950s to the late 1980s that I have discussed in this section highlights how Dhimal collective experiences of landlessness, economic-political marginality and cultural loss, and the caste-ethnic based domination and exclusion shaped their understanding of their political subjectivity as an oppressed ādivāsi community. These historical conditionings of the social worlds these senior Dhimal activists inhabited and confronted as educated and political conscious youths had stirred in them a strong and deeply embodied sense of social responsibility to act for their community. In the next section, by way of conclusion, I will elaborate the ways in which these activists explained their involvement in the activism as an embodied social practice they pursued out of their moral duty by following the path their predecessors had initiated for subsequent generations.

‘I’ve Been Walking And Walking Into It’: Activism As Embodied Social Actions

At the end of an interview, Babai expressed his confidence and a sense of satisfaction that his continuous involvement in organizing the Dhimal community in the last four decades has not been in vain. He told me:

There are few of us who have been continuously *lāgēko and lāgēko* (read, involved and involved) to establish our *jāti sansthā* [ethnic organization] since the early days. Till now, there is not a single year that I have not been involved in our *jāti sansthā*. Since 1970, I have been *walking* by saying ‘Dhimal’ and ‘Dhimal’ (involved as Dhimal, and for Dhimal). Now we have reached here, yet I am still *walking* and *walking*. Now we have our own ethnic organization that has reached to all Dhimal villages. I am confident this organization will continue even after us. It will not stop now (Interview with Babai April 9, 2008)

Notice that throughout their retelling Babai and Dada's narratives of why they became involved in activism, they used words like "lāgnu" and "hidnu" (to walk). Similarly, Naya Dhimal, who is older than Babai and Dada, also used the notion of *lāgnu* to express his dedicated involvement as a member of and for the Dhimal jāti. He told me:

I have always thought about Dhimal jāti. I become involved [*lāgē*]...After the training, we opened a library here in the village. My duty was to show these youths a *bāto* or a path or road. I was the *guru* (the teacher, the leader) who showed these youths the *bāto* to form our jāti sānsthā . I am still in it, still *lāgēko chhu* (I'm still clinched to it)" (Interview with N. Dhimal, April 5, 2008)

I argue their uses of the words such as *lāgnu* and *hidnu* succinctly convey that they consider activism as an enactment of their embodied social responsibility and moral political actions. Recall the historical circumstances of Dhimals' shared and lived experiences of political, economic and cultural subordination, the loss of land and culture in particular, in which these activists grew up and felt the weight of the responsibility of "doing something" for the community that had fallen on their shoulders. So these words also help us to discern activists' understanding of political agency, their "culturally constrained capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001: 53-64) in specific historical-political conditions that shaped their sense of temporal urgency and their understanding of themselves as agentive social actors with moral responsibility toward their community. Illustrations of the ways in which *lāgnu* and *hidnu* are used in other contexts will further clarify their significance in the narratives of Dhimal activists.

The standard English translation of *lāgnu* from Turner's *Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language* (1931) includes: to be attached to, cling to; persevere. Matthews defines it in his *A Course in Nepali* (Routledge, 1998) as: to be attached, to seem, to happen, to begin to. While these understandings capture some of the senses of this Nepali word, their inability to capture the full richness of its Nepali meanings is shown when we consider

some of the common contexts in which it is used. For example, *rakshi lāgnu* (to be drunk), *bokshi lāgnu* (to be bewitched), *krishtin dharmama lāgnu* (to become Christian), *kaamma lāgnu* (to be immersed in work). One could go on, but the point is that the element of existential states, of being and identity, are not fully captured by the usual English glosses. What gets lost, in part, is the quality of embodiment, the joining of what is separate. According to the anthropologist Tom Fricke (2013), who has studied the Tamang people of Nepal, a people who share a similar notion of personhood and self with the Dhimal:

“the Middle English use of “one” as a verb to connote a joining, fusing, or unifying that bears many of the same senses as *laagnu*. The OED reports that this use as a verb became obsolete in the later 15th or early 16th century and only reappeared in a conscious revival during the 19th century in theological contexts. Like *laagnu*, *oneing* is inadequately translated by contemporary English words. Kerrie Hide points out that its use in the writings of Julian of Norwich, for example, brings up metaphors of knitting together and the sharing of substance (in Julian’s case, sharing of substance with deity)...This gets us a little closer to the sense of *laagnu* for Nepalis. There is a union that transforms the person. A part of that transformation is embodiment and what may be embodied has to do with virtue and moral practice (McHugh 2001) (Fricke, email correspondence, March 15, 2013).¹²²

Hence when Babai and Dada emphasize their ongoing involvement as *lāgnu* or *lāgēko* and *lāgēko*, they are emphasizing both the duration of their involvement in activism and the nature of their activism as embodied social action, which for them began with a felt sense of duty and responsibility, and which over time has become part of their selves, inseparable from the textures of their lived everyday life and biographies -- hence a *nashā* as Babai used to describe activism is a state or condition of being-in-the world as if possessed or completely immersed. Their use of the idea of “walking” further illustrates the embodied and moral nature of activism.

¹²² “Julian’s concept of *oneing* is virtually untranslatable. To be *oned* in Middle English means to be one, united, joined, blended or fused. Yet none of these words conveys the sense of this primordial interpenetration of the divine and the human that preserves difference in identity.... There is something mystical and indefinable about the union that *oneing* conveys....” (Hide, 2001: 53).

As becomes evident in the concluding passage of my interview with Babai, the physical presence of the Kendra and its organized activities across Dhimal villages evokes a sense of achievement for activists such as Babai and Dada who had been “walking,” as they call it, on the path of community organizing for the last four decades. The Kendra also embodies Dhimal history of ethnic activism, and this particular history is an indivisible part of the life histories of Dhimal activists like Babai, Dada, Naya and many others who had labored hard to establish and expand their *jāti sānsthā*. This sense of deep, historical connection is well expressed by Babai when he said, “Till now, there is not a single year that I have not been involved in our *jāti sansthā*. Since 1970, I have been *walking* by saying Dhimal and Dhimal.”

Babai’s emphasis on *walking* is not just allegorical; Babai and Dada have literally walked to all Dhimal villages, met and held discussions with people during the last three decades, in the course of organizing their community. They have physically connected with Dhimal villages, their ancestral places and other regions by means of walking. And this practice of walking is both a moral and a political practice. It is moral as their act of ‘walking’ was inspired by their felt sense of duty and responsibility and by their belief that they were following the paths their ancestors had began for Dhimal. This ‘walking’ is also a political practice as they wanted to collectivize their ethnic identity and shared experiences of marginality so that they could act as a community in order to subvert the conditions of their collective subordination. I argue that the act of collective ‘walking’ is an important political practice in Dhimal indigenous activism. For example, each year, on the first day of the Nepali New Year, they collectively walk to the recently rediscovered ancestral place at a village called Raja Rani in order to claim their historical relationship with the place (see Chapter 5); their street rallies proclaim their political rights as they ‘shut down’ the city or block the road to stop others (in their vehicles) from

walking on the street in order to make the state listen to them.

Moreover, this act of activism as ‘walking,’ which few of them chose to pursue unremittingly, was never an easy endeavor; it was fraught with many challenges -- suppression by the state, tensions within their movement, cooption by the state and the political parties, economic vulnerabilities for their families (as Dada told me) and so on. Yet, the path of activism they followed despite these challenges has now fortified a collective political movement, though many new and some old confrontations still attempt to block their path. Hence Babai and Dada’s emphasis on the actuality of ‘walking’ signifies their experiential history of the activism that they had chosen out of their sense of moral responsibility and duty towards their community.

Babai’s statement, “now we have reached here, and I am still walking and walking” suggests that he sees his involvement in activism (walking) as a journey that has taken him from the past into the present. It is important to emphasize here the generation of Dada and Babai did not begin the path of activism from nowhere; but rather they were following in the footsteps of the ancestors who had initiated this particular journey. This notion of activism as walking in the footsteps of ancestors is well captured by the Kendra’s first publication on ‘Dhimal history.’ In the book entitled, *History of Dhimal vol. 1* (2010), the activist writers describe the history of Dhimal political participation under the title “Political footsteps that our ancestors had trod in the past” (Dhimal, S. et. al. 2010: 22-30). Their use of the bodily metaphor of “footsteps” also illustrates how Dhimal activists remember their history of ethnic activism by highlighting the political agency of their ancestors. The idea of history-making as physically leaving footprints on a path for future generations to follow helps us to understand why Dhimal activists use the metaphor of ‘walking’ to describe their long and continual involvement in activism. Their use of ‘walking’ also connects their actions to those of their ancestors and makes their emphasis on

generational continuity explicit for us, as expressed by their conviction that the Kendra “will not stop now.”

The strong sense of optimism and hope that Babai’s statement “Now we have our own ethnic organization that has reached to all Dhimal villages. I am confident this organization will continue even after us. It will not stop now” vividly shows how people like Babai and Dada see the Kendra in terms of inter-generational social relations between activists and activism. Envisioning himself in the role of his ancestors, Babai’s expression of optimism that “this organization will not stop now” underlines his conviction that new generations will continue to build upon the path that they and their predecessors had begun in the past. When they said that they are still *lāgēko* and *lāgēko* in the Kendra and its activities, they underlined that they still have responsibility to show *bāto* (path, direction, road) for the new generation. This is well captured by Naya Dhimal when he claimed himself to be a *guru* or a teacher-leader with a felt duty to “show these youths *bāto* or a path or road” while he himself continued to cling (*lāgēko chhu*) to that path of activism.

I argue that by relating their activism to the actions of their predecessors and by commemorating Dhimal ancestors such as those who participated in the revolutions of the 1950s and 1970s as political actors, these activists connect their activism to the widely held and practiced cultural ethics of Dhimal social worlds in which recognition of and respect for their *warang-berang* (Dh. seniors, ancestors) constitutes one fundamental practice Dhimal morality. *Warang-berang* are Dhimal’s elemental deities whom they worship and to whom they offer rituals during their family and the village rituals (see Chapter 4 and 5). People prefix either *warang* (for male) or *berang* (for female) when referring to the village Dhimi (priest), village Majhi (head), Oja (shaman) and all other elders, which illustrates the moral values and cultural

practices that shape Dhimal understanding of ancestors. My next chapters will detail how Dhimal marriage, ritual and place-making practices are centered on the importance of their ancestors in the constitution of Dhimal society as a collective.

With regard to the focus of this chapter, I want to emphasize here that an important attribute of Dhimal ancestors is their contribution to the continuity of Dhimal as a community or a village. For instance, as I have discussed in Chapter 2, people believe that without the ritual power of Dhami they would not have survived the malarial environment in the past (Chapter 2). People also believe that agriculture, their primary source of sustenance, is impossible without performing the Shrejat ritual, for which they need both the village Manjhi and Dhami. Like their ancestors, these senior Dhimal activists are also contributing to the continuity of the Dhimal community by means of their indigenous activism in particular. More than a functionalist explanation, these are lived practices that define Dhimal's sense of self and its embedded relations to a shared collective. When this cultural ethos becomes part of their indigenous activism, even non-activists in the community can equally identify with the movement agenda and its discourses. Stories of ancestors like Sikaru and Nar Bahadur Dhimal can move Dhimal politically as well as emotionally and not simply because a gifted orator like Babai speaks about them during an election campaign. People identify with these stories and they relate them to their own experiences of the present as exemplified by the case of Mr. Bhisma Dhimal. Thus by reconnecting with ancestors and constituting themselves as *warang-berang*, these senior Dhimal activists also enact a compelling cultural politics of their moral authority and their social legitimacy as community leaders. In the next two chapters, I will discuss how different activists derive their moral authority in their activism, and mediate their differences through cultural politics.

Chapter Five

‘Our Wedding Should Look More Dhimali’: Politics Of Cultural Reforms

A Wedding Amidst ‘Cold’ Social Relationships

One evening in July 2008, *Dai* (Nep. elder brother) from my host Dhimal family called, to my great joy, asking me to attend and observe a wedding in the village. An invitation to a wedding! I thought this was an important rite of passage, if not a moment of triumph, for my fieldwork. I had met Dai in one of the village meetings that I had attended in early 2008. On knowing that I was desperately looking for a family to live with and do my work in a Dhimal village, he generously asked me to stay with his family in Karikoshi village of Morang. Two days later, I was in Karikoshi living with Dai’s family. I was no more an “orphan ethnographer” as I used to describe myself earlier as an anthropologist without “my family” and “my village” in the field.

However, my first fieldwork in Karikoshi village sadly lasted no more than a month. I had to leave the village, though temporarily, following the declaration of the historic election for the Constituent Assembly that was held on April 10, 2008. As election campaigns became exuberant across the nation, electoral politics engulfed the village. The seemingly cohesive Dhimal village

became polarized into political factions: people seemed to mediate social distance between one another based on their affiliation with a party. Even my daily ritual of drinking tea with Dai at the local teashop early in the morning, a distinctive male activity in the village, began to attract fewer and fewer of those people whom we were accustomed to meet every morning around 6 am at the teashop. Fewer people were willing to join Dai (and me) because of the changing dynamics of party politics in the village. With the exception of a few families including that of Dai, the entire village of 121 houses had gone Red by supporting the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) or the CPNM.¹²³

The Maoist Party had recently ended a decade-long violent “Peoples’ War” and was contesting the CA election with a radical election manifesto that included a proposal for federalism based on ethnic autonomy with the right to self-determination. Many prominent Dhimal indigenous leaders affiliated with Kendra were actively campaigning for the CPNM; they promoted the CPNM as the only “revolutionary” party for the ‘liberation of all oppressed class, caste and ethnic groups’ in Nepal.¹²⁴ These Dhimal had formed the *Dhimal Jati Mukti Morcha* (Dhimal Liberation Front), an ethnic wing of the CPNM. The membership and activities of the Morcha, as Dhimal call it, were expanding in Dhimal villages. But Dai has long been a dedicated party worker of the Nepali Congress (NC), a liberal democratic party established in 1949.¹²⁵ Dai’s family and eight others refused to join the Morcha and continued to support the

¹²³ The CPNM, now United CPNM, as a party, was formed in 1993. On February 13, 1996, it declared ‘Peoples’ War’ which they waged till the April 2006. Following the Peoples’ movement of 2006 which overthrew the Monarchy, the Maoist party ended their ‘Peoples’ war,’ entered into the ‘open’ political processes and emerged as the largest political party in the Constituent Assembly election of 2008. See <http://www.ucpnm.org/english/index.php>.

¹²⁴ At times it was confusing for the local people as many of their prominent leaders from the Dhimal Jati Bikas Kendra were also the leaders of *Morcha*. They would take the *Morcha’s* activities to be that of the jaati organization and vice versa.

¹²⁵ See the party’s official site: <http://www.nepalicongress.org/index.php>

NC. Thus they became a political ‘minority’ among their kinfolk and in daily social interactions when the village became polarized along the party affiliations. “We are one people but our social relations have become cold now,” Dai often complained about the emerging political polarization in the village. It was obvious that he blamed the Morcha for souring village relations.

The factionalized social worlds I encountered in the village show how party politics can override people’s sense of belonging and relatedness based on kin ties and culture. I was growing uncomfortable with maintaining my stance of ‘neutrality’ to party politics. My efforts to persuade people that I was there only to study ‘Dhimal culture’ become increasingly unconvincing. After all, I was myself a Nepali living with a family that openly supported one party.¹²⁶ I was worried that my staying with Dai’s family might cause problems for them. Thus, with a heavy heart, I left the village and moved to Damak municipality to stay, again with a Dhimal friend, a radio journalist, who was then working for a local FM Radio station. So, when Dai called me with the invitation for the wedding, I could not help wondering how the marriage would go when social relations had turned, as Dai used to say, so “cold” recently. The CA election had just ended and the Maoist party had emerged as the biggest political winner in the election.

When I reached the village on the evening before the wedding, I was pleasantly surprised to see that normal social ties in the village seemed to have reemerged; individuals who were not on speaking terms a few months before were once again working, joking, and drinking together. Dai, who is the maternal uncle to the groom, was asking other people (affiliated with the CPNM party), with appropriate use of kin terms, to perform certain tasks. They seemed to follow Dai’s

¹²⁶ I am raising this issue of ‘nationality’ in order to draw attention to some of the challenges of doing ‘ethnography at home.’ My intention is not to open up the ‘foreigner’ vs. ‘native’ anthropologist debate, which is more pronounced in Nepal (see Fisher, 1987).

suggestions and commands with no hesitation. The next morning I met Dai behind the wedding house. He was digging the ground to make the fire hearth where they would prepare the wedding feast. There was a bamboo-fenced garden to the left side of the fire hearth from which a loud animal cry emanated. I ran toward the site where I saw six people struggling to tie and kill a giant female pig that the family had raised for a year. I escaped the men-animal battle and returned to Dai. Dai had already prepared an altar by clearing a small patch of the ground. He lit three packets of incense, and performed a quick ritual.

Knowing that I would be interested, he gave me a simple and straightforward explanation: “We need to worship our village deity and our ancestors so that bad eyes (evil) won’t fall on our food. Otherwise, our guests can get sick. It will be a big shame for our village and us if that happens.” The wedding was a village affair, and both individual honor and the collective honor of the village were closely tied to its success.

A black baby goat was offered as a sacrifice, and Dai asked his nephews to prepare the slaughtered goat. When they left, Dai was alone for a while. I slowly whispered my happiness that all of his relatives and neighbors had come together for the wedding. He smiled and said, “Oh, yes! This is our *cheli*’s (Nep. sister) family. We need to come together. This is for the *samaj* (Nep. society/ community).” Dai reiterated that people could, and should, suspend their differences, and must come together as a collective during the wedding in the village. Hence, marriage and wedding are communal events in which people would enact the shared cultural notion of the good (Taylor, 1989; Fricke, 1997: 191-192) by coming together as kin and as members of the Gramthan, the village shrine.

The marriage event had brought the politically polarized villagers together. People seemed to have suspended their political differences for the wedding. There was a sense of collective

ownership and unconditional unity among the relatives for the wedding. They came together, as Dai had commented, for the *samaj* (society/community) and because the success of the marriage ceremony was also tied to the village's prestige. There was a practical need for the cohesion of the community for the wedding. In practice, a wedding is financially challenging for a low-income peasant family, and it is a time- and labor-intensive cultural practice.¹²⁷ During the marriage preparation, each individual family from the village, as a social rule, contributed some cash (fifty rupees from each family) to the groom's family. The villagers had something more to contribute- labor, uncooked rice, brewed beer and alcohol, and money depending on their kin reckoning with the groom's family. For three consecutive days, people came to the groom's family to greet and bless the new bride and groom. People offered to help the family prepare food and clean the dishes; they spent hours chatting, eating and drinking together. All the villagers were invited and for three days the feasts continued. This practice of collective sharing and support for a wedding was not unique to this particular village, but is a common Dhimal practice in other villages as well. I argue that these practices of sharing and taking collective responsibilities in order to execute the wedding, and rising above their political disagreements with one another, is a substantive example of how marriage and wedding can reconstitute Dhimal as a community. And in doing so, marriage and wedding events also recreate the localized moral basis of sociality (Fricke, 1997: 192-194), even if such relations are always at risk of becoming "cold" again, to use Dai's apt metaphor.

The above fieldwork reflection, by way of an ethnographic vignette, shows that the lived everyday social worlds of the Dhimal do not always reflect the image of a cohesively bonded

¹²⁷ I was told that for this wedding the family spent about Rs two lakh (two hundred thousand rupees). The groom had worked in the Gulf countries for two years and thus had saved some money that he was able to spend for his own marriage. This amount is worth a year salary (in 2008) of a tenured lecturer in Tribhuvan University, Nepal's oldest and largest public university.

community. Dhimal, like any other group of people, are divided along class, political, and regional lines, in addition to the other lived realities that can perpetuate such social differences. Kin relations and the shared substance connoted by the Gramthan, as the incidents of the CA election showed, do not necessarily always tie people together in practice. In the same way, things that keep people apart, like political ideologies, do not always sever people's sense of relatedness and community belonging. But Dhimal do strive to forge a sense of common belonging and membership to a shared moral community through concrete practices. As this ethnographic example of the wedding in Dai's village illustrates, marriage is one of the concrete practices through which Dhimal work to remake their community.

However, Dhimal activists and village elders also point out that they have too many “*kuriti*” and “*bikriti*,” the Nepali terms they use to describe “bad” and “deviated” practices in the ways in which Dhimal enact their marriage and wedding ceremonies. In 1993 the Dhimal Jāti Bikās Kendra approved a code of conduct, akin to a set of social rules, to standardize Dhimal marriage and wedding practices, among other Dhimal customary practices, to make them compatible with the present day. During my fieldwork, Dhimal abided by some of these newly reformed wedding practices while they completely ignored others. Dhimal elders seemed very particular about following the Dhimal *riti-thiti* (customary practices) regarding exchange (exchange of marriage payments or prestations). Dhimal activists, village women and others also make sure that the new bride and groom wear their traditional ethnic dress during the wedding, a practice revived after the implementation of the Kendra's rules. The Kendra asked people not to use the service of Hindu priests and ‘Hindu ways of doing wedding rituals.’ Similarly, the organization has also banned the use of the *desi* musicians (the traditional occupational caste groups of Tarai origin) in their wedding. Hence there is a selective preference

for reviving and reforming Dhimal marriage and wedding practices. How can we understand Dhimal activists' concerns with reforming what they considered as *kuriti* and *bikriti* of their cultural practices? In what ways do these cultural politics inform Dhimals' indigenous activism?

In this chapter, I discuss why Dhimal community elders and indigenous activists focus on certain cultural practices, for example, those related with marriage, as arenas for cultural reforms and preservation. I argue that in order to understand why Dhimal are concerned with their marriage and wedding practices, we need to approach marriage as a 'community making' practice. My emphasis on 'community making' practice is informed by Dhimal indigenous notion and practice of 'village' and how they reconstitute 'Dhimal village' and its customary social organizations through concrete practices, exemplified by the ethnographic example discussed above, and symbolic representations.

The goal of this chapter is to substantiate my claim that these politics of cultural reforms Dhimal leaders enact through their jaati organization are 'constitutive practices' of their indigenous activism. I label them 'constitutive practices' to emphasize the significance of these cultural politics in reproducing the legitimacy of Dhimals' indigenous organization and the authority of its leaders. These cultural politics target the very terrains of communal practices that Dhimals consider part of their cultural heritage. Thus, these cultural politics offer Dhimal leaders with both opportunities and challenges to solidify their roles and social power. My ethnographic analysis shows the ways in which multiple actors attempt to consolidate their social legitimacy by imposing or resisting the reforms.

‘Dhimal village’: An Indigenous Notion and Practice

In everyday parlance, Dhimal use the Nepali term ‘*gaun*’ (village) to evoke the idea of shared belonging, their sense of relatedness, and their experience of commonality with others living in a locally embedded social and territorial entity. In terms of kinship organization, both patrilineal and affinal relationships are important in Dhimal society, but it is their patrilineal descent perceived in terms of consanguineal relationships that defines their clan. Each Dhimal belongs to one of the ten major clan groups or *harā*. They are clan exogamous, and with the death of a clan member, all clan members must undergo the required rite of passage as part of the mortuary rituals.

However, a clan membership is not territorial nor does it determine the structure of a Dhimal village. The village, the space of everyday social relationships is heterogeneous both in terms of clan memberships, and now also increasingly in terms of its ethnic composition. In fact, the ways in which a Dhimal village is constituted and structured through the centrality of its village shrine, the village *Majhi* (the head), and the *Dhami* (village priest) define its ritual, social-geographical and political boundaries. I argue that the village as defined by its shrine, the *Gramthan*, is the shared substance that defines Dhimal sense of relatedness in their everyday practice (Carsten, 2000).

This notion of ‘village’ is different from the commonsense use of the term as a rural setting in contrast to what is a ‘city’ (see Pigg, 1992, 1996 on the idea of ‘village’ in Nepali contexts). In Dhimali, ‘village’ is called *dera*, which connotes more of a socio-geographical residence than a

deeper sense of dwelling and belonging.¹²⁸ The Gramthan, the village shrine, is elemental to the constitution of a village. The Dhimal notion and practice of ‘Dhimal village’ has specific delimitations and deeper cultural meanings. At the minimum, as a residential unit, a ‘Dhimal village’ must have its village shrine, *Gramthan* and its village head, *Majhi*, which is a hereditary social position. Similarly there is a village priest, *Dhami*, the ritual specialist, who performs the annual village ritual *Shrejat* at the Gramthan for the well-being of the villagers, their animals and crops.

For Dhimal, the idea of ‘our village’ is crucial to their sense of belonging and dwelling in a closed socio-spatial networks of kin or kin-like relationships by virtue of their common residence in and shared membership of their Gramthan. So Dhimal often use the term ‘*Grammati*’ in order to refer to their sense of ritual membership in the village Gramthan and their shared loyalty to the specific village deities they worship during the rituals. As members of their Grammati, Dhimal have moral obligations and duties to support each other during agriculture activities, village rituals, marriage, funeral, and other realms of social life that demand mutual reciprocity among them. Thus the Gramthan establishes the reciprocal and inter-dependent relationship between village deities, non-human beings, the natural environment, and the villagers. In this sense a Dhimal village is a moral community.

I contend that the idea of ‘Dhimal village’ discussed here can be used as an analytical framework to examine Dhimal marriage and wedding practices by drawing attention to their habituated cultural world. The ‘village’ should not be understood as the construction of a “bounded” territorial unit, an isolated rural space inhabited by distinct people. I focus on the idea

¹²⁸ I use Heidegger’s notion of ‘dwelling’ (Heidegger, 1971). Heidegger’s notion of dwelling as an experience of being in the place and location emphasizes the acts of building i.e. the making of the dwelling place such that the relationship between the dwellers and the place is not a prior or given. It also emphasizes the caring for others and the nature (the earth, the sky, and the divinities).

of ‘village’ because, for the Dhimal, it is an objective structure (Bourdieu, 1977: 78-87) which shapes their understanding of who they are by informing their sense of belonging as members of a collective or a ‘jāti’ connected to a place. As I show in this and the next chapters, Dhimal continue to reconstitute and remake their villages through concrete collective efforts. Each year Dhimal collectively perform their most important village ritual, the Shrejat, which reconstitutes the village and its customary social organization (see Chapter 6). In the case of Dhimal marriage reforms, the village elders (both men and women) and activists deploy the moral force of the community, or the “village agency” (Sax, 2010), to ensure that people follow customary practices for their marriage and wedding ceremonials. A Dhimal marriage cannot be completed without the involvement of the community, the village Majhi, and village elders. Thus, marriage and wedding events become important political spaces whereby people work to recreate their village, its traditional social organization, and internal power relations.

In recent years, scholars working in South Asia have revived the notion of “village” as an analytical construct in order to understand how a village “continues to be vibrant grounds for the production of culture, social relations, forms of sociality, identity, environments, histories, politics, bodies, imageries, and persons” (Mines and Yazgi, 2010:13). The significance Dhimal give to their village in their everyday life and in their indigenous activism has important implications for its relevance as an analytical category in anthropology (see Mines and Yazgi, 2010 for new approaches to the village as an analytical category in the South Asian context). Mines and Yazgi (2010:1) argue that “villages are a lost object in the anthropology of India, at least in Europe and North America.... By the 1970s, ‘village studies’ had been pushed to the margin of the anthropological field.” I am not emphasizing that ‘village study’ should

again become the focus of anthropology in South Asia, but as scholars (Mines, 2005; Sax, 2010; see Mines and Yazgi, 2010) have shown, the village still matters in peoples' everyday lives. As a localized form of social life, a 'village' constantly emerges in dialogical mediation with the wider world. The village and its sociality have not simply disappeared with the forces of globalization (cf. Appadurai, 1996a). As a lived social formation, people continue to experience a sense of continuity within their village, its moral-ethical underpinnings, and social relationships even though these are always mutually constituted by their experience of constant disjuncture and change in their social life.

As I discussed earlier, the Dhimal experience of myriad radical social and cultural transformations in the last six decades powerfully informs their sense of collective self and their outlook toward the Nepali state and other social groups. They also made make consciously strive in political action to recreate their 'village' as a means of continuing their identity as a distinct people. Dhimal also experience this continuity in the social-cultural formations and practices that they consider their 'culture,' again as a way to define themselves as a distinct people. These understandings and experiences of cultural continuity through perceived customary practices are made ethnographically visible only by bringing their idea of 'village' into our analytical framework. An historical overview of Dhimal collective efforts at marriage reforms in the past and the continuity of these reform efforts in contemporary indigenous activism will help us understand how Dhimal consider marriage and weddings an important community-village making practice. Echoing Mine's (2005:59) emphasis that "village-making is at the same time nation-making, for the processes in which villagers engage at home participate, too, in the constitution of national movements and agendas as they are enacted regionally," I contend that an anthropology of indigenous political movements in Nepal, and arguably in the entire South

Asian region, needs to pay closer attention to village-making processes. Hence, my emphasis on the politics of cultural reforms as “constitutive practices” of indigenous activism underlines the importance of community-making practices in these political projects.

Reforming Marriage: Historical-Political Contexts

In the years 1951 and 1952, as many as fifty-six Manjhi from different villages of Morang and Jhapa met for a week-long period during which they are believed to have decided to implement a program of “uniform social rules regarding marriage practices and to eliminate other *kuriti* (Nep. bad customary practices) from society” (Dhimal, S. et. al., 2010: 20). Dhimal activists cited what they called “capture marriage” as an example of such *kuriti* that had prevailed in Dhimal society before 1950. They used Nepali terms like ‘*tanne chalan*’ (after *tannu* which means ‘to pull,’ and *chalan* meaning habitual/customary practice), ‘*supari bihe*’ (areca nut marriage) and ‘*chori bihe*’ (Nep. marriage by theft) to describe some of the ways in which a Dhimal man used to seek a woman he liked under the system of “capture marriage” in the past.¹²⁹ According to Dhimal activists, at these meetings in the early 1950s village Majhi decided to end the practice of “capture marriage” prevalent in Dhimal community.

The practices of forced marriage, I am told, became a source of concern when non-Dhimal began to settle in Dhimal ancestral territories. As I have discussed earlier, the 1950s was a period of radical social and political transformations in Nepal. It was very likely that the Dhimal Majhi, who used to mediate relations between their villages and the state functionaries until the

¹²⁹ According to these Dhimal elders, under the ‘*supari bihe*,’ the prospective groom would try give a supari to the woman he liked to marry. If the girl would accept the nut or remain silent, he would take the girl (sometimes forcibly) home. Then the girl’s parents and village elders would come to the boy’s home to discuss the marriage. In the ‘*chori bihe*,’ Dhimal boy would capture or forcibly drag the girl he liked and hide her for a while. Then, with the consent of the village heads and their parents from the two villages, the marriage would be negotiated. In both of these practices, it is claimed that the prospective bride was required for the approval of the marriage.

1950s, were required to deal with these emerging social and political changes. Their traditional authority was under threat from the new political system, but they were still important political actors in the Dhimal communities during the early 1950s.

During this period Dhimal social worlds were increasingly becoming multi-ethnic and their everyday interaction with the newly settled social groups, particularly the dominant groups with their different world views and caste ideology, were reshaping Dhimals' sense of their jāti identity. Dhimal were ranked as an inferior *matāwali* (Nep. liquor drinking) caste group in Nepal's 1854 Old Legal Code that officially legalized the caste system in the nation (see Höfer, 1979). The new settlers in Dhimal ancestral territories, particularly the dominant hill "high" caste groups, looked at Dhimals as "*sano jāt*" or the low ranked caste group. The hill Hindu settlers considered Dhimal to be "totally illiterate" and their "animistic type of religion as crude and primitive" (Regmi, R. 1991: 131).

Hence, with these emerging inter-ethnic social interactions mediated by caste ideologies, some of the customary practices of Dhimal became impractical or were deemed discordant with the moral, ethical, and even legal standards of the larger society or the nation. As a result customary practices like capture marriage, for which these Dhimal activists used the popular Nepali term '*kuriti*' (here *ku* means "bad"), became targets of reform.

Similarly, after the 1950s, the state-led projects of modernization and development, access to education, and the promotion of the cultural worldviews of the dominant group as "Nepali culture" stirred new social and cultural changes in Dhimal community. Dhimal activists emphasized that people began to abandon Dhimal *riti-thiti* to adopt new alien marriage rites because of the influences of other cultures. Dhimal cultural activists use the popular Nepali term '*bikriti*' to underline deviation from the normative cultural *riti-thiti*, for example, as a result of

the adoption of Hindu practices. I argue that Dhimal explanations about *kuriti* and *bikriti* help us to uncover the interplay of history, the state, inter-ethnic relations, and changing social and political-economic conditions in shaping Dhimal's reflexive evaluation of their cultural practices.

Four decades after this Majhi meeting, Dhimal held the First National Convention of their present-day Kendra in December 1993. This convention adopted the '*Dhimal Samajik Riti Riway Niwamawali, 2050*' (Rules regarding Social Customary Practice of Dhimal, 1993; hereafter *Niwamawali, 2050*) to regulate and standardize Dhimal rituals and marriage.¹³⁰ The politico-historical contexts of these two meetings are different but 'marriage reform' was a major focus of these meetings undertaken in span of forty years, and involved representatives from all Dhimal villages. Dhimal activists provided me many explanations for why they kept their focus on regulating their marriage *riti-thiti* (Nep. customary norms and practices). Common to all these explanations was their belief that marriage is an important part of their culture and a marker of ethnic identity, governed by distinct customary rites and rituals. They also emphasize that these *riti-thiti* are historically constituted practices that had continued from the time of their ancestors (see the fn 130). As such, these *riti-thiti* also reflect their ethnic history, and the moral and ethical values of Dhimal society.

With the establishment of the Kendra in 1991, these activists decided to focus on reviving Dhimal customary practices and reforming the prevalent *kuriti* and *bikriti* in marriage and other cultural practices. Why did Dhimal activists and their representative organization focus on these

¹³⁰ The preamble of this *Niwamawali, 2050*' (Rules-Regulations for Dhimal Social Customary Practices, 1993) mentions: "From the ancient time, this jati has been following customary social rules prepared by the collective efforts of the Majhi, Dhimi learned people and others. Dhimal...continue to use such social rules with regard to their customary practice, religious activities, customs regarding death, birth and marriage, and to govern other possible concerns and problems society encounters. In the past, there were *kuriti* like the forced marriage whereby a girl would be dragged or pulled by force for marriage. In order to eliminate such *kuriti* and to standardize marriage practices, the Majhi *warang* met at Damak in 1952 and decided to reform these practices (cited by Dhimal, S. et. al 2010: 82).

particular practices for marriage reforms? S. Dhimal, a central-level member of the Kendra in his early forties, and one of the prominent Dhimal public intellectuals who have been writing about Dhimal culture and history in Dhimali, Nepali, and English, emphasized that the Kendra's marriage reform is an organized project for 'de-Hinduization.' He said:

Before the First National Convention (1993), what happened is that, our Dhimal marriage practices were becoming more like that of Nepali Bahun-Chhetri. The culture of the Chhetri-Bahun had become the dominant one. The old system laid down by the Majhi became weakened. Then Dhimal began wearing saree, pant shirts and using 'jagge' (Nep. altar made for marriage ritual modeled after the Hindu religion). Dhimals began copying what Chhetri-Bahun do in their marriage. In places where there are more Chhetri-Bahun, Dhimal even used the Hindu priests and jagge for the marriage rituals. In other places, people used jagge but without the service of a Hindu priest. There were no uniform practices. Our *parampara* (Nep. customary practices, tradition) got deteriorated.

