Mutable Aspirations and Uncertain Futures:
Everyday life and The Politics of Urgency in Kathmandu

by

Sabin Ninglekhu

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Department of Geography and Program in Planning
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Abstract

This dissertation interrogates the right to the city as a category of analysis with recourse to an account of extreme marginality. As a starting premise, it seeks inspiration from Kristin Ross’ (1987) take on everyday life as a site of dominant relations of power on the one hand, and an incubator of utopian possibilities on the other. To this end, the dissertation probes three key questions. The first question asks: what are the conditions of possibility enabling the “slum dwellers” (sukumbasi in Nepali) in Kathmandu, Nepal, to make claims for the right to the city? I document the rituals of everyday life and the capacity to make claims that are organized through a metaphorical framework of a “house with three pillars.” The second question broaches the issue of how claims for a right to the city come up against governmental programs seeking to secure norms of private property, environmental sustainability, and elite aesthetics. It asks: How does the threat of violence forge sukumbasi
political subjectivity and inform renewed strategies of inhabitance? The third question investigates what implications these strategies have for diminishing, or modifying, the right to the city project? The last two questions prompt us to locate the practices of the poor within the context of a “politics of urgency” – an ad hoc creative and counterintuitive “non-movement” forged in the crucible of crisis, in which the organized ritual of everyday life is disrupted and stretched in new and uncertain directions. It is under these conditions that the demand for the right to the city loses its aspirational spirit on the one hand, while ushering in an evolving politics of possibility, on the other. In considering the politics and contingencies of the right to the city, we are presented with a stark understanding of the possibilities and limits of the political aspirations of the poor. The dissertation draws on ethnographic research of “the slum” in Kathmandu, and aims to combine Postcolonial Urbanism, Planning Theory and Critical Urban Studies to constructively probe the role of urban everyday life in troubling the political contours of the right to the city project.
Acknowledgement

This dissertation is an outcome of countless moments of feeling empowered and disempowered; these experiences have been interspersed over years of reading, researching, writing, and rewriting, and procrastinating, that have been both inspiring and excruciating in equal measure. I am pleased that the dissertation has finally seen the light of the day. A heartfelt note of thank you, therefore, should go to my supervisor, comrade, and colleague, Dr. Katharine N. Rankin, for relentlessly and passionately pushing me over and over again as if she was never prepared to give up on me. Enormous gratitude goes to my partner, Sirjana Pant, whose notes of encouragement conveyed through a perfect balance of patience and urgency always served as an everyday source of motivation and focus. Dr. Kanishka Goonewardena, Dr. Rachel Silvey and Dr. Anderson Sorensen are my dissertation committee members who have together provided constructive criticism, incisive feedback, and much-needed empathy in constantly re-invigorating the intellectual self that was necessary to inject energy into the dissertation time and again. Dr. Mark Hunter, the internal dissertation examiner, provided insightful comments during the final exam that has pushed the dissertation in a new direction. I owe a special thank you to my external examiner and the appraiser during the final exam, Dr. AbdouMaliq Simone, for a meticulous reading of my work and a very thoughtful set of encouraging comments that have helped me take ownership of the future direction of this project with renewed vigor and confidence. Without Yogendra Shakya, friend and mentor, this journey would not even have begun. Likewise, it would have been impossible to end this journey without Smita Acharya, Raju Lama and Moti lama, the fellow inhabitants of the city that I come from, Kathmandu, with whom I continue to collaborate in activism and planning for the right to the city. To my mom and dad, I dedicate this work for their dignified silence towards the latter stages of the PhD, which could have meant anything, but I mostly decided to take it as a source of inspiration. Few names remain unnamed because I have already thanked them in the hearts of my heart.
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Introduction

1. Prologue

Paurakhi Basti is a squatter settlement located under the bridge of the Bagmati River in the middle of Kathmandu, Nepal. In early 2012, it was among thirteen settlements along the banks of the Bagmati River facing the threat of state-endorsed eviction. The land needed to be cleared in order to fulfill the mandate set out in the Bagmati Action Plan (BAP), a five-year river restoration and beautification project. The mundane everyday life of the residents – sukumbasi¹ – in the settlements was put on hold. Now, life revolved around organizing a citywide movement to resist the threat of eviction: meetings with politicians, human rights activists, media, and government officials became the new itinerary of everyday life. In the early morning hours of the 13th of March 2012, residents of Paurakhi Basti woke up to find that their settlement had been cordoned off by a wall of armed police forces, and a bulldozer standing behind the wall. The everyday absence of the state was made conspicuous through the presence of what one may call, following Ananya Roy (2011), “the activist state” – one that lacks a unified urban strategy, and oftentimes operates in discreet and disparate ways; and one that deploys powerful instruments of planning to (de)regulate space and subjectivities. The specter of eviction that had loomed dangerously in the minds of sukumbasi had taken shape in the form of the activist state.

¹ Sukumbasi is the Nepali word generally used for squatters; it is also a word that can have contested meanings, which will be further teased apart below.
² Roy and Ong (2011) describe ‘activist state’ as one that is able to assemble different
The weeks leading up to the eviction did not feel safe, but there had been a sense of preparedness owing to a network of solidarity that had formed among sukumbasi during anti-eviction organizing. The squatter communities thenceforth had faith in their collective capacity to resist state-led threats of eviction. Eviction notices had been issued in the newspapers on several previous occasions. Preparations in the settlements would follow suit, which would largely mean a very busy network of mobile phones used to alert one another back and forth across the looming threat. All the resident activists would then congregate at the entrance of the squatter settlements targeted for eviction. Because of their links with student and youth organizations affiliated with different political parties, sukumbasi in the city were also able to bring leaders and members of these organizations to the settlement as the faces of the resistance that was put together: “It was about showing force” said Basanta Jaisi, one of the leaders of the anti-eviction campaign. People from NGOs working with sukumbasi as well as human rights activists would join them too. The organizing was carried out weekly. Sometimes informants in the road department, under whom the bulldozers operate, would leak to the sukumbasi leaders information about another secretly planned eviction. A similar method of organizing and resisting would follow such leakages. In the morning of March 13, however, the messengers failed. There was no notice, no leakage of information, and hence no anticipation of danger or preparedness of any kind. Eviction struck at dawn when they least expected it.
News of the demolition became public early in the morning. One of those who seemed to have been caught off guard with the news was Baburam Bhattacharai, prime minister at that time and ex-vice-president of the United Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist (UCPN – Maoist), the ruling party. The next day Bhattacharai visited the eviction site that had been razed to the ground. Amidst the congestion of those gathering to witness the tales and the details of destruction, and those still salvaging whatever materials they could from their dismantled homes, Bhattacharai lamented,

We have no idea how this happened. We were still in the process of coming up with a decision regarding eviction. We were still in the process of finding a
resettlement site for you, as well as compensation, but suddenly this happened.

A few days after Bhattarai expressed his frustration, Keshav Raj Sthapit, the head of the Kathmandu Valley Development Commission (KDVC, declared in a TV interview, 14 March 2012):

I am very hurt and very angry [about the eviction]. We have a government led by a very fine prime minister who talks about creating a socialist society. I belong to a different political party but the prime minister was large-hearted enough to appoint me as the head of KVDC. But who are these actors that are vilifying the prime minister and his intention? Why are they doing it, and with what vested interest?

After raising his doubts about potential duplicity within the government, Sthapit went on to declare with conviction, “I guarantee you that I will resettle those displaced within six months’ time. I will not use a single dime from the state. I know many networks within international circles” – signaling a potential arrival of the neoliberal state to counter the threats of the “activist state”. He would later pass a firsthand assessment of the eviction,

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2 Roy and Ong (2011) describe ‘activist state’ as one that is able to assemble different instruments of governmentality to deploy the instruments of planning at will to de-regulate space...
There was on-going dialogue from all sectors of the government to come up with an amicable solution with the sukumbasi. In the middle of the exercise, how can they bulldoze the settlement just like that? Wow! This is inhuman.

The events described in this prologue raise a number of critical questions and concerns: With what logic of modernity, or development, if any, was the eviction carried out? How did the figure of a ‘sukumbasi’ figure in such logic? How did sukumbasi assemble conditions that enabled them to forge anti-eviction resistance? How did anti-eviction demands link with the central demands of sukumbasi for shelter with land rights, and rights to obtain citizenship status?³ How do these demands articulate with the demand for the right to the city? How did the state-led intervention containing eviction threats shape and produce particular sukumbasi subjectivities? How do these subjectivities open or close the horizon of the “politics of the possible” – “the emergent ways in which collective actions coalesce and mutate in light of new urban developments” (Simone, 2008: 187)? How can such politics be theorized in relation to the politics of everyday life of the poor that constitute the city? As I pose these questions I am sensitive to their contested nature and the ways in which the issues entail invisible complicities among diverse, and seemingly disparate, set of actors, such as between sukumbasi and civil society actors, representatives of the local and municipal states or members of political parties. Together these questions provide the preliminary basis for setting out the methodological and epistemological inquiry of this dissertation as it relates to

³ I will discuss in more detail in the following sections that sukumbasi in Nepal continue to be excluded from obtaining formal citizenship status even if they are of Nepali origin and are born in Nepal.
“the slum” – “the most common itinerary through which the Third World City…is recognized” (Roy, 2011: 225).