We discussed this problem at length in our (Kendra's) First National Convention. We all had felt the need to 'maintain' (his word) our *parampara*. The use of saree, the Hindu priest, jagge, and marrying like Chhetri-Bahun... all these were making us *Nepalized* (assimilated to the dominant groups' culture). Therefore, in order to maintain the *parampara* and to make our wedding making similar in all villages, Dhimal and Majhi came up with some proposals.... Then the Second National Convention approved and passed these rules and regulations' (Interview with S. Dhimal, April 8, 2009).

Hence by focusing on the Hinduization of Dhimal marriage and wedding practices, S. Dhimal implied that the *bikriti* in marriage or deviations from Dhimal *parampara* emerged in the inter-ethnic social and cultural contexts mediated by the unequal power and structural relations of domination and subordination. Though he also alluded to the adoption of 'modern' dress codes such as sarees, shirts and pants as wedding dress to index some changes in wedding ceremonies, I found it interesting that S. Dhimal focused more on the adoption of the Hindu rituals as examples of 'Nepalization' and weakening of Dhimal *parampara*.¹³¹ His repeated

¹³¹ I use the concept of 'Nepalization,' after Gaige (1975) to refer to the state policies of promoting 'hill nationalism' (one language, one culture and one religion) as way of cultivating sense of 'being one people' i.e. Nepali. Since these policies were disguised under the banner of 'modernization' or 'bikas' (development), the term 'Nepalization' is more apt here than the notion of 'Hinduization' which may only indicate religious assimilation. Nepalization and Hinduization were related historical processes in Nepal (see Gaige, 1975; Bista, 1982).

emphasis on reviving ‘Dhimal parampara’ clearly indicates that the Kendra’s effort at marriage reform was strongly influenced by the pan-national indigenous project of resisting the Hindu nation and the dominance of the Hindu ways of life as normative ‘Nepali’ ways of life.

Dhimal activists’ emphasis on efforts at de-Hinduization also needs to be understood in the context of the political changes of the early 1990s, the most important of which were the restoration of democracy in 1990, the constitutional recognitions of Nepal as a multi-ethnic nation for the first time in its history (but still a ‘Hindu’ nation), the state’s recognition of the categories of ‘indigenous nationalities’ in 1993, and the resurgence of a strong pan-national indigenous movement. All of these opened up a vibrant political space for the revival of indigenous cultures and practices across indigenous communities (see Gellner et. al. 1997; Hangen, 2005b, 2007; Hangen and Lawoti, 2013). Indigenous peoples and their organizations have been the most vocal protagonists demanding the establishment of a ‘secular nation-state’ since the 1990s. They led strong social movements to reject and boycott Hindu public rituals, which had been promoted by the state as emblems of ‘Nepali culture’ promoting ‘unity in diversity.’ For example, in eastern Nepal, indigenous groups, their organizations, and ethnic parties like the National Mongol Organization (see Hangen, 2005b) had successfully mobilized their communities to boycott *Dashain*, the most important public ritual of the hill Hindu, enshrined by the state as the great Hindu national festival.

As I have discussed earlier, the Dhimal had been making these efforts to reclaim their cultural identity by resisting the Hinduization of their everyday life since the early 1950s. But their efforts could not mature into an organized collective movement under the oppressive Panchayat regime which had promoted and institutionalized the dominant’s group culture as the normative ‘Nepali identity,’ and its practices the symbols of Nepali nationalism. But with the

establishment of the Dhimal Jati Bikas Kendra in 1991, Dhimal efforts to redefine their religion as '*praktik dharma*' (nature worshipper), hence non-Hindu, and to revive their customary practices and de-Hinduize their culture gelled as a collective movement.

But why would Dhimal activists and community elders still be concerned with reforming their marriage and wedding practices in the post-1990 period? In order to explain the continuing Dhimal interest in reforming marriage and wedding practices, I argue that we need to approach marriage as a constitutive practice of indigenous activism. We need to understand how marriage as a communally embedded practice constitutes Dhimal community and its customary social organization, and how Dhimal indigenous activists and the Kendra derive their moral and social legitimacy from engaging in these reform efforts.

Reinstituting The Village Through '*Marriage Rit*'

For Dhimals, marriage is one of the most important communally embedded practices and socially encompassing events. Dhimal still preferentially marry within their community, although the frequency of inter-caste and inter-ethnic marriages is on the increase.¹³² In all the weddings that I attended during the period of my fieldwork, the age of the grooms ranged from twenty-five to thirty while the brides were from nineteen to twenty-six years old; none of them were high-school students at the time of their marriage. Marriage within the same clan group and within three generations of cross-cousin relations is prohibited. There is no preference for nor a social norm of 'exchange marriage' of sisters.

¹³² For example, among the 121 Dhimal houses in Karikoshi, there were 10 marriages to non-Dhimals as of August 2008 (based on interview with the local Dhimals). Dhimal report that the trend of inter-group marriage is highest among Dhimals working in Kathmandu.

Marriage, in most cases, is village- or Gramthan- exogamous. Hence Dhimal villages, particularly those in Morang and within the Mai river of Jhapa, are tightly connected through marriage alliances and the resulting kin relations. The social geographies of marriage are expanding as a result of the expansion of transportation, increased face-to-face interactions, and because people are increasingly moving outside their ancestral territories for jobs and education. Therefore the village Shrejat ritual and its celebrations become socially important in acknowledging and reconstituting these individual, as well as village-to-village, kin relations. Marriage and the village rituals are still important locally embedded cultural practices through which Dhimal socially produce their community and their sense of collective peoplehood, a nation.

Divorce and widowhood are not stigmatized in Dhimal community; in these cases, both women and men can remarry if they choose to do so. One of the traditional duties of the village Majhi is to mediate divorces and the conflicts between families and villages arising out of the breakup of marital relations before or after the wedding. This suggests that Dhimal not only value the community-making potentials of marriage but, as a community, they are institutionally prepared to deal with the potential community-breaking aspects of marriage should it fail for various reasons. Their consistent efforts at marriage reform are also about mitigating the adverse effects of social conflicts which could arise from problems with marriage and wedding. I will highlight two related aspects of Dhimal marriage that I see as important in producing the Dhimal village and its customary social relationships: the importance of the marriage *rit* (prestations) and the centrality of the community in the completion of a marriage.

The normative marriage processes and wedding ceremonies cannot be completed in socially accepted ways without the involvement of the village Majhi, Dhimi and other important

kin groups. Their involvement is required not only for symbolic representations but for actual execution of the marriage in customary ways. The common marriage practice is the ‘*maghi bihe*,’ which literally means ‘marriage by asking,’ but it has generally been translated as “arranged marriage” in which the parents of the couples getting married, at least in theory or in symbolic practice, select the bride or groom for their sons and daughters.

In this marriage practice, the community elders and village Majhi are involved from the beginning of the marriage negotiation. For example, in the initial marriage negotiation, at the stage of the marriage proposal, the boy’s family must go to the girl’s family with proper *rit* (Nep. prestations) accompanied by some community elders and the village Majhi. The presence of community elders and the Majhi, I am told, not only signals their moral support of the marriage but it also ensures social accountability on behalf of these community elders regarding marriageability between the boy and the girl based on clan exogamy, and the character of the boy, and his family, proposing the marriage.¹³³

Similarly during the wedding, the physical presence of these village representatives including the village Majhi is required to complete the marriage processes. Before the groom and his procession called *jānti* set out for the bride’s village, the Majhi *warang* blesses the groom and wishes him good luck. In return, the groom’s family offers him a bottle of *gora* or brewed alcohol, the primary item of marriage *rit*. When the groom and the *jānti* returns home with his new bride, the final marriage ritual involves the village representative who would then “approve” the marriage. This special ritual will be held in the courtyard of the groom’s home. In this ritual,

¹³³ Dhimal marriage is clan exogamous, and cross cousin marriage is permitted after the third generation only. During this negotiation ritual, the village Majhi, community elders and kin members from the two families first inquire about the clan histories to determine if the marriage is permissible, ask the girl and the boy if they have consented to the matrimonial relationship, and make inquiries regarding any other information to ensure that the boy is prepared to take the responsibility

the village Manjhi, the groom's senior male kin and other community elders sit on the cleaned ground in a circle. A chicken will be sacrificed and a few drops of this chicken's blood will be added into a container of water. All the people sitting on the ground will throw some of this water behind them.

This ritual is performed, I am told in order to avoid the 'sins' of eating the wedding food should the marriage turn out to violate rules of exogamy and incest.¹³⁴ Then the bride serves these village representatives and kin members cooked rice and lentils on a banana leaf. The acceptance of food served by the bride, and the bodily consumption of the "sins" by the village Majhi, groom's kin members and other community elders symbolizes the formal acceptance of the groom into the family and the community at large. Upon the completion of this final ritual the marriage is approved and the new bride is accepted as one of them. As Dai once explained to me, "you cannot marry without the *samaj*" -- Dhimal marriage practices and wedding rituals necessitate the active participation and support of the village at large. The analysis of the exchange of marriage *rit*, the fundamental wedding ritual, also illustrates how Dhimal marriage reinstitutes the community and its traditional social organization.

Over the period of my fieldwork, I attended as many as twenty Dhimal weddings, and participated in five wedding *jānti* in which I observed the rituals of marriage *rit*, the exchange of marriage prestations. During the wedding rituals, the two families must exchange customary marriage *rit* in order to complete the marriage ceremony. Dhimals take these marriage *rit* to be essential customary rules, which they must follow in order to have a culturally acceptable and meaningful wedding. *Gora*, the traditionally brewed alcohol, and cash (five to ten rupees) are the two major *rit* items that the groom's family offers to the bride's family while the bride's

¹³⁴ People explained to me that this ritual, which they called "paap katai pileka" (to throw off the sin), began when Dhimal did not have system of arrange marriage, some people could marry within clan group or between non marriageable kin groups (or because of the incestuous sexual relationship).

family would reciprocate their acceptance with the *Gora*. I observed the standardized use of these marriage *rit* in all of the wedding ceremonies that I attended between 2008 and 2009. I have presented the details of Dhimal marriage *rit* in the Annex 1.



Figure 5: The village elder blesses the groom before the *janti* leaves for the bride's home. Karikoshi village, Morang (2008).



Figure 6: Village representatives from the groom and bride sides engage in the marriage *rit* exchange. Karikoshi village, Morang (2008).

In all of the weddings, the exchange of these wedding prestations between the two sides commenced as soon as the groom's *jānti* arrived outside the bride's home. The groom's family offered the required *rit* which include *Gora*, cash, and areca nut to the *warang and berang* (the village elders), and friends (boys and girls separately) of the bride. The village representatives and mediators from the two sides, as an act of friendship and acceptance of relatedness, smoked tobacco together out of a long bamboo pipe, and thus reconstituted one of the fundamental practices of everyday sociality among villagers – the sharing of tobacco (cigarette) and smoking together. Only after recognizing the representatives of the brides' village, both elders and other members, and the bride's friends, was the groom *jānti* allowed to enter into the wedding house. The fact that the wedding *rit* began first by acknowledging the members of the bride's village, not her immediate family and kin members, illustrates the importance of the village as the shared substance of sociality and relationship in Dhimal community.

Once the *jānti* entered the compound of the bride's house, the groom was taken to the altar where the wedding ritual would take place, while the representatives from the two sides would continue to engage in the exchange of marriage *rit* away from the wedding altar. In all the weddings, I observed that a special space was allocated in the courtyard of the wedding house where the community elders from the two villages would engage in the exchange of such marriage *rit*. Even when the courtyards were full of people, and the loud music (mostly Hindi songs from Bollywood movies) from the rented music system would make you feel completely deaf, these community elders meticulously attended to the performance of the *rit* exchange. In

these exchanges, the groom's family offered specific *rit* first to the bride's mother, and then to her father, followed by *rit* offerings to the village Majhi, Dhami, and the village elders.

Such marriage prestations are important ritualized practices through which the social and kin ties between the bride and groom families are reckoned and constituted in an embedded relationship characterized by reciprocity, rights, and obligations. Hence these marriage *rit* help to create a moral social world between these two families and their villages. Even a casual observer can see how these marriage *rit*, in the form of the marriage prestations, reinstitutes 'Dhimal village,' and its traditional social order and relationships. The reflections of a Chhetri villager from the Kari Koshi village, whom I will call Mr. Prakash Thapa, will be illustrative here. Mr. Thapa has been living in the Dhimal village for the last twenty years, and I would often meet him, actively participating during the village marriage as a *mit* brother of the local Dhimal family.¹³⁵ In one of the wedding ceremonies that took place in December of 2009 in the village where we both participated together, he told me after the marriage *rit*:

I have seen many Dhimal marriages in this village and other villages. I have been to many wedding *janti*. Many things have changed. But one thing that has not changed is that they still follow their marriage *rit* very seriously. In our wedding (the Hindu), the priest does all the things. In the case of Dhimal, their marriage *rit* brings the whole community together - their village head, Dhami, their families, friends -- all are brought during their wedding rituals. This has not changed' (field note, December 21, 2009).

This observation of a non-Dhimal who have been living in the Dhimal village for more than two decades about the significance of Dhimals' customary practices of marriage *rit* in bringing 'the community together' affirms how Dhimal customary marriage practices and wedding rituals reproduce their 'village' and its traditional social order.

¹³⁵ *Mit* can be loosely defined as 'ritual friendship'. Individuals from two different social groups (caste or ethnic groups) ritually become '*mit*' - a special kind of friends who would in turn consider each other's families as their 'mit' families, and reckon proper kin relations with one's mit families (Okada, 1957). *Mit* used to be a widespread social practice in Nepal across caste and ethnic groups. Anthropologists have (mis) translated '*mit*' as "fictive kinship" (see Prindle, 1975) as if only the relationships created by marriage and 'blood' constitute the real kinship (Carsten, 1995).

Recently, with the adoption and implementation of the *Samajik Niyam 2055* by the Kendra, the presence of the village Majhi in this pre-wedding ritual has been compulsory. The Kendra has even issued an ID (identification card) to the village Majhi to ensure that the “real” Majhi are involved in facilitating the social legitimacy of the marriage.¹³⁶ In the past, one of the important customary responsibilities of the Majhi was to decide the social legitimacy of marriage (particularly with respect to clan exogamy) and to mediate in marriage-related social conflicts such as divorce or failure to comply with the marriage payments. After the 1950s, with the advent of a new political system and the expansion of bureaucratic governance, the traditional power of the village Majhi in social practices shrunk and was now limited mainly to their roles in the village rituals. The establishment of the Kendra in the 1990s was instrumental in reviving the role of the village Majhi, among other customary institutions. The revival of the village Majhi and the legitimacy of their roles under the banner of the Kendra had provided a sense of empowerment for Dhimal Majhi. One Dhimal Majhi from Kirtipur village of Morang told me:

Yubā ketā haru (youth guys) may not come to us in other periods. They may not have recognized us as the Majhi. But when their time of marriage comes. They recognize us and come to us (laughter) (Interview with Majhi DK Dhimal, age 45, September 21, 2009).

This village head concisely explained that the social recognition of the Majhi as an important customary social actors and the representatives of Dhimal customary social-political institutions has widened after the implementation of the Kendra’s *Samajik Niyam 2055*. Recall that the Majhi-Dhami committee of the Kendra, the representative organization of the village Majhi and Dhami actually proposed the *Samajik Niyam 2055* in order to revive and standardize Dhimal customary practices, including the marriage and wedding rituals. The resurgence of the

¹³⁶ One Majhi told me that there were cases in which young grooms, instead of their village Majhi, used Majhi from another villages for marriage negotiations. And when there some problems in the marriage, the village Majhi refused to get involved because he was not part of the marriage negotiation, and thus not socially and morally accountable to represent the family in dispute resolutions.

indigenous political movement, and Dhimal efforts at cultural revival and reform have revived the communal legitimacy of Majhi and Dhimi and transformed them into ‘cultural activists’, hence an important political actor for indigenous activism.

Many anthropologists working in the other regions have highlighted how the internationalization of the indigenous rights movement has revived the political roles of customary indigenous social actors such as shaman and ritual specialists (Turner, 1995; Conklin 2002; Jackson, 1995; Rappaport, 1994). In the contexts of the Himalayan anthropology, there is a growing scholarly interest in examining the political roles of the customary social actors such as the shamans, the village heads and other ritual practitioners in indigenous activism (Holmberg, 2000; Shneiderman, 2009; Pettigrew, 1999). The ratification of the ILO 169 by the state and its endorsement of the UN declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples (UNDRIP) have further strengthened the importance of customary social actors like Majhi and Dhimi as they represent the ‘indigenous customary social institutions.’ The existing Nepali laws do not recognize any specific indigenous customary social institutions as domains of rights and protections. Therefore, indigenous groups and activists invoke the ILO 169 and the UNDRIP to demand that the state should recognize their rights to indigenous customary social institutions as part of the meaningful implementation of these international instruments of the indigenous human rights (see Bhattachan, 2009; 2012).

In other words, Dhimal Majhi and Dhimi are increasingly becoming subjects of transnational indigenous rights discourses. Conklin (2002) has shown how shamanic knowledge and shaman as political actors have received new relevancy and importance in the interface between the internationalization of indigenous rights movement, the global environmental movements, and the discourses of national sovereignty in Brazil (see also Turner, 1995). But

unlike in Brazil where shaman as well as other ritual and religious leaders had become politically active since the early period (Conklin, 2002:1050), the roles of Dhimal Majhi and Dhami were increasingly sidelined and marginalized after in the post 1950 social changes in Nepal. In such contexts, the interplay between the heightened resurgence of indigenous rights movement and Dhimals' organized efforts of revival of their customary practices and institutions have rendered new political relevance of the Majhi and Dhami for indigenous activism. And, Dhami and Majhi themselves have become instrumental in strengthening their social positions and communal power associated with their customary roles.

The codification and implementation of customary practices as regulatory social rules, in the language of a 'state,' does not mean that the Kendra's *Samajik Niyam 2055* is an imposition by a selected group of people over the community. There is a widespread moral and social expectation among Dhimal that they should follow their customary *rit* and rituals in the marriage and wedding ceremonies, while allowing enough flexibility to accommodate new practices, as my subsequent discussions will attest. Recall the case of my friend Kewale that I discussed in Chapter 1: that his family and village elders made him redo the engagement ritual in proper customary ways shows that people are both conscious of their customary practices and also more willing to follow these customary norms through practices. Such collective awareness of their culture and ethnic identity can also be taken as evidence of the impact of indigenous activism and cultural revival led by the Kendra and Dhimal activists. However, the Kendra itself is not a cohesive nor a coercive organization. How do the representatives of the Kendra implement their regulatory customary practices? What is being regulated or reformed? I will address these issues in the next sections in order to highlight the selective spaces of reforms and the ways in which such reforms are negotiated, implemented and resisted on the ground.

Making Marriage ‘Look More Dhimali’

“Our wedding should look more Dhimali. When people see our wedding from distance, they should say, ‘Oh! It’s a Dhimal wedding!’ They should not be confused if it’s a Chhetri Bahun wedding, Tharu wedding or a *desi* (of Indian origin) wedding,” JB Dhimal told me in response to my asking why the Kendra had formulated standard rules regarding Dhimal weddings. JB Dhimal is an active member of the Majhi-Dhami Committee of the Kendra, and he has played a leadership role in codifying the *Samajik Niyam 2050*. His emphasis on the visual appearance of the wedding as an enactment of Dhimal jāti identity and a marker of ethnic distinction in relation to three different social groups helps us to understand why Dhimal activists focus on certain practices as sites for marriage and wedding reforms. Later I learned that the marriage reforms which Dhimal activists prioritized included: following their marriage *riti-thiti*, that is, avoiding the use of Hindu rituals and Brahmin priests in Dhimal weddings, using their traditional dresses as wedding dress, and banning the use of *desi* musicians.

I have already discussed the issues of the de-Hinduization of Dhimal wedding practices, and elaborated with ethnographic examples showing how Dhimal practice their customary *riti-thiti* in wedding rituals and their significance for Dhimal. I was told that the use of *desi* musicians, which had become customary in Dhimal wedding processions, first became widespread in practice after the 1970s more in imitation of other groups’ practices than for any particular ritual or religious purpose (see also Dhahal, 1979).¹³⁷ Later, rich Dhimal families began to use more expensive and ‘modern’ brass band musicians, particularly in Damak areas.

¹³⁷ Dahal (1979) observed that “Dhimals bride preferred to have *desi* musical band than using the hill Damai [traditional occupational caste groups, considered “untouchable” but their music were considered auspicious, see Tingey 1994] musical instruments. There are *Madhesi Haari* [a Tarai ‘occupational caste group’ [classified as

The decision by the Kendra to ban the desi musicians and brass bands was completely honored by people. Dhimal activists told me that they had decided to ban the use of these musicians because they were becoming expensive and because they represented the *desi* culture. It can be argued that the Dhimals' sense of not being Madhesi has certainly influenced the Kendra's success in achieving a complete ban on the use of *desi* musicians in Dhimal wedding procession, the public display of their wedding culture. It is very common for Dhimal, young and old, to say, "We are not Madhesi, and we are not *Pahade* (Nep. hill people) either." This collective sense of distinction also explains why JB Dhimal emphasized that their wedding should "look Dhimali" so that "people are not be confused if it's a Chhetri Bahun wedding, Tharu wedding or a *desi* (of Indian origin) wedding." This success story also illustrates how the politics of labeling the use of *desi* musicians as *bikriti*, when used in Dhimal wedding, is shaped by the interaction of Dhimal practical concerns about lowering wedding costs and their indigenous activism of asserting distinct 'indigenous identity' in the sense of being the aboriginal people of the Tarai

'Women Are The Pillars Our Culture': Bohna Beyond The Marker Of Dhimal Identity

Bohna, also called *Petani* in Nepali, is a single piece of long (about 3 meters) cotton cloth woven in black color as the background with red, orange/yellow or purple stripes in the middle.¹³⁸ A traditional garment that Dhimal women weave and wear in their everyday life, the *bohna* has become one of the most powerful emblems of 'Dhimal identity' in the post-1990

"untouchables" by the state in the past] generally in a band of 9 people, playing such desi music. Dhimals say that they began to have such music in their wedding ceremony after the introduction of arranged marriage" (p: 132,Fn: 7 translation and emphasis mine).

¹³⁸ There are different types of *bohna*. For the purpose of this study, I will simply call all these patterns *bohna*. On different types of *bohna*, see Shepherd (2006).

period of resurgent indigenous politics in Nepal. Women wrap *bohna* from their chest to below their knees. The most common *bohna* is the *Da Bohna* (*Dabha* means black in Dhimali), black with red colored stripes. The *Da Bohna* is “often associated with young girls, and with beauty, and it is the only *bohna* that brides wear at their own weddings. Overwhelmingly, it is also the first choice for attending weddings, visiting the market, or attending *mela* (festivals or fairs)” (Shepherd, 2010: 16). It is the most widely used *bohna*, hence has become the iconic symbol of Dhimal *jāti* identity in indigenous activism and Dhimal public events like rituals, fairs, and meetings.

The *bohna* is everyday dress, not a special cloth to be used only on certain occasions and events. It is still primarily woven for personal and social uses, not for selling in the market. Dhimal women wear it in all kinds of social spaces and events: home, fields, markets, cinema halls, colleges, *mela*, and other places. The *bohna* in its design and style is distinct from that of the Pahade dress, the traditional dress of the dominant groups in particular, and its alterity: the dress of the Madhesi people. This everydayness and distinctiveness of *bohna* -- the product of Dhimal women’s knowledge, labor, skill and time, and their daily bodily adornment -- imbues this ubiquitous cloth with significant meaning as an ethnic marker in addition to its political meanings for Dhimal activism.

In recent years, the *bohna* has also moved well beyond its undeniable importance in Dhimal contemporary indigenous activism. From the Dhimal beauty pageant competitions to their everyday college life, young Dhimal girls are creatively refashioning *bohna* in order to reclaim their ethnic identity and express their sense of being “suitably modern” (Liechty, 2003). The public circulation of images of *bohna*-wearing Dhimal women representing ‘Dhimal *jāti*’ has intensified, thanks to the efforts of Dhimal themselves. Now Nepal’s mainstream media

(newspapers and TV), even when they do not cover the political agendas raised by Dhimal, seem ‘inclusive’ enough to circulate images of *bohna* wearing Dhimal women for public consumption.

The wider circulation of such images of *bohna* as the material emblem of Dhimal identity also signals the increasing public sensitivity to the multicultural realities of Nepali society. Even at the level of recognition of difference, the celebratory consumption of *bohna* in Nepal’s “mediascape” (Appadurai, 1996a:35-36) indicates the impact of Dhimal political mobilization. Now Dhimal-organized public cultural events and political mobilizations have become inconceivable without the concrete embodiment of Dhimal collective identity in the form of *bohna* adorned women. The increasing presence of *bohna*-wearing women in Dhimal indigenous activism reflects not only their ‘participation’ in the movement. It also underlines women’s assertion of indigenous identity and their collective political agency to challenge their subordinated position in the nation, as well as within their own community and their indigenous political organizations.

“Dhimal women are the pillars of our culture,” many Dhimal men proudly told me. Scholars have warned us to take cautiously such feminization of indigenous identity in indigenous political movements for its “naturalizing women identities with stereotypical female identification...and while (it) marginalizes their voices by providing very few spaces for actual political participation” (Muratoria, 1998: 411).¹³⁹ I acknowledge this important concern. However, as the anthropologist Ann-Elise Lewallen’s (2006) work on the Ainu women of Japan has demonstrated, the increasing significance of cultural artifacts and knowledge associated with indigenous women in the indigenous political movement can also empower indigenous women

¹³⁹ Many women indigenous activists expressed similar views during various interaction programs I attended in Kathmandu during my fieldwork. However, all the Dhimal women leaders who I discussed the issues of the Dhimal ethnic dress and indigenous activism asserted their sense of pride of wearing their *bohna* on everyday basis as well as in their activism. On indigenous women and feminism, see Suzak et al. 2010.

as political actors. Dhimal men's appreciative acknowledgement also helps us to understand Dhimal women as agentive culture maker on their own (Warren, 1998).

With regard to the resurgence of the *bohna*, I argue that the cloth needs to be understood as more than the defining materiality of Dhimal identity by centering on women's skill, labor, and the kinship relations within which *bohna* continued to operate as an "inalienable possession" (Weiner, 1992) of Dhimal women's social world. In order to understand *bohna* as the resurgent cloth, we need to locate women's collective agency in continuing to weave and wear *bohna* under the assimilative state policies as well as in the cultural embeddedness of *bohna* and its production.

Scholars have shown how dress practices become entrenched in the fields of power, economic, political, gendered, or generational (see Allman, 2004; Lewallen, 2006). The relationship between cloth and the fields of power becomes evident in the case of the disappearance of the traditional dress of Dhimal men. *Dhari* (Dh.) -- the traditional dress of Dhimal men -- is similar to *Dhoti* (in Nepali and Hindi), a common cloth that men wear in Nepal's Tarai and in India.¹⁴⁰ Dhimal men's dress was still worn into the late 1960s, but it disappeared from everyday use by the late 1970 (Diwas, 1980) after the arrival of the hill groups and the state-led assimilative policies of 'Nepalization.'

With the advent of the Panchayat regime in 1962 led by the King Mahendra, the ruling regime effectively used the notion of 'national dress' to foster a shared sense of 'Nepali identity' whereby all social groups were asked to consider 'Nepali language and dress dearer than their lives.' The irony in this national sentiment was that the 'language' and 'dress' was that of the dominant hill Hindu groups, which others were required to hold as dearer than their lives.

¹⁴⁰ It is a rectangular piece of unstitched cloth, usually around 4.5 meters long, wrapped around the waist and the legs and knotted at the waist. The hill people often derogatively call the people of Tarai origin as '*Dhoti*' to mark them as "Indians" from their idea that all Indians wear *Dhoti*.

Thus the Panchayat politics of national dress also illustrates “how relations of power are constituted, articulated, and contested through dress” (Allman, 2004: 1). A major yet unspoken aim of these state policies of creating hill-centric ‘Nepali’ subjects was to assimilate the people of Tarai origin into the hill culture and to prevent the political influence of India in Nepal via the Tarai region (Gaige, 1975). Furthermore, when the traditional dress of the hill Hindu groups was recognized and promoted as the ‘official dress,’ Dhimal were required to mediate state-led body politics by distancing themselves from any visible markers that could designate them as “people of Indian origin.” By the 1970s, Dhimal men, because of their increased participation in the public sphere, education, and interactions with state power, had become ‘Nepalized’ in their dress practice (Diwas, 1980; Regmi, 1985).

Dhimal women’s experiences of state-led body politics were not different from those of Dhimal men. In the past Dhimal women had not worn blouses (Nep. *Chola*) with *bohna* i.e. the upper parts of their bodies above their chest were left uncovered, perhaps because of the heat of the Tarai climate. Dhimal women began wearing the blouse, I am told, when they encountered new neighbors moving in from outside the Tarai, with different worldviews about clothing and bodies. These incomers took the failure to wear a blouse as a form of “nudity” and questioned Dhimal women’s morality and character (Regmi, 1982; see Guneratne, 2001 for similar experience of Tharus). Dhimal women began to wear blouses more frequently after the 1970s in public places like the markets, mela, and weddings (see Diwas, 1982: 41-53). The use of blouses, an innovative adoption by Dhimali women, added to the wider acceptance of the *bohna* in the larger society. Dhimal women continued to weave and wear *bohna*, but outside their domestic spaces it was displaced by the saree, kutra suruwal, and other ‘modern’ dresses. Still the continuity of the weaving and the wearing of *bohna*, though not in the same form, signifies

the social agency of Dhimal women to creatively withstand the very forceful assimilative conditions which had emerged after the 1950s in the Tarai.

Why did Dhimal women continue to weave and use *bohna*? Were they not “modern” enough (cf. Deloria, 2004)? I argue that the embeddedness of *bohna* in Dhimal social relationships, particularly among women, and its ritual roles largely contributed to its continuity.¹⁴¹ As with the Tamang women described by Kathryn March (1983), weaving represents dense symbols of gender, and the practices of weaving connect women in the “reciprocal network of affections and mutual obligation” (March, 1983: 731), particularly with other women.

Weaving is a distinctive feminine skill that Dhimal women learn from their grand/mothers and other female kin groups at home in their natal village. In the past, weaving was associated with women’s character and hard work, and as such it constituted an important social embodiment related to social recognition, honor and prestige for women, their family and the village. For a young girl, her weaving skill was also associated with social preference for her marriageability. The skill and labor of weaving women produced many household garments such as blankets, rugs, bed sheets, hammocks for babies, sacks and others. For Dhimal, then, women’s weaving was an integral part of the household economy and sustenance.

Weaving also connected women with their ancestral deity, and so evokes their relationship with the spiritual power. Dhimal believe that weaving *bohna* is a divine skill that their ancestral grandmother, revered and worshipped under many names, among them Laxmi Berang, Dhobini Berang, and Sadi Berang, taught other women. Each year during the ritual celebration at a place called Raja Rani, the ancestral grandmother used to leave *bohna* and jewelry in a particular place

¹⁴¹ Weaving provided occasional cash income. But the *bohna* even at that time of this writing is not produced for the market.

so that the Dhimal women who were attending could use them during the ritual. At the end of the ritual, the women were expected to return these *bohna* and jewelry. At one such mela, some people, who had become greedy, did not return these items to the Grandmother, but instead took them home. The Grandmother got very angry at their greed and breach of trust. And she punished the entire village with death. Thus *bohna* carry deeper meanings related with Dhimal history, notions of morality, the power of Berang, and the senior women (see Chapter 7).

Each year, during the *Parwa* ritual, Dhimal women unpack their weaving looms, wash all the parts with clean water, and worship them. In this ritual, the loom that works with Dhimal women for many months a year to produce cloths of their designs is revered as a deity, and its contribution is acknowledged and reciprocated with ritual offerings. “We have to thank this loom and ask it to be more enduring for the coming year. So we have to worship it today,” the Karikoshi bhauji explained to me during the *Parwa* ritual of 2009. The care, affection and respect that Dhimal women accord to their looms say much about their indigenous moral economy that produces the piece of cloth, now one of the most visible markers of Dhimal ethnic identity.

For Dhimal women, *bohna* gain special meanings during weddings. The *bohna* is an important wedding item that women must weave in order to gift it for the new bride coming to their villages or to their female kin or friends on their marriage. Similarly, the mother-in-law must weave a new *bohna* and give it to her new daughter-in-law in the hope that before long, the new daughter-in-law will provide both a grandson and a granddaughter (Shepherd, 2010). Even now, Dhimal women continue to make *bohna* in their free time for the wedding seasons. “Only lazy women will buy a readymade cloth (*lungi*, cotton cloth that women wear by wrapping around their waist) and give it as a wedding gift concealed in a paper wrapper,” one Dhimal

bohna weaver said as she explained to me in 2009 why they must weave the wedding gift. Thus the *bohna*, also a symbol of divine creation that is crafted through women's labor, skill and their sociality with other women, helps to recreate and connect the embedded relations of affection, exchange and mutual obligations between Dhimal women.



Figure 7: A relative of the groom gifts a new bohna to the bride. Karikosi village, Morang (2008)



Figure 8: Bohna as the wedding gift; gifts of clothes other than bohna are wrapped (concealed)

With the increasing Hinduization and modernization of their local social worlds, Dhimal had given up the use of their ethnic dress as wedding dress by the early 1980s. The saree for the bride and shirt-pants for the groom became the most widely used wedding dress. After 1990, as Dhimal indigenous activists began enforcing their marriage reforms, this effort also engendered new spaces of generational conflicts. While the wedding dress code adopted by the Kendra recognizes the cultural significance of the *bohna* by making it the authentic wedding dress, it also makes the everyday dress which women use everywhere the required special dress for their wedding. Moreover, grooms are required to wear a form of dress that they do not relate to or identify with their habitual practices. Hence the wedding dress code imposed by the Kendra was often resisted by the bride and groom for different reasons in the early phase of implementation.

How do these reforms work on the ground during wedding events? In what follows, I focus on the experiences of the Kendra cultural activists in implementing the wedding dress codes in their villages. How do these social actors variously positioned by their gender, generation (the elders vs. youths), their status within the customary social organization (Dhami, Majhi, and kin groups), and by their involvement in the cultural activism in organizations like the Kendra and other political organizations, resist, struggle and negotiate in order to shape what appears in its objectified form a 'successful' acceptance and enactment of the Kendra's wedding dress code?

Reforms In Practice: The Moral Authority Of The Community

In all of the weddings that I observed during my fieldwork, the bride wore the *bohna* and the groom wore the kurta-suruwal (though not of the same color) and the turban. When the grooms and the brides came to the stage made for the wedding ritual, I did not observe any signs of resistance to the wearing of traditional dress.¹⁴² All the Dhimal whom I interviewed about this issue confirmed that nowadays the use of their ethnic dress as wedding dress is on the rise. Dhimal Jati Kendra and its cultural activists cited the revival of the use of their traditional dress in the wedding as an important achievement of their reform efforts. But the revival of and peoples' self-identification with one's 'ethnic dress' is also shaped by the larger political transformations in Nepal after the 1990s, which I have discussed earlier. The actual implementation of the wedding dress code, I am told, was met with resistance both from the bride and the groom in the earlier reform period. It was the moral force of the community or the 'village' that became instrumental in defusing such resistance to the Kendra's regulation.

As I have emphasized earlier, the participation of the community elders and village Majhi are crucial for the completion of Dhimal marriage and wedding rituals. These groups of people are also formally included in the village-level committee of the Kendra. As such, many of them need to perform their responsibilities as the members of the Kendra. The two cases I will discuss here illustrate how peoples' positions within the Kendra compelled them to negotiate when they encountered resistance from the bride and groom.

¹⁴² Sarah Shepherd, then Fulbright student (University of Michigan) who studied Dhimal weaving during 2008-2009 had observed a wedding in the bride's village in which both the groom and the bride did not wear their traditional dresses. Eventually, the bride was made to change her saree (by wrapping bohna over it) by the village women while the groom was allowed to continue without the required dress (personal communication, 2012).

Mh. Dhimal, in his mid-thirties, was one of the younger executive members of the Central Committee of the Kendra. He comes from a Dhimal village near by Belbari bazaar of Morang. In 2005, during a marriage in his village, the bride refused to wear a *bohna*. She wanted to wear a new saree. “It’s my wedding day, the only time in my life, and I want to wear what I like the most,” the bride said, according to Mh. Dhimal. She refused to compromise. She was Mh. Dhimal’s cousin sister (daughter of his mother’s younger sister) and he promised to buy her two sarees if she could wear a *bohna* for the wedding ritual. But she would not listen to him or to her mother. “I honestly bowed down to her feet begging that she wear the *bohna*,” is how Mh. Dhimal expressed his frustration over the relentless refusal. This act of persuasion was not just about making the bride wear the *bohna* in order to abide by the Kendra’s rule. The credibility and recognition of Mh. Dhimal as the central level representative of the Kendra was also on the pyre because the groom *jānti* was being led by no other than the two senior-most leaders of the Kendra. Mh. Dhimal said:

What to do, what to do? The *Cheli* (Nep. sister) won’t listen to us at all. *Budda* (Nep. older people, here senior people) were coming to my village. I am a *Kendriya* (Nep. Central level) *sadasya* (Nep. member). I was in trouble. It was also matter of my *ijat* (Nep. honor). Then I discussed the issue with the village elders. They were also not happy with her. Some senior women also complained that the bride should wear the *bohna*. Then they said to her, ‘look, this is our *chalan* (culture). If you don’t wear the *bohna*, then we won’t join your wedding. We won’t eat the food; we’ll leave your home now.’ Finally, she agreed to wear the *bohna*.’ (Interview, Mh. Dhimal, April 2009)

This is a telling example of how the bride, despite her continued individual resistance, was finally forced to comply with the wedding dress code only when the community members threatened to boycott her wedding ceremony. Given the liminal phase of the wedding ceremony, the bride could not risk the withdrawal of her own community from her wedding. Such an act would have affected her family’s honor and potentially her marriage as well. The bride challenged Mh. Dhimal’s position as an executive member of the Kendra, making him feel

equally vulnerable. It becomes evident when he said, “I am a *Kendriya sadasya*. I was in trouble. It was also a matter of my *ijat*.” Mh. Dhimal, on his part, deployed the tactics of ‘community withdrawal’ in order to reproduce his social position. Dhimal leaders and cultural activists often use the tactics of ‘community withdrawal’ as a way of enforcing the Kendra’s marriage rule, not only for the bride but also for the groom.

The following conversation with a youth political leader of the *Sanghiya Parsihad* illustrates how the moral force of the community confronts the resisting groom. I was told that the use of the turban did not go well with the groom. BG Dhimal told me:

Well, the Kendra has provisions of fines in such refusal. We tried to convince the bride and the groom why they should wear our Dhimal dress. Many young men had complained to me about the white color turban. They don’t understand the historical significance of the turban. The turban symbolizes the *Mangol* uniform, and our historical connection to the Mangol. But they don’t know about this history. There is a lack of training, and a lack of education.

On my asking what they would do when someone refuses to wear the required dress in the marriage, he elaborated:

In most cases, they do. They follow. For some, there was need of more ‘obligatory’ means in the beginning (when the decision was made). If no one goes for his janti, what can he do? Is he going to get married by himself? That is impossible. We have done this for some people. [I asked him, “Oh...if *samaj* (society) does not go, you cannot marry?]. “Yes, exactly,” he said (Interview with BG and Mh. Dhimal, April 2009)

BG Dhimal is the leader of the political front that demands that the easternmost region of Nepal should be federated as the ‘Limbuwan autonomous state’ under which Dhimals will exercise political autonomy (see Chapters 1 and 7). Therefore, for Dhimal political activists such as BG who are committed to a specific political project, the wedding cloth symbolizes an important political history of relatedness, their kinship with other non-Hindu indigenous groups,

whom he subsumed under the racial category of “Mangol.”¹⁴³ So he emphasized that Dhimal should wear the turban during the wedding in order to claim their indigenous identity and embody the political history of resistance to the colonizing Gorkhali rulers (see Chapter 2). He sees the role of Kendra (and himself) as an educator to teach people the historical meanings of their traditional dress. And, sometimes, such teachings come through what he called “obligatory means.” Like Mh. Dhimal, he also emphasized the importance of ‘community’ in making an individual marriage successful. Hence if the bride and the groom resist accepting the wedding dress code, they can be forced to comply using the tactics of ‘community withdrawal.’



Figure 9: Dhimal bride and groom in their traditional ethnic dresses. Kakom Village, Morang (2008)

¹⁴³ See Hangen (2005a) for discussion the use of the notion of ‘race’ in indigenous politics in Nepal.

These two examples illustrate clearly the important roles of community elders, both men and women, and Dhimal activists in enforcing the wedding dress code. In enforcing the Kendra's wedding code, indigenous activists like Mh. and BG Dhimal not only reconstitute the moral authority of the Dhimal community and the Kendra, but also socially reproduce themselves as activists. Similarly, Dhimal ideas of indigeneity, ethnic histories, the significance of their indigenous organization like the Kendra, and indigenous bodies also enter into and become locally meaningful as well as contested ideas through these localized cultural politics.

Still, such tactics of community withdrawal do not always work. The experiences of Babai Dhimal, one of the pioneering indigenous activists and "cultural reformers" substantiate the challenge to and vulnerability of individual Dhimal cultural activists when they confront resistance in their own homes. The First National Convention of the Kendra held in 1993 decided to implement the Kendra's rules on marriage and other customary practices. Therefore, when Babai was to marry off his daughter in that year, he was under lots of social pressure to actually implement the rules. There was no problem on his side (the bride's side) but his soon to be son-in-law, a soldier in the Nepal Army who was indifferent to the Kendra's rules, came dressed in 'modern' suit pieces with his jānti.

Oh, there were so many people who had come to see the marriage of the central member's daughter. So many people! We killed three pigs; still the meat was not enough. It was a big marriage! Many people had just come to watch the marriage. My son-in-law is an army man. It was during the Maoist insurgency and the Nepal Army was on the street (they were in the war with the Maoists, hence the Army was politically dominant). They won't listen to us (civilians). Oh! What a challenge fell upon me! Then I brought my son-in-law inside and explained my situation to him with the utmost request. He agreed to wear the kurta-surwal but he would not wear the turban. I tried to convince that he does not have to wear it throughout the ceremony. I apologized to him, and finally convinced him to wear the turban, almost by bowing to his feet. Then we performed the wedding ritual in Dhimal ways. The Dhimals and non-Dhimals who watched the wedding commented: "Yes, this wedding made Dhimal identity" (Interview; April 22, 2008)

The story of Babai, like that of Mh. Dhimal, shows how Dhimal activists saw resistance by bride or groom to the reform rules they had decided upon as a challenge to their social honor as activists in the community. Recall that both of them used the language of “bowing down” to the bride and the groom’s feet. Senior people like Babai are referred to as *warang* (*berang* for women), the same terms their deities are called. The ceremonial greetings assume and reproduce the kin and the age status between Dhimal. In the normative greeting practices, it is always the younger family members, irrespective of their gender, who bow down and touch the feet of their seniors. Therefore, bowing down to feet of persons who are younger than oneself is a complete reversal of the normative kin and age status in Dhimal community. So when cultural activists like Mh. and Babai say that ‘they bowed down to the bride’s and groom’s feet,’ they suggest that they would even risk lowering their social status in order to convince their kin members to comply with the reformed wedding dress code.

Thus by inverting the normative greeting practices, Mh. and Babai used Dhimal shared everyday cultural ethics and the morality of kinship practices in order to persuade the bride and the groom to abandon resistance to the new code. The Kendra is not a hegemonic jati organization that can simply impose its ideology to compel individual compliance. The moral support of the community, expressed in the tactics of ‘community withdrawal,’ is vital for enforcing the Kendra’s decision. As these ethnographic examples attest, we also need to pay closer attention to the individual efforts of the indigenous activists and their sense of vulnerability in making the Kendra’s rules ‘real’ and ‘pragmatic’ in order to understand how these cultural reforms become normal practices.

The Kendra is neither a coercive nor a cohesive social organization. Dhimal cultural activists from the Kendra have recognized that the bride and grooms' preference for their choices of dress during the wedding cannot be completely suppressed. There is, as some activists put it to me, flexibility of the dress code during the wedding ritual. S. Dhimal, to whom I have alluded earlier, explained to me how they mediate to provide choices for the groom and bride if they prefer not to wear Dhimal dress throughout the wedding:

In all Dhimal villages, if we are Dhimals then our wedding should be in our dress, and in accordance with our *parampara*. If they (the bride and the groom) feel that they are Dhimal, they should wed wearing our Dhimali dress. It does not mean that they have to wear it for the whole event. But they should wear the dress until the major *parampara* regarding the bride and the groom is done. After that, if they don't like it, they can change to dress of their choice. There is the flexibility. Sometimes, the ceremony does not even last for ten minutes. In some cases, our younger brothers and sisters (groom and bride) have refused to wear the Dhimal dress. So the village Majhi and community elders have to be strict in such cases (Interview, April 14, 2008).

S. Dhimal clearly states that wearing Dhimal dress during the wedding is more about expressing one's deep sense of self-identification as 'Dhimal.' He suggests that a wedding is an important ritual through which individuals and community are socially reconstituted as 'Dhimal.' By wearing the Dhimal dress in the most important phase of their wedding ritual, Dhimal brides and grooms embody their Dhimal *parampara* and they also publically state their sense of pride of being and becoming Dhimal. Therefore, wearing Dhimal dress during the wedding is a moral choice people have to make.

In the recent years, more and more Dhimal youths are using their traditional ethnic dresses for their wedding and following 'Dhimal parampara' for their marriage ceremonies. The resurgence of indigenous political movement, the efforts made by Dhimal activists and village elders under the banner of their *jāti* organization, the active participation of Dhimal youths in the indigenous politics, and Dhimals' sense of collective responsibility to 'preserve' and promote

their ‘culture’ – all have contributed towards this indigenization of their marriage and wedding practices. The objectification of certain practices such as ‘ethnic dress’ as marker of Dhimal identity and ‘customary practices’ for political and social purposes may have effects of turning “culture into things” (Handler, 1988: 14-15). But as the anthropologist David Akin (2004) has persuasively demonstrated and argued that objectified customs (or *kustom* for the Melanesian regions) can equally become part of peoples’ everyday custom and that anthropologists should also focus on the “the concurrent subjectivization of *kastom* as culture” (Akin, 2004: 302). The significance of bohna for Dhimal culture, and the ways in which Dhimal women identify themselves with bohna is a substantively illustrates why the Kendra codified it as the wedding dress for the Dhimal bride.

My ethnographic focus on the cultural politics of marriage reforms move beyond the issues of “authentic” or “invented” nature of these customary practices that Dhimal activists emphasized (cf. Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). I was interested in understanding why Dhimal activists emphasized these practices as spaces for reforms and revival. The ethnographic examples that I have discussed here illustrate that various social actors mediate, negotiate and comprise to implement the ‘code of conduct’ or ‘social rules’ imposed by the Kendra. I have shown how these micropolitics of negotiations also reproduce the power of the Dhimal community or the ‘Dhimal village’ by making people abide to these prescribed customary practices.

It is equally important to recognize that many Dhimal activists consider the communal power and moral authority that the Kendra commands in enforcing social rules regarding their cultural practices such as the Dhimal marriage-wedding ceremonials is an inherent exercise of their inalienable collective right to cultural autonomy and self-government. They argue that the

continuity of their customary institutions such as Majhi and Dhami, despite many challenges they had faced in the past, attests that Dhimal have been practicing their traditional system of governance in the realms of their customary practices before the advent of the modern state of Nepal. Thus, Dhimal can easily relate with and strongly support the indigenous peoples' demands for right to self-government and recognition of indigenous traditional institutions. In the next chapter, I will further expand on the significance of the politics of cultural reforms for Dhimal in claiming their indigenous rights and addressing some of the practical concerns of their community.

Chapter Six

‘This Ritual Was Like A Doctor In The Past’: Indigeneity, Ritual And Cultural Politics

Participating In A National Ritual

The central office of Dhimal Jati Bikas Kendra, located along the east-west highway at a place called Mangalbare in Uurlabari Village Development Committee of Morang district, has a huge open space covering a total of ten *bigah* (1 bigah = 1.67 acre). Dhimal generally refer to the Kendra as ‘*Dus Bigah*,’ meaning both its physical address and also the area of the land it was able get from the state in 1995.¹⁴⁴ There are two small office buildings and a few other small houses, but the rest of the area is open field with huge trees. A giant white cement gate, the ‘Welcome Gate,’ about fifteen feet tall, proudly stands at the entrance of the Kendra, its name carved in red at the top. On June 29 of 2007, when I got off a bus in front of the gate around eleven in the morning, hundreds of bicycles were parked along the two sides of the entrance. Hundreds of people who had come from different villages were pouring into the Kendra’s compound. I had come there to observe the final performance of the most important annual village ritual of the Dhimal, the *Shrejat Puja*, also called *Jatari Puja*, organized by the Kendra to mark the ending of the ritual for that year.

A big banner painted on a blue cotton-cloth hanging in the Welcome Gate said, “Greeting- Welcome to all guests who have come to observe the *national* Jatari ritual.” This was the

¹⁴⁴ The land is still under the state ownership but registered under the Kendra’s name (Dhimal, S. et.al. 2010: 182).

national ritual, belonging not to a particular village but to the entire Dhimal jāti on a par with any other ‘national’ ritual of the nation. And it was the first Dhimal public event that I observed in Morang, and thus the source of my first field-based ethnographic data. I had come all equipped with all the necessary data collection tools: notebooks, an audio recorder, and a camera

A *mela* (Nep. fair) was also organized for the general public on one side of the huge ground, in which a vibrant mini market drew public attention and money. There were many small stalls of the nomadic traders, who wander from one mela to another to sell items such as bangles, plastic toys and balloons (a remarkable attraction for children), sweets, ice creams, teas, and other items. This was a completely secular space where entertainment and intensive circulation of commodities ruled. The Kendra may have earned good income by levying some monetary fee from these vendors and the other stall keepers on that day.



Figure 10: People attending the ending of the annual Shrejat at the Kendra (August 2, 2007)

At the eastern side of this entrance gate, the Kendra had built a Dhimal shrine, the *Gramthan*, where Dhimal priests, Dhami, and his assistants (*hanuwa*) were busy performing the ritual. People queued in a long line to offer their prayers and ritual offerings to Dhimal deities; many of these devotees were non-Dhimal from different villages where practices of religious syncretism define the local sociality. Some journalists from local newspapers and FM radio stations were interviewing the head Dhami. One reporter from the local FM radio was using his cell phone to broadcast the event ‘live’- an innovative style of radio journalism that I had not observed before. It seemed the local media had recognized the importance this particular cultural event attended by thousands of people.



Figure 11: Dhimal priest performing the ritual (left); journalists interviewing the head of the Dhimal priest during the Shrejat ritual celebration at the premise of the Kendra, 2007

Beneath a huge tree standing to the east of the shrine, twenty to thirty Dhimal men, lined up in a row, were playing their traditional drums or *Dhong* made of goatskins and wood. Each drummer represented his village, and the village name was imprinted on one surface of the drum. Because many villages hold inter-village drum competitions during the Shrejat celebration, the ritual event is also called *Dhong Dhonge melā*. This particular ritual organized annually by the Kendra is considered to be the national ritual, which belongs to no one particular Dhimal village but to the whole Dhimal jāti. Thus I was participating in the collective national Shrejat ritual performed for the well being of all Dhimal and their villages. And these Dhimal drummers, by representing their respective villages, were also enacting the making of this national ritual.

Further north in the crowded ground, a big stage was built for the folk dance competition organized by *Tungai Sanskriti Manch*, a cultural wing of the Kendra responsible for reviving and promoting Dhimal art, music and dance. In the beginning, relatively fewer people had gathered there but the crowd grew bigger when someone announced that the event would soon begin. I was very excited and ready to collect my first field data, the voices of Dhimal activists at this important public event. Five minutes after I reached there, the master of ceremony, a Dhimal youth in his early thirties, with an impressive skill and voice, called the chairperson of the Kendra, Mr. Ram B. Dhimal, onto the stage to address the inaugural event. The audience greeted him with a warm cheer. I turned on my recorder -- a red flash glowed ensuring me of its loyal operation.

The chairperson of the Kendra, while addressing the public, introduced Dhimal as “the first group of people to imprint their footsteps on the soil of the Tarai region of Sunsari, Morang and Jhapa districts.” Then he highlighted the importance of Dhimal Jati Bikas Kendra for promoting Dhimal culture and for advancing their political concerns to the state. Emphasizing the Kendra’s

role in the national indigenous movement, he explained that it had endorsed and supported the demands put forward by the national representative association of the indigenous peoples, the NEFIN (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities) that the federal restructuring of Nepal should be based on ethnic identity, history and territory. But what struck me the most in his ten minutes long speech was the emphasis he put on the efforts that the Kendra had made in the last few years to reform “*bikriti*” (Nep. bad practices; deviations from the customary practices). He termed these reform efforts “revolutionary.” He told the public:

This organization (Dhimal Jati Bikas Kendra) has undertaken a revolutionary step to preserve the Dhimal culture, religion, language, and traditions as well as to reform *bikriti* (Nep. “bad” social practices prevalent in our community)... In order to address the need of this contemporary time, it is necessary that we not only preserve our culture but also reform any bad practices our customs and culture have. In this regard, Dhimal Jāti Bikās Kendra has decided to end the Jatiri mela being organized in different villages, and to organize the mela at one place only (at the Kendra). This has been discussed and adopted in the First, Second and the Third National Conventions of the Dhimal Jaati Bikas Kendra. It is ironic that our villages are still continuing to organize the Jatari mela. Why did the organization (Kendra) decide this? Dhimal are increasingly spending more money in the name of celebrating our traditional culture like Jatiri mela. In a year, Dhimals spend about twenty million rupees or more in order to celebrate Jatari puja.... We need to preserve our culture but we also need to give up the bad practices in accordance to the need of the contemporary time...

This was truly a spectacular event that powerfully signaled me the importance of the Kendra and how indigenous activists use their annual village ritual to consolidate a shared sense of “an imagined community” (Anderson, 1983) as a collective ‘jāti.’ Shrejat is a village ritual collectively organized by people for the well-being of their families, crops, cattle, and the village as a whole. However, the Kendra organized this particular Shrejat as the national ritual, the representative jāti ritual of and for all Dhimal living in Sunsari, Morang, Jhapa, and even in Kathmandu where more than thousand of them live, but without a Gramthan.

Thus the event also underlined the important role of jāti organizations like the Kendra in codifying what constitutes Dhimal religion to create new collective subjectivities such as ādivāsi

with certain religious practices, in dialogical mediation with newly emerging political conditions and with their practical concerns with the costs and duration of ritual celebrations (cf. Fisher, 2001). However my first ethnographic data --- the public address by one of the most influential and respected Dhimal leaders – also brings to the surface a seemingly paradoxical issue. Addressing thousands of people who had come there to participate in the event, the chairperson of the Kendra criticized his own community for cultivating *bikriti* in celebrating their annual village ritual. He publically criticized Dhimal, whom he introduced as the “first group of people to step on the eastern Tarai” for indulging in unnecessary ritual spending. The reflexive critique of one’s own community in such an important public space by a Dhimal indigenous leader first puzzled me, and many months later led me to understand the importance of such reform efforts in Dhimal indigenous organizing.

On a specific day between the months of Baishak (April-May) and mid-Ashar (June-July) but before people begin planting the paddy, each Dhimal village organizes its Shrejat ritual and celebrates it in festive ways by inviting kin members and people from other villages for a feast in their homes. So during some weeks during the Shrejat period, there will be multiple village rituals in different villages and people will be busy visiting from one village to another, reconnecting and recreating their social relationships by way of celebrating the rituals.

The long duration of the Shrejat ritual has become a matter of concern for Dhimal and their jāti organization. They argued that the many weeks of Shrejat ritual celebration have kept Dhimal students away from school, which they believed has led to students’ poor performance in their exams. Similarly, with the monetization of the economy and the challenges many Dhimal face to meet their daily subsistence, the increasing cost of celebrating the ritual in festive ways has become a major issue; people invariably raised this point with me pointed me. I should

emphasize it here that this was a not particular class-based agenda raised by some ‘modernizing’ “elite” activists (cf. Guneratne, 2002; Fisher, 2001).

In the last few years, the Kendra has enacted a cultural politics of what I will call “ritual time compression” in order to shorten the period during which the villages must complete their Shrejat ritual. By limiting the ritual time, Dhimal activists argue, ritual celebration will become more economical and problems like the low attendance of Dhimal school-going children during the ritual-festival period will improve. To this end, the Kendra has introduced new practices of making their annual village Shrejat ritual into what they call the “*ekakrit ratriya puja*” (Nep. integrated national ritual) of all Dhimal villages. Now Dhimal collectively inaugurate the ritual in a place called Raja Rani located in a small hilltop near by Letang bazar of Morang, and end it by organizing the final Shrejat of the year at the Kendra (see Chapter for Raja Rani ritual). What does a national ritual mean for Dhimal? Why did they need to make Dhimal annual village ritual into ‘an integrated national ritual?’ In what ways do the making of Shrejat as a national ritual become integrated into Dhimal indigenous activism? Why is the Shrejat the focus of their ritual reforms?

In this chapter, I will address these questions by focusing on Dhimal understanding of the Shrejat ritual and how they organize their village ritual. My focus is on how people organize and participate in the ritual and how these practices inform peoples’ sense of their collective identity, ethnic history and territorial belonging. The Kendra and its leaders are the major actors enforcing the cultural politics of reforms and the making of a national ritual. I build on Dhimal indigenous notions and practices of ‘village’ to argue that the Kendra must be approached as an extended Dhimal village in the making, an integrated “imagined Dhimal community” (cf. Anderson, 1983). By analyzing how Dhimal use their cultural model of village to organize the

community under the leadership of their jāti organization, I show how the Kendra exercises its moral authority as a Majhi (village head). Thus the analytical framework of Dhimal indigenous notion of village can help us understand how historically constructed practices such as ‘cultural reforms’ and historically instituted actors such as Majhi acquire new forms and political relevance within contemporary indigenous activism.

Drawing from my close observation of and participation in three consecutive annual Shrejat rituals organized by the Kendra, I will describe the ways in which the making of Shrejat as a Dhimal ‘integrated national ritual’ not only forges a collective sense of Dhimal identity and culture through public performance but also reinforces the communal power of the Kendra and its leaders in this process. My analysis will also detail how the micropolitics of this Shrejat celebration at the Kendra confronts and mediates the divisions that persist among the Dhimal indigenous leaders, the ‘senior’ and youths, and different villages.

During my village-based fieldwork, I observed how the regulations of the Kendra get implemented and resisted by local Dhimals in actual practice. Dhimals’ politics of reforms is not a simple story of ‘revitalization’ and resistance to it. My analysis of Dhimals narratives of why and how they celebrate Shrejat ritual illuminate how Dhimal make sense of their history, ethics of communal ways of life, conditions of their marginality and the paradoxes of indigenous activism centered on such reform. Thus Dhimal’s efforts to reform their communal ritual ask us to examine their cultural politics taking into account both the particularities of the Dhimal community and the larger political contexts of indigenous political movements. The contentious and discursive nature of these cultural politics, in which large numbers of Dhimals (of all social categories) participate in debates about themselves and their ‘culture,’ both in appreciation and a self-critical fashion, contribute in important ways to shaping the fundamental concerns of

Dhimal indigenous political activism. To summarize, this chapter will show that an ethnographically informed analysis of these cultural politics helps us discern how the seemingly ‘abstract’ concepts of indigenous politics such as ‘indigenous culture,’ ‘identity,’ ‘traditional or customary institutions, ‘cultural autonomy’ and others, emerge meaningfully in Dhimals’ “indigenous analysis” (Kirsch, 2006) of their lived conditions and in their practical actions for their community and its future.

The Kendra As A Dhimal Village Writ Large

In the previous chapter I elaborated the Dhimal notion of the ‘village’ and the centrality of the Gramthan in the constitution of the village. The village shrine defines the village boundary in terms of specific territorial locations of rivers and other geographical markers (rocks, forests, etc.). Similarly, the Gramthan also encloses the village boundary in terms of its ritual space -- the village-specific deities and ancestral priests, who must be worshipped and given material offerings during the village ritual.

The Shrejat ritual is collectively performed at the village shrine, and the ways in which it is organized and performed helps to reconstitute the Dhimal village and the reciprocal relationships among Dhimal, their ecology, their deities, and other powerful beings. The village Majhi, Dhami and *Oja* (exorcist, shaman) are important social actors for the continuity of Dhimal as a community. In the past, the village Majhi, who represented the political authority of the village, was entrusted with the important responsibilities of maintaining social order, organizing labor for communal works and village rituals, and mediating their village relationships with other villages and the state. Each village also has its priest, Dhami, the ritual specialist, who performs the annual village ritual Shrejat at the Gramthan for the wellbeing of the villagers, their animals and

crops. Finally, there are many Oja, who have shamanic power to cure people when they become sick or when they are afflicted by ‘spiritual force.’

The traditional structure and organization of Dhimal village has been radically altered in the decades since the 1950s. Yet, even as they confronted the conditions affecting them and participated in the processes of social change, Dhimal also rebuilt and still continue to re-create their customary social organizations and village ways of life in new forms under emerging circumstances. While discussing their past with me, all Dhimal mentioned how their ancestors used to live in the malarial forest, where they were daily challenged by the threats of wild animals, diseases and epidemics. So they relied on the ritual power of Dhami and the shamanic power of Oja to protect them in such conditions of living. Later, when Dhimal began to subsist by farming, they also relied on the power of Dhami and Oja for growing more food, protecting their cattle and their families so that they could continue as a collective. They still collaborate to organize and collectively perform Dhimal annual ritual in the Gramthan for the collective wellbeing of the village.



Figure 11: The Gramthan of Laxmanpur village, Jhapa, 2010.

Thus the Gramthan, the village Majhi, Dhami and other customary social actors remain pivotal to Dhimal communal social life and their sense of belonging as villagers, and for becoming ‘Dhimal’ in emergent conditions of living. While their primary roles remain the same, they are increasingly important as community actors who can reimagine their customary village-making practices as tools to strengthen Dhimal political mobilization. In the emerging political transformations, beside placating their village deities and other non-human beings, Dhimal customary practices of village ritual can also create new possibilities, for example, to reclaim their ancestral territories for their political autonomy, hence making their village anew for the village (see Chapter 7).

I argue that Dhimal’s notion of ‘village’ is important to understand how this indigenous logic and practice of social organization not only integrates Dhimal villages into the Kendra and vice versa but also bestows on the Kendra its moral authority and social legitimacy to act for and to represent the whole Dhimal community, integrated as a collective village; this in effect makes the Kendra the head of this extended village. In terms of its organization, it is each Dhimal village, and not the administrative unit (the village development committee, VDC) as defined by the state, that is the village-level committee of the Kendra. Thus village Majhi, Dhami and community elders are also the village representatives of the Kendra. Since the village shrine constitutes a Dhimal village, the Kendra has built a Gramthan where it organizes the national Shrejat on behalf of all Dhimal villages to mark the ending of their annual ritual. Recognizing the important roles of Majhi and Dhami in Dhimal community, Dhimal have formed the central-level Majhi-Dhami committee in the Kendra which is entrusted with the responsibilities of carrying out Dhimal customary practices, formulating necessary social rules in order to standardize such

practices, and organizing the integrated national Shrejat ritual of all Dhimal, on behalf of the Kendra.

Hence by incorporating their indigenous practice of ‘village,’ the Kendra has itself become a Dhimal village writ large. In doing so, Dhimal indigenous activists have creatively used their cultural models and practices (for example, Gramthan, the ritual, the Majhi-Dhami) to gather moral and social legitimacy to the Kendra as the shared representative *jāti sanstha*. The representatives of village and regional committees elect the leadership of the Kendra, and this electoral politics as well as the cultural politics of structuring the Kendra as a village has strengthened the social legitimacy and communal power of the Kendra and its leaders. Hence the particular ways in which the Kendra constitutes itself as a Majhi are important to understand how Dhimal activists understand their right to ‘customary governance’ including their rights to decide about their ‘culture’ (or to reform their cultural practices).

‘Ours is a Praktik Dharma’: Shrejat and Indigeneity

Dhimal use the common Nepali term ‘*Dharma*’ to refer to the beliefs and practices they identify as their ‘religion.’ Dhimals believe that the state of their individual and family wellbeing, and the wellbeing of their fellow villagers, their animals and crops are influenced by the power of human and non-human agents who inhabit their social worlds. As I have discussed earlier, the Dhimal idea of the ‘village’ recognizes the mutual belonging of human, animals, plants, rivers, soils, and other spiritual beings in the village ecology, to which their everyday life and history is closely connected. There are *dir* or deities who inhabit Dhimal homes, village spaces, forests, rivers, soils, roads, and many other locations. Dhimal ancestors, the Dhami, Oja (shamans), and

the Majhi also belong to their pantheon of deities. Similarly, some deities of the dominant Hindu groups, like *Devi* and *Kali*, and those from other indigenous groups, particularly the ‘Kiranti’ deities, like ‘*Budda Subba*’ are also recognized and revered. These deities are agentive beings who can protect Dhimals and their village from illness and misfortunes.

A Dhimi, the village priest and ritual practitioner, is needed to placate and propitiate their *dera dir* (village deities) and spiritual agents. This Dhimi and his associates perform the Dhimal village ritual, the Shrejat Puja. They may be also called on to perform the funeral and other household rituals, but any Dhimal person who has acquired the knowledge of them can perform these rituals. The rituals for *sa dir* (the household deities) can be performed by this knowledgeable family member. Similarly, there are *de ranghe*, evil spirits in the form of witches and ghosts (see Diwas, 1984; S. Dhimal, 2009) who inhabit Dhimal social worlds and the forest. When these spiritual agents become unhappy or angry, they can inflict on people, their animals and crops various illness and misfortunes.

Dhimals make three major ritual offerings in a year. The temporality of these rituals closely corresponds with their agricultural calendar: *Shrejat ritual* in the beginning of the paddy plantation (*April-June*); the *Parwa ritual* during a period of decreased agricultural activity but a pre-harvest period of crop vulnerability (September-October) and then *Nuwagi* ritual, performed after the harvest (November) in order to offer the harvested crops to their household deities. I should emphasize here that one of the central practices of all Dhimal rituals is the recognition of all the agents and material objects that contribute towards their sustenance and wellbeing throughout the year. For example, during the *Parwa*, Dhimals recognize and worship their various deities, rivers, forests, gardens, soils, roads, cattle, agricultural tools and machines, water-taps, women’s looms, the grain-storage, cart, and any other objects they use in their everyday life.

Many scholars have regarded Dhimal 'religion' to be simply a 'belief in supernatural power' (Regmi, 1985, Panta, 1984). The hill Hindu who settled in Dhimal villages after 1950 found Dhimal religious practices to be "primitive." Some "armchair" ethnologists like Panta (1984), who served as a government employee in Jhapa and then published a book on the indigenous peoples of Jhapa, derogatively described Dhimal religious practices as a "religion of backward jāti" lacking "a developed philosophical foundation" like Hinduism. Such a Tylorian model of religion also reflects the perpetuation of the caste ideology and its ranking of various indigenous groups as impure based on their cultural practices (not their physical features as in racial ranking) in the state-imposed caste hierarchy. Hence the continuity of Dhimal religious practices and their claim of distinct, non-Hindu, ādivāsi identity, also need to be seen as subversive political practices through which they are also producing themselves in politically meaningful cultural forms (Jackson, 1995) such as non-Hindu, ādivāsi, nature worshippers and others in the emerging fields of power between them, the state and its dominant groups.

Scholars of indigenous political movements have highlighted how ritual becomes integrated into indigenous activism for myriad political projects such as revitalization movements (Wallace, 1956; Kehoe, 1989), claiming indigenous identity (Csordas, 1999; Shneiderman, 2009; Hangen, 2010), territoriality and history (Rappaport, 1990; Myers, 1991; Hill, 1988; Pettigrew, 1999; Surrallés and Hierro, 2005; Liffmann, 2011), and struggles against neoliberal capitalism (Kirsch, 2006). In the contexts of Nepal, the struggles against the making of the nation as a Hindu state and the political, cultural and economic domination of the ruling hill Hindus have been the collective agendas of the ādivāsi janjāti movement since the 1990 (see Bhattachan, 2003; Bhattachan and Pyakuryal, 1996; Lawoti, 2005; Gellner et. al. 1997; Hangen, 2007; Gellner, 2007; Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009). The category of 'ādivāsi janjāti' as a distinct

peoplehood is defined in opposition to the Hindu caste groups, thus making religious identity a salient feature of indigeneity in Nepal (Bhattachan, 2008).