The overall objective of this dissertation is to interrogate the right to the city as a category of analysis with recourse to an account of extreme marginality. To this end, I pose three key questions (under each, there are few sub-questions) that frame the overall focus of the dissertation project. The first question is, what are the conditions that enable sukumbasi to make claims for the right to the city? The right to the city is an overarching right that encompasses the following set of rights in the context of Kathmandu: the right to shelter with land rights in the city; right to municipal citizenship rights that guarantees access to municipal services like water and electricity; right to obtain formal citizenship status that would allow for the “right to have more rights”; the right to stay put; the right to be relocated within the city in the event of displacement/eviction; and the right to remain free of stigma such as “dirty” and “illegal”. I examine self-management of sukumbasi that result in the emergent and intertwined production of space and subjectivity as being the enabling conditions to demand these rights. The practices of self-management are framed through the metaphor of “house with three pillars” that circulates widely in the settlements in the city. The metaphor represents a network of solidarity between four different sukumbasi-led organizations – one “house” represents a central organization, and the three “pillars” are three other organizations that work closely with the “house”. This metaphor articulates a network of solidarity that is mobilized to institute the principles of self-organizing. Such principles regulate the rituals of everyday life of sukumbasi. The second question broaches the issue of how claims for a right to the city confront governmental programs seeking to
establish norms of private property, environmental sustainability, and elite aesthetics. It asks: How does the threat of violence and eviction influence sukumbasi political subjectivity and inform renewed strategies of inhabitation? The third questions asks what implications do these strategies have for diminishing, or modifying, the right to the city as a transformative as well as an aspirational project that must encompass both the potential and limits of the politics of the poor?4

In light of these inquiries, next, I would like to provide some essential institutional and political background to the aforementioned questions. The section below is divided into two subsections. First to be noted is the rapidly changing political situation in Nepal. The last decade alone encompasses the People’s War in 2006, the subsequent demise of the monarchy, and the rise of the Community Party of Nepal – Maoist, or simply the Maoist Party, as the largest political party in Nepal. Together, these keystone movements created “naya Nepal”, or new Nepal, that helped fill people’s everyday lives with aspirations for a more inclusive and democratic state. For identity-based movements, such as the movement of the indigenous nationalities as well as the Madhesi, marginalized people from the southern plains of Nepal that border India, “naya Nepal” symbolized the transformative potential of this political conjuncture (Hangen, 2007). The second context to be considered is the set of institutional and political-economic formations that have shaped urbanization over the last two decades. These formations have set in motion different planning and

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4 The framing of the right to the city as a ‘project’ indicates not a coherent set of outcomes to be obtained through prescribed actions. Rather, ‘project’ signals a collective will and acknowledges the coherence to the quest for a right to the city.
governance regimes that have encouraged the production of urban spaces and subjectivities in line with the logic of liberal democracy. Situating the dissertation research questions in these contexts is important for two reasons. First, it encourages us to take stock of how the “urban” movement led by sukumbasi in the city articulates a wider aspirational politics. The “urban” character of the sukumbasi politics is to be found in the formation of a kind of citizenship that refuses to submit to the liberal democratic logic of property ownership. Instead, the citizenship is rooted in the idea of inhabittance of the city as its residents – as urban inhabitants. Second, it invites us to interpret the politics of everyday life of sukumbasi as a politics intended to liberate sukumbasi from the conditions of exclusion introduced through the politics of urban planning.

2. Misplaced Dreams?

2.1 The Conjuncture of Naya Nepal (or New Nepal)

At its inception, the dissertation research took place during a political conjuncture that was infused with renewed sense of hope, aspiration, and belonging among citizens of Nepal. The conjuncture contained a historic potential to usher in Naya Nepal, thereby marking a radical departure from Old Nepal. Naya Nepal signals a departure from a Hindu monarchical state dominated by the permanent establishment of Nepal (PEON) representing the high caste Hindu elite\(^5\). For 240 years, Nepal was formally ruled by the Shah monarchy, often in

\(^5\) PEON is a term coined by Nepal’s foremost political thinker and public intellectual CK Lal. In regular columns in national and international news dailies, Lal continues to remain a vehement critic of the PEON – an immovable coterie of high-caste, historically advantaged group of population whose single-minded focus to remain in power continues to delay progressive changes from taking shape in Nepal.
conjunction with hereditary prime ministers of the Rana dynasty. Both the Shahs and the Ranas are high-caste Hindus, and Nepal during this period was officially designated as a Hindu kingdom. The foundational work for the construction of a homogenous Hindu nation was achieved in 1854 through the adoption of Nepal’s first comprehensive legal code called the Muluki Ain. Under this code, the majority non-Hindu ethnic groups were incorporated into the Hindu state through a process of Sanskritization, which, following the principles of Hindu religious doctrine, categorized non-Hindu ethnic groups as low caste groups occupying various locations within the hierarchical Hindu caste system (Hofer 1979).