Since the 1990s, indigenous people had collectively demanded the establishment of a secular nation-state and intensified social movements for de-Hinduization of their cultural practices through cultural revival and reforms. The nationwide impacts of the social movements of indigenous peoples and other religious minorities such as Buddhists, Christians and Muslims to reclaim their religious identities and to resist the two-century long state-led Hinduization project become evident from the falling share of Nepal's population identifying as 'Hindus' and addition of non-Hindu religious categories to the national censuses. These new categories include indigenous religions such as 'Kiranti' in the last two national censuses between 1990 and 2001 and 'Prakitik' (nature worshipper) in 2011.¹⁴⁵

In 2000, the Kendra officially named their religious practices as '*Prakitik Dharma*' (religion of nature) emphasizing the worship of 'nature' as the foundation of their religious practices. The decision was made during the Second National Convention of the Kendra in conjunction in the indigenous peoples' movement to record their indigenous religion in the national census. The Kendra decided that Dhimal should record their religion as '*Prakitik Dharma*' in the 2001 national census (Interview with the Kendra's chairperson; December, 2009). Nepal was a Hindu nation until 2006, and the indigenous groups, and other religious minorities (Buddhist, Christians, Muslims and others) were demanding that Nepal be declared a secular nation. The official

¹⁴⁵ The total of population reporting their religion as 'Hindu' declined from 86.5 percentile (1991) to 80.6 percentile in 2001. On the other hand, the number of population claiming their religion as Kiranti (that of the hill indigenous groups like the Rais, Limbus, Sunuwar, and others) increased from 1.7 percentile (1991) to 3.6 percentile (2001); that of Muslim increased from 3.4 percentile (1991) to 4.2 percentile (2001); people claiming Buddhists increased from 7.8 percentile (1991) to 10.7 (2001), and similarly the numbers of Christians increased from 0.2 percentile (1991) to 0.5 percentile (2001) (see Gurung 2003: 9, table 5). A new category of indigenous religion 'Prakitik' has been recorded in the 2011 census.

codification of Dhimal religion as ‘Prakitik Dharma’ by the Kendra was politically significant for Dhimal indigenous leaders. By identifying their religion, they rejected that constitutional recognition of Nepal as a Hindu nation. In doing so, they also exercised indigenous right to ‘self-determination’ to “freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development” (UNDRIP, Article 3).¹⁴⁶

The impacts of the larger indigenous movement of unmaking Nepal as a Hindu nation and the Kendra’s decision in support of it in shaping Dhimals’ assertion of being non-Hindu can be discerned in the 2001 census recording as well. The 2001 census did not categorize religion under ‘Prakitik’ but it reports that fifty percent of Dhimal as Hindus, eight percent of them as ‘Kiranti’ and thirty percent of them as under the ‘Other religious categories,’ which is most likely to include other indigenous religious practices (Dahal 2012 in CBS 2012, Annex 3.4: 133-135). The 2001 census figure that fifty percent Dhimal are Hindu can be considered important if we compare it with other Tarai ādivāsi groups. For instance, almost ninety-six percent Tharu, the largest Tarai ādivāsi group, and eighty-five percent of Rajhbansi, the largest Tarai ādivāsi group from Jhapa, overwhelming identified themselves as Hindu. Similarly, the fact that almost half of Dhimal self-identified themselves as ‘non-Hindu’ and that these people overwhelming identified themselves with indigenous religious practices such as ‘Kiranti’ and ‘Others’ attest to the impacts of the larger indigenous politics and the Kendra’s movement for asserting Dhimal indigeneity as non-Hindu groups.

¹⁴⁶ UN General Assembly, United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 2 October 2007, A/RES/61/295, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/471355a82.html> [accessed 25 April 2013]. Nepal has endorsed the United Nations Declaration of Indigenous Peoples’ Rights (UNDRIP).

The explanations provided by the chairperson of the Kendra also help us understand how Dhimal view the worship of nature to define their religious practices. In an interview with me, the chairperson explained why they declared Dhimal religion as ‘Prakitik Dharma’:

We're not Hindus. It is the religion of Chhetri-Bahun. We're not Buddhists either. We are not Muslims. Christianity is the religion of the ‘whites.’ So what is our religion? We debated. We worship *Dharti*, (Nep. the mother Earth). The Dharti is the *Prakitik*. Whatever religious creeds people may claim, but it is the Dharti that we belong to, from the birth to the death. Ours is a practical religion. We don't have a concept of heaven and hell. We don't have belief in an afterlife or the past life. What do we do? We worship this Dharti. Our lives, lives of all beings, are sustained because of what we get from this dharti. We acknowledge this. We acknowledge that we are *bhumiputra* (Nep. sons of soil/earth). We grow crops from this soil, eat them, and survive. When we die, we are buried under the very same soil. Thus we recognize, ‘*our life is of soil, and we go back to the soil.*’ We are nature worshippers (Interview, December, 2009, emphasis added).

This excerpt suggests that Dhimal indigenous leaders believe that each distinct social group or jāti has its own religion, and that they consider the ‘Hindu religion’ to be the religion of the dominant groups. His use of the notion of ‘*bhumiputra*,’ a common trope of indigeneity in South Asia (see Barnes, Gray and Kingsbury, 1995), along with his emphasis on the worship of ‘*dharti*’ (the earth, soil) suggests that the Kendra’s decision also resonates with the global discourse of indigenous movement which emphasizes that the indigenous life world and worldviews are more closely related to ‘nature’ (Castree, 2004). But he also relates the worship of Dharti to Dhimal beliefs about life, sustenance, death, and the relationship these have with the earth or Dharti. His explanations also allude to a Dhimal understanding of personhood that is not autonomous but exists in embedded relationships not only with their fellow human beings but also with the ecology of which they are a constituent part (Descola, 2005, Kirsch, 2006). The ways in which Dhimal perform their Shrejat and the meanings people derive from their ritual practices also show why Dhimal indigenous activists categorize their religion as ‘Prakitik Dharma’

Shrejat And Sociality With ‘Non-Human’ Beings

Shrejat is the most important, the only village ritual that Dhimals celebrate exuberantly by collectively performing the *puja* (Nep. ritual) once a year at the village shrine, the Gramthan, which is called *Dera Dir Than* (house of the deity) in Dhimali.¹⁴⁷ As I have discussed earlier, the Gramthan is central to the constitution of any Dhimal village. Dhimal village is equally a dwelling place of all of the deities that Dhimal worship in their Gramthan; some of these deities (Dh. *Sa dir, sa: house, dir: deity*) actually co-reside with Dhimal in their homes (see Diwas, 1982: 75-80). The Gramthan is generally located in the eastern side of the village, further away from the major village settlements, located by a forest or a river. However, with increasing immigration of people, alienation of land, and deforestation, many Gramthan shrines are located within the village settlements. In general, the Gramthan is built of simple design and construction. The Shrine is a triangle-shaped tin-roofed structure usually supported by wooden poles (sometimes cemented beams) surrounded by a square-shaped brick or cement wall two to three feet high. The space between the wall and the roof is open. The southern side is used as the entrance, and it is generally open with no wall or door. The northern corner of the shrine is always used for making the altar during the ritual.

Dhimal deities are named but they lack any specific iconographic forms and representations. During the rituals, the Dhimi makes six to nine tiny (three fingers full) piles of uncooked rice in circular rows for each individual deity to be worshipped. These tiny piles of uncooked rice represent an altar for each deity who will become ‘visible’ through the specific

¹⁴⁷ It is also called *Ashare puja* to emphasize the timing of the ritual i.e. the ritual ends in the month of Ashad (May-June). Shejat is also called Jatri puja in order to emphasize the fair (Jatri mela) that is organized alongside the Shrejat ritual. Other groups, particular Rajbhansi, the largest Tarai adivasi group from Jhapa, also call their village shrine: *Gramthan* (Gram means village in Sanskrit/Hindi and *Than* is common Nepali word for a scared place with a shrine).

offerings and animal sacrifices they ‘consume’ during the rituals. Small clay figurines of elephants and horses, which are offered during the Shrejat rituals, are left in the *than* (Nep. shrine).

The Gramthan consist of three to five shrines: the main *than*, and the biggest, hosts all Dhimal deities, which number from fifteen to thirty three across different villages (see Diwas, 1982; Dhimal, S. et. al. 2010) during the Shrejat ritual. Deities like *Maharaja* (male), *Budda Thakur* (male), *Rasati* (male), *Laxmi Berang* (female), *Konkai mai* (female, river), *Choumajhi* (male), *Ra Dhami* (male), *Devi* (female), hunting deity (male), and *jarwagelai* (ancestors, both male and female) are the major deities common to all Dhimal Gramthan. Beside these *dir*, each Gramthan houses its pantheon of village-specific deities during its Shrejat rituals. These various Dhimal *dir* are related to forest, river, soil, wild animals, ancestors, Dhami, Majhi, and other agents associated with spirits (for example, witches). In 1847, Brian H. Hodgson recorded that “all the rivers between the Cosi [Koshi] and the Torsha [Tista] are chief divinities of the Dhimal” (Hodgson [1847], 1880: 127). And these major rivers which flow through Dhimal village territories are still worshipped by Dhimal as their elemental deities in the Gramthan.

Local rivers are important markers of the boundary of any Dhimal village. Dhami must perform a special ritual if he needs to cross his village rivers. The head Dhami (*Raj Dhami*) told me that such ritual is necessary to acknowledge the ritual realms of other villages inhabited by other deities and spiritual beings with whom he may not have established the required ritual relationships. By performing this ritual, the head Dhami also recognizes the authority of the local Dhami as the priest of the village Gramthan. Thus a village Gramthan also defines the ritual territory of the village priest, and other village priests must recognize this ritual territory.

Forest deities and other (non-human) forest dwellers dominate the ritual space outside the main shrine at the Gramthan. During the Shrejat ritual, a small two-storied shrine is built at the northeast side of the Gramthan for the Dhimal ‘hunting deity’ or *Shikari* (Nep. hunter), the representative of the ‘forest deities.’¹⁴⁸ Dhimal place an effigy of a bamboo bow and arrow on the shrine’s roof for the *Shikari* deity. The special allocation of the altar and ritual offering to the forest deities signify Dhimal connection with the forest, particularly their history of belonging in the fringes of the Tarai’s forest (see Chapters 2 and 3).

Similarly, another small altar, in the form of an effigy of a cage made of grass is placed on the southwest side of the shrine. In this altar, Dhimal give ritual offerings (rice, incense, betel leaves, banana leaf, etc.) to the wild animals, birds, rodents and other forest dwellers which often will prey on their crops and thus damage their agricultural yields. Although it is motivated by the prospects of better harvests, Dhimal ritual feeding of these animals also shows that they recognize these animals as agentive actors whose needs for food destroy their crops. “We say to these wild animals, birds, rodents – Please, accept our offerings. Don’t destroy our crops. Eat these foods in return!” one Dhimi explained to me. Thus, the ritual also facilitates Dhimal communication with these wild animals who must be propitiated with food offerings before being asked to refrain from preying on their crops. The ritual emphasizes the mutual coexistence of various beings based on an ethnic of reciprocity.

Since Dhimal deities ride on elephant and horse, they build a special stable, represented by a short wooden pole or tree stem erected on the ground, to feed and care for these two animals. People offer the figurines of elephant and horse made of clay or paper (which can be erected on the ground) so that their deities can ride on these animals and roam around places. Hence the

¹⁴⁸ Shikari is a common deity among other indigenous groups from the hills as well as from the plains.

social geography of the Dhimal shrine and the various deities whom they recognize and worship during the Shrejat ritual illustrate the ways in which Dhimal social worlds are constituted and shaped by their reciprocal relationships with their ancestors, deities, and other beings. Dhimal explanations (to me) regarding why they perform Shrejat ritual further illustrate the nature of these relationships.

‘This Ritual Was Like The Doctor In The Past’: Explaining Ritual Practices

Dhimal consider their rituals to be one of the means of sustaining their lives by properly worshipping and propitiating their household and village deities. Dhimal generally explain that they perform the Shrejat ritual so that their families, animals, and crops will be protected, and no calamities will befall them and their village. They also relate their ritual practices to the past ecological conditions their ancestors confronted in order to survive and thrive in the Tarai. The explanations provided by JB Dhimal, a village Majhi and a dedicated Dhimal cultural activist, show how Dhimal understand the history of Shrejat ritual.

How and why did we begin this ritual? We discussed and inquired about this with our elders. They told us this. In the beginning, we lived in jungali condition. We had to fear the wild animals; elephants and tigers killed many people. Dhimal used to die because of epidemics and diseases. Our paddy used to be destroyed by insects and bugs, by birds, by rats, and others. You know that we offer them (these animals and insects) puja (ritual) today. So how do we avoid these things? Then our ancestors thought of it (pause). Then there were these diseases of *biphor* and *haijaa* (small pox and cholera) that came to the village. Many people died. Some villages were completely eradicated, the whole village! What to do then? There were some *jannē manchē* (Nep. people who know; knowledgeable person). They used to encircle the whole village with their spiritual power so that such diseases would not touch the village. So in order no to protect the crops from the insects, bugs, and wild animals, and to avoid dangers of elephant, tigers and diseases, our ancestors began doing this ritual.

We offer *puja* to all of them asking them not to harm our crops and us. This is our *puja*. Nothing special. The main thing was our survival. There were no doctors and hospitals then. This (the ritual) was the one thing that we could rely for our survival. Now, the *keta haru* (Nep: literally boys, but used as the youths) may ask why do we need this

ritual? That's a different issue. But then in the past, *the ritual was like the today's doctor who could save us from almost everything*. It could protect us, and our crops from everything -- the epidemics and the wild animals.... Now, of course, there are no wild tigers and bears. They are people everywhere, and they have become like them (dangerous, harmful). But still our crops need protection from diseases, insects and bugs. So we perform this Ashare Puja at the *Than of Maharaja* (Nep. literally means, the great king deity) (Interview with JB Dhimal, April 14, 2008, emphasis added).

We can see from this passage that Dhimal consider the Shrejat ritual to be a set of historically constituted practices their ancestors adopted to overcome the challenges of living and surviving in the adversarial conditions of the Tarai. His vivid descriptions of the ecological conditions of the Tarai resonate with Dhimals' dominant narratives about how their ancestors (including their grandparents or parents) once lived in the Tarai (see Chapter 3). JB repeatedly emphasized the protective power of the ritual, which I interpret as Dhimal understanding of their culturally mediated capacity to overcome these ecological conditions that threatened their survival in the past. His emphasis on the ritual power also highlights the roles of Dhimal ancestors, the *jannē manchē* or the knowledgeable ancestors, in keeping Dhimal safe and prospering in the past. Dhimal acknowledge their ancestors and pay them ritual tributes during the Shrejat. Thus the Shrejat is also a ritual which commemorates Dhimal ancestors as agentive historical actors. Notice that JB Dhimal also highlighted how the ritual enabled Dhimal to establish relationships with other beings with whom they shared the place. So the Shrejat underlines the sociality among various inhabitants of the Tarai since the days of the ancestors. Hence the ritual is a historically instituted practice of making an uninhabitable place habitable; it is about place-making.

As becomes evident from the interview excerpts under discussion here, Dhimal connect the Shrejat ritual with the practical conditions of everyday life (sickness, illness, success, failure, draught, etc.). They call on their deities to help them overcome these conditions and for that aid they pledge to reciprocate with ritual offerings in acknowledgement of the deities. Such acts of

ritual promise, called *manta* in Dhimali or ‘*bhakal*’ in Nepali, are a common practice across religious-social groups in Nepal. For Dhimal, the Shrejat is the most appropriate ritual event to enact their *manta*. The following ethnographic example will show the significance of *bhakal* and its enactment during the Shrejat.

While returning from the Raja Rani *Shrejat puja* in 2009, I met a group of six family members walking along a graveled road passing through a forest. Of them, there was a senior woman who seemed to be walking with some difficulties. They had a bicycle on which a small boy was seated while being pushed. I stopped my scooter, introduced myself and told them that I lived in Karikosi village with a Dhimal family. They were from Dhap Goan, a settlement nearby where I was staying for my fieldwork. I offered a ride to the grandmother; she accepted my offer happily with a note of blessings. Knowing that she was not used to riding a scooter, I drove the machine very slowly. The reduced speed enabled us to talk together on the dusty graveled road that stretches along the forest located between the highway (Kane Pokhari bazar) in the south, and Letang bazar to the north (see Map, 3). I asked the grandmother if she had come to the Raja Rani Gramthan many times. I remembered her saying:

No, this was my first time. I cannot walk uphill. But we had a *bhakal* this time. My grandson became very, very ill, when he was thirteen months. Then I called on (prayed) our Raja Rani Gramthan and asked it to cure my grandson. I made a *bhakal* saying ‘If my grandson is cured, I will offer a *bhale* (Nep. roaster) during the Shrejat puja.’ My grandson recovered later. That’s why we all came today to do the puja here. We offered one *bhale*, one *pothi* (hen) and a pair of *parewa* (Nep. pigeon)’ (field notes, April 15, 2009).

So the grandmother, despite her physical condition, walked up hill to the Raja Rani Gramthan because she made a *bhakal*. To fail to honor the *bhakal* would be morally wrong and could destabilize their relationship with the deities. *Bhakal* is a ritual commitment to abide by the reciprocal relationship that one has promised to sustain. I argue that Dhimal practices of

bhagal help us to understand how they mediate their reciprocal relationship with their deities through a cultural ethic that permeates their everyday social relations with their fellow villagers and kin members. When they need support from others, it is habitual for Dhimal to call on their kin members and fellow villagers. Such reliance on one another's support and help, as my discussion of Dhimal marriage practices shows, is shaped by their sense of membership in the Gramthan and their embedded ethics of reciprocity among villagers and kin members. It is a generalized practice of sociality in Dhimal villages. In a like manner, Dhimal also call on their deities for their help in their personal and family problems. They must propitiate the deities with ritual offerings to get the desired favor from them. If they cannot make such an offering immediately, then they must make a pledge, the *bhagal*, that they will enact the promised offering during the *Shrejat* or the *Parwa* ritual. Ones' family's kin members and fellow villagers can become upset or angry if the everyday ethic of reciprocity is not followed. So too, Dhimal deities and other powerful non-human agents can become angry and unhappy if people breach their promised *bhagal*. In such cases, the deities too can afflict people with sickness or misfortunes. Dhimal are very concerned about making and enacting the *bhagal*.

For example, if Dhimal consume their first harvest without offering it to their household deity, the *Sadi Berang* (the most revered and feared household deity, a woman deity), they will suffer from severe abdominal pain, vomiting, diarrhea, and other afflictions which will 'take out' the food that was not shared with the household deities who protect them and their crops. In extreme cases, family members can even die due to the breach of reciprocity and because of their failure to acknowledge that the productivity of their crops are not solely the product of their family labor. Commensality and sharing of food is a common cultural ethos that shapes Dhimal everyday interactions with their fellow villagers.

When someone has disputes or conflicts with their kin members and fellow villagers, Dhimal try to placate them by offering a bottle of *gora* (liquor) or some other kind of gift. They can also seek the help of the village Majhi to mediate their disputes or bad feelings with their fellow villagers. Similarly, Dhimal seek the help of *Oja* and the village priest, Dhami, to mediate between them and their deities and other powerful non-human agents. They propitiate them through ritual offerings, the most important being the animal sacrifice. People's everyday sustenance is also dependent on the wellbeing of the village as a whole. They must be thankful for the help of the other dwellers and spiritual forces that contribute towards their sustenance and continuity as a collective social group. Thus the Shrejat is the most important ritually regulated means of expressing Dhimals' gratitude to their deities and other forces, and of seeking their continued support for the protection and wellbeing of all villagers.

Shrejat Ritual As Community-Making Practice

The Shrejat is the only Dhimal village ritual which is collectively organized and performed. And it is made a truly communal ritual through concrete practices and symbolic representations. The village Gramthan becomes the center stage of the Shrejat performance. During the Shrejat, the Gramthan not only enshrines its sacredness, it also becomes a place where Dhimals show their collective hospitality to their deities by offering food and other ritual offerings. They facilitate the mobility of their deities by bringing them effigies of their favorite rides- the elephant and the horse. The village Dhami, on behalf of the entire village, calls on all the village deities and welcomes them to the Gramthan so that villagers can make the ritual offerings. The preparation and organization of the Shrejat reinstitutes Dhimal village and its customary social organization.

Dhimal collect some amount of uncooked rice (about one kilogram) and cash (fifty to one hundred rupees) from each individual household to finance the ritual. The rice collected from individual households is mixed (collectivized) and used in the Shrejat ritual both as the ritual offering and as the Gramthan's *prasad* (Nep. the items offered to the deities that is redistributed to devotees as deities' blessing). The uncooked rice, the major cereal crop of Dhimal, is also the principal ritual object that is used to make the deities' altars. The rice so collected from each individual families is used as '*achetta*,' the ritual item that Dhami uses as offering to communicate with the deities. After the ritual, the *achetta* becomes the Gramthan's *prasad* - a ritual item possessing the deities' blessing. The Dhami puts the uncooked rice as *tika* (rice mark) on devotee's forehead; people take the *achetta* back homes as *prasad*.

I argue that the transformation of the value of the uncooked rice into *prasad* through collective contribution of all village households is an important act of community making in the Shrejat ritual. JB Dhimal told me that collected uncooked rice represents the individual household's offering during the Shrejat ritual. I would further argue that the transformation of uncooked rice (an agricultural product) into a ritual object emphasizes the conjoined efforts of the villagers and their deities in producing the means of livelihood for the individual family. During the *Parwa* ritual (September-October), Dhimals also pay special ritual offering to the farm.¹⁴⁹ Dhami or any other knowledgeable person will perform rituals asking their deities to protect their ripening crops so that the crop yields will be maximized. They worship the local rivers that irrigate their farms, and bring out some sand from the bottom of one river. The sand is then mixed with soil; the Dhami asks the deities to bless the mixture of soil and sand.

¹⁴⁹ Parwa is a three-day long ritual. I did not observe this particular ritual event. The description is based on interviews and discussions.

Individual Dhimals take this sand and soil mixture and spread it in their farms in order to protect and enhance the vitality of their crops (paddy).

After the harvest, the individual family acknowledges the contribution of their deities in the process of agricultural production, and they must offer the first harvest to their household deities by performing the *Nwaugi* ritual (November). The transformation of uncooked rice into *prasad* during the Shrejat ritual emphasizes this collaboration between the individual and his deities in producing the means of subsistence. This also shows that Dhimals recognize that production of means of survival (here symbolized by rice) depends not only on peoples' labor, money, technology and knowledge. The blessing and labor of their deities and the ritual power of their village Dhami are equally important.

The Majhi, though he is not a ritual practitioner, plays the leadership role in the organization of the Shrejat. The ritual performance of the Shrejat begins at the village Majhi's home the evening before the actual ritual. On that evening, one representative from each family, who are members of the village Gramthan, must gather at the Majhi's home and participate in the ritual of '*Jagaram*' (Nep. staying awake). During the *Jagaram puja*, the Dhami and his associates prepared a ritual altar for the deities who will be worshipped the next day in the Gramthan. The Dhami will pay special ritual offerings to the effigies of an elephant and horses, which remain tied to a bamboo stick. Then a female member of the Majhi family (Majhi's wife or his daughter or daughter-in-law), dressed in new *bohna*, offers special hospitality to the deities, and their rides, the elephant and horses, by offering food and other ritual offerings. Hence by hosting the Jagaram ritual through which the villagers offer the deities hospitality, the Majhi becomes the sponsor and the host of the ritual and deities. During the actual Shrejat ritual in the Gramthan, the ancestral Majhi of the village is also recognized and worshipped as a deity.

Thus unlike the individual villagers, Majhi and Dhami not only mediate with the deities, they become deities as well.

My discussions so far have shown the pivotal role of Dhami in the Shrejat ritual and how it reinforces the importance of Dhami for the continuity of the Dhimal community. The Shrejat ritual at the Gramthan begins first by making offering to the ancestral Dhami, who is the most knowledgeable agent at placating the deities and other powerful beings. “We first to pray our ancestor Dhami asking him to bless and guide our ritual offerings. We ask him to check if our ritual offerings are complete. If we have not made proper offering, then one of us (the ritual performers) will be possessed by the power of ancestral Dhami and that person will communicate to us through his state of trance” the head Dhami told me in 2009. The Shrejat both signifies and legitimizes the importance Dhimals assign to the social position and role of the Dhami. Once during my participation in the Parwa ritual at his home in Karikoshi, Dai explained to me the importance of Dhami:

The Dhami is very, very important to us. He has a big responsibility for providing shelter, clothing, water and grain in our village. He carries this responsibility. If he cannot make our deities happy, we will starve and suffer. We have given him the responsibility of carrying this *parampara* since the ancient time. We don't have power like him to make our deities happy and satisfy. Therefore, we need to worship Dhami during Shrejat and during our *parwa* ritual at home (Interview with Dai, October 12, 2009).

When the Shrejat ritual is completed the next day, Dhami will ritually end the Shrejat by thanking the deities followed by the ‘raising of the altar’ i.e. the act of picking up the altar and the offerings (animal sacrifices and other *prasad*). Then the Dhimal ritual team proceeds towards the Majhi's home. The procession ends at the Majhi's home where the ritual offerings will be purified with water and then be kept at the Majhi's home. The Majhi then hosts the feast for the Shrejat ritual team, and the Shrejat *prasad*, the meat and the uncooked rice, will be

equally distributed to all the individual families of the village. The beginning and ending of the Shrejat ritual at the Majhi's home, and the distribution of the *Shrejat prasad* to the individual village families from his home after the ritual contribute towards the social production of the Majhi's position and his legitimacy. Similarly, because of his inevitable role in the ritual, the significance of Dhami is reinforced through the Shrejat ritual. Majhi and the Dhami are worshipped as one of the Shrejat deities in the Gramthan.

The significance of the Shrejat in Dhimal social and religious life, and the ways in which Dhimals collectively perform their Shrejat ritual contribute in important ways to reproduce the social legitimacy of the traditional social positions of *Dhami*, *hanuwa*, *Oja* and *Majhi*. The Kendra also derives its social recognition from the fact that the social actors representing Dhimal customary institutions like Dhami, Majhi, Oja, and Hanuwa are also respected leaders in the Kendra. Their leadership adds moral authority to the Kendra's cultural politics of defining and reforming 'Dhimal culture.' On the other hand, the active roles and the leadership of Majhi, Dhami, Hanuwa, Oja and other cultural activists in organizing and executing the performance of the Shrejat ritual consolidate their recognition as important 'cultural activists' among the villagers.

The Making Of Shrejat As A 'Rastriya Puja'

I began this chapter by describing the final Shrejat ritual performance of the year (2007) at the Kendra. This ritual was organized and participated in by thousands of people as the national ritual of Dhimal. The Kendra's representation of Shrejat as a national ritual can be seen as a claim that Dhimal is a distinct Jāti with its definite historical territoriality, 'culture,' language and a religion, that is, a nation. This claim of themselves as a nation becomes powerfully visible in

the Dhimal political movement for a ‘Dhimal autonomous state’ under the federal restructuring of Nepal, which I will discuss in the next chapter. With the declaration of Nepal as a secular republic in 2006, the state recognized many non-Hindu rituals and religious days as ‘national holidays.’ In the last few years, Dhimal have been demanding that the day they celebrate the final annual Shrejat ritual should be declared a ‘national holiday’ of Nepal as well. Thus by reviving their village ritual and collectively organizing and celebrating it together, the transformation of the individual village Shrejat into a national ritual has opened up the possibility of claiming new rights within the state in the emerging political contexts. It also illustrates how Dhimal village ritual, as a materiality of Dhimal Jāti identity and culture, has become a constituent part of Dhimal indigenous activism, hence an important political practice.

This remaking of the Shrejat as national ritual shows us how historical constituted village-making practices can become a political project for claiming indigenous identity and rights. There are three important factors that help to establish the Kendra’s Shrejat a ‘truly’ national ritual for Dhimal activists. First, consider the organizer of the ritual. We can begin by asking, could any organization other than the Kendra organize a Shrejat ritual on the scale of a national ritual? Based on my ethnographic observation and analysis, I can claim that the kind of moral and communal authority the Kendra has over what Dhimal consider their culture and customary practices is unmatched by any other organization such as ethnic associations of Dhimal affiliated with political parties. The Kendra as I have discussed earlier is not only the ‘official’ representative jāti organization. It is an extension of Dhimal village and its customary social-political organization.

The second important factor which helps to establish the Shrejat performed by the Kendra as a national ritual is the collectivization of its organization and performance. Each village

contributes money, goods, and labor for the ritual and sends its representatives to participate at the Jagaram ritual, the ritual of staying awake to welcome the deities. Hence all Dhimal villages, like an individual member of the Kendra's Gramthan, the collective village shrine, actively participate to organize the ritual. But unlike the village ritual which is performed primarily for the well-being of the members of a particular village, the national ritual organized by the Kendra is organized for the well-being of all Dhimal villages and all Dhimal including those who are living outside the village, such as in Kathmandu, where they do not have Gramthan. Hence this spatial encompassment of the Shrejat ritual organized by the Kendra becomes very important distinction for Dhimal.

In his important work on nation as an "imagined political community," Anderson (1983: 26) emphasizes how the rise of print capitalism like the newspaper and the novel made it possible for the imagination of people living in distant places nevertheless to imagine themselves inhabiting the same discretely measured time (homogeneous empty time), which is somewhat analogous to imagining an entire community (the nation) moving together through history. In other words, Anderson emphasizes that the experience of simultaneity mediated by print capitalism is fundamental to the creation of the nation as an imagined community. His notion of the experience of simultaneity helps to explain why the Kendra has tried to make the Shrejat into a national ritual where Dhimal share the significance of being in the same place, participating in the same event on the same day. The importance of the collective experience of place also asks us to reconsider Anderson's important analytical framework by focusing on the role of geographical imagination in creating a nation.

I argue that the collective organization of the Shrejat at the Kendra, which brings together Dhimal from their many villages, and Kathmandu as well, makes it possible for Dhimal to

experience the simultaneity which the village-level ritual lacks. Typically, each village may organize its Shrejat on different days between the months of Baishak and Ashar. On the contrary, the collective performance Shrejat at the Kendra is not only for all Dhimal, but it is simultaneously participated in by all Dhimal villages *on the same day* and *at the same place*. Hence it makes the Kendra's Shrejat a national ritual. In this way, the sense of collective participation, the sense of being in the same place together is equally important for fostering the sense of an imagined territorial community. In Chapter 7, I will discuss how Dhimal tried to make the Shrejat their national ritual in order to reclaim their ancestral village in a place where no Dhimal currently lives. Thus by making Shrejat the national ritual of Dhimal jāti, Dhimal have innovatively blended their localized ritual practices and historically constituted practices of village-making to mediate and act on the emerging political-economic forces that affect them and their communities.

These efforts to give national character to the Shrejat are also prompted by practical concerns among dhimal activists about costs and the duration of village Shrejat celebrations. Many Dhimal activists, like the chairperson of the Kendra whom I introduced in the beginning of this chapter, pointed to escalating ritual spending as '*bikriti*' or "bad" practices. In order to address these concerns, the Kendra has begun shortening the allowed time during which each village must complete its Shrejat ritual. Thus by instituting new practices of celebrating Shrejat collectively by all villages at one central place as a national ritual, the Kendra is also enacting the politics of "ritual time compression."

Politics Of Ritual Time Compression

The villagers hosting the Shrejat ritual celebrate the occasion in festive ways. Kin members and friends from other villages come to the village hosting the Shrejat ritual, and they will visit their kin members' homes where they will be offered food and drinks. Unlike in the marriage ritual where the wedding family hosts the feast, each and every individual family in the village feast their visiting kin members during the Shrejat ritual. Pork is the main dish of the day, and every family cooks it so that the village becomes scented with the delicious aroma of the pork. Married sisters and daughters come to visit their natal family with their husbands and children during the Shrejat. They are the most expected guests of the family. The sisters and daughters come with special traditional gifts of food, and in return, their natal families send them home with meat and food for all of their family members. Beside ones' close family members, anyone they know can visit them that day, and they will host them with their best hospitality. Richer families, the Majhi, political leaders, and other respected community members will have more guests during the Shrejat. Therefore the social celebration of the Shrejat helps to renew and connect individual family relations with their kin members and friends across multiple villages.

Some senior Dhimals emphasized that the festive celebration of the Shrejat ritual needs to be historicized in terms of the agricultural calendar and its varying demands of time and labor. According to this interpretation, once the agricultural work begins, people would become so engulfed in their agricultural activities that they would not be able to see and meet their kin members who live in other villages for many months. Knowing this, they would meet their kin members during the Shrejat ritual before the commencement of the cultivation of paddy. "During the malarial time, people did not know if they would see their kin members next season.

So they would meet and eat together during the Shrejat,” Babai Dhimal explained to me the rationale behind such festive celebrations of Shrejat in the past. But other Dhimal indigenous activists (reformists) claim that Dhimal began celebrating Shrejat in festive ways only after the 1960s (DJBK, nd). Whatever might have been the context for the festive celebration of Shrejat, it puts additional financial pressure on individual families. Given the economic marginality of Dhimal now that they have to buy almost all the things they need to host the Shrejat celebration, the economic challenges of doing Shrejat celebration in the ‘traditional way’ are real and hard felt by individual families.

Dhimal indigenous activists seemed to be very worried about the economic costs of the Shrejat celebration. They worry that the long duration of Shrejat celebration adds to the economic burden borne by the individual families. They argue, based on their detailed calculation, that these ritual costs can further degrade the already impoverished economic conditions of the majority of Dhimal families. Since families go on extended visits from village to village during the Shrejat rituals, so Kendra activists argue, many Dhimal school-going children have lower school attendance. In order to address these problems, the Kendra has recently shortened the period of Shrejat celebrations by fixing the beginning and ending day of the ritual.¹⁵⁰ By shortening the duration, the Kendra activists believe that many villages will host their ritual on a single day so that the numbers of people visiting other villages will decrease (and so lower the individual expenses). Similarly it will also lower the absentee rate for Dhimal students. Hence the Kendra is intervening to regulate when and also how people should

¹⁵⁰ When I first participated in the final Shrejat ritual organized by the Kendra in 2007, the last day for any village to have their Shrejat was the 15th of Ashar. I was told that this decision was made with the consent of the all village Dhimi and Majhi. In 2007, it was reported that all villages complied with the new end day for the Shrejat. In 2008, the Kendra further shortened the ritual duration requiring all villages to end the Shrejat ritual by the second day of Ashar. Two villages were reported not to have abided by the Kendra’s decision. I was told that 6 villages did not listen to Kendra in 2010, just before I left Nepal.

celebrate their village rituals by providing a seeming logic of economic rationality, informed by the dominant ideologies of modernization and *bikas*.

I argue that such concerns with ‘economizing the ritual practices,’ a common practice of movements for cultural revival in Nepal (Guneratne, 2002; Fisher, 2001), needs a “thicker ethnographic” approach (Geertz 1973: 5-6, 9-10; Ortner, 1995) to indigenous emphasis on cultural reforms.¹⁵¹ We need to take into account multiple factors and structural conditions which have influenced Kendra’s politics of and justification for ritual time compression. Dhimal in general and those who are economically vulnerable in particular affirmed the economic burden of the festive celebrating of Shrejat. Dai’s family with whom I stayed for my fieldwork did not have any stable source of income, and they owned very little land to support their family needs. They told me that they spent about five thousand rupees in 2007 for the Shrejat celebration, and this is a substantial amount for the family.