Another characteristic feature of the Hindu kingdom was the steady territorial expansion across small regional principalities that comprise the terrain of present-day Nepal. Subsequent practices of land management played a critical role in economic and political forms of state expansion and especially in the state’s efforts to exert sovereignty on dispersed local populations—mostly ethnic, indigenous, and low caste groups (Regmi 1978; 1999). Local governance was achieved initially via a system of land grants that placed the Shah/Rana regime at the apex of an extractive feudal agrarian system. With increasing integration into regional and global geopolitics in the mid twentieth century, efforts to govern the peasantry from afar encompassed more liberal approaches premised on benevolent rule. The Land Acts of 1961 and 1964 during the era of Mahendra, a Shah King, are key examples of state rule aimed at modifying highly unequal landowner-tenant relationships that had been generated by earlier ruling practices (Regmi, 1978; 1999). Overall, however, the effects of state-expansion were largely negative for the majority of Nepalis outside of the Hindu elites. Many of these communities lost land to the Hindu elites during the state-building process and
were forced into relations of subjection. Even as land reforms established some rights to land
tenancy and ownership, the state increasingly institutionalized the caste system, and the
dominance of the Hindu elites, through policies governing language and culture, such that
ethnic and low caste groups have continuously, if not increasingly, faced cultural and
associated forms of economic marginalization. Such modes of domination continued into the
era of multiparty democracy that was instituted in 1990, following Nepal’s first ‘Jana
Andolan’, or People’s Movement, after putting an end to the Panchayat regime. The
Panchayat regime was a single-party system of government, with the king as the executive
head of the nation. While the multiparty democratic system ushered in a new era of economic
liberalization, and expedited the pace of cultural globalization (Liechty, 2003), the
domination of the Hindu elite continued to persist within the state machinery (Lawoti, 2010).

It was during the mid-1990s that Nepal’s political landscape began to radically alter,
which would have major repercussions on the Nepali state form in the decade that followed.
In the early-1990s, a dissident faction of the United Communist Party Marxist Leninist –
Nepal (UML) re-organized as United Communist Party of Nepal – Maoist (UCPN –Maoist)
after forming their base in Thabang, a small village in the western hills of Nepal (Adhikari,
2014 Thapa, 2003; Gidwani and Paudel, 2012). With the hinterland as their heartland, the
Maoist declared a “People's War” in 1996. Inspired by Peru’s “Shining Path”, the insurgent
Maoist deployed guerrilla warfare to galvanize the peasantry against the state that until 2006
had been referred to as a homogenous Hindu nation (Onesto, 2004; Thapa, 2003; de Sales,
2007). The People’s War ended in 2006, signaling the end of Nepal’s 240-year old
monarchy. After years of conducting underground guerrilla warfare mostly from village
bases, UCPN - Maoist surfaced “above-ground” and subsequently shifted their base from the countryside to Kathmandu – Nepal’s administrative, financial, cultural, and political capital. The same year marked the ascendancy of identity-based movements outside Kathmandu, mostly in the eastern plains and hills of Nepal – the Maoist-waged class war providing enabling conditions for their emergence. These movements demanded the declaration and delineation of identity-based federal provinces as autonomous regions that would safeguard and guarantee the rights of indigenous and ethnic nationalities to self-determination and rule (Jha, 2014).

A national-level election in 2008 elevated the position of the Maoist as the largest political party of Nepal. The election resulted in the declaration of Nepal as a Federal Democratic Republic and the formation of a Constituent Assembly, which was mandated to draft a new constitution. The seeds of popular aspirations and claims over state power, the seeds for “naya Nepal”, that had been planted at the onset of the 1990 multiparty democracy, which were radicalized during the People’s War, were finally coming to fruition after 2006. References to naya Nepal, therefore, signify the mainstreaming of the Maoist party, the demise of the monarchy, and most notably, the birth of a federal democratic republic of Nepal. They represent citizens’ ongoing desire for an inclusive democracy and a radical departure from the oppressive structures of old Nepal. But what permutations did the aspirational politics of new Nepal assume once it encountered the everyday life of sukumbasi in the city?

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A new constitution was finally drafted in November 2016.
2.2 Dreams Devoid of a Base

The wide-scale, identity-based politics of inclusion and belonging found a breeding ground on the revolutionary change that the Maoists initiated, as I have discussed thus far. This vision for change was premised primarily on a class-based analysis that conceived of the peasantry as agents of transformation. However, owing to the failure of the then parliamentary parties and democracy to address their grievances, identity-based movements in the late 1990s found “a chain of equivalence” within the Maoists politics (Shrestha 2007; Bhattachan 2000)7. Sukumbasis’ claim for the right to live in the city would be mobilized historically across ethnic and caste differences. In sukumbasis’ self-understanding, this struggle is a class struggle and “the new constitution should address class relations, not just ethnicity” (Smita KC8, interview, 26 October, 2011). However, the organizing logic for the sukumbasi struggle is not premised on an analysis of class-based exploitation tied to transformative or revolutionary change. One prominent sukumbasi leader had this to say: “If there is no right mentioned in law, banging our heads against the wall a hundred times will not get us housing rights” (Bina Bajracharya, interview, 10 November 2011). What sukumbasi desired was to be found within the current democratic set-up, not by transcending it, but by being included in it. In that respect, the claim for the sukumbasi right to the city aspired for universal equality to be realized through realization of political-juridical equality rather than social equality. After the Maoists came to power, a dissident sukumbasi faction joined the UCPN-Maoist and became their “urban base”. The Maoists-led class war that

7 Laclau and Mouffe (1985) describe “a chain of equivalence” as a relation between different struggles in hegemony as linked by a chain; equivalence recognizes the specificity of each mode of oppression.
8 Smita KC, one of the most vocal and active leaders of the movement of the squatter communities in Nepal was one of my primary contact persons for the fieldwork.
mobilized the rural peasantry at an unprecedented level (Onesto and Somlai, 2007) provided conditions for the identity-based movements and parties to become a major political force (Shrestha, 2007), while the politics of belonging championed by the identity-based movements provided the political and discursive conditions for sukumbasi to wage their class-based urban struggle. Gibson-Graham’s (2006) assertion that identity politics opens door for class politics – albeit coming from a different context – finds expression in the way seemingly divergent politics are relationally constituted in Nepal.

The Maoists share a duplicitous relationship with sukumbasi in Kathmandu, a population group as well as a fractured community that the Maoists have problematically claimed to be their “urban base”. Toward the end of the People’s War, one of the key leaders of the Maoist party, Hishila Yami, also known as Comrade Parbati, candidly confided to a journalist a utopian vision of the city. The landscapes of her dream city are laced with the skyscrapers of Chicago; high and wide streets with separate lanes for four wheelers, motorcycles, and bicycles à la Amsterdam; and Bangkok-like tourist shopping centers. Such invocations were intended for an urban petit-bourgeois audience, which the UCPN-Maoist was trying to break into and win over during that time. In itself, there is nothing wrong with invoking these kinds of dreams. What is problematic here is a glaring dismissal of poverty and extreme marginality that is gaining ascendency in the city. We may want to grant the Maoist party the benefit of the doubt and assume that this dream city would include an urban imaginary that all, including the urban poor, would want and aspire to. But still, much like the high-rise juxtaposing a slum settlement of Bamsighat (Figure 2), the dream sits rather uncomfortably juxtaposed against the reality of the urban poor, the unpropertied underclass,
many of whom live on the riverbanks, and who form a large part of the “urban base” of the Maoist party.

Figure 2: Bamsighat, as seen from the southern end, is settled against two high-rise buildings nearing completion.

The Maoists were at the levers of control dictating the direction of Nepal’s mainstream political landscape in the aftermath of 2008. As such, the party itself was gradually embracing the ideals of liberal democratic politics in Nepal – itself a tactical move, according to a high-ranking Maoist leader, Hishila Yami. Yami uses the analogy of “sea waves” to describe a Maoism engaged in ideological compromise – it was a tactical move with an end game in mind. Yami explained, the sea waves recede, only to rise later. It recedes gain, to gather stronger force and momentum for the next rise, which is bigger than

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9 Hishila Yami and her husband Baburam Bhattarai have now quit the Maoist party to establish a new political party called the “New Force”.

14
the previous one. Over time, it would have carried so much force before the next rise, that it eventually inundates everything.\(^{10}\)

For Yami, the Maoist would recede for the final time to gather enough force – after making tactical alliances with all and sundry (the market forces, the civil society actors, the politicians that are ideologically opposed) – for the next and final wave that would inundate the political landscape of Nepal to establish a socialist democracy en route to establishing a communist society. But one of the primary tasks that stood before the Maoists was to form an “urban base” as part of gathering the waves of tactical solidarity; and one of the ways in which this task of forming the base, as per anecdotes, was being realized was by bringing a number of landless families from the countryside “by the busloads” – they were brought to the city in the eve of the election in 2008 and were relocated on the riverbanks under the promise of landownership in the city\(^{11}\). These new settlers organized under the dissident factions from the Society of Preservation of Shelter and Habitat-Nepal, or SPOS\(H\) in short\(^{12}\), named “All Nepal Proletariat Association” (ANPA).

ANPA was established in 2007 as the Maoist party’s “proletariat wing” after they split from from SPOS\(H\). The organization represents a majority of the sukumbasi who settled in Kathmandu after the Maoists came to power. The majority of these are concentrated in newly formed settlements along the banks of the Bagmati and its tributaries, while some, still

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\(^{10}\) Yami conveyed this to me during a personal conversation after an event.

\(^{11}\) These anecdotes were intimated during interviews with sukumbasi residents and resident-activists, as well as during informal conversation in the settlements.

\(^{12}\) SPOS\(H\) is a national umbrella organization of sukumbasi in Nepal with a federated network across forty-four districts in Nepal. I discuss SPOS\(H\) in more detail in Chapter 2.
a large number, are splintered in older settlements along the riverbanks as well as in the inner city. Together, these households form the “urban base” of the Maoist party. ANPA formed after some members of SPOSH quit the organization under the leadership of SPOSH’s ex-president, Deepak Rai. There was a deep ideological divide between SPOSH and ANPA, orchestrated by the Maoist Party that instigated the split. On the split, Deepak Rai claims,

Only the working class can represent the issues and interests of the working class. NGOs can never represent us. Instead, they prevent us from seeking a political solution to poverty. They teach us how to deal with poverty, but by putting a lid on seeing poverty as a political issue …NGOs have turned the sukumbasi into a Dashain goat for their benefit”\textsuperscript{13} (Interview, July 13, 2012).