“Gāro chhā!, it is difficult,” he used to comment on my asking if it were financially challenging to celebrate the Shrejat ritual by inviting their extended families, kin members and friends across Dhimal villages. Yet Dai and his family had the greatest zeal for the ritual; they seemed to have managed to do it, perhaps by borrowing money or selling whatever paddy they may have stored or bhauji (Dh. elder’s brother wife) may have woven more cloth pieces to be sold in the market. If Dhimal are spending more on celebrating the ritual, then we may ask why do they do it? Individual families spend money to host feasts for their married sisters, kin members and friends from another villages during Shrejat. In other words, Dhimal are

¹⁵¹ Such concerns with ‘economizing’ the ritual practices and emphasis on “cost-cutting” (Manzardo and Sharma, 1975) of the cultural practices are common themes raised by other ādivāsi groups in their indigenous organizing (Guneratne, 2002; Fisher, 2001) as in the caste associations in India (see Guneratne, 2002, for an excellent overview. These concerns on “reforms” also echo with the dominant ideas of “jāti improvement,” state-led modernization discourses, as well as the impacts of the leftist political parties which used the ideas of ‘*kuriti*.’ See my discussions in Chapter 5 on for the political-economic contexts within which ideas of ‘*kuriti*’ and ‘*bikriti*’ became the focus of their reform efforts.

reproducing their social relationships, kinship, and themselves through these ritual celebrations. By investing financially in the festive celebration, people are enacting everyday “ordinary ethics” (Lambek, 2010) of being and becoming Dhimal and producing honor for their families, and the village. Dai and his family will be equally welcomed and treated with honor when they visit other villages during their Shrejat. Thus people, as moral actors who embedded in the localized social worlds of social relations based on ethics of mutual obligation, duty and reciprocity, participate in the community-making practice of Shrejat celebration.

But the structural conditions of economic marginality in which these Dhimal live make participating in the prestige economy, the practice of maintaining a family honor through enactment of their shared ethos of reciprocity, extremely challenging. Yet as an individual family, Dai cannot initiate any change to shorten the duration of the ritual. The village Majhi, even if he should want to, cannot intervene on his own to regulate the duration of the ritual or the individual family expenses. Any such effort by an individual will risk their being disconnected from the village. On the other hand, the Kendra, as the representative jāti organization, can act like a Majhi, when all the village representatives come together to discuss these issues and to come up with a tangible solution. Any intervention by the state or any other non-representative entity like political parties or NGOs on this issue would be regarded as unethical and people would strongly resist them, particularly in the post-1990 period in Nepal. The Kendra is a representative institution; its moral authority and social legitimacy primarily come from its embeddedness in and relationship with Dhimal. Therefore, the Kendra’s politics of time compression also illustrates how Dhimal as a community exercises its sovereign right to deal with issues arising from their cultural practices such as Shrejat.

Shortening the ritual period is an innovative middle-ground solution which recognizes the customary rights of each village to organize its annual ritual, even as it tries to address, to some extent, the issues of ritual costs and lower school attendance of Dhimal students during the ritual period. The conflict between Dhimal festival time and the school calendar elucidates how Dhimal political marginality can impinge on their collective rights to celebrate their culture. Dhimal lack of access to and control over the state policy-making processes, in this case, the power to decide the school calendar informed by the local cultural contexts, is an important part of this conflict. It is interesting that schools in the Tarai region close for forty-five days during the summer beginning from the month of Ashar, the month when the Kendra ends its annual Shrejat ritual. If Dhimal had rights to participate meaningfully in setting the annual educational calendar of the local schools, it is likely that Dhimal students would be able to celebrate their cultural festivals without worrying about missing their exams. Note that the Hindu school children have school holidays during which their most important festivals and rituals occur. Now many other non-Hindu groups have also been granted similar rights. In the last few years Dhimal have been demanding that Shrejat should also be entitled to be deemed 'national holidays,' hence the importance of the promoting Shrejat as a national ritual for Dhimal.

The last Shrejat ritual that I attended was in 2010 at the Kendra's premises, a month (June) before my return to the University. The majority of Dhimal villages had complied with the new date fixed by the Kendra, though the numbers of villages resisting the ritual time compression grew from two to six between 2008 and 2010. This was a clear indication of an emergent conflict between the village and the Kendra, still many villages changed the date for their Shrejat in order to comply with the new ritual calendar. I did not directly inquire if the shortened ritual time helped in lowering the ritual costs. My discussion with Dai indicated that the organization

of the Shrejat ritual by many villages on a single day had lowered his family's spending by some amount. He seemed to be in agreement with the logic of these intended reforms.

In 2010, the chairman of the Kendra, who had visited many villages that year in order to observe how people actually celebrated Shrejat, said to us (the participants at the *Jagaram* evening), "people don't listen to (us) in the matter of spending for the ritual feast." He claimed that Dhimal were spending more money now. He was referring to the impact of the remittance economy on the festive celebration of Shrejat. Now more and more Dhimal families have at least one family member employed in '*bidesh*' (Nep. foreign places), mostly working in labor-intensive jobs in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and also in Iraq, Israel and Malaysia. Cash remittance from a family member employed in *bidesh* has become an important component of the local economy. I participated in many village-level Shrejat celebrations during my fieldwork and observed that the families linked with the *bidesh* economy tended to have more 'guests' during the ritual. There was an indication that the interface between the circulation of remittance money and the ritual celebrations seemed to highlight the emerging class differentiation and the prestige economy among Dhimals.

In 2009, I visited the homes of the two of the central-level Dhimal indigenous leaders during their village Shrejat ritual. Both completely embodied the ritual celebration; their homes were full of people- sisters and daughters, kin members, party members (non-Dhimal) and the ethnographer. Contrary to the Kendra's rhetoric of blame in tagging their own community members as "careless spenders in feast and drinking," these Dhimal leaders highlighted to me the significance of Shrejat in strengthening their kin relations, especially between brother and sister. The trope of 'economizing the ritual,' though it resonates with the concerns of Dhimals in

general, is rejected by people for whom Shrejat is more about reanimating their social relationships with their kin members and friends than a budgetary calculation of sociality.

Even though the Shrejat is historically constituted practice, collectively organized and performed by villagers, it does not have the ritual template emphasizing collective resistance against external forces or dramatization of structural relationships of dominations which anthropologists have described for rituals of many other indigenous groups in Nepal (Sagant, 1985, Holmberg, 2000; Shneiderman, 2005; Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2002). The Dhimal priests and others did not invoke the languages of ‘resistance’ while explaining to me why they perform the ritual. Their emphasis on the mutual sociality, reciprocity and recognition of all the entities and beings helping one another to survive and subsist in their ‘village’ does not correspond to their lived experiences of being Dhimal in the multiethnic local social worlds governed by the extremely exclusionary Hindu state.

I argue that the ritual production of their village (cf. Mines, 2002), even as Dhimal were progressively becoming landless and marginalized is inherently a political practice. In the multi-ethnic social compositions of the Village Development Committee (VDCs), the village-level political unit of local government, Dhimal make up less than ten percent of the total population in the VDCs of Morang district. Despite their political-economic marginality and state-led assimilative policies, Dhimal have persisted in retaining their religious ways of life and traditional social organization even when they were at the same time “modernizing” themselves. As Merlan (2009: 18-21) reminds us, “indigeneity” is not a permanent condition that is “simply there,” but a historically constructed interaction between parties engaged in unequal power relations. Drawing from Merlan, I contend that the centrality of the Gramthan for the constitution of Dhimal village became an important marker of Dhimals’ *ādivāsiness* and Shrejat

as important ritual of Dhimal place-making in the emerging unequal power relationships between various groups and the Nepali state after the 1950s.

The fact the majority of Dhimal villages still have their village shrines shows that those who settled in Dhimal villages seemed to have respected the local Gramthan, maybe out of mutual recognition, respect and fear. Non-Dhimal from the local villages have become 'members' of the Gramthan; they contribute money and rice for the ritual and receive blessings from the Dhimal priest and deities. So the village shrine is a powerful maker of Dhimal aboriginality in the village that proclaims their historical, religious and social relationships to the land in the contexts of their collective experiences of marginality as a Jāti. Hence by annually performing Shrejat ritual, Dhimal also claim their ādivāsi identity and territorial belonging in the village. In the same way, by making Shrejat a national ritual, the Kendra is claiming Dhimal to be a nation, a collective people with distinct ways of life and connected to an ancestral geography.

Chapter Seven

‘This Is Our Ancestral Place’: Place-making, History and Indigenous Territoriality

A Place Called ‘Raja Rani’

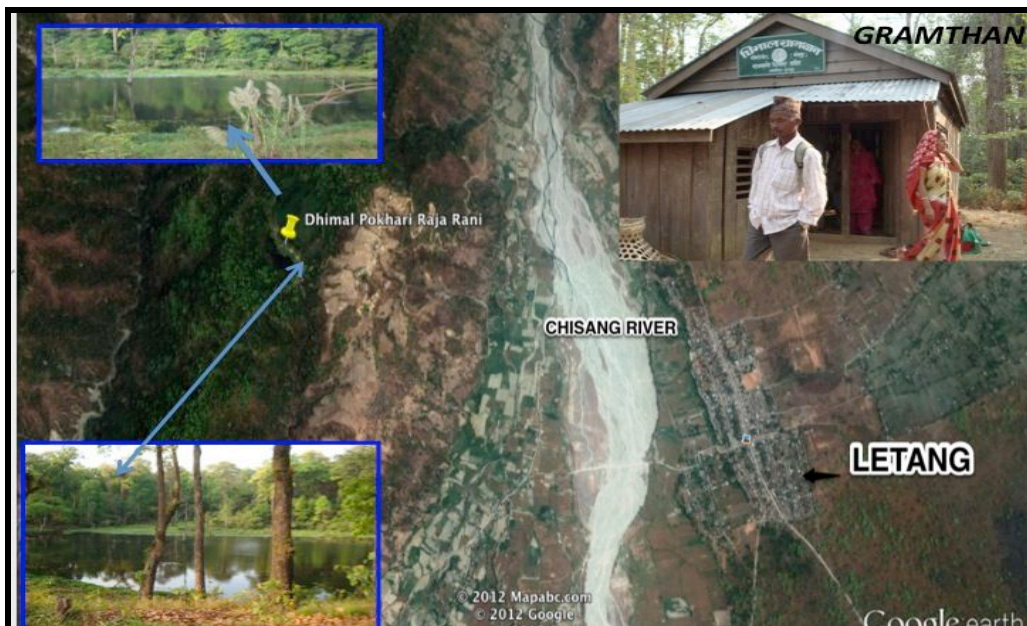
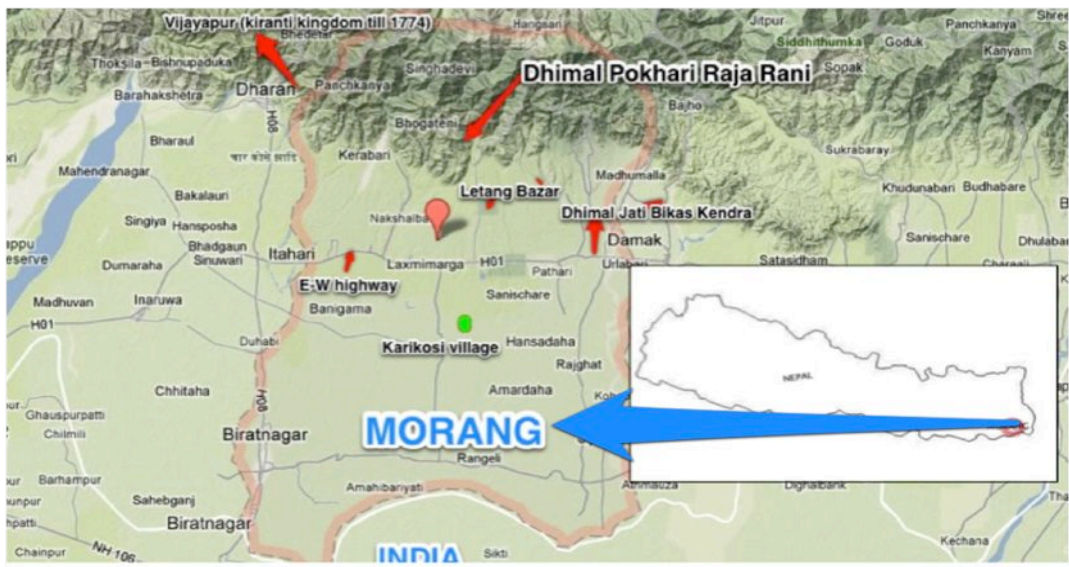
Each year, on the first day of the Nepali month of Baisākh (April-May), Dhimal from different villages gather at the official premises of the Kendra, around mid-day.¹⁵² Then they will travel about 20 kilometers to a place called *Raja Rani* (which literally means ‘king’ and ‘queen’), a village on a small hilltop (1,558 ft.) located west of Letang bazaar of Morang district (see maps 5: 1 and 5: 2). The village is named after two small ponds located inside a small but thick wetland forest that lies further west of the main village settlement; the locals refer to these two ponds as ‘Raja’ and ‘Rani.’ This is a special collective journey, a new practice that the Kendra initiated in 2001 to mark the beginning of the Shrejat, Dhimal’s most important village ritual. Currently no Dhimal live in Raja Rani; it is predominately a village of Magar, a hill indigenous group who are believed to have settled there in the early 20th century.

In the late 1990s, Dhimal discovered that Raja Rani was one of their ancestral places, hence a historical place that holds their *jāti itihās* (ethnic history) and ancestral spirits. After its

¹⁵² It is also the Nepali New Year Day, but the ritual event is not organized to celebrate this temporal calendar.

rediscovery, in the year 2000, Dhimal built a Gramthan close by the two ponds inside the village forest. The next year (2001), the Kendra and the representatives of Majhi and Dhimi decided

Figure 11: Location of Raja Rani areas in Morang (not in scale)



that Dhimal should collectively organize Shrejat ritual in the Raja Rani Gramthan to inaugurate the beginning of Shrejat. Dhimal purchased a small piece of land in Raja Rani village and built a hut-styled rest house in the year 2002 to shelter ritual participants and perform the Jagaram ritual.¹⁵³ Now, as a rule, Dhimal can perform their village ritual only after the completion of Shrejat in Raja Rani. This inaugural Shrejat at Raja Rani, like the final annual Shrejat that Dhimal collectively organize at the premise of the Kendra, is the ‘national ritual.’ Hence this Shrejat ritual connects all villages and other places where Dhimal live to their ancestral place in Raja Rani.

When I first observed this event in 2008, about one hundred Dhimal from different villages and walks of life, men and women across the span of three generations, participated in the collective ritual journey from the Kendra to Raja Rani. Dhimal women, young and old, all came dressed up in their beautiful bohna. The next year, a few Dhimal men, the youth indigenous activists, had also put on their ‘traditional’ male garment but they seemed less confident of their performative acts. That year, more than two hundred people had joined the Jagaram ritual, almost half of whom were young high school and college students. On the second day of the ritual in the both years, hundreds of Dhimal and non-Dhimal visited Raja Rani in order to make ritual offerings to and receive blessing from Dhimal deities. Many prominent Dhimal political leaders and the executive members of the Kendra who did not participate in the Jagaram ritual attended the ritual on the second day.

In 2008, the Raja Rani Shrejat happened to be Dhimal’s first public gathering right after the historic election of the Constituent Assembly. The two Dhimal who were elected in the Constituent Assembly that week also attended the ritual event on the second day. A journalist

¹⁵³ See Chapter 6 for ethnographic discussion on Shrejat ritual.

had come all the way from Biratnagar city since the first day of the ritual event to document the ‘Dhimal culture.’ There were other media representatives and photographers from the local TV stations, FM radio and various newspapers. The presence of these political leaders and the media also signified the popularity as well as the significance of this Shrejat ritual event.

In both years, the locals of Raja Rani had organized a *mela* (fair) in the village to mark the village ritual as well as the Nepali New Year. Every open corner of this village with less than three hundred people had turned into a busy mini-market. The village was overcrowded with people selling and buying foods, drinks and other items that many nomadic vendors from elsewhere had brought there in order to earn some profits. The ritual event seemed to have helped the local villagers to earn some income for their household economy. This small village where I had spent a very quiet and peaceful night had turned into a vibrant bazaar next day- filled with colorful and cheerful people, some of who were heavily drunk while others were merrily enjoying. At one interval (in 2008), when I looked down on the village from a distance further up hill, the enthralling beauty of the village landscape was altered for that day. I saw people moving everywhere. From up there, the green wetland ground by the forest, which lies at a lower elevation than the main settlement areas, had completely changed its outlook with so many people in colorful dress walking on it. Among the crowd that was everywhere, Dhimal women were distinctively visible with their bohna. Hence, on that day, they had also ‘dressed’ Raja Rani village, their ancestral place, with their cultural identity.



Figure 14: Dhimal preparing to leave for Raja Rani (2008)



Figure 15: Jagaram: staying awake in Dhimal rest house (2008)



Figure 16: A mela (fair) organized at the Raja Rani village during the Shrejat ritual (2008)



Figure 17: Dhimal women waiting to offer ritual in the Raja Rani Gramthan (2009)

Until recently, Raja Rani did not carry any sense of place for current Dhimal indigenous activists. Dhimal used to live in Raja Rani even as late as the 1940s, but except for a few senior individuals, the place had almost been erased from Dhimal collective memory. After its rediscovery in the late 1990s, particularly with the introduction of the new practice of inaugurating the Shrejat ritual, Raja Rani has been transformed into a ‘sacred place’ where Dhimal’s ancestral spirit and their ethnic history reside. In the spheres of everyday life, Dhimal cite the place name to index many things. For example, once the during the celebration of Dhimal annual ritual *Parwa, Dai*, my host Dhimal brother, proudly declared:¹⁵⁴

We do our rituals more like the ways our ancestors had done in the past. The Dhimal villages in the eastern belt don’t do rituals like us. You can see it. They have borrowed from *Rajbhansi* (one Tarai ādivāsi group). Our ancestors came directly from *Raja Rani* to this village. You know it? That’s why our *chalān* (Nep. customary practices) is still like that from the past (Field note; October, 18, 2009).

On this particular conversation, our discussions did not focus on Raja Rani per se but Dai knew well that I was aware of the significance of the place for Dhimal. But the ways in which he evoked the place name was completely a new narrative that I had not heard before from other Dhimal. A few years ago, this association of ‘Raja Rani’ with one’s village history (ancestral genealogy) or with a claim of the authenticity of a ritual (in this case) would not have had much meaning to Dhimal in this village or elsewhere. During the period of my fieldwork (2007-2009), I observed that Dhimal frequently mentioned the place in their everyday conversations. For example, Dhimal boys swear on Raja Rani to express their commitment and purity of their love

¹⁵⁴ *Parwa* is a three days family ritual in which Dhimal commemorate their ancestors, and family members who have passed away the year before, and worship their household deities, rivers, soils, forests, cattle and all utensils and objects on which they depend throughout the year. See Chapter 6.

for the girls they are courting, as is illustrated by this stanza of a poem published online.¹⁵⁵ In his poem, one Dhimal youth writes:

My heart is good (pure)
How is your heart?
Never will I forget you
I swear to Raja Rani (Dhimal, A, 2009; *my translation*).

More important, Raja Rani has also entered into Dhimals' territorial mapping of the 'Dhimal autonomous state,' one of the central demands of the Kendra. Hence, by performing their village ritual in Raja Rani, Dhimal were not only claiming their historical relationship with the place. They were also using this territorial claim to demand their political autonomy in the federal restructuring of Nepal, a process then being undertaken through the drafting of a new constitution by the Constituent Assembly (2008-2012). Now many Dhimal activists claim that Raja Rani is the abode of their 'ancient kingdom.' By 2009, Dhimal had begun calling the two ponds in the Raja Rani as 'Dhimal Pokhari' (Nep. ponds) Raja Rani' or simply 'Dhimal Pokhari.' Increasingly, Dhimal activists and scholars are writing and publishing about their ancestral place in the local as well as the national newspapers.

Why has Raja Rani, where no Dhimal currently lives, acquired such a heightened sense of place for them? In this chapter, I focus on this question in order to illustrate the interplay among ritual, history, place-making practices, indigenous political movement and political transformations in Nepal. This chapter primarily draws on my ethnographic observations of the Dhimal collective ritual journey to Raja Rani (in 2008 and 2009) and interviews/discussions with ritual participants. I propose to locate this particular place-making practice in the contexts of Dhimals' experiences of the Nepali state in the past, the Kendra's cultural politics of

¹⁵⁵ Source: <http://www.sahityaghar.com/modules/detail.php?ID=4973&modID=13>; accessed October 15th, 2010).

representing Shrejat as the national ritual, Dhimal search for their 'jāti itihās' (ethnic history), and the contemporary indigenous articulation of federalism based on ethnic identity, history and territory in Nepal (see Bhattachan, 2009).¹⁵⁶

In this chapter, I will focus on the ways in which Dhimal deploy their village ritual to invent new understandings of their historical and lived relationships with their territories and the ways they integrate these place-making practices into their indigenous political activism. Building on my discussions in the chapter 4, this chapter further elaborates the significance of cultural politics in Dhimal indigenous political mobilization by focusing on their politics of place-making practices.

I examine Dhimal's collective ritual performance at Raja Rani as 'place-making' practices. I draw on the recent approaches to "place" as an anthropological concept to illustrate how Dhimal are inscribing meaning, materiality, social relationships, and histories onto the landscape of Raja Rani, what I call place-making practices, in order to reclaim it as their ancestral *place*. As an analytical concept, place is more than a physical location or "the setting for action, the stage on to which things happen" (Rodman, 1992: 643). A place, Escobar (2001: 141) argues, is the *experience* of a particular *location* with some measure of *groundedness* (however unstable), sense of *boundaries* (however permeable), and some *connection to everyday life*, even if its identity is constructed, traversed by power, and never fixed (emphasis added). Hence, a place has location, materiality, and is invested with meaning or sense of place (Agnew, 1987; Gieyn, 2000).

Drawing from this notion of place, I argue that for the present-day Dhimal, Raja Rani is a *place* in the making. They are rediscovering histories already emplaced in Raja Rani as well as

¹⁵⁶ Dhimal do not refer to this ritual journey as "pilgrimage," hence I have not approached this event as a pilgrimage.

incorporating new histories into this place. By infusing Raja Rani with a collective sense of place, Dhimal are reconnecting this newly rediscovered place to their villages as well as to wider networks of socio-spatial relations between them, other social groups and the state through concrete practices. This particular place-making practice also needs to be understood as a project. Dhimal indigenous activists are aware of their intentionality in reclaiming Raja Rani as their ancestral place.

My analysis of Dhimal place-making practices with respect to Raja Rani is informed by an anthropology of place that combines both the phenomenological approaches of “being-in-place” (Casey, 2009[1993], Basso, 1996) and the political-economic approaches to place and production of place (Harvey, 1996).¹⁵⁷ Peoples’ sense of place and experiences of places are equally influenced and shaped by larger political-economic contexts and power relations (Kirsch, 2001, 2006, Thomas, 2002). In this regard, the emerging approach that integrates both the ‘being-in-place’ and the political-economic approach to place, as exemplified by the recent works of Stuart Kirsch (2006), Kahn (2011) and Liffman (2011), is more relevant to understanding how practices of place-making and experiences of place are always socially and politically organized (Myers, 2002). This approach is particularly useful to understand why indigenous peoples’ sense of place is at the heart of their political struggles for control over their ancestral territories (Castree, 2004).

For example, Kirsch (2006; also 2001) has shown how the environmental pollution caused by the Ok Tedi mine company in Papua New Guinea led to some fundamental changes in the

¹⁵⁷ In the phenomenological approach to place, “being in place” is considered to be the very essence of human self (Casey, 2009 [1993]; 1996). This perspective takes place as a bodily experienced and dwelled space, which has its constitutive “operational intentionality” (Casey, 1996) and generates its own fields of meanings (Basso, 1996) out of interactions between its various inhabitants (Ingold, 2002).

ways in which the Yonggom people make sense of their landscape. The “enchantment of place” that Yonggom experience in their everyday life is deeply embedded in their practical engagements for productivity (through magic spells), their indigenous understanding of human-environmental relations (including the relationship between clan and landscape), and their agentive capacity to reveal and predict future events (Kirsch 2006, Chap. 2). In the aftermath of the environmental pollution caused by the mining, the landscape is “no longer site of productivity but a scene of loss” (p: 198), and Yonggom expressed their experiences of the destructive effects of environmental pollution in terms of their feeling of *mimyop*, of sorrow and loss (Kirsch, 2006: 190-197). We can say that the environmental pollution caused by this extractive capitalist venture ruptured Yonggom’s relationship to their past, present, and future, which had been mediated by their landscapes.

Despite these destructive effects, Yonggom continue to emphasize their relations to place, and use their experiences of being in place to respond to new challenges imposed by the state and the environmental impact of the mining company (Kirsch, 2006: 201-215). Thus, it can be argued here that Yonggom’s sense of place also became a shared motivation and catalyst to struggle against the corporate power of the mining company. Peoples’ sense of attachment to their lived places can be a powerful motivation driving the political actions that people undertake to defend and reclaim their places (Kahn, 2011; Liffman, 2011). We should at the same time consider peoples’ sense of place in an analytical framework that focuses on the spatiality of power relations (geography of power relations) in examining how places are made, unmade and used to structure relations of domination and subjugation. Therefore, I find the integration of phenomenological and political-economic approaches to place productive and insightful.

One of my central arguments in this chapter is to underline the collective creative agency of indigenous activists in transforming a once ‘forgotten’ place into a place of lived ancestral histories. These activists were the movement actors who not only ‘rediscovered’ but also re-introduced the place to the Dhimal community and beyond by integrating it into Dhimal’s communal practices of Shrejat ritual.¹⁵⁸ The collective performance of the ritual has been instrumental in investing the place with its qualities of sacredness and in highlighting its historical significance. But this does not imply that the performance of the Shrejat ritual inevitably transforms any Gramthan into a politically significant place at the national level.¹⁵⁹ I argue that it is the particular history of the place, its past as the abode of Dhimal ancestors, that has imbued the Raja Rani Gramthan area with its religious, historical and now political significance. The emerging political-economic contexts (2006-2010), particularly indigenous people’s heightened political mobilization to influence the federal restructuring of Nepal, had imbued people’s historical relationship to their ancestral territories with new meanings and political relevance. Thus the making of Raja Rani as an ancestral place attained further political significance for Dhimal.

Raja Rani, however, was not simply “invented” to achieve certain political outcomes. History, as many scholars (Basso, 1996; Rappaport, 1988) have shown, “leaves its traces, both conspicuous and subtle, in the landscape” (Kahn, 2011: 31). Holding a Dhimal ritual event in Raja Rani, as my analysis will show, facilitates the uncovering and the making of Dhimal’s

¹⁵⁸ Put bluntly, because of its appealing scenic beauty, if Raja Rani had been popularized as a picnic spot after its rediscovery, it is very likely that the place would not had received the same level of reverence and political significance for Dhimal.

¹⁵⁹ For instance, the Kendra has itself built a Gramthan in its official premises where Dhimal end their annual Shrejat ritual (see Chapter 4). Based on my three consecutive observations, the ending ceremony of Shrejat at the Kendra was attended and participated by thousands of people from all over the places. Yet this had not transformed the Kendra’s Gramthan into the most revered village shrine for Dhimal.

ancestral histories in multiple ways, often through increased interactions among ritual participants. Thus in this chapter, I have attempted to illustrate how a forgotten place can become a part of lived ancestral history. For instance, by showing how a seemingly simple statement such as “I was here in this place with my grandmother twenty years ago” can become part of a powerful history-making narrative in specific historical-political contexts, this chapter helps us to understand how ordinary individuals *make* and *inscribe* histories in the land by physically being at and participating in the Shrejat ritual at Raja Rani.

In the remaining sections, I will structure my discussions to highlight the key arguments of the chapter. I will first provide a brief overview of the post-1990 period in order to explain why indigenous claims of distinct histories emerged as an integral part of indigenous peoples’ movements in Nepal. This historical-political contextualization will help us to understand the significance of Dhimal’s place-making practices in Raja Rani. Then I will outline how Raja Rani was rediscovered in order to highlight what made it an impeccable ancestral place for Dhimal. The rest of chapter will then focus on ethnographic cases to illustrate how Dhimal make and write history in the land by organizing and participating in the Shrejat ritual at Raja Rani.

Indigenous Claims Of Distinct Histories

In his monograph entitled *Jhapa ko ādivāsi* (B.S. 2043)/ ‘*Indigenous Peoples of Jhapa*’ (1984), S. Panta, a hill “high” caste government bureaucrat, introduces the Dhimal in the most demeaning way that I have encountered in any textual representations so far. He writes:

Backward castes (*jāti*) do not have factual and true history. We have to speculate about their history based on their hearsay and myth (p: 105). ... Dhimal is the most backward caste of Nepal. They are (politically) unconscious and unable to raise their head high. They are a pitifully small-numbered group (p: 107) (Panta, S., B.S. 2043: 105-107, my translation).

This book, published by a state cooperative publishing house called *Sajhā*, which ironically means “common,” substantially reflects how the dominant society thinks of the relationship between *ādivāsi* and ‘history’ in Nepal. In such representation, ‘history,’ to paraphrase Dirk’s (1990) idea, becomes “a sign of modern” in the sense of a group’s position (status of “civilization”) in the caste hierarchy such that the perceived lack of “true” or “factual” history is taken to be one defining attribute of “backwardness” of that group.

Such a stigmatizing contrast between ‘history,’ here in the sense of as a factual, scientific description of past events undertaken by trained professionals, and ‘myth,’ on which *ādivāsi* societies were based (see Hill, 1988), has also led to the resurgence of indigenous claims to distinct histories in Nepal since the early 1990s in particular. With the proliferation of indigenous peoples’ movements in the 1990s, “writing one’s own history” has emerged as an integral part of the indigenous struggle to reclaim their identity and rights in Nepal (see Hangen, 2009; Lama, 2006). In our conversations, Dhimal indigenous activists, scholars and other individuals repeatedly expressed to me the urgent need to ‘write’ down Dhimal histories.¹⁶⁰ Their sense of urgency to write their *jāti itihās* by themselves can also be read as an expression of their political agency, by asserting themselves as historical actors against the mainstream historiography that represents them as “backward caste without true history.”

In the past two decades, Dhimal have begun writing and publishing their histories both in Nepali and Dhimali (using the *Devānagarīk-Nepali* script). In 2010, the Kendra itself published a book entitled ‘*History of Dhimal part 1*’ (in Nepali) which focuses on their ethnic history, particularly Dhimal’s history of political organizing. It is relevant to mention here that the book

¹⁶⁰ Some of them wanted to know if I was writing “Dhimal history.” One senior Dhimal also asked me to travel to a Limbu village (name unknown) in the eastern hill in order to collect an archive that is believed to have contained information on how Limbu and Dhimal are brothers. Some of those who knew my work also introduced me to others (new people) as a “researcher studying Dhimal history.”

has a section on ‘*Places named in Dhimal language*’ (Dhimal, S et. al, 2010: 11-19) which documents forty-eight place-names and their meanings in detail in order to highlight how their ethnic history and identity are place-based. The authors conclude the section with a statement of the critical urgency to ‘write their history by themselves.’ They write:

There could be many other places named in Dhimali language. These places, which were named in ādivāsi Dhimali language, have been given new names by the clever and cunning people who now live there. This has endangered the history of territorial and ethnic identity of ādivāsi Dhimal and other marginalized and minority communities. There has been a lack of state-led initiatives to carry out research on our concerns. Consequently not much historical works have been done for us. So unless *we write our own history*, the history of our ethnic identity will be in crisis in the near future (Dhimal, S. et. al. 2010: 19; my emphasis).

The authors’ arguments lucidly illustrate how place-based historical imaginations have emerged as concrete political projects for the Dhimal. The importance of place-making as a history-making practice further becomes evident in the Dhimal notion of “*history of land*,” which was increasingly articulated by Dhimal indigenous activists at the time of my fieldwork. For instance, Bāngai Dhimal, one of the influential Dhimal political leaders, argues that the history of Tarai ādivāsi *needs* to be approached from the ‘history of land.’ He writes:

Ādivāsi’s relation with the Tarai’s land is much older than modern history. Today, political history is considered to be the ultimate history. But someday when the trend of writing the *history of land* comes into practice, then we will understand that this land is made out of our ancestors’ labor, blood, sweat, and tears coming out of their bodies when they struggled with the wild animals and harsh environment to make this area habitable for all of us’ (Dhimal, B, 1998/V.S. 2055; my translation and emphasis).

Thus Bāngai argues that the history of the Tarai begins with the ādivāsi struggle to transform the land of the Tarai into a habitable place for all. His claim that the Tarai’s land is made out of “their ancestors’ labor, blood and sweats coming out of their bodies,” may sound like a “primordialist” argument to his critics, but I argue that Bāngai is not invoking the philosopher John Locke’s theory that one acquires permanent property rights in land by mixing

one's labor with it. Instead, his emphasis on the bodily substances of Dhimal ancestors as the constituent part of the Tarai's history closely echoes what the anthropologist Tim Ingold has called "the temporality of the landscape" (Ingold, 1993). Building on what he calls "dwelling perspective," Ingold argues (1993: 152), "that the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of -- and testimony to -- the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves."

In this approach, the temporality of landscape is not the chronological ordering of events that had occurred in a space over a period of time, but rather temporality and historicity emerge in "the experience of those who, in their activities, carry forward the process of social life" (Ingold, 1993: 157). The arrays of practical activities or what Ingold calls "taskscape" that Dhimal ancestors undertook as "constitutive acts of dwelling" (Ingold, 1993: 158) in the Tarai were gathered as embodied forms of the Tarai landscapes; many of them had been altered and erased as the Tarai had undergone substantial changes over the last century (Chapter 2). What troubles Dhimal such as Bāngai is that their ancestral pasts, unlike the political history of the kings and other ruling groups, have been silenced, made invisible, and gone unrecognized. Hence, he draws our attention towards the need for different ways of 'writing' and 'reading' the ādivāsi history. Bāngai (2010: 35) calls this approach "history of land." He explains:

History has become the story of the winners. When we focus on the history of land, then we will come to understand the unwritten histories of many subjugated *jāti* groups. In the present-day Limbuwan,¹⁶¹ not a single Dhimal family lives in the areas between the Sanguri *bhanjyag* (Nep. a pass between two hills) and *Raja Rani*, nearby the historic Vijaypur. But in the land therein, Dhimal ancestors had left many historic markers, which have remained as unwritten history (my translation).