Rai ends the interview with a critique aimed at SPOSH, “NGOs are happy with you if you run your organization the way SPOSH runs: non-politically.” Rai further emphasizes, “Without politics, claims over land cannot be made. One needs to capture state power to realize such claims. Without politics, one cannot capture state power” (Interview, July 13, 2012). For Deepak Rai and those who followed him, it was no longer possible to collectively work for “the emancipation of the poor” under the banner of SPOSH and hence jointed the Maoist party (Interview, July 13, 2012). Ironically, to the contrary, the foundation of Yami’s dream city would align more comfortably with that of the neoliberal development schemes that follow the logic of private property – long the object of Maoist critique. I sketch some of these schemes below.

\textsuperscript{13} During Dashain, Nepal’s biggest religious festival, goats are traditionally sacrificed for those indulging in the festivities
3. The Rise of Neoliberal Governance and Planning

Contemporary Kathmandu exists in a conjuncture framed through multiple layers of overlapping moments. On one hand, there is a political-economic transition of municipal and local governance owing to projects of economic liberalization that might be termed the “gentrification of state-spaces” (Ghertner, 2011) as well as geographical spaces; on the other hand, there is a changing aspirational landscape for the unpropertied working class tied to the fading promises of Naya Nepal and the failure of radical politics to reimagine “the urban.”

“Special time” is a phrase borrowed from Amita Baviskar. Baviskar refers to the special time of spectacles, such as the Commonwealth Games in Delhi, prior to which a city undergoes a major spatial transformation to make it more desirable. Such events usually contain threats of displacement of the urban poor from their homes. In Kathmandu’s case, this “special time” is whenever it is Kathmandu’s turn to host the bi-annual SAG (South Asian Games) and the annual SAARC summit. This “special time” is also a spatial time because it is generally during this time that the state mobilizes the logic of these special events to provide legitimacy for a desired spatial transformation of the city spatially: houses are demolished, streets widened and blacktopped, parks are cleaned, and trees planted as the entire city receives a face-lift. This language of “special time,” however, provides a fitting vocabulary to discuss the political time of Naya Nepal, which was also special. It was a special time

14 Gentrification of state-spaces indicates state-led or state-endorsed invention or reinvention of political spaces in which only propertied elite citizens are invited to participate in the political process.

15 SAARC stands for South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. At the summit, mandates for regional co-operation are worked out.
within which it became possible to talk about urban transformation in Nepal in the aftermath of 1990 – especially when the discourse of Naya Nepal hit its inspiring political crescendo.

I will discuss in more detail below the projects of economic liberalization as they bear implications for progressive planning in the city. For now, however, for the sake of contextual clarity, it is worth mentioning that in the two decades since the inception of multiparty democracy in 1990, the state has taken up some key mechanisms for decentralizing governance as part of economic liberalization. One of them is the introduction of the Local Self Governance Act (LSGA). Under the act, a “Public Private Partnership” (PPP) was introduced, which opened up more channels for middle-class propertied residents of the city while it narrowed existing channels for the unpropertied inhabitants to participate in the process of “self-governance.” It bears significance to look at what this transition to economic liberalization, as it affects urban local governance, has meant for the urban poor. Has it opened up new spaces for practicing citizenship, or have existing spaces narrowed?

Historically, urbanization and growth in Nepal’s cities have not been greatly influenced by their proximity to global capital, but rather have been influenced by a continued dependency on donor agencies promoting the prevailing developmental orthodoxy that decentralization is most conducive to neoliberalization (Ninglekhu and Rankin, 2008). The continued donor thrust toward decentralization led to the promulgation of what may be considered a landmark act in 1999, the Local Self-Governance Act (LSGA). Central to LSGA’s commitment to decentralization is a private-public partnership (PPP) model of governance aimed at promoting a partnership of local communities with ward and municipal
states for designing, selecting, and implementing local development projects such as drinking water supply, road improvement projects, and sewage maintenance. Under LSGA, PPP has led to the rise of privately run, citizen-led neighbourhood associations in the city. These associations partner with the local and municipal governments to implement neighbourhood development projects such as road maintenance and sewage reconstruction.

There are certain terms of engagement that the municipal government outlines for citizens to be able to “partner” with the municipal and local governments. Any citizen-led committee or association has to be registered, and depending on the kind of infrastructural projects, they have to bear anywhere from 25 to 50 percent of the total project costs; this percentage of the funding is contributed by individual households in the neighborhood that can afford to contribute. The municipal government matches the combined value of capital and labor contributed by the communities. But first, members of the associations have to be homeowners or landowners. This clientelistic neoliberal turn in local governance has given rise to what might be called, following Miraftab (2004), “invited” spaces of participation – the “invitation” for the neighborhood associations coming from donor-led and state-implemented mechanisms like the PPP. I have noted elsewhere some of the regressive tendencies that such governance practice foments: the exclusion of tenants as well as homeowners in low-income groups from participating in local governance because “invitation” from the municipal state is only extended to those who own property and can afford to pay for building services (Ninglekhu and Rankin, 2008).
The introduction of LSGA (and under it, PPP) absolves the state of its responsibility to provide basic municipal services at the local scale in Kathmandu, which in turn provides enabling conditions for the privatization of services (Ninglekhu and Rankin, 2008). The latter part of the 1990s has seen the increasing presence of private companies delivering basic services. More importantly, within the last decade, there has been a sharp increase in what Saskia Sassen (2014) refers to as “direct investment in cities.” The combination of private banks and financial institutions opening up to financing land and homes (Neupane, 2009) and the investment of foreign capital (mostly remittance money) in the construction of “urban gigantism” has resulted in the rapid privatization not only of spaces but also of services and social relations on an unprecedented scale (Sassen, 2014). In the context of an increasing number of gated communities – or “housing” or “colony” as they are colloquially referred to in Kathmandu – Andrew Nelson (2011:222) quotes interesting slogans that private builders and developers use to promote and advertise such housing: “we want to not only give houses, but also give a lifestyle”; “secludes you from the hustle and bustle of the city”; “the future has arrived”; and “we give you friends, beyond neighbors.” In summary, “colony” or “housing” claims to offer a “total way of life” (Caldeira, 2000:89).

Urban transformations like this shed new light on how the formation of relationships between urban forms, politics, and everyday life is a disjunctive process, as Teresa Caldeira suggests. In Sao Paolo, for example, the rapid surge of urban social movements and the growing democratization of politics coincided with the rise of a private enclave wall (Caldeira, 2000). Many residents of Kathmandu who literally buy into the “total way of life” identify several reasons that push them toward life in a colony: lack of security, an increasing
population of migrants with no “culture,” a dysfunctional municipal governance system, and a degenerating democracy (Nelson, 2011). The rise of local and foreign investors in the city has led to a tendency that increasingly treats the city as a commodity and gradually strips away from it what is left of once public spaces. How do sukumbasi in Kathmandu fit into these confounding developments in the city in the current conjuncture – especially when, worldwide, large cities like Kathmandu are a destination for the majority of the poor and lower middle classes who migrate to the city in search of better lives?

Reportedly, 58% of Kathmandu’s total populations live in rental units. As intimated by many in the settlements, one of the main factors turning people into sukumbasi in the city is the skyrocketing rent in the city. On a related note, Prafulla Man Singh of the UN-Habitat offers an anecdote: “Why do we need rental housing the city? When an individual moves to the city from the village, the first thing they look for is a place to rent. Student life begins in a rented place. If one cannot rent, then one turns into sukumbasi. But I have seen even those who can afford to pay reasonable rent move to occupy public land instead because of the fluctuating rental market. A colleague that I know from the urban development department once told me that after moving to ten different places in four years with his aging parents, he now lives in a sukumbasi settlement with them. Their life, as he claimed, has been better because they no longer have to constantly move looking for less expensive rent.”

In February 2013, UN-Habitat and Lumanti, an NGO working on housing for the urban poor that has played a central role in forming sukumbasi organizations in the city and advocating for housing – not land – rights for sukumbasi, jointly organized an opening
ceremony for a rental housing project that they had jointly implemented and now just completed building an apartment building as part of the first phase of the housing project.

From the outset (pictured above), the building replicates the more recent “housing” developments in Kathmandu – ‘housing’ as “Kathmandu’s everyday vernacular, has come to represent a new form of residential organization whereby a private company plans and builds residential units and provides the colony with infrastructure, services, a security system, and an enclosing wall”, writes Andrew Nelson (2011:211). “Housing” in Kathmandu refers to the rise of housing colonies and high-rise apartment buildings that caters to the desire of the affluent – the starting price for one bedroom can be as low as seventy five million Nepali rupees or as high as three hundred million (from hundred thousand Canadian dollars to three hundred thousand, approximately). On top of “housing”, most of the high-rise buildings in Kathmandu target private hospitals and private schools and colleges as potential renters. Meant for a family of four, the 25-unit rental housing shows a contrasting feature on the inside. It follows the concept of shared-space – a moderately sized space accommodated a kitchen and bed, leaving behind some floor space with an attached bathroom and a small storage on the side. This inauguration of rental housing marked a shift in the formal institutional focus in a country with insignificant institutional history of non-commercial rental housing specifically targeting the urban poor. To speak further of this institution shift, the National Shelter Policy that was revised in 2012 identifies the need to form a separate land policy specifically to address urban housing and land ownership issues that sukumbasi raise. On a related note, UN-Habitat produced a policy guideline in March 2013 in response “to a request from the Ministry of Urban Development” that was titled Urban Poor Housing Program Guideline that the National Shelter Policy of 2012 as its framework.
This new shift in the institutional focus on “the urban” may indicate a renewed commitment of the state to reframe housing and land related questions tied to urban poverty, especially when compared against a sixty-page policy document that a Commission for Resolution of Sukumbasi Problem prepared and made public exactly five years ago in May 2010. The commission consisted of representatives of Nepal’s major political parties, and the ministries, such as the Ministry of urban development and the Ministry of Land Reform and Management. The commission report documents the more recent efforts by the state to address landlessness through land redistribution, while also pointing out how such efforts have been appropriated by the nexus of local elites and district-level bureaucrats to redistribute land to non-sukumbasi households. What is quite telling about the report is its negligible mention of questions linked to land and shelter that sukumbasi foreground through their demands. Concerns about the negligence is normally met with this: “Sukumbasi is a rural problem; it is not a Kathmandu problem”, said the chair of a 2013 commission. In contrast, the recent institutional resolve – to address Kathmandu’s affordable housing – that the state has shown in conjunction with NGOs including the UN-Habitat, while deserving praise, also calls for caution in the way they display neoliberal tendencies as the private sector is openly portrayed as a key player in addressing housing needs of the poor. For example, Chhabi Raj Panta, Minister of Urban Development who was at the opening ceremony that I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, declared that Lumanti’s initiative in the housing sector sets the tone for other forces, such as the market, to enter the field. He