¹⁶¹ Refers to the historical political entity- "homeland" of the Limbus located in the present day areas between the Arun river and the Mechi river in the eastern Nepal; till the late 1950s, the region, the hill areas in particular, was known as Limbuwan, even in the state's official usage.

Thus Bāngai's emphasis on the history of land and the Kendra' publication, *History of Dhimal* (2010), illustrate Dhimal's collective will to 'write' place-based ethnic histories. My discussions of Dhimal place-making practices in Raja Rani will further elaborate on Bagmai Dhimal's notion of 'history of land' by showing how Dhimals empower their rediscovered ancestral land with ethnic history

Forgetting And Remembering A Place: The Political Contexts

Like many other villages of Nepal, Raja Rani is an ordinary place, unknown and invisible to the larger national and regional population. Prior to the formation of the present-day state of Nepal, the eastern hills were 'homelands' or 'little kingdoms' of non-Hindus indigenous groups, among them the Rais and Limbu, who are also popularly known as the 'Kirāti people.' The capital of the Kirāti kingdom, Vijaypur, was located in a Siwalik hill (Subedi, 2005; Chemjong, 1967) within a radius of fifteen miles west of Raja Rani (see Map 3). This historicity, as I will show later, becomes an important reference for Dhimal in their claim of ethnic history. It is interesting that Dhimal actually came to know about their historical connection to Raja Rani in the 1970s. Tulsi Diwas, a Nepali scholar who documented Dhimal 'folk culture' in the late 1970s, reported that:

It has become known that Dhimal had a settlement in a place called Raja Rani in Letang until 1994 V.S. (1937 A.D.). When the Kirtiman Padhani (a place where forest was cleared) opened in the Tarai, they slowly moved towards the south and began to live in villages such as Sunpukuwa, Kari Koshi, and other nearby places (Diwas, 1982: 12; my translation).

Oddly, despite knowing that there used to be Dhimal villages in Raja Rani, the collective act of remembering the place held no significance for Dhimal during the 1970s. The resurgence of the historical consciousness of this very place in the 1990s illustrates how "places are always

filled with a multitude of interactions, and especially with interactions motivated by the power in whose grip people are caught” (Kahn, 2011: 19). The 1970s was the heyday of the Panchayat regime (1962-1990) that aggressively promoted the monolithic vision of “one nation, one people, and one culture” and suppressed all oppositional politics, including the expressions of diversity and ethnic identity. With the advent of the Panchayat regime, Nepal’s rulers began an active program of producing new geographies by erasing the ethno-geographical identities of places associated with indigenous communities. This they achieved through the administrative renaming of village panchayats, districts, and zones with seemingly ‘neutral names,’ albeit associated with the dominant groups’ identity, and by defining new boundaries to govern these regions and peoples.

This state-led “geographical violence” (Said, 1993: 225, see Kahn, 2011: 31) was subsumed under the rubric of ‘modernization,’ ‘*bikas*’ (development) and ‘national unity.’¹⁶² For example, during this period, many villages, forests, ponds, and other landmarks were increasingly named “Raja Rani” (king and queen) as symbols of ‘national identity’ (Chemjong, D., 2010) and as “rituals of development” (Adhikari, 1996). By the 1970s, the Tarai had experienced an unprecedented immigration of hill people that further accelerated and amplified Dhimal’s experiences of “losing ground” (see Chapters 2 and 3). Dhimal were struggling to organize their communities in order just to meet the emerging challenges posed to them as a community (see Chapter 4). Not only was the political-social context unfavorable to the rediscovery of Dhimal ancestral places, Dhimal themselves lacked the needed resources (organizational, cultural and political) to reclaim their ancestral geographies in the 1970s.

¹⁶² Said (1993: 225) writes, “imperialism after all is an act of geographical violence through which virtually every space in the world is explored, charted, and finally brought under control.” In this sense, from indigenous perspective and experiences, the state making processes through ‘development’, ‘modernization’, ‘administrative decentralization’ and other means are equally imperialistic in nature that deepened the magnitude of the historical continuity of the geographical violence.

During the 1990s, by contrast, the Nepali state had constitutionally recognized Nepal as a multi-ethnic (yet a Hindu) nation, and had officially made the distinction between the categories of ‘caste’ (*jāt*) and ‘ethnicity’ (*janjāti*); the latter groups were identified as a “distinct cultural group with its own language, religion, history, custom, and a traditional territory” (Bhattachan, 2008). Similarly, indigenous peoples’ movement for recognition of their ethnic identity (as nationalities or indigenous peoples), indigenous rights, greater inclusion in all aspects of national life, and especially, indigenous demands for meaningful and equitable participation in the decision-making processes affecting their lives and communities had strengthened nationally as well as locally.

The Dhimal were also resurgent as one of the most organized indigenous communities in terms of their mobilization and participation in the pan-national indigenous movement in the 1990s. They were reclaiming their distinct cultural identity, reviving their customary ways of life and reclaiming their ethnic histories. “Historical consciousness comes only when people become politically conscious,” one senior Dhimal told me when he narrated the story of the rediscovery of Raja Rani.¹⁶³ In other words, he argued that by the 1990s, Dhimal had become politically more conscious and aware of the importance of their ethnic history. These changing political-economic contexts of the 1990s and Dhimal’s sense of political empowerment made the rediscovery of Raja Rani more relevant and significant. The making of Raja Rani as an ancestral place became politically even more relevant and meaningful in the context of the post-2006 period when Nepal was to become a ‘New Nepal’ through federal restructuring and the promulgation of a new constitution by the Constituent Assembly.

¹⁶³ “*Rajnaitik Chetanā pachi matrā ithihas ko chetanā aauda rahechā*,” interview with Babai, March 13, 2008.

Place-making and Federal Imaginings

In the aftermath of the political transformations following the April 2006 peoples' movement (*jān āndolan*), indigenous peoples re-emerged as one of the key political actors who could envision and affect new directions for the making of 'New Nepal' (see Hangen, 2007, 2009). They became a strong and influential collective political force at center stage in Nepal's national politics geared toward the peaceful transition to 'inclusive democracy' and 'restructuring of the state' through a new constitution-making process. During the period of my fieldwork, the discourses on federal restructuring, particularly debates on the appropriate model of federalism for Nepal, intensified to such an extent that, at times, it seemed not only political pundits and leaders but everyone and every human settlement in the country had become engulfed in the nationwide arguments regarding the making of '*Naya Nepal*' (New Nepal).

Indigenous people and their representative organizations demanded that Nepal's federal restructuring be based on ethnic identity, history and territory so that indigenous communities can safeguard and exercise their fundamental rights to political autonomy (see Bhattachan, 2005, 2009; Lawoti, 2005; Mirsha and Gurung, 2012). Not only did they demand rights to political autonomy through ethnic federalism but they also came forward with proposed maps of Nepal federated into ethnic autonomous regions. Similarly, following the April 2006 movement, the people of Tarai origin (Madhesi) emerged as the major political force in Nepal through their political movement for regional autonomy. Their demand for "one *Madhesh*, one *Pradhes*" (the Tarai regions as one federal state) further intensified the national debate and political polarization surrounding the modalities of 'state restructuring' in Nepal (see Hachhethu, 2007; ICG, 2007).

The demands made by the political movements of *ādivāsi*, *janjāti*, and Madhesi for the

federal restructuring of Nepal were radical, albeit contested political proposals. Many groups including the mainstream political parties, the dominant scholars (Nepali as well as foreigners) and other expressed their fear that the nation would “beak down into pieces” if Nepal’s federalization were to be based on ethnic identity and territory. These debates and movements for federalism infused a heightened sense of ‘territorial consciousness’ among indigenous communities. Their belief that there is an inalienable interrelationship between ethnic identity, culture, history and territory consolidated into a collective political project, for which there was unprecedented support from their communities. In such political contexts, indigenous claims of territoriality (Liffman, 2011) invested new meanings and political relevancy into people’s place-making practices, such as the Dhimal’s annual ritual journey to their rediscovered ancestral place.¹⁶⁴ This brief overview of the post-April 2006 political context in Nepal can help us to understand the dialectically interlaced relations among national political transformations, global-national indigenous politics, and Dhimal place-making practices.

Rediscovery Of An Ancestral Place

In the mid-1990s, some Dhimal activists came to know that until recently there had been Dhimal villages in Raja Rani. Then, in 1997, three of them visited Raja Rani and held exploratory discussions with the local Magar. These visiting Dhimal were pleasantly surprised to discover that the local Magar not only knew of Dhimal’s historical connection to the place but also they had continued to worship Dhimal ancestral deities as their own local deities. Places, as Kahn (2011: 30) writes, “are moments of interacting social relations.” How a place is made and

¹⁶⁴ According to Liffman (2011: 19), “territoriality includes formal rights, popular concepts, implicit premises, and everyday practices of placemaking and controlling physical and discursive spaces to confer identity, belonging, and power.”

sustained through social relations becomes evident in the ways in which the local Magar established and continued their reciprocal and respectful relationships with Dhimal ancestral deities.¹⁶⁵

The grandparents of these local Magar migrated to Raja Rani when they purchased the village land from some *Kipat* owners (Limbus) in the early 20th century.¹⁶⁶ When they moved into the new place, some Dhimal were still living in the village. The new Magar settlers witnessed and experienced the spiritual power of Dhimal ancestral deities ‘living’ in the the forest and around the village. They realized that the vitality of the place also derived from the spiritual power of these Dhimal ancestors. Thus, in a reciprocal act of acknowledgement, the local Magar began worshipping these Dhimal ancestors as their local deities. Local Magar still know and recall many stories their grandparents and parents had told them about Dhimal ancestors. One such popular story that people recount about Raja Rani focuses on why the two ponds are named ‘Raja’ and ‘Rani.’ On my first participation in the Raja Rani Shrejat ritual in 2008, a fifty-five year old local Magar named Mr. Lok Bahadur generously took time to show us around the area, and narrated the following story.

In the long distant past, a king and a queen lived in the current areas of Raja Rani. There is a place called Rani Pani, now called Lamitar. This is where the king and the queen used to live and go for hunting. Then, the present day Chisang was a very big river. There used to be a huge rock, with a slightly flat surface nearby this place. People believe that it was the rock where the queen used to dry her hair after bathing in the river. One day, the king heard that the enemy had attacked his kingdom in the south. He had to go there to fight back and defend his land. So the king had to leave the queen by herself. The king asked his cook, a Brahmin man, to carry a white pigeon in a birdcage.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ The discussions on the local Magar in this chapter are based on my interview with the local Magar and conversations I had with them in 2008 and 2009.

¹⁶⁶ On *Kipat* and Limbu, see Caplan, 1970.

¹⁶⁷ I am told that some rich Dhimal family, particularly the tax collector family, used to employ Brahmin as cook in their families so that that the state officials and other “high” caste Hindus could accept the food offered by them.

The king told the queen: ‘If this pigeon comes back to you, then you will know that something had happened to me in the battle.’ Then they left for the battle. While the king joined the battleground, the Brahmin cook (Brahmins were not supposed to fight the battle) waited for the king. But he accidentally let the bird go out of the cage, and the pigeon flew away. The king and his people defeated their enemy. When he came to the Brahmin, then he learned that the bird had already been accidentally set free. Worrying about the queen, he rushed back to his village. On his way, he met a blacksmith who was busy preparing a *khukuri* (a typical Nepali knife). The king asked him if he had seen a white bird flying back to the village. ‘I don’t know. I did not pay attention. I’m busy making this *khukuri* that will be used to kill the king (by his enemy),’ he said even without looking at the person asking him about the bird.

The white pigeon had flown back to the queen. When the queen saw it, she thought the king died fighting the battle. She was so devastated with the grief that she jumped into one of the pond and drowned. By the time, the king reached his place the queen had disappeared into the depth of the pond. The king could not bear the loss of his beloved queen, and he too killed himself by drowning into the other pond. Thus these two ponds are named the king and the queen. Before his death, the king had cursed that no Brahmin and blacksmith could ever live in his village.¹⁶⁸

This is the most popular story people retell about why the two ponds are named ‘Raja’ and ‘Rani.’ Dhimal believe that the king and the queen were their ancestors. ‘*Rasati*,’ or ‘*Raja Sati*’ in Nepali, is an elemental deity worshipped by the Dhimal during their Shrejat ritual.¹⁶⁹ In Dhimali, one meaning of the word Ra is the ‘hill;’ ‘sati’ (Nep./Hindi) means the practice of widow immolation on the death of her husband. Some Dhimal argue that ‘*Rasati*’ memorialized the hilltop where the king and queen committed suicide but that later, because of outside influence, it was called ‘*Raja Sati*.’ Since there is no Dhimali word for ‘king’ they use the Nepali (also Hindi) word ‘Raja’ as the title for many of their deities. The naming of the two ponds as ‘Raja’ and ‘Rani’ must have occurred in the period after the encroachment of the

¹⁶⁸ The story also focuses on social relations between the Brahmin, the black smith, and Dhimal ancestors. It is interesting that the high caste Brahmin who works for the king is indirectly blamed for the suicidal death of the king and queen. The local Magar told me that there are no Brahmin and blacksmiths in their village. In the past, they tried to help many blacksmith families settled in the village, but eventually they left the village after each of them encountered some misfortunes.

¹⁶⁹ *Ra* also means a round shaped swifter woven from bamboo that people used to separate grain from other things, such as dust, pebble stones, etc. Called *Nānglo* in Nepali, it is one the most basic multipurpose utensils.

Hindu state.

In his acclaimed work, *Provincializing Europe*, Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), drawing on Marx's analysis of the relationship between 'capital' and 'history', has formulated a framework for understanding the relationship between two kinds of history of capitalism that he calls 'History 1' and 'History 2' (Chakrabarty, 2000:47-71). History 1 is the universal and the totalizing history of capitalism, "a past posited by capital itself as its precondition (p: 63)" which "leads to the reproduction of capitalist relationships" (Chakrabarty, 2000:64). In contrast, History 2, more precisely History 2s, are the heterogeneous and multiplicity of pasts which exist along with History 1 but which do not necessarily contribute to its reproduction. History 2s are "not pasts separate from capital; they inhere in capital and yet interrupt and punctuate the run of capital's own logic" (Chakrabarty, 2006: 66). Despite the hegemonic rise of the History 1 and its efforts to subjugate and destroy the multiple possibilities that belong to History 2, Chakrabarty argues that such totalizing history-making projects are never complete. History 2 "lives in intimate and plural relationships to capital, ranging from opposition to neutrality" (Charkrabarty, 2002:66) and modifies History 1.

The focus on the dialogical relationship between these two histories "allows us to make room for the politics of human belonging and diversity" and "gives us a ground on which to situate our thoughts about multiple ways of being human and their relationship to the global logic of capitalism" (Chakrabarty, 2000:66). The relationship between universal history, which I will call 'official history' (History 1), and subaltern histories are relevant to my analysis in this chapter. Following Chakrabarty's analytical framework, I equate History 1 with Nepal's official historiography which is written and promoted by the state as the 'Rastriya Itihas' (Onta,

1996). This is the ‘nationalist history,’ that posits the centrality of Hindu monarchs and cultural heroes, those from dominant groups, as history-making actors for the nation (see Onta, 1994, 1996). In this story of the naming of the two ponds, the significance of the king and the queen, the designation of this place as a kingdom, and the king-enemy relationship illustrate how this local history of place, along with its ethnic history, are framed in terms of Nepal’s dominant state-centric official history (History 1). This history may be ultimately attributed to the history-making agency of the king.

At the same time, this story also “interrupts and punctuates” (Chakrabarty, 2000:66) the logic of this official history. The ‘King’ and the ‘Queen’ commemorated by the naming the two ponds are not the historical actors glorified by Nepal’s official historical narratives; they belong to the subjugated groups whose kings and territories were conquered by the ruling Hindu rulers. Yet, by alluding to the Dhimial king and his battle to defend his territory, the story adds to the trope of ‘defending ones’ territory.’ In this guise, it has become an important political narrative deployed by some Dhimial indigenous activists in their own articulation of Dhimial political history (see Chapter 4).

Similarly, the story also focuses on social relations among the “high” caste group, the blacksmith, and Dhimial ancestors. The Brahmin is depicted as the king’s cook, hence the king’s servant, but not a trustworthy person as he is implicated in the death of the king and queen. The local Magar told me that there are no Brahmins or blacksmiths in their village. In the past, despite their efforts to settle blacksmith families in the village, all of the families left after each of them encountered some misfortune attributed to the spirits of antagonistic Dhimial ancestors. These elements of dislike for the Brahmin and the blacksmiths may be seen as an instance of the local history narrative, or History 2, and their retelling by present-day village

Magar residents of the village becomes crucial for the Dhimal collective practice of claiming Raja Rani as their ancestral place. Thus, local Magar residents become politically significant in that their own historical testimonies that imbue the place with the power of Dhimal ancestors.

Similarly, in 2009, another Magar, younger brother of Mr. Lok Bahadur (the first narrator), added another important layer to the history of place by sharing with us a story about *Pultung Dhami*, the elemental ancestral Dhimal deity and how he used to maintain the sacredness of the forest and the two ponds. He explained that the two ponds used to be bigger and cleaner in the past. He cited an example by saying, “You don’t see many tree leaves falling into the pond. In the past, not a single leaf could fall into the pond. Whenever a tree leaf fell, a beautiful red bird would come flying from nowhere. Then the bird would pick up the leaf in the air and take it away without letting the leaf reach the pond’s surface.” Thus he attributed the cleanliness of the ponds’ water with the spiritual power and the care of Dhimal’s ancestral Dhami. His introduction of the Dhimal Dhami and his ritual power was very effective in making us internalize the sacredness of the place and its relationship with Dhimal. He told us:

There was this powerful Dhimal Dhami named Pultung Dhami. He was very powerful, and he used to help the local people with his power. He used to worship the ponds and the area around by burning incense in a *makkāl* (Nep. earthen container). He used to carry a *kalash* (Nep. a water container made of copper or bronze for ritual purpose). After performing the ritual, he used to go into the pond and disappear for a while, sometimes for many hours. When he used to come out of the pond, the fire in his *makkāl* would still be burning and his body would not be wet. This is how Pultung Dhami used to worship here for many years. He often used to say to others: “I’ve been asked to stay down there (under the pond). There is a different world down below. There is a big city, full of lights. I have been asked not to go up (outside of the pond) and stay with them. I have been telling them that I prefer to go up. Many requests have been made to me. Maybe, I will not return someday.”

He continued to worship the pond and its area. People say that he used to come near by that area where you people (Dhimal) have built the Gramthan. *This was a Dhimal place in the past.* Pultung Dhimal used to live here. He was the priest of the area and of the ponds. One day, he went inside the pond and did not return. We have built a small shrine for him inside our

village temple. Even today, people worship Pultung Dhami during our annual ritual. The locals, mainly the *Mangol* community (read, the indigenous community), must worship Pultung Dhami, and the Raja Rani during our important events, for example marriages.¹⁷⁰ They offer a pair of pigeons and a male goat. Raja Rani is a religious place for all of these areas (Interview with K. Magar, April 14, 2009; emphasis added).

I find this story and its retelling by the local Magar important for several reasons. The narrator firmly stated that Raja Rani was a Dhimal village in the past, and the power of Dhimal ancestors like Pultung Dhami had maintained the purity of the areas in and around the present day village forest. Related with the first story, the story of Pultung Dhami also associates the two ponds with Dhimal ancestors. In this story, Raja Rani ponds are depicted as sacred places located between the two different worlds: the one inhabited by people outside the pond, and the other belonging to the “other powerful beings” beneath the ponds which remain invisible from common people. Only people like Pultung Dhami could travel to and interact with the other world because of his spiritual power.

The story not only sacralizes the place but it also enlivens the power and the ritual significance of the Dhami (village priest) in Dhimal society. Except for a few village priests, many Dhimal have not heard or did not know of Pultung Dhami. He is one of the elemental Dhimal deities, the first deity to be worshipped by the present-day priest of the Gramthan during the Shrejat ritual in Raja Rani. Now Pultung Dhami is again remembered and revered by Dhimal during the Shrejat ritual in Raja Rani and their villages. Pultung Dhami who was kept alive in Raja Rani by the local Magars has now become a constituent part of the sacredness of the place as well as a part of Dhimal’s lived ancestral history. This story in particular underlines how Raja Rani as a shared place anchors the reciprocal relationship between Magar and Dhimal ancestors.

¹⁷⁰ People also use “Mangol” to refer to the various indigenous communities as one “racial” group in order to differentiate themselves from the “Aryan”- the caste Hindu groups. See Hangen (2005a) for the discourse “race” and ethnic politics in Nepal. On the history on the concept of “Aryan” race in the South Asia, see Trautmann (2004).

These stories and their recollections by the local Magar, and most important, their continual recognition of Dhimal's ancestors through ritual offerings, particularly when the present-day Dhimal had forgotten about this place, have contributed in keeping Dhimal's historical relationship with the place alive and socially remembered. Even though the local Magar had made Raja Rani 'their place,' they continued to share it with Dhimal ancestors in acknowledgement of their power in keeping the place protected and ensuring its vitality. The local Magar exemplifies that mutual recognition and respect for one another's ancestors can make a place hold its multicultural social relations and ethnic histories in mutual coexistence. Thus, unlike in the current Dhimal villages where the arrival of new migrants had resulted into the progressive loss of Dhimal histories written in the land, the locals in Raja Rani acted as custodians of the Dhimal ancestral spirits and stories, and thus kept their version of Dhimal ethnic histories emplaced in the place.

Place-Names As Living Histories

Besides the testimonies of the local Magar, there are other two kinds of major evidences, one linguistic and the other material- that Dhimal claim impeccably prove that Raja Rani is an integral part of Dhimal ancestral territories. Dhimal discovered that the places in and around the Raja Rani village are named in Dhimali language. For example, *Leta* in Dhimali means 'down below,' and people can add stressed 'ā' sound to emphasize a place which is 'down down below' from the top. Hence, Dhimals claim that current settlement of '*Letang*' is named in Dhimali, as it is located right below Raja Rani hilltop. Similarly, Dhimals claim that place-names like *lokrā jhar* (tiger forest; forest where there is tiger), *guwabari* (areca nut field), and *Bhogetani* (hiding place) further support that Dhimals used to live in these areas until recently.

These place-names, Dhimal argue, are not simply toponymic inscriptions in their languages, but they also describe the landscapes in meaningful ways to account the relationship between their social life and geography. For instance, Dhimal claim that the place-names of the present day *Chisang* river (see map 5.2) that flows between Letang and Raja Rani, and *Lokrā jhar* are connected to convey particular information about the landscape for their ancestors. Since wild tigers used to live in the forest (hence the name, *Lokrā jhar*) people were scared of crossing that particular part of the Chisang river in order to reach villages in the other side. Hence, Dhimal used to caution travelers “*Odopar Maparasu lokrā Chisangko*” which means “don’t cross from this side, the tiger will eat you” (Dhimal, S. et. al. 2010: 13). And hence, the river came to be known as *Chisang* with reference to *Lokrā Jhar*. Similarly, Dhimal claim that when their ancestors fought with the invading Gorkhali army (in the 18th century), they used to hide inside the caves of the hills around Raja Rani, and so they began to call these areas ‘*Bhogethalmi*,’ which later became *Bhogeteni*, the present day place-name (Dhimal, S. et. al., 2010: 15). Hence, the place-name *Bhogeteni* also underlines the political history of Dhimal, in particular, their resistance to the Gorkhali state in “defending their territory.”

During my fieldwork, I observed that the present-day Dhimal indigenous activists were increasingly taking place-names seriously in reclaiming their historical relationship to and underlining their sense of belonging in their ancestral territories. They actually began documenting and publishing Dhimal place-names of villages, rivers, districts and forests in Morang and Jhapa (their ancestral territories). For Dhimal, these place-names, to paraphrase Basso (1996: 37), are “stalked with histories,” their ancestral wisdom and political agency. While some place-names still persist, many of them have disappeared as the result of their political marginalization, thus erasing their ethnic histories associated with these places. Like

anthropologists and geographers who approached place-names to study the relations between spatial practices and power relations,¹⁷¹ Dhimal indigenous activists also articulate the importance of place-names for their ethnic histories, and the erasure of those histories by state-mandated changes in place-names. For example, in the Kendra's book *History of Dhimal Part 1* (2010) Dhimal clearly express their understanding of state-led spatial politics of place naming:

The various geographical areas of Nepal were named reflecting the language, culture, history and identities of various communities, caste, and ethnic groups who have been living in them since the ancient period. But because those clever and cunning people controlling the state and state power had changed these place-names for their convenience, the history of ādivāsi, the aboriginal inhabitants of these areas, have been erased (Dhimal, S. et. al. 2010: 11-12).

Thus Dhimal assert that the place-names in the area around Raja Rani support their claim that this place is imbued with their ancestral histories. They assert that, as 'indigenous *people*,' they have the right to reclaim these places so that they can continue their customary ways of life and "protect" their histories from further erasure.¹⁷²

Place-Making Through Ritual Objects

The other important material evidence that helped Dhimal to reclaim Raja Rani as their ancestral place is the ritual object they discovered in the forest where they have now built their Gramthan. In 1998, the visiting Dhimal team that I have introduced earlier found many clay

¹⁷¹ Place-names have been a key focus in anthropological studies of "native peoples" in American Anthropology from its earliest beginnings, particularly with the important works of Franz Boas (Thornton, 1997) who emphasized the "structural relationship between geographical names, culture and language" (Boas, 1934: 14 cited by Thornton, 1997).

¹⁷² Dhimal indigenous activists cite the ILO 169 to claim their right to unrestricted access and ownership over their historical and sacred sites. Nepal is one of the two nation-states in Asia that has ratified the legally binding International Labor Organization Convention-ILO No 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries. It is the only international *convention* that specifically recognizes indigenous peoples' relationship to their traditional land and territories including "the right of the peoples concerned to use lands not exclusively occupied by them, *but to which they have traditionally had access for their subsistence and traditional activities*" (ILO, 169; Article 14 (1). See http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=1000:12100:0::NO:::12100_ILO_CODE:C169. January 30, 2013).

idols of elephants and horses scattered here and there in the village forest (see figure 18).

Dhimal offer these clay idols to their village shrines during Shrejat. Since, they claim, no groups other than Dhimal use these types of idols as ritual offerings, these discoveries must mean that their Dhimal ancestors used to live and perform their rituals in the Raja Rani area until recently.

How can Dhimal claim their historical relationship to a place based on a single ritual item?

What kind of the place-making power do these clay figurines possess?



Figure 18: Clay figurines of elephant and horse found in Raja Rani forest (ritual objects offered by Dhimals' ancestors in the past)

In order to understand the place-making power of these ritual objects in investing a landscape with Dhimal's ethnic identity in culturally meaningful ways, I propose that we consider the relations between these ritual offerings, the village shrine (Gramthan), and the Shrejat ritual in producing the Dhimal village (see Chapter 6). Dhimal believe that their elemental deities and ancestral Dhimi (village priest) ride on *nāriya* (elephant) and *wayā* (horse) to travel here and there. During the Shrejat ritual, these deities need to be brought into the Gramthan so that Dhimal can perform the ritual. During the *Jagaram* ritual that takes place the night before the Shrejat, Dhimal take care of the elephant and horse idols by "feeding" them grass and water. They present ritual offerings (called *nāriya wayā puja*) to these deities' rides in order to "make them happy so that they will take care of the deities" (Interview with the Dhimal head priest, April 15, 2008).

These ritual offerings are made *only* in the village Gramthan. So the piles of these clay idols that Dhimal found in the Raja Rani forest affirm that a Gramthan must have existed there in the past. As I have described earlier, the Gramthan is so foundational to the constitution of any Dhimal village that there can be no Dhimal village without its Gramthan. The village shrine also defines its ritual and territorial boundary. For Dhimals, then, the discovery of these ritual offerings confirmed that Raja Rani was once a Dhimal village. So when Dhimal indigenous leaders decided to build a Gramthan in Raja Rani, it was a powerful place-making act designed to reconstitute the area as a 'Dhimal village' in culturally meaningful ways that ratified the sense for all Dhimal their connection with their rediscovered ancestral place.

Hence the Kendra's decision to build the Gramthan earned moral and widespread financial support from all Dhimal villages. When the construction of Gramthan was completed, the news of the discovery of "an ancient Dhimal place" had reached all Dhimal villages in Morang and

Jhapa. In the first Shrejat ritual after its rediscovery, Dhimal from every village flocked to Raja Rani to see the place and offer worship to their ancestral deities in the new Gramthan.

According to Ganesh Dhimal, the central committee member who lived in Raja Rani village for seven months (1998/1999) in order to supervise the building of the Gramthan, “thousands of Dhimal came to this hill turning it black (referring to the color of the bohna Dhimal women wore on that event” that year. The huge participation of huge numbers of Dhimals in the first Shrejat motivated the Kendra to continue their ritual performance at the Raja Rani Gramthan. The Kendra has been successful in ‘nationalizing’ the Shrejat by collectivizing the organization and undertaking of this annual ritual event whereby all villages equally contribute in the preparation of the ritual and participate in the annual ritual journey and the performance of Jagaram ritual.

The *Raj Dhami* (head priest) told me in 2008: “This *puja* (ritual/worship) is done for the wellbeing of all Dhimal living in the four districts (Kathmandu, Morang, Jhapa and Sunsari).” I understood him to be implying that the collective ritual performed at Raja Rani *connects* spatially dispersed and socially diverse Dhimal as one *jāti* or even as a nation. If a nation is an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983), then it must also be imagined geographically, particularly for indigenous people who see their ‘differential geography of belonging’ (Castree, 2004) as a legitimate ground for demanding their indigenous rights, including the right to an autonomous federal state based on their ethnic identity, history, and territory. Thus, by inaugurating this collective ritual at Raja Rani, the ancestral place where no Dhimal currently lives, the Kendra is integrating this place into their imagined community, and at the same time, “re-territorializing” the nation by grounding it within Dhimal’s ancestral geographies. This

territorialization becomes necessary for Dhimal's political movement for federal restructuring that I have discussed in the previous chapters.¹⁷³

At the village Shrejat ritual, each family, as a member of the village Gramthan, must contribute (in kind and cash) to the ritual, and then partake in the evening Jagaram ritual. In other words, each individual family participates in the village ritual for the wellbeing of the entire village as well as of her/his family (chapter 4). This moral way of becoming a social actor in producing the community is reinforced in the organization and undertaking of Raja Rani Shrejat in which every village acts to produce the collective well being of the entire Dhimal Jāti. During the Shrejat performance at Ranai Rani, each Dhimal individual who joins the collective ritual journey from the Kendra and participates at the Jagaram ritual the evening before represents her/his village. Each individual thus *brings* and *connects* his/her village to their ancestral place. Each village through the village level committee of the Kendra *must* contribute some cash for the Raja Rani Shrejat ritual and send its village representatives to participate in the Jagaram ritual. Dhimal village Manjhi and Dhami also represent their respective villages. In the remaking of the village Shrejat into a national ritual, moreover, only the Kendra, out of all the different Dhimal organizations that existed during the period of my fieldwork, has the moral authority and communal legitimacy, because of its inclusiveness and its acceptance by Dhimal as their *jāti sanstha* (ethnic organization), to organize an event like the Shrejat ritual at this scale. Thus by organizing and performing the Shrejat ritual at Raja Rani, the Kendra and its indigenous activists also reproduce themselves as the representative indigenous organization, and thus representative activists of their community.

¹⁷³ I am using “territorialization” to describe the processes of ascribing “boundaries” and claiming a bounded territory order to enclose it as an “autonomous federal unit.”

Place-making and ‘Writing History in the Land’

As a collective place-making practice, this new tradition of inaugurating the Shrejat ritual at Raja Rani has invested the place with a new historical consciousness for Dhimals. Since there are no “official” historical sources (no prior published historical texts, more precisely) about Dhimal that could lend support to their claim for a historical connection to the place, I became interested in exploring how Dhimal come to understand their ethnic histories during the Shrejat ritual. My ethnographic participations in the Dhimal annual ritual journey and Shrejat performance helped me to understand how the ritual event, by bringing Dhimal from different age groups, historical backgrounds, social positions, gender and villages together, contributes to “writing history into the landscape” (Santos-Granero, 1998).

In his study of the notions of space and territoriality among Yaneshas of the Peruvian Central Andes, Santos-Granero (1998) has proposed the notion of “topographic writing” to describe the Yaneshas’ practices of inscribing historical significance and memories in the landscape (see Stewart and Starbuck, 2003; Feld and Basso, 1996; Schama, 1996; Hill, 1989, Merlan, 1998; Rappaport, 1998; Kirsch, 2006). Related to Santos-Granero’s concept of topographic writing are his concepts of “topograms” and “topographs.”¹⁷⁴ Topograms “are elements of the landscape that have acquired their present configuration as a result of the past transformative activities of human or superhuman beings” (Santos-Granero, 1998: 140). As such, topograms constitute signs that recall past events or become part of a wider semiotic system in combination with or in opposition to other similar signs, and thus become

¹⁷⁴ Santos-Granero characterizes topographic writing as “identifying-mnemonic device” and attributes it to be “protowriting systems” but he emphasizes that topographic writing is not confined to “nonliterate societies,” and the advent of “true writing system” does not necessarily result into the total displacement of topographic writing (Santos-Granero, 1998: 142-143). But emphasis on ‘topographic writing’ as “prototype writing” not like the “true writing systems” can potentially contribute in maintaining the hierarchy of “written histories” over other forms of historiographical practices including ‘topographic writing.’

“topographs” (Santos-Granero, 1998: 140). The clay effigies discovered by Dhimal in Raja Rani constitute important topograms for Dhimal, but when Dhimal use these objects along with the place-names, the Gramthan, and other features of landscape signs, they become topographs which convey a variety of meanings to Dhimal and others.

For the Yanesha people, topograms such as *personal reminiscences*, *collective oral traditions*, and *mythical narratives* which infuse the landscape with historical significance can become powerful mnemonic devices only when they become the subject of mythical narratives and ritual activities (Santos-Ganero, 1998: 140-141). In other words, it is through the legitimizing power of the mythical narratives and ritual activity that Yanesha’s landscape becomes “true topograms and topographs in permanent manner” (ibid). Santos-Granero’s notion of ‘topographic writing’ can be applied to Dhimal place-making practices as history making practice at Raja Rani. During the Shrejat event in Raja Rani, *personal reminiscences* and retelling of what people know about the place to others *during the ritual period* become important acts of topogram making.