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16 This commission, although ad-hoc, was mandated with not just policy reform, but also implementation, unlike those formed before and after (this one was also quickly terminated citing political reasons) that have only had the mandate to recommend, not reform or implement.
said further, “We have always discouraged private sector involvement in service provision in Nepal. We think it is always the state’s responsibility. But the state has failed. If we look at the West, we see that private sector has played a crucial role in their development. Private sector should take the reigns of development here too.” One of the central themes of the discussion during the event was exploitative relation between landlord and tenant over not just the rental rates but also over everyday things such as who is to take what percentage of share of the monthly bills on water and electricity usages. The government, according to Panta, is working on a “code of ethics” to address landlord-tenant relations. Under the “code of ethics”, among other concerns, rates on rent will be regulated, “just like in other goods and services.” But the code too was left at the mercy of the market: “the demand for rental housing, and even rental rates in such housing, should be decided by the market. We (government) are there to provide support whenever there is need for one” (Interview, August 14, 2013) 17.

The sukumbasi demands are framed against this backdrop – of momentous political events and political-economic formations forming alliance that is more in service of the neoliberal planning regime in service of private property and the market.

17 After the formal speeches of the event were over, over tea, a UN-Habitat representative said to me privately, “We never consulted any of the government policies before building these rental units. There is no point in consulting the government policies or acts because they are always playing catch up. The reason why we invited them here today was just so they can see, learn, and make changes in the policies as necessary” (Interview, 14 August, 2013).
4. Everyday Life and The Right to the City: Framing the Sukumbasi Demand

The phrase “right to the city” that I use in this dissertation is meant to capture the political spirit and the vocabulary that sukumbasi use in advancing their demands. There are two central demands of sukumbasi in Kathmandu. Their first demand is for the right to shelter with land rights, that is, the right to own not just the house where one lives, but also have legal ownership of the land on which one’s house stands. The second demand is for formal citizenship status. Many in the settlements all over Nepal are still devoid of citizenship status. The making of the demands and asserting them relentlessly signals the transition of everyday matters that concern sukumbasi, from the discourse of needs to one of rights – as legitimate bearers of those rights demanded, even if the conditions on which the rights are advanced are “illegal”.

Sukumbasi are born in Nepal; they are Nepali. However, what they lack is ownership of land or citizenship. Up until 2006, the Citizenship Act of Nepal demanded landownership as a necessary requirement for citizenship. Moreover, citizenship could only be passed through the father, not through the mother— or one’s citizenship could only be confirmed with evidence of father’s citizenship. Even though these provisions were deleted from the citizenship act reformed in 2006 and the interim constitution passed in 2008, and more recently, the new constitution promulgated in November, 2015, there continues to be a

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18 Nepal’s first citizenship act promulgated in 1963 postulated that if one comes from Nepali origin and is able to speak the Nepali language, then one is “authentic Nepali”. Many sukumbasi, despite not being citizens, are still considered Nepali as they “look” Nepali and speak fluent Nepali – as against people form the Madhesh region, the Southern plains of Nepal bordering India, who are propertied citizens of Nepal yet are not considered “Nepali enough” because they look Indian, and speak in “Indian accent”.

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demand for both landownership and father’s citizenship as necessary conditions for obtaining citizenship due largely to the continued dominance of a patriarchal mindset among state officials responsible for distributing citizenship and also because private property ownership continues to be a dominant idea that underlines the social contract binding citizens with the state. In short, such intentionality among the state officials on what is expected from those applying for citizenship is indicative of “elite informality” (as opposed to “informality” usually association with the poor) precisely because there are no formal requirements for either landownership or father’s citizenship in the citizenship act. There are many families and individuals within the sukumbasi settlements in the city who are without one or both – hence the demand of citizenship. One is deemed to be eligible to obtain citizenship only upon providing the state (local/municipal governments) with evidence of land ownership. It is, therefore, through the informal mobilization of discourses of “land” and its ownership that a normative understanding of citizenship is constructed; in the process, sukumbasi are denied citizenship and the rights that it entails, such as the provision of basic services, employment in government offices, and so on – as I was emphatically told during an interview (15 March, 2010) with a national-level sukumbasi leader in Kathmandu:

Why do we need a land ownership certificate? Because everyday conversation in Nepal starts with, “Where do you come from?” The language requires a “home.” And you need it to obtain citizenship. Government law makes it necessary for us to have a land ownership certificate.
The current citizenship act offers three main provisions under which an individual can obtain Nepali citizenship: by descent, by naturalization, or by birth. In general, a