All places, because of their interactions with human and other non-human beings, are filled with stories (Jackson, 1995; Basso, 1996; Ingold, 2000; Kirsch, 2006). These place-stories are important cultural means through which places and experience of places become meaningful. In his classic ethnography *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (2006), Keith Basso shows how the landscapes of the Western Apache are filled with stories that constitute and guide their moral worlds. The local Apache use these stories to self-discipline themselves and to influence the moral actions of their fellow community members. “All these places have stories. We shoot each other with them, like arrows,” Nick Thomson, a senior Apache man, Basso’s teacher, tells the anthropologist (1996: 48). And Basso learns that

Apache use the historical tales, which are stories about what actually happened when some named individual acted improperly, to “criticize social delinquents (or, as the Apaches say, to “shoot them,” p. 50) in order to alert them about the potential consequences of their misbehaviors. When these stories are embodied by individual Apache and enacted in their everyday practice, the landscapes that generate these stories also become meaningful and revered places for the Western Apache people. Basso’s (1996) ethnography is relevant to understanding how place-stories become integral to the process of place-making, for example, in the context of Dhimal ritual participant’s experiences of their ancestral place in Nepal.

But for the present-day Dhimal, unlike the Apache, Raja Rani is not a lived space of their everyday life; rather it is a *place in the making*, to which people are rediscovering and adding many historical and mythical narratives. So the ritual event itself becomes an important social process through which people come to uncover and understand past events, and thus transform these features of landscape into historical topographs. Thus for Dhimals, the Shrejat ritual becomes a collective act of remembering the place and its histories. The role of personal reminiscences, an individual’s capacity to remember their family histories or what their ancestors have told them about the place, and their agency to share these recollections with other people become important practices of topographic writing for Dhimal.

Moral Geography As History

On the morning of the second day of my first participation in the Dhimal ritual at Raja Rani in 2008, I followed a group of young Dhimal with the purpose of navigating the surrounding landscapes of the village on my way to the Gramthan, located at a twenty-minute walking distance from the Dhimal rest house. This was the first time I met Puja, a fourteen-year

student from Rajghat village, Morang. It was her third consecutive participation in the annual ritual trip. She had come here with her mother and other relatives. “Why do you come here every year?” I asked her. “I like the place. It’s a place of our ancestors (*mamro purkhā ko thāu ho*),” Puja responded, somewhat uninterested. Since Puja and many other Dhimal women wore their ethnic dress for the event, I asked her after a while, “Why do you wear your *bohna* here? Is this some kind of rule that the Kendra imposes?” Puja said hurriedly, “No. It’s not a *niyam* (Nep. rule). I just like to wear it,” and she disappeared for a while.

On our way to the Gramthan, we walked farther up hill for ten minutes. As I walked uphill, the cold breeze refreshed me again, and it did not feel like the month of Baisākh at all. It was impossible not to be captivated by the mesmerizing panoramic view of the surrounding landscape. While walking, I stopped for a while and took some photographs of the landscape. After a few minutes, Puja’s calling distracted me. “Isn’t it a beautiful place, uncle?” She asked me.¹⁷⁵ “Oh, indeed!” I replied without thinking, while focusing on my camera’s lens. “Our ancestors lived in such a beautiful place! Why did they have to leave to the plains?” she pondered with an expression of seriousness. I paused for a while; I did not have any answers for her then (and I don’t have one for her now). “You should buy some land here and come to stay,” I said jokingly. Puja said nothing; maybe she did not like my comment. It was obvious that the ways in which she felt the landscape were different from my experience of the place. I lacked the embedded connection to the place; I did not think of Dhimal ancestors when I was captivated by the panoramic view of the place. I did not experience ‘history’ as Puja seemed to have felt it there (Field note, April 15, 2008).

¹⁷⁵ In Nepal, it is expected that people refer to other (even “stranger” or someone who is not a kin or friend) with some kin terms. Young ones often use the English term “uncle” to refer to elders who they do not know much and whom they have to call them with some kin terms. See Turin (2001) for an excellent discussion on the use of the term “uncle” in Nepal.

Basso (1996: 4) argues that place-making is a universal tool of the historical imagination, and it is “a way of constructing the past, a venerable means of doing history” (p: 7). Following Basso (1996) and Santos-Granero (1998), I suggest that the query, “why did they (our ancestors) have to leave to the plains?” asked by a fourteen year old Dhimal girl, provides substantive evidence that shows how the new practice of the collective ritual performance at Raja Rani is shaping historical consciousness of its ritual participants.¹⁷⁶ The place not only mesmerizes Puja with its beauty but it also animates (Basso, 1996: 55) her with much curiosity about her Dhimal ancestors. Her inquiry affirms an achievement for the Kendra, the organizer of the collective ritual journey and the Shrejat ritual at Raja Rani. “We want to bring more Dhimals here because we want them to know about this place and our history,” the chairperson of the Kendra explained to me in the 2008 Raja Rani Shrejat ritual.

Later Puja directed my attention toward a narrow pass by the sides of the two ponds, and she asked me “Uncle, *tapai lai thaha chhā?* (Nep. Uncle, Do you [in honorific term] know it?). Down there is a place, Dhimal grandmother’s place.” I did not see anything down below except a rocky steep and narrow pass covered with thick bushes. Then Puja narrated to me the story of the great Dhimal grandmother who used to provide Dhimal beautiful *bohna* and jewelry when they came here during the mela and ritual in the ancient past. Dhimal were required to return the *bohna* and jewelry at the end of the event. At one such ritual-mela (fair), some people, who had grown greedy, did not return these items to the grandmother but instead, took these items home. The grandmother got very angry for this greed and breach of trust and so punished the entire village with death.

¹⁷⁶ Dhimals do not have a definitive explanation to conclude why Dhimals left Raja Rani. The senior Dhimals from the village of Karikoshi where I did my fieldwork said that the great grandfather of the village’s then landlord (he was the third generation in the village) had migrated from Raja Rani around the mid 19th century (cr. 1950 A.D.). Some Dhimals argue that Dhimals were evicted from Raja Rani when some Limbus claimed that Raja Rani was under their *kipat* (land under communal ownership).

When Puja ended her narration, she looked at me and said, “That’s why we have to wear *bohna* when we come here. It’s the place of our ancestor.” I had heard this story before, but this particular storytelling by a young ritual participant at the very place where Dhimal’s ancestral grandmother, the powerful deity, is believed to be living, was a completely different chronotopic experience. More than that, it helped me to understand how Puja experienced the particular landscape as a moral geography. By her third participation, Puja seemed to have learned a deeper understanding of her ancestral place, and she was definitely very effective in teaching me one important meaning associated with the place. Dhimal often refer to this landmark, the dwelling place of the Dhimal ancestral grandmother, as “the place that gives away jewelry” (Nep. *gar gahanā dine thāu*).

This particular Dhimal ancestral grandmother, *a berang* (Dhi. senior woman), who is believed to be the creator of Dhimal *bohna*, the original keeper of the knowledge and skill of weaving, is revered for her kindness and love (as exemplified in her sharing of *bohna* and jewelry to anyone visiting her place). But she is equally feared for her anger and the stiff punishments she metes out to those who commit sins or violate her trust.

In my second participation (2009) in the Shrejat, I was again reminded of the significance of this Dhimal ancestral grandmother and her power by none other than the *Raj Dhami*, the head Dhimal priest himself. On the morning of the Shrejat ritual, I along with few other ritual participants followed the head priest and his assistants to observe their ritual offering at the place of their ancestral grandmother, whom the Raj Dhami called “*Dhobini budi*” (Nep. *cloth washer old woman*).¹⁷⁷ On our way back, the Raj Dhami narrated to us his personal experiences of the

¹⁷⁷ I was unable to find out why she was called “*dhobini budi*.” Many Dhimal simply called her “Dhimal Grandmother” or “deity who gives away *bohna* and jewelry).

power of the ancestral grandmother in order to emphasize that Dhimal must pay ritual offering to her during the Shrejat ritual. He told us:

She is our grandmother deity. She is kind and giving, but also she can get angry. A few years before Dhimals began coming here for the Shrejat *puja* (Nep. worship), I came to the forest in order to worship the place and our deities.¹⁷⁸ I forgot to worship this shrine, and returned back home. Oh, then I became so sick for many days. My head was bumping; my stomach pained so much. I felt I was turning crazy. Everyone was so worried. Then one night, the *Dhobini budi* came to my dream and complained that I did not worship her. The next day, I performed a ritual at my home. I begged for forgiveness and promised that I would offer her the *puja* from next time. Then I recovered. Since then, I never forgot to worship this place and the *Dhobini budi*”(Field notes, April 16 2008)

When the Raj Dhami narrated the story, all of us (the ritual participants) were literally spellbound. The seeming ‘empty place’ located beneath the side of a ridge, we realized, is a living territory of the Dhimal ancestral grandmother. For the Raj Dhami, “Dhobini Budi” is as real as her power to punish if she is not offered the due respect she deserves as the Dhimal *berang* (senior women, also female deity). Raj Dhami’s personal experience of the power of the ancestral deities who live in the vicinity of Raja Rani Gramthan, and his retelling of this story during the Shrejat ritual, a story known only to few people in the past, effectively reinforced the sacredness of the place. But the place is also a “topographical referent” (Rappaport, 1989: 89) to one of Dhimal’s key cultural symbols (Ortner, 1973) that emphasize the appropriate moral conduct between Dhimal and their elder members, who are called *Warang Berang* (senior men and senior women). As my discussions of Dhimal marriage ritual and the village Shrejat ritual show, Dhimal are expected to respect their senior *warang berang* like their deities in their everyday life. Because this place, like the landscape of the Western Apache people described by Basso (1996), gathers and tells moral stories for Dhimals, it is also a moral geography.

¹⁷⁸ Note that he claimed that he was coming here by himself to perform the ritual since many years before the Kendra began inaugurating the new practices of Shrejat at Raja Rani. When I asked him about it, he affirmed that his ancestors were the “priest” of this Gramthan. Hence, he is also called the Raj Dhami- the head priest.

I argue that Dhimal ritual participants come to understand the relationship between the place, ancestral power, and appropriate moral conduct by physically participating in the ritual and by bodily experiencing the place interlaced with moral stories about their ancestors. Recall that Puja narrated to me the story of the Dhimal ancestral grandmother a year ago at the ritual event. The Raj Dhimi and the fourteen-year young ritual participant both emphasized the significance of the ancestral deity and the sacredness of the place. But Puja also positioned herself as a ‘Dhimal woman’ in order to relate to the place and the ancestral grandmother, the creator of *bohna*, which is an integral part of Dhimal’s everyday life and now a major marker of their ethnic identity (see Chapter 5). By narrating the story of the ancestral grandmother, Puja wanted me to realize that she had worn her *bohna*, both as a respect for her ancestral deity and also to reclaim Raja Rani as her ancestor’s place. Recall that she had told me, “That’s why we have to wear *bohna* when we come here. It’s the place of our ancestor.”

Hence by their collective performative act of wearing *bohna* in Raja Rani, Dhimal women like Puja “integrate the place with their bodies” (Casey, 1996: 22) and further invest the place with moral meanings for Dhimal and others (for example, a visitor like me). While the Raj Dhimi was using his ritual knowledge to acknowledge and offer his respect to the ancestral deity, Puja wore cloth and jewelry for the same purpose. Hence, in the context of Shrejat ritual at Raja Rani, it is not just the act of ritual performance, but also the bodily habits of wearing *bohna* which become an important collective act of place-making, through which Dhimal women add materiality (ethnic identity, ritual objects, material referent to the story of the ancestral deity, etc.), and sense of connection to their ancestral-moral landscape. Hence, these bodily habits also become embodiment of history of land, to paraphrase Bāngai Dhimal.

In the ethnographic cases discussed above, I have attempted to show how the performance of ritual, people's experiences of Raja Rani as a sacred and moral geography, and stories Dhimal and Magar tell others about the landscape around the Raja Rani Gramthan as being imbued with the spiritual power of Dhimal's ancestors become important generative place-making practices during the Shrejat event. The local Magar, Puja and the Raj Dhami -- all of them -- experience Raja Rani as a sacred and moral geography, yet they also relate to the place in different ways: as the local residents, as the priest, and as a woman. Hence my discussions also highlight what the anthropologist Margaret Rodam (1992) has called "multilocality" of a place i.e. Raja Rani tenders polysemic meanings for different people depending upon their social positions, gender, age, and their historicity of engagements with the place (and its other non-human residents). In the next section, I will discuss how these differently positioned ritual participants become history-making social actors, who collectivize their individual memories about Raja Rani for the production of the social history of the Dhimal's ancestral place.

Kurā Kāni (Chitchat) As Ways Of Making Histories¹⁷⁹

When I participated in the Raja Rani Shrejat ritual in 2008 and 2009, I observed how the ritual participants produced historical knowledge about the place and its relationship with Dhimal by engaging in discussions among themselves and with others. Each year, Dhimal ritual participants gathered on the ground in front of the Raja Rani Gramthan after the completion of the ritual in the morning of the second day of the Shrejat. The gathering was well attended by the old and young ritual participants, mostly men but also women, and by the indigenous activists as well as the general participants. Youth Dhimal, Puja and her friends, were among the

¹⁷⁹ It means light discussion, talk or chitchat. I use it here to describe the ethnographic event I observed as well as to emphasize that ethnographic information is heavily based on Kura Kani. See, Desjarlais (2003) for his brilliant discussion on ethnography as "kura-graphy."

keen ‘audience’ participants in these two years. These discussions were not planned activities, but rather had more the air of informal conversational gatherings when Dhimal rested after the hectic ritual activities that had began the night before; many of them had stayed awake throughout the night for the *Jagaram* ritual.

Personal reminiscences and their retelling are important aspects of place-making practices, which can infuse the land with historical significance (Basso, 1996; Santos-Granero, 1998). For example, in 2008, a group about thirty Dhimals gathered outside the Raja Rani Gramthan, and they openly discussed the same issue that Puja raised that morning: when and why Dhimal left the place. After discussing this for about an hour, Dhimal participants reached the consensus that their ancestors had lived in Raja Rani till the early 20th century (1940s A.D). There is no written historical text that can help Dhimal to deduce when and why their ancestors left Raja Rani. However the lack of written or other forms of documentary evidence did not prevent these Dhimal from arriving at this temporal understanding of their ancestral presence in Raja Rani. This was achieved primarily through individual Dhimal who convincingly shared with the group what their parents and grandparents had told them about the place. Some of them had even come here when they were very young with their elders.

For example, one participant, Daya, a 52 year old Dhimal man belonging to Lembang clan, from Kharkare village of Damak Municipality used his knowledge of his family genealogy to periodize Dhimals’ migration out of Raja Rani by citing exact years and the events that happened in those years. In 1995, Daya and other Lembang Dhimal prepared a clan genealogy to record their clan history, which had helped them to trace their ancestral connection to Raja Rani. But they neither paid any special attention to the place nor did they visit here to explore the place until the Kendra began the new practice of Shrejat ritual. Daya told us that his father was born in

Raja Rani village in the Nepali year 1984 B.S. (1927 A.D.), and left the village at the age of thirteen when his grandfather's younger brother by the name of Kirtiman cleared a tract of forest in the lowland plains around 1942 A.D. The place is still called *Kirtiman Padhani* (Nep.

Padhani means a place cleared from a forest). He added:

By 1999 B.S. (1942 A.D.), Dhimals had completely left the area; so even if we exclude the last two or three years before their final move away, Dhimals must have performed the Shrejat ritual here until the year 1994/1995 (B.S.).... But we (the later generation) did not ask about these things to our grandfathers and fathers. We did not come here to visit. When we wrote the genealogy of our Lembang clan, we did not come here to study. This has been a major weakness of our generation. Our father and his brothers used to say the names of each settlement of this area. There is a history in this place. It is about our *parampara* (Nep. custom-tradition), (transcript of the Dhimal group discussion, April 14, 2008).

Other participants who provided their personal experiences of having visited Raja with their parents or grandparents also corroborated Daya's claim that Raja Rani was a ritual geography of Dhimal till the early 1940s. The assistant of the Raj Dhimi, a man in his mid-forties, told us that once when he was ten years old, his mother introduced him to Raja Rani hilltop as the place "where their ancestors once used to live" when they walked pass Letang bazar on their way to Dharan (see Map 3). His mother also showed him the mango trees along the trail, which were planted by her ancestors when they used to live there. "I was like ten years old, and then I really did not pay attention as to why my mother was telling me these things. Now I realize that she was telling me important things about our ancestors," he told the group.

Similarly, there was a Dhimal man in his early thirties, a soldier in the Nepal Army who was on a brief leave that month, who told the group that he was revisiting the place *after twenty-two years*. He had also come here with his mother to perform a puja (Nep. ritual) when he was eleven or twelve years old. "There was no shrine here, and the ritual spot was near where there the new temple (the Hindu; not the Gramthan) is now. There were not many people then. The

forest was much bigger, and I was bit scared inside the forest,' he remembered. He also emphasized that his grandmother had told him that her father came from that place, but there were no Dhimal living in that area when they visited the place then. "I had forgotten about this place. Then I came to know that now Dhimal come to this place to worship. So I have come this time," he said, indicating that his return visit to the place after a period of two decades was the result of the Kendra's initiative of bringing people to Raja Rani for the ritual. His recollections also informed us that Dhimal had not totally forgotten about this place. Even after Dhimal had completely migrated out of Raja Rani, some of them continued to visit their ancestral village and to reconnect with their ancestors by performing ritual in the shrine, most likely on individual basis. These ritual participants were also self-reflexive about how they had forgotten about the place, while the last two recollections I have discussed here also inform us that these two narrators were brought and introduced to Raja Rani as their ancestral place by their mother and grandmother; the act of remembering the place and its history was not confined to Dhimal men.

All three narrators shared with the group what they had heard about or their personal experiences of the place in the past. It is important that we take into consideration the chronotopic phenomenology of this group discussion to understand how these collective acts of remembering through storytelling in front of the Gramthan during the ritual period become important and effective history-making practices. Personal reminiscences of any kind that involved the place were valued and they gained differential significance in this particular storytelling setting. These narrators were not trying to be "historians." Yet, by physically being in the place and participating in the ritual, this very act of gathering and discussing their ancestral past, I argue, is an active practice of doing and making history. During the ritual settings, when Dhimals shared their personal recollections of the place, they are also re-inscribing these stories

in the place, and producing a shared memory among the ritual participants.

The recent re-appearance of the place and the relatively limited knowledge of its histories and its connection to Dhimal ancestors had sparked an interest among ritual participants to know about this ancestral place. During my two consecutive participations in the Shrejat, I observed that many of the ritual participants, particularly those who attended the Jagaram ritual, were keenly interested in knowing more about the place and its histories. During the ritual event, they were involved in the collective act of remembering stories and histories of the place by sharing and learning from one another. Anyone with prior knowledge and experiences of the place, irrespective of their ages and social backgrounds, could become a “resource person,” hence a legitimate narrator of his/her personal reminiscences or stories they know about the place.

For Dhimal activists and others, the act of sharing these stories was as important as the stories themselves. In fact, I was not only person who was taking notes, my journalist Dhimal friend and other members of the Kendra were also ‘writing down’ information gathered during these discussions. In these discussion settings, historical knowledge was not confined to one or few individuals, but it was rather diffused and unevenly circulated, albeit in fragments, among individuals. Any seemingly mundane information about the history of the place, when shared in such discussions during the ritual event, could become an important part of Dhimal’s new collective social memory and the history of land. And the ways in which Dhimal attempted to collectivize this historical knowledge through chitchat, group discussion, individual storytelling, documenting, and seeking help from other non-Dhimal were *simple yet powerful* collective acts of history making and history writing. As these stories circulate and are retold to others, people can add their personal recollection and knowledge about the place to these stories.

I observed that each year, Dhimal were accumulating new pieces of historical information to add to what they already knew. For example, during a similar group discussion in the 2009, the Raj Dhami and other Dhami from different villages discussed and traced a genealogy of those Dhimal priests, who in the past used to officiate at the ritual in the forest where the present-day Raja Rani Gramthan stands now. And, they were able to recollect the names of nine priests which in their estimation roughly corresponded to nine generation of Dhimal priests, the current Raj Dhami being the ninth priest in the order.¹⁸⁰ I argue that the importance of this genealogical reckoning lies in “the temporality of landscape” (Ingold, 1993) that can incorporate further meaningful textures and stories to the finding that ritual knowledge, spiritual power, character and morality, bodily substance, and material products belonging to the span of nine generations of Dhimal Dhami have become constitutive parts of the landscape, and “in doing so, have left there something of themselves” (Ingold, 1993: 152). Recall that local Magar’s retelling of the stories of Phultung Dhami (the 5th generation Dhami), which supports and enlivens the place-based histories of Dhimal ancestral Dhami in Raja Rani.

From a chronological viewpoint, this finding locates Dhimal’s ethnic history in Raja Rani to a time predating the rise of the present day state of Nepal, as was emphasized by one of the participant activists when he exclaimed triumphantly by saying, “This is very, very important information on our history which proves that Dhimal Dhami have been performing ritual here long before Nepal was formed. Now we can guess that these clay idols must have been as old as three hundred years old, maybe older” (M. Dhimal, April 15, 2009). That Dhimal Dhami themselves claimed that they have been officiating for the ritual at Raja Rani for at least nine

¹⁸⁰ These Dhami included (in the order): Karam Dhami, Arjun Dhami, Ran Singh Dhami, Bahadur Chaudhari Dhami Pultung Dhami, Name unknown (Father of Rambou and Bhambou), Sudai Dhami, Saharman Dhami and Kasiram Dhami (source: Mohan Dhimal, indigenous activist; former executive member of NEFIN). They claimed that this genealogy evidenced that they were offering ritual at Raja Rani at least for the last 300 years or more.

generations, in their genealogical reckoning, carried credible legitimizing power and authority. Within two weeks of its revelation, the names of these nine ancestral Dhimi were published (May 1, 2009) in the state-owned national daily newspaper, the *Gorkhapatra*.¹⁸¹

The immediate publication of these names in the national daily substantiates the recognition of the historical authority of the ritual specialists by Dhimal, the indigenous activists in particular. It also shows how the historical knowledge produced from acts of seemingly informal discussion during the Shrejat ritual event in Raja Rani becomes part of Dhimal's wider discourses of their ethnic history and territorial belonging in Nepal. During the Shrejat ritual celebration in Raja Rani, I also observed how Dhimal and non-Dhimal ritual participants actually used this space and the activities of 'small talks' to debate, to challenge, and also to reconstitute some of the 'established' historical understandings about Dhimal and their relationships with other indigenous groups, particularly the hill indigenous groups: the Limbus and the Rai. In doing so, they also connected Raja Rani to regional and national history and emphasized how the place gathers kinship and history between Dhimal and other indigenous groups.

Raja Rani And The Geography Of Kinship

In the 2008 Raja Rani Shrejat ritual, as the ritual participants were engaged in discussing histories, a senior man with a strong physical posture, dressed up in a well-pressed white *daura suruwal* (the 'national dress') underneath a black coat, and a Nepali *Dhaka topi* (hat) on his head, greeted the Dhimal participants, 'Namaste! (Nepali greeting, hello), my Dhimal brothers!' It

¹⁸¹ *Gorkhapatra* is Nepal's oldest daily national newspaper (in Nepali language). It is a state owned newspaper. As a symbolic practice of inclusive and representative journalism, since the late 2007, this national daily has initiated a regular two-page feature series under the title *Naya Nepal* (New Nepal). Each feature is guest edited by the writers from different linguistic groups (other than the Nepali) belonging to Nepal's various indigenous and other minority communities. This feature has provided an important access for Dhimal to write on issues pertaining to their community and as well as to voice their concerns, most importantly by themselves in their own mother tongue (though in Devanagari script). The first feature in Dhimali language was published on December 4, 2007.

seemed none of the Dhimal participants had known or seen the gentleman before; he joined the group and sat down on the plastic sheet that was used to cover the ground on which we all were sitting. He introduced himself as Lakhman Rai, an 82 years old resident of a village adjacent to Raja Rani. At the age of five, he came to his current village when their grandparents and parents moved here from Ilam, a hill district in Nepal's easternmost border.

Mr. Lakhman Rai was a knowledgeable person. According to him, there were clay idols of elephant and horses scattered all over the place. As Dhimals used to offer copper coins as *bheti* (Nep. money as ritual offering) to their deities, Mr. Lakhman Rai remembered that one could see and find these coins scattered all over the forest. "We were too scared to pick up and use these coins for the fear of being troubled by Dhimal deities. Later, the Army people collected and took away all these coins," he disclosed to the group. His disclosure that the army had taken away these coins also echoed the claims made by some Dhimal activists (not present at this particular group discussion) that the palace's army (the state) had taken away "important material archival remains" from Raja Rani areas in the early 1960s. However, none of the ritual participants had heard of it and they seemed rather uninterested in this revelation. Not all information that came out of the discussion equally intrigued the discussant Dhimal; they were selective about which concerns would make their way into the accumulative processes of history-making. For these Dhimal participants, the 82 years old knowledgeable Mr. Rai was a living history; they would not stop but kept asking him questions about their ancestral past. They seemed more interested in finding out if Mr. Rai had met any Dhimals who lived in the Raja Rani village when he visited the place in the past. For his part, Mr. Lakhman Rai had his own preferences for what reminiscences he wanted to share with the Dhimal.

Mr. Lakhman Rai claimed that Dhimal deities had come to him in his dreams when he was the *Pradhan Pancha* (the chairperson of the village level government body) in 1972. He realized then that the local people needed to offer ritual worship to these Dhimal deities. So he brought a black goat and a hen as ritual offerings and asked the local Magar to perform a ritual for the Dhimal deities, near the ponds. We learned that Mr. Rai helped to build the current (Hindu) temple located by the side of the two ponds in 1975. He also asserted that the water level of the two ponds increased after people began worshipping in the temple. “Yes, the water level of these ponds also increased when we began to worship here in 2001,” some Dhimal corroborated how the level of water in the ponds indicates whether or not people acknowledge and recognize their ancestors through ritual performance.

Mr. Lakhman’s emphasis on the story of building a temple for a Dhimal deity at Raja Rani, like the story of local Magar I have discussed earlier, also foregrounds the making of Raja Rani as Dhimal’s ancestral place in the inter-ethnic relationships between Dhimal and other indigenous groups. I cannot rule out the possibility that by claiming he helped to construct the temple, Mr. Rai was also narrating a self-aggrandizing story of his being “a man of power” in the past. Still, I sensed there were other more important motivating factors that had encouraged Mr. Lakhman to participate in the discussion. The stories he shared with the ritual participants emanated out of his embodiment of what Lakhman Rai emphasized as ‘*satya*’ (Nep. truth, duty) or the moral responsibility and obligation towards one’s ancestral (or others’ ancestral) beings, and his strong belief that *he shares a ‘genealogical’ relatedness with Dhimal*. The Dhimal deity came to his dreams, not because he was man of power but because he is a man of good morality and virtue. He said:

You, Dhimal people, have been worshipping the Satya Raja and the Satya Rani here since the time of your ancestors. *Hami Kirāti vansa haun!* (Nep. we are Kirāti clan), and we

have our *Satya* and our *Dharma*. People had stopped doing *puja* here. When the Dhimal deity came to my dream, I helped to build the temple. We cannot leave our *Satya*.

Thus his beliefs in '*satya*' and in his genealogical relatedness with Dhimal motivated Mr. Rai to build a temple by the two ponds.¹⁸² There is a 'popular' belief that Dhimal and the Limbus (and also Rai) are '*daju-bhai*' (Nep. brothers), and this view is widely shared by both the Limbus and Dhimals in the plains. Lakhman Rai repeatedly emphasized that Rais, Limbus and Dhimals are *daju-bhai*, descendants of the three sons from the same Kiranti mother. Many of the Dhimal discussants supported his claim and added their versions of how the two brothers (Rai and Limbu) settled in the hills while their ancestors lived in the plains. Other Dhimal, citing the political-economic differences between three groups and the story that Limbu had chased away Dhimal ancestors from Raja Rani, discredited this "mythic fraternal unity," to use Gaenzle's (1997) apt characterization, among these groups. However, all of them agreed that Dhimal are Kirāti people. The old Rai man was firm in his conviction, and when asked if these three groups were brothers then why had Limbu chased Dhimal ancestors from Raja Rani, he told them:

Brothers do quarrel, don't they? But we're all the three sons of the same Kirti mother. Brothers! Yes, we were the kings of these regions. Then, the Bahun-Chhetri (the Hill "high" caste Hindus) their king came disguised as a *jogi* and took away our land and

¹⁸² Mr. Lakhman's use of the concept of '*Satya*' is close to the idea of *Dharma* (Nep. duty, moral responsibility, religion). This is evident in the story he narrated about a Tamang man, who because of his good '*Satya*,' was escorted by the Dhimal deity, into the palace located in the other world deep beneath the Raja Rani ponds. According to the story:

One young Tamang man was returning to his village from Letang bazar in the evening. It had already turned very dark. Then on the way, he met a very old man coming towards Raja Rani hill. The old man asked the Tamang man where he was going and if he could help the old man to reach his place. The Tamang man willingly agreed and helped the old man to walk to his place. That old man was actually Dhimal deity. He was very happy with the Tamang man for his help and kindness. Then the deity took the Tamang man into the pond and showed him the palace and other places inside the pond. The place, the Tamang man said, is magnificent- full of lights. The next morning, he was escorted out to the bank of the Chisang river down there.

This story of Tamang man being invited to tour the 'worlds' of the Dhimal deities located somewhere inside the ponds is similar to the story of Pultung Dhami narrated to me by the local Magar.

kingdoms.¹⁸³ That is true.

Mr. Lakhman Rai man not only asserted that Rai, Limbu and Dhimal are real fraternal brothers, but they were also the “kings of these regions.” According to him, these three Kirāti sons, ruled the three different areas in what are now the eastern regions of Nepal. And all these brothers became dispossessed of their power and land after the arrival of the ancestors of the present-day dominant Hindu groups. The image of the Hindu king disguised as a ‘*jogi*’ reinforces the dominant indigenous narrative of the indigenous people being cheated by the Hindu groups in the unfair exchange of land (also see Caplan, 1972; Guneratne, 2001).

This ethnographic anecdote shows how the “myth of fraternal unity” (Gaenszle, 1997) is also “strengthened by the specific historical experience of being subjugated for the past two centuries, and so this comprehensive kind of traditional ethnic identity (Kirāti) is of special political significance” (Gaenszle, 1997: 364). It also illustrates how ritual participants discussed the relevance of Raja Rani by linking it with the regional and political history of Nepal, and emphasized that this particular ancestral place is not only a ritual geography but also a historical geography of their political autonomy.

Conclusion: Indigenous Territoriality and Place-Making

After the rediscovery of Raja Rani and the ritual reclaiming of the place as their ancestral place, Dhimal now claim these Raja Rani areas to be ‘historic sites’ of a Dhimal kingdom in the past. They consider the material remains rediscovered in and around the Raja Rani areas, which are located within a radius of ten miles of the fort of the historic Vijayapur kingdom (see Map 5.1) to be the relics of their ‘ancestral kingdom’-- evidence of their political autonomy in the past

¹⁸³ (Nep: a hermit who has denounced the social life, and gets daily food sustenance by “begging”- visiting door to door)

(B, Dhimal, 2009).¹⁸⁴ If the telling of the past is shaped by peoples' experiences and sense of the present then how can we understand Dhimals' claim of the existence of their 'kingdom' in the past, particularly in the context of the post April 2006 indigenous resurgence in Nepal?

I argue that Dhimal's claim of "ancestral kingdom" helps us to understand how historically marginalized groups use their historical imaginations to influence the emerging political-economic processes with which they creatively engage to assert their ethnic identity, territorial belonging, and political benefits such as autonomy and indigenous rights. During the period of my fieldwork (2007-2009), Dhimal also asserted their desire for political autonomy and the right to govern themselves by demanding a "Dhimal autonomous state" based on their indigenous identity and historical territory. Since various indigenous groups were claiming the same geographic region under their ethnic autonomy, and there were also overlapping geographical claims, for example, regarding the proposed federal states in the eastern regions, Dhimal further needed to discredit the claims of others and explain why their proposed federal state represents their ancestral territories and history of belonging as the *ādivāsi* of the region. In their proposed territorial mapping of the future autonomous region of Dhimal, 'Raja Rani' prominently featured as the historical landmark for their ancestral territories, and thus a "political boundary" of their proposed federal state.

The new practice of collective ritual performance by the Dhimal, the construction of the Gramthan, and their periodic organization of various cultural activities at Raja Rani under the leadership of the Kendra have substantially contributed to making Raja Rani the Dhimals' ancestral place, and even their "ancestral kingdom." In the last decade, like many other indigenous groups without written documents of their own, Dhimal have begun to "scripturalize"

¹⁸⁴ According to some Dhimals, the local residents of Raja Rani had told them that some of these material remains (for example, an idol believed to be an effigy of a Dhimal warrior) are believed to have been stolen by the state authorities in the recent past. However, I did not follow up this information with the local residents of the village.

(Gaenszle, 1997: 364) their histories in the forms of books, pamphlets, articles, and in online media like weblogs, and Facebook. The dialogical shaping between the scripturalized mode of history writing and the ‘topographic writing,’ I argue, has further magnified the political significance of ‘Raja Rani’ not only as the ancestral place of the Dhimal, but also as the political boundary of the future “Dhimal autonomous state” in the new federal republic of Nepal. But it is important, as my ethnographic observations suggest, to note that if we focus only on these more organized public events organized by the Kendra or the published historical narratives, we can potentially miss out on the contributions that ordinary individuals like Daya, the village priest, the soldier on leave, Puja and many other Dhimal women and men make in ‘writing’ their ethnic history in the land.

The place-making practices that I have discussed here are constitutive practices of Dhimal’s indigenous activism, but they are not “invented” to respond to larger political-economic forces. Drawing from my ethnographic discussions in this chapter, I argue that these place-making practices are part of Dhimal’s collective efforts to reproduce themselves and their social life in culturally meaningful ways (Holmberg, 2012; Turner, 1997). By performing the Shrejat ritual at Raja Rani, the Dhimal are reestablishing their relationships with their ancestors through their customary practices (Nep. parampara) in culturally meaningful ways so that people can experience how that place connects Dhimal, their villages, histories and ‘culture’ together as a collective people or a nation. This is inherently a political process, which is embedded in Dhimal’s everyday cultural practices in dialogical interactions with the larger political-economic contexts of their emplacements. For Dhimal, to build a Gramthan is also a political act of producing a village in a culturally meaningful way, and thus it is an act of producing their collective self. Thus, when Dhimal indigenous activists deploy the cultural politics of such

place-making practices in their political activism, they are doing more than just responding to the emerging political-economic conditions and changes. As historically located agentive social actors, these indigenous activists are dialogically transforming the national-global discourses into their culturally meaningful ideas and locally relevant political projects. Thus, this chapter also illustrates the creative agency of these indigenous activists in engaging their localized cultural politics to counter those political changes that can powerfully and negatively affect the Dhimal as a community.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

Envisioning An Indigenous Future

On December 21, 2009, as Dada recounted the history of his village to me, especially how its original name *Charakpada* was altered to *Chiyapasal* (teashop), his heartfelt and rich stories completely seized my mind. In particular, his remark that “many Dhimal do not know its (the village’s) original name” made me ask myself how Dhimal would remember their ethnic histories in the future. I then asked Dada what could be done in order to make the new generation aware of their ethnic history, their historical relationship to the place in particular. Dada repeated my question, “What can we do?” But after a moment’s thought, he went on:

In order to make our children know our history, first they should learn it in school, in our language. For that to happen, Dhimal should (be allowed to) write the school history textbooks. There should be Dhimal teachers to teach this history to our kids. But the question is: will they (the state) give us the rights to do so? Up to now, it does not seem like they will give us such rights (Interview with Dada, December 21, 2009).

For Dada and many other Dhimal activists, the ‘history of land’ and their *jāti itihās* (ethnic history) are mutually constituted. But Dhimal collective experiences of losing ground not only led to their political-economical marginality but also silenced their ethnic histories and severely weakened their collective ability to reproduce themselves as ‘Dhimal’. In the interview excerpts cited here, Dada underlined the need for the formal teaching and learning of one’s ethnic history

in school. His compelling emphasis on Dhimal control over the education of their youth encapsulates the central issues that I have addressed in this dissertation.

Here, Dada strongly asserted indigenous peoples' firm experiential conviction that access to and control over the state power can have lasting effects on the collective act of remembering or of forgetting one's ethnic history (Schlemmer, 2004; Tamang, 2008). I take Dada's claim that their children should have rights to learn their ethnic history in school, in their own language, and that Dhimal should be the ones writing these history textbooks, to be an example of his political vision for the indigenous future of Nepal. It also reflects Dhimals' collective hope that in the 'New Nepal', the making of which had begun with the peoples' movement of April, 2006, indigenous peoples will have a sovereign right to "freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development" (UNDRIP, Article 3). Since Dhimals' experiences of the Nepali state so far have been too exclusionary, Dada questioned whether they could imagine such an indigenous future. However, such denials of indigenous rights from the state also compel people like Dada, who has dedicated more than three decades to ethnic organizing, to continue their involvement in indigenous organizing and to work with new generations in crafting a collective future in a nation which, after the political changes of 2006, aspires to become inclusive, egalitarian, and respectful of its own diversity.

Dhimal youths in particular champion and characterize their activism as a movement for claiming Dhimals' 'history of land.' Coming from various villages and urban centers in Nepal, these Dhimal youths connect with one another despite their differences of class, gender, regional location, and educational attainment. Moreover, these youths are equally 'modern' in terms of their experience of 'modernity' (Appadurai, 1996a: 27-47), which the anthropologist Mark Liechty (2003) has described in his ethnographic account of the making of middle class culture

in the consumer society of Kathmandu, Nepal's capital city. Yet, unlike the Kathmandu youths whom Liechty studied a decade ago and who seemed less interested in their 'ethnic identity' than in their middle-class status, these Dhimal youths are deeply concerned with their ethnic identity as '*ādivāsi*'.

These youths are emerging as a major political actor in Nepal's indigenous political movement. They are expanding their political mobilization by forming alliances with other indigenous groups in order to collectivize their political strengths in claiming their rights with the state as *ādivasi janajāti* (indigenous peoples). For instance, these Dhimal youths have politically expressed their solidarity with the Limbus by forming a single political party- the Federal Limbuwan State Council (FLSC)- of which Dhimal Sanghiya Parishad is one of the constitutive political councils. Furthermore, the FLSC is an affiliate political state council of the umbrella national ethnic party of various ethnic groups registered as a single political party called Federal Democratic National Forum (FDNF) that contested the national election for the Constituent Assembly in 2008. Thus, the indigenous activism of these Dhimal youths also underlines an important emerging trend in Nepal's indigenous political movements - the process of transformation of indigenous social movements into ethnic political parties (Lawoti, 2012; Hangen, 2010; see Van Cott, 2005 for a similar process in Latin America).

The formation of an ethnic political party by the Dhimal youths was a nascent movement during my fieldwork period. Nevertheless, it had led to an overwhelming participation of Dhimal youths in indigenous activism and political mobilization. These Dhimal youths believe that the mainstream political parties use indigenous peoples and their issues only to advance the party interests and to perpetuate the domination of the traditional ruling groups within the parties as well as in the state. They argue that it is only by organizing and mobilizing themselves and

their communities through ‘ethnic political parties’ of their own that they can achieve substantial positive change for indigenous peoples in Nepal. Their sense of political empowerment was expressed by the general-secretary of the Sanghiya Parishad, an MA-level student of English at the Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, when he told me, “Now other political parties and the local administration cannot simply ignore us and *hāmro rajnaitik shākti* (Nep. our political force). They have realized that we are also a political force here in Morang.” Once I asked him to explain to me how they would write a ‘history of land.’ Without any elaboration, he gave me a very succinct one-line answer by saying, “Dai, (Nep. elder brother), in order to write the history of land, we must first have and achieve political power.” In other words, this youth leader wanted me to understand that they are engaged in indigenous activism to contribute towards the political empowerment of their community so that Dhimal can meaningfully claim their history. For these Dhimal youths, ‘history of land’ is not only about knowing one’s past but also about making their collective future. The shared conviction of Dada and the Dhimal youth regarding indigenous politics and their imagined future offers us an important perspective into how political struggles are continued over time through activism by bringing together people across generations and social backgrounds, and by building social relations of responsibility and duty towards their community.

Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to highlight indigenous activism as one of the many ways through which historically marginalized communities such as Dhimal are striving to subvert the political construction of their collective marginality so that they can socially reproduce themselves as a distinct people (*jāti*) with a distinct culture and history emplaced in their ancestral places. In this dissertation, I have examined Dhimals’ indigenous activism at two levels: (a) at the level of localized community politics that involve multiple Dhimal activists and

Dhimal community members engaged in defining and refining their ideas about Dhimal culture, customary practices, history, and their relationship with their territory, and (b) at the level of national politics where they align in solidarity with other indigenous groups in the pan-national indigenous movement as well as at the regional level to ensure their collective indigenous rights in the ongoing political transformation of Nepal as a federal and inclusive nation-state. These two levels are analytical constructs that do not operate as distinct and bounded domains in practice. I used them to examine the relations between political changes, indigenous activism and cultural politics in order to highlight how people, located in specific historical-political contexts, transform the global-national discourses of indigeneity and indigenous rights into locally meaningful and relevant political projects through their embedded everyday practices.

As the central premise of this dissertation, I have drawn on the formulation advanced by the anthropologist Terence Turner that the essence of indigenous activism is “the struggle for the continued production of collective life, the self-production of the social group, with its values and forms of personhood” (Turner, 1999:132). With the Dhimal case, I have expanded Turner’s emphasis on the social production of collectives to argue that indigenous activism needs also to be considered as a moral practice which people enact out of their felt sense of responsibility and duty towards their community. Central to this notion of activism is peoples’ understanding of themselves as moral actors, and their political agency to act on the structural conditions and relations of power that “disempower peoples’ ability to socially reproduce their social collectives” (Turner, 1992:132). I have sought to provide substantive illustrations of how approaching indigenous activism as a moral practice offers a valuable analytical framework to examine the inseparability of activism from peoples’ sense of self, political agency, and their

historical experiences of the nation-state. In what follows, I will highlight the major arguments of this dissertation and the contributions it makes to the anthropology of indigenous movements.

Indigeneity And The Political Transformations in Nepal

In Nepal, political transformations towards democracy have positively influenced the resurgence and relevance of indigeneity and the rights of indigenous peoples.¹⁸⁵ This dissertation shows how Dhimal self-identify as ‘ādivāsi’ people in order to assert their distinctive cultural identity and historical-territorial belonging in the Tarai, and how this sense of indigeneity becomes politically salient in their collective struggles for the recognition by the state of their indigenous rights. The Dhimal indigenous political mobilization discussed in this dissertation was shaped both by the strong resurgence of the pan-national indigenous movement following the political-historical transformations in the early 1990s, the post-April 2006 period in particular, as well as by the specific struggles of the Dhimal community for the reproduction of their collective peoplehood. From their organized efforts of the early 1980s under the rubric of ‘jāti bikās’ to the present day movements for ‘ethnic federalism’, Dhimals’ indigenous political mobilizations also show how what it means to be ādivāsi and the kinds of political rights people can possibly attain by virtue of being recognized as ‘indigenous peoples’ by the state have been substantially transformed during the last four decades in Nepal.

In his study of the transformation of indigenous social movements into ethnic political parties in Latin America, Van Cott (2001) argues that indigenous peoples’ organizations were

¹⁸⁵ Some scholars have argued that the transnational concept of ‘indigenous peoples’ do not apply or is a misfit in the case of Asia, the South Asian contexts in particular (Beteille, 1998; Li, 2000). Such views have been completely rejected by the people through their everyday and organized political practices by showing how the concept of ‘indigenous peoples’ resonates well with their political struggles, everyday practices and their sense of peoplehood.

successful when “they could raise claims in a forum that was part of larger regime bargain, allowing them to insert claims in a discussion of fundamental regime issues” (Van Cott, 2001:32). Similarly, indigenous organizations in Latin America were “more likely to extend their activities in electoral arena after they had secured significant and substantive policy advancements as social movements” (Van Cott, 2005:213). From a comparative perspective, Van Cott’s observations are relevant in contextualizing the strong resurgence of indigenous political mobilizations, including that of the Dhimal community, particularly in the post-2006 period. In the last two decades, the political transformation toward an inclusive nation-state and the important roles played by indigenous peoples and their representatives in these historic changes were instrumental in establishing indigenous peoples’ issues as the core national agendas for meaningful restructuring of the nation-state (Bhattachan, 2009; Lawoti, 2013).

In the early 1990s, indigenous peoples in Nepal strove for the recognition of their indigenous identity and they mobilized their movements to ensure social equality and justice by demanding recognition of their distinct social, political, cultural and linguistic identities and rights and to increase their equitable representation in every aspect of national life (Bhattachan, 2013). Indigenous peoples expanded their movement organizations across the nation as well as at the transnational level to pressure the state and mainstream political parties to endorse and commit to international agreements on the human rights of indigenous peoples, like the ILO 169. Indigenous peoples’ organizations became instrumental in redefining cultural identities and practices of indigenous communities through their organized politics of cultural reforms and revivals (Lawoti and Hangen, 2013:20).

The decade-long (1996-2006) Maoist insurgency and its successful mobilization of Nepal’s historically oppressed classes and social groups for political transformations through an

armed revolution made it clear that, along with class inequality, the issues of discrimination and exclusion based on caste, ethnicity, gender and regional identities are fundamental to the establishment of an egalitarian and inclusive democratic polity in Nepal (Bhattachan, 2013:53-54). In particular, the Maoists' promises of "upholding the right to self-determination, ethnic, linguistic and regional autonomy and self-rule, equality and equity based on the basis of gender, caste and ethnicity, language, religion and region" (Bhattachan, 2013: 49) supported indigenous peoples' struggles for their rights. It endorsed indigenous peoples' demands for a radical restructuring of Nepal's polity in order to embrace its cultural diversity by ending the hegemonic dominance of the hill Hindu groups and ensuring the equitable political participation and representation of all social groups.

Following the peoples' movement of April 2006 for the inclusive remaking of the nation, the abolition of the two-century long monarchy, and the state's ratification of ILO 169 and its endorsement of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), indigenous peoples and their representative organizations were successful in transforming the transnational notions of indigeneity and indigenous rights, the most important being the idea of political-territorial autonomy, into a collective political project for a federal restructuring of Nepal (Bhattachan, 2009; Lawoti, 2013). Similarly, the historic election of the Constitution Assembly (CA) in 2008 and the strong presence of indigenous representatives in the CA and of other political parties who supported many of indigenous peoples' political agendas stirred new hopes among indigenous and other historically marginalized communities that their political aspirations would be meaningfully addressed in the new constitution.¹⁸⁶ At the time of

¹⁸⁶ Of the 601 CA members, 240 representatives were elected through direct electoral system, and 335 were elected through proportional representative system while 26 were nominated by the council of ministers. 219 of the CA members (36% of the total members, drawn from all parties represented in the CA), were from indigenous communities. The 2008 CA was the most representative and inclusive national political institutions in Nepal's

my fieldwork, the pan-national ādivāsi janjāti (indigenous peoples) movement emerged as one of the most influential social movements to effect Nepal's political transformations (see Hangen, 2007; Lawoti and Hangen, 2013; Gurung and Mishra, 2012), and indigenous peoples were successful in establishing their political demands as fundamental to the inclusive restructuring of the nation-state into the 'New Nepal' (cf. Van Cott, 2001:32).

Therefore, the indigenous activism of Dhimal that I have described in this dissertation was not an isolated phenomenon. As historically constituted political practices, Dhimals' articulations of indigeneity and indigenous consciousness, and their envisioning of an indigenous future were intricately tied with and influenced by larger political transformations and mobilizations at the local, regional, national and global levels.

But, how should we approach the study of indigenous activism in a period of such radical political transformation? This was both a methodological and an analytical challenge that I confronted during the initial phase of my research period. In this regard, the anthropologist B.G. Karlsson (2000, 2001) provides an insightful perspective. In his study of the ethnic mobilization of the indigenous Rabha people living in the states of West Bengal and Assam, India, the former group having a localized community-based ethnic activism which is less confrontational than that of the Rabha people of Assam with their strong organized movement for ethnic autonomy, he writes:

One needs, as argued earlier, to take a closer look at what takes place on the ground, in the spheres of everyday life. The problem is that most studies of ethnic conflict or ethnic movements start with situations where people are out in the streets shouting slogans, raising political demands, and, at worst, taking to violence, and thus they tend to miss the more subtle or invisible processes of community formation taking place outside the visible domain of ethnic politics (Karlsson, 2001:29)

history till today. There were two Dhimal CA members are affiliated with the United Communist Party of Nepal, Maoist (UCPNM) (<http://www.can.gov.np>, accessed February 28, 2013).

Karlsson's emphasis on the need to focus on everyday practices and community formation processes is relevant to the ethnographic focus of this dissertation. During my fieldwork, there were many sporadic and organized indigenous movements, periodic protests, public demonstrations, strikes or 'Nepal shutdowns,' and other contentious activist events both in Kathmandu and in Morang which Dhimal and other indigenous groups both organized and took part in. Besides such organized and overt political activism, there were other spheres of activism which were more focused on organizing the Dhimal community than on confronting the state. Activists and their indigenous organizations were actively engaged in these locally embedded cultural politics related to the reforms and revival of what they consider to be Dhimal customary practices such as marriage and wedding ceremonials, the village rituals, and traditional ethnic dresses. These cultural politics, as this dissertation has demonstrated, are central to Dhimal indigenous activism. Throughout this dissertation, I sought to explain that if we limit our analysis of indigenous political movements only to overtly organized and contentious mobilizations, then we will miss how people enact and engage in indigenous activism through the everyday politics of community making.

Land and the Ādivāsi-State Relations In Nepal: A Regional Approach

A major focus of this dissertation has been to illustrate how issues of land and landlessness become fundamental to Dhimals' sense of who they are, what had happened to them in the past, what is happening to them now as Dhimal, and their vision of the future as ādivāsi in Nepal. With a historical analysis, this dissertation shows that Dhimals' emphasis on land and landlessness crystallizes their concrete subjective experience of the Nepali state and their resistance to it. I have argued that state colonization of Tarai land since the early 19th century

was a colonial project of resource extraction and of maintaining the political domination of the ruling groups (cf. Regmi, 1999), similar to the British colonial rule in the Tarai regions of Western Bengal (see Karlsson, 2000). This dissertation shows that the ways in which the aboriginal groups of the Tarai experienced, resisted and mediated such colonial encounters, and how they bring out these historical experiences in their political mobilizations powerfully shape their understanding of what it means to be *Tarai ādivāsi* in Nepal. Specifically, I have shown how Dhimal understanding of the ways in which their ancestors survived the malarial environment in the past and thereby sustained their traditional ways of life and political autonomy by evading the state strongly shapes their sense of territorial belonging and indigeneity.

In the study of indigenous relationships to land and indigenous advocacy of land rights in Nepal, *ādivāsi*'s communal ownership of land, exemplified by the Kipat system of the Limbu (see Caplan, 1970), has become a generic model and the dominant analytical framework. Such a model is less applicable to the case of Dhimal who were compelled to settle into farming communities after the state-led land colonization in the mid-19th century. This dissertation illustrates how the particular history of state-led land colonization in the Tarai, the extractive land tenure relations based on the dominance of the hill Hindu groups in particular, and the interplay among the politics of regional geographical imaginations, caste hierarchy, Dhimals' reliance on non-farming subsistence to adapt to the ecology of the densely forested and malarial Tarai, and their different notions of land (without permanent individual or collective ownership) placed Dhimal at such a distinct disadvantage in their relations with the encroaching landlord Nepali state until the early 20th century that many Dhimal later became landless in their own ancestral territories. This regional approach, a Tarai-centric regional-historical analysis, is

necessary to understand the experiences of territorial dispossession, landlessness and political-economic marginalization of the Tarai ādivāsi (Guneratne, 2002; Karlsson, 2000).

Like the Arjun Guneratne's work (1996, 2002) on the Tharus, my research brings new approaches to the study of the relationship of Tarai ādivāsi with the land by focusing on the interplay among the territorial sovereignty of the state, the role of malaria in mediating relations among ādivāsi, the state, and other social groups, and Dhimals' historical agency in resisting the extractive Hindu state. In doing so, this dissertation also highlights the critical need for a historically informed social history of malaria to understand the changing relations among the state, indigenous groups and other social groups in Nepal's Tarai. With this focus on the issues of land and landlessness, I have also emphasized that an anthropology of the state informed by indigenous peoples' politics must center on the dialogical relationship among geography, labor, history and power.

Place-Making, Indigeneity and Indigenous Territoriality

Since land is a central analytic in studying the relationship between the state and indigenous peoples, this dissertation shows the relevance of 'place' as an analytical framework for understanding indigenous politics. Drawing from theoretical perspectives on place and place-making, this dissertation demonstrates that a place-based approach is necessary to account ethnographically for the variegated ways in which people enact the cultural politics of making and claiming a differential geography of belonging. Such place-based approaches offer greater scope to understand indigenous activism by centering on how people, place, history, and politics are produced in mutually dialectical relationships (Feeley-Harnik, 1991; Leach, 2003; Kirsch,

2006; Kahn, 2011). My focus on place-making as an integral part of Dhimal indigenous activism has important implications for understanding indigenous politics in Nepal.

The demand for rights to indigenous territoriality is fundamental to the global indigenous political mobilization (Niezen, 2003; Castree, 2004; Karlsson, 2003), and now it has become one of the most important demands of indigenous movements in Nepal. At the time of my fieldwork period, indigenous demands for territorial based political autonomy in the federal restructuring of the nation was one of the most important and contested national political agendas in Nepal. During this period, Dhimals' experiences of landlessness that began in the early 19th century and their embedded belonging in their ancestral places, hence their understanding of indigeneity, also became an important political project in order to claim their collective aspirations for political autonomy. Dhimal and other indigenous groups not only demanded that Nepal should be federated in terms of autonomous states based on ethnic identity, history and geography. They also came up with their own propositions for the federal restructuring and delineations of territorial boundaries, for example, that of the proposed 'Dhimal autonomous state' in the new Nepal (see Bhattachan, 2009).

In Nepal, this indigenous articulation of territorial-based political autonomy in the form of ethnic federalism is an emergent indigenous political project that radically challenges the dominant ideals of multi-party democracy (see Bhattachan, 2009; Lawoti, 2005). Some scholars, political leaders, intellectuals, media personalities and commentators have warned so strenuously that federalism, particularly ethnic federalism, will cause the nation to disintegrate the nation that this fear seems to have caught the imagination of some sectors of the public (Lawoti, 2010).¹⁸⁷ The forces driving these fears about indigenous claims of territorial autonomy are important

¹⁸⁷ See Mishra and Gurung 2012 for an overview of the debate; also see Lawoti, 2009; Bhattachan, 2013 for critiques of such views.

political issues that merit serious scholarly discussion (see Rycroft and Dasgupta, 2011). At the same time, we also need to question critically how the dominant political parties and the mainstream media widely use and circulate this politics of fear that ‘ethnic federalism will disintegrate the nation’ in order to mute and marginalize the multiple indigenous federal imaginations from meaningful public debates in Nepal.



Figure 19: “Welcome to Dhimal autonomous region under Limbuwan autonomous state”: a signboard by the Sanghiya Parishad along the East-West High in Laxmi Marga, Morang.

The prospects and perils of ethnic federalism were beyond the scope of this dissertation. I was interested in exploring how people make sense of those federal imaginings that had captivated people from all walks of life and places during the time of my fieldwork. By focusing on the centrality of place and place-making practices in understanding peoples’ sense of ethnic history, ancestral belonging, experiences of inclusion and exclusions from the state and the

power relations affecting their lived worlds, my ethnographic discussions of Dhimals' place-making practices elucidate how people craft and draw meanings from such federal envisioning by relating them to their historical experiences, the global-national discourses of indigeneity, and their everyday practices.

The anthropologist Mukta S. Tamang (2009:286) succinctly argues that “indigenous activism through assertions of relative autonomy and identity cannot be separated from the struggle against political-economic exploitation in a situation where the land, labour, and resources of the relatively marginal and powerless groups are being exploited with impunity by market and dominant social forces.” He shows how Tamang indigenous activists work to produce territorial consciousness through place-making practices at two levels. On the one level, Tamang activists produce a social solidarity across diverse local communities of Tamang through symbolic invocation of Tamasaling (homeland of Tamang). On the other level, “by constructing an alternative indigenous history, activists assert that the established order and the histories associated with it are arbitrary human construction, thereby pointing the ways for radical changes in order to empower the disempowered” (Tamang, 2009:286).

As with the place-making politics of Tamang activists, Dhimal indigenous activists also creatively use their village ritual Shrejat to forge a collective sense of peoplehood by promoting it as their ‘national ritual’. Drawing on theoretical approaches that combine phenomenological and political-economic approaches to place-making and experiences of place (Kirsch, 2001, 2006; Escobar, 2001; Meyers, 2001; Kahn, 2011), I have examined how Dhimal are reclaiming a new historical relationship with their lived geographies through rituals, history writing, and undertaking collective journeys to their ancestral places and how they are using these place-

making practices to produced new territorial and historical consciousness in the Dhimal community through indigenous activism.

The relationship between land and history is a recurring focus in the anthropology of place (Basso, 1996; Ingold, 1993, 2000; Santos-Garnero, 1998; Kirsch, 2006; Kahn, 2011). My ethnographic discussions of how ordinary individuals make and write history in the land by participating in ritual and by being physically present in their ancestral places through seemingly mundane practices of chitchat and informal group discussions adds new ethnographic insights to understand the practice of “topographic writing” (Santos-Garnero, 1998), i.e. how people inscribe histories in the land. Furthermore, this dissertation provides a grounded ethnographic example to illuminate the dialogical interplay among global-national discourses of indigeneity, political transformations, and peoples’ everyday practices by showing how ordinary people imbue a place with historical significance and how such history making can become a powerful source for the indigenous articulation of territorial claims in their specific political struggles, for example, in the movements for a ‘Dhimal autonomous state.’

Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to explain that the centrality of land, territorial claims and place-making in Dhimal indigenous activism are moral and political projects aimed at making “their own places rather than have them made for them” (Castree, 2004:161) so that they could reverse their long history of state-led dispossessions of their indigenous territories. My historical and ethnographic data show the severity of territorial dispossessions, and the political, economic and cultural marginalization Dhimal suffered for generations as a result of the state colonization of the Tarai and the impositions of assimilative cultural polices in the past. After the 1950s, the escalation of the state-led geography of violence in indigenous territories under the politics of land reforms, administrative divisions of the nation, and other modernizing

schemes forcibly erased the Dhimal's own history of land in their ancestral territories. Despite the devastating impact of these state-making projects, Dhimal continued to reconstitute themselves as a people, albeit in new forms, primarily by their grounding their communal life in the place and connecting to their collective social life through their indigenous notion and practices of 'village.' Thus I contend that Dhimals' place-making practices also need to be understood as the collective efforts to remake their village and its social organization. Hence, with its focus on place-making, this dissertation also contributes towards the rethinking of the concept of 'village' in the study of South Asian societies (see Mines and Yazgi, 2010; Mines, 2005). I argue that the interplay among place-making, the social production of the village or the process of community formation (Karlsson, 2001), and indigenous activism also helps to explain how people become morally motivated to become involved in indigenous activism. I will return to this point in the final section of this chapter.

While Dhimal reclaim their indigenous territoriality and indigeneity, their place-making practices are not exclusionary and do not deny the mutual belonging and existence of other social groups. As my ethnographic discussions of the Shrejat ritual performance in the village of Raja Rani evidence, Dhimal place-making practices recognize the inter-ethnic belongings and reciprocal relationships between various social groups. Dhimal themselves are acutely aware of the multiethnic character of the ancestral territories which they seek to make their autonomous region. Yet they also know from experience that such a multiethnic coexistence, when it is mediated by unequal power relations, always works to disadvantage them. For the historically marginalized ādivāsi who have become *sukumbasi* in their own ancestral lands, the politics of place-making and their ability to make their own places or their 'villages' entail political

possibilities for the continued social production of collectivities possessing their own values, forms of personhood, and history (Turner, 1999; Holmberg, 2011).

As expressed by Dada and the youth leader, the secretary of the Sangihaya Parishad, in the beginning of this chapter, Dhimal seek to expand their hold on political power through their indigenous mobilization so that they can subvert the political construction of their marginality. Thus their claims of indigenous rights to political autonomy, for example in the form of ‘Dhimal autonomous state’ in the present-day political context of the federal restructuring of Nepal, reflect Dhimal political envisioning of a ‘New Nepal’ in which they will be politically empowered to make decisions for themselves. Dhimal indigenous activists and others understand that their vision of a Dhimal autonomous region is fraught with complexities and challenges, and they are fully cognizant of the fact that they must recognize the rightful belonging and autonomy of others groups as well.¹⁸⁸ Drawing on my discussions with Dhimal indigenous leaders, observations of their political activism, and analysis of their published and unpublished position papers on ‘Dhimal autonomy’ in the proposed federal restructuring of Nepal, I confidently infer that Dhimals’ political projects of place-making are about making their ‘villages’ and for the remaking, not for the breaking up, of the nation.

¹⁸⁸ The preamble of the constitution of the Sanghiya Parishad - the Dhimal Federal Autonomous Council, 2066 V.S. (2011 A.D.) makes it explicit that “ In keeping view with the historical responsibility of institutionalizing the complete peoples’ federal democratic (*loktrantik*) republic state system, the restructuring of the nation towards a just and prosperous society should be based on the ethnic historical territoriality without comprising the national sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence, national autonomy, freedom and national unity. Dhimal autonomous region would be committed to the principles and values of inclusive democratic governance, freedom of citizens, secularism, fundamental human rights, rights to voting, complete press freedom, free and able federal judiciary, legitimate and law abiding governance, and values of the complete peoples’ democracy. The proportional and total representations of all caste and ethnicities, class, region and genders will be ensured in the Dhimal autonomous region (Sunsari, Morang and Jhapa).”

Indigenous Activism as Locally Embedded Moral Practices

In recent years, ethnographic attention to indigenous political movements has increasingly focused on transnational spaces (Muehlebach, 2001; 2003), the global circulation of indigeneity and indigenous discourses (Brysk, 2000; Niezen, 2003) and the interface between neoliberal regimes and indigenous politics (Li, 2000, 2007; Postero, 2006). We now know more about how the global discourses of ‘indigenous rights’ circulate and translate across cultural, political and geographical boundaries creating both potential and limitations for inclusive democracy. However, we still understand very little about the ways in which such global-national indigenous politics become meaningful part of the locally embedded everyday practices. To this understanding, this dissertation makes an important contribution.

The centrality of cultural politics in Dhimal indigenous activism is a major focus of this dissertation. I was interested in exploring why Dhimal emphasize certain cultural practices such as marriage, village ritual, and traditional dress as sites of reform and preservation, and how these reforms inform their indigenous politics. I have sought to highlight how indigenous activists and their ethnic organizations derive their moral authority from these cultural politics and how they creatively interweave marriage, ritual, and place-making practices into the political project of demanding their rights from the state and for the revival of Dhimal customary practices and institutions. Thus, I call these cultural politics constitutive practices of activism. With my ethnographic cases, I have emphasized the importance of understanding indigenous activism as a locally embedded cultural practice. By demonstrating how marriage (hence kinship), village ritual and place-making activities can become constitutive practices of

indigenous activism, this dissertation makes an important contribution in foregrounding indigenous activism as a locally embedded practice.

I have argued that this analytical focus on community making practices helps us to understand what motivates people to become activists and how activism becomes embedded in everyday life in its specific political-historical settings. For instance, when I asked senior Dhimal activists why they became involved and continue to engage in activism, they explained that activism was like a *nashā* or an addiction – an embodied practice integral to their sense of self. For them, activism is something they wear (*lagāunu*) and walk with (*hindu*) as a moral person, not by choice, but out of their felt sense of temporal urgency and their embodied duty to act on the political-economic conditions that disempower them and their community. This sense of embodiment is vital to understanding the explanations that Dhimal give for their becoming involved in indigenous activism, explanations that call to mind embodied moral practice and felt sentiments of responsibility and duty.

In looking for a way to fully convey what Dhimal mean when they use words like *lāgnu* and *hidnu*, it becomes evident that the difficulty derives in part from the differing notions of personhood that characterize Euro-American and Dhimal (and other Nepali Tibeto-Burman peoples) notions of the self. Scholars drawing attention to these differences include Ernestine McHugh (2001) and Robert Desjarlais (1992, 2003) who point out that the Gurung and Yomo Wa with whom they worked experience a world in which the boundaries of the self are more permeable than those conceived by Westerners – where motivation, the qualities of the good, and elements of virtue involve an integration of what we might think of as substance. Dhimal activists' use of words like *lāgnu* and *hidnu* emphasize the practical processes of embodiment that so transform the person that they cannot conceptualize their sense of self without being

involved in the practice of activism. A part of that transformation is embodiment and what may be embodied has to do with virtue and moral practice (McHugh 2001, Fricke, 2008).

In my analysis of the Dhimal history of ethnic organizing and the life histories of senior Dhimal activists, I have focused on the political-historical contexts that compelled these Dhimal to become activists. All the senior activists explained that the Dhimal collective experience of landlessness and the resulting marginalization compelled them to become activists. Their emphasis on activism as an obligatory moral duty not only illustrates how people embody activism in their everyday life, but also points to the need to account for the larger historical-political contexts and structural relations of power within which people derive such meanings of activism. In other words, for Dhimal activists, activism is a historically constituted embodied moral practice through which their political struggles are continued and reproduced across generations. Such an understanding of activism has important implications for how we represent indigenous activism and activists.

Many scholarly works on ethnic and identity politics in Nepal and South Asia describe ethnic activists as educated and middle class individuals whose urban experiences are detached from the reality of the rural people for whom they claim to speak. Or they are the 'elite' members of their community, who, with supports from the state, international donor community, and mainstream political parties, set the movement agenda in order to reap economic and political opportunities for themselves. My ethnography challenges such a narrow economic and class-based approach and offers an alternative perspective on indigenous activism as a locally embedded moral practice through which people engage with the larger social worlds and reproduce their collective selves.

Appendix

Appendix 1: Summary Of Dhimal's Marriage Rit

Before Wedding		
<i>Rit</i>	<i>Rit Items exchanged</i>	<i>Significance</i>
<i>Samdhi Doghbhet</i> (In-laws greeting exchange)	Groom's side: 2 bottles of <i>raksi</i> , betel nut, cigarette/tobacco Bride's side: one earthen pot of <i>Ghangsing</i> (brewed beer) and one bottle <i>raksi</i> (brewed alcohol) for the whole village (representative) in acknowledgement of their presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Representatives of the village elders from the two sides. They determine if the proposed marriage is permissible (clan exogamy; cross cousins beyond the third generation). • In-laws are formally introduced and greeting exchanged • Commitments to the marriage from the two sides • Fixing of the wedding date
During the Wedding (at the bride's home)		
<i>Rit</i>	<i>Rit Items exchanged</i> <i>(Before entering the bride's home)</i>	<i>Significance</i>
<i>Dhana Kawari rit</i> (rit for the male youths of the bride's village)	Groom family gives: <i>7 supari</i> (beetle nut), <i>7 paisa</i> (coins) and one bottle of <i>raksi</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of the bride's friends (male) and village youths • Seeking apology for taking their friends away •
Warang-berang rit (Village elders block the way)	The groom's side pays Rs. 5 to the elders. One earthen pot of <i>Ghangsing</i> and one bottle of <i>raksi</i> is exchanged between the two sides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of the village elders
Rit for the girls	The groom side pays Rs. 10 to the groups of girls standing on the entrance. <i>Ghangsing</i> and one bottle of <i>raksi</i> is exchanged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To welcome the <i>janti</i> (procession) • Recognition of the bride's girl friends and her sisters.
Wedding rit exchange		
<i>Dhudhauri rit</i> (Milk payment)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one <i>tokara</i> (dried squash used as container) <i>gora</i> and Rs. 2. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of the bride's mother for nurturing (milk feeding), caring and

<p><i>Kanataka Chukaika rit (rit for the bride's family and the bride's village)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an oil lamp is lit and placed on the banana leaf. The fire is placed as a sacred object to which h the two sides can pledge the exchange processes. • The bride's side offers a bottle of <i>raksi</i> and two rupees to the bride's father. The bride and groom's father greet the community people. • The bride's family reciprocate the rit by offering a bottle of <i>raksi</i> and a pot of <i>Ghangsing</i> to the groom's janti 	<p>bringing up the bride</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Important rit: recognition of the bride's father and bride's kin groups • The two sides exchange greetings and offer respect to the community • Exchange of <i>jari sona</i> (wedding songs) as ways of making the bride's families and relatives ensure that their daughter will be loved and treated well in her husband's family (Moral commitment).
<p><i>Dhami Manjhi rit</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The groom side offers one bottle <i>raksi</i> each to <i>Dhami</i> and <i>Manjhi</i>. One bottle brewed beer (<i>Ghangsing</i>) for <i>Dhami</i> <i>Manjhi</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition and respect to the village <i>Dhami</i> and the <i>Manjhi</i>
<p><i>Rit for Pancha: respected community members</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The groom side gives five rupees and a bottle of <i>raksi</i> to the community members of the bride village 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respect and recognition of the community members
<p>Both the bride and the groom's family will offer special recognition to all the people who had helped them in preparing the food.</p>		
<p>When the bride is brought to the groom's home, the groom's family and relatives will bless her. Her mother in law and other female kin members of <i>the groom gift her the bohna</i>, the traditional dress for <i>Dhimal</i> women. Then a special ritual will be held in the courtyard of the groom's home This ritual is performed in order to avoid 'sins' of eating the wedding food if the groom and bride are kin groups (incestuous marriage). Then the bride serves them cooked rice and lentils on a banana leaf. The acceptance of food by the village <i>Manjhi</i>, groom's kin members and other community elders symbolizes the formal acceptance of the bride into the family and the community at large.</p>		

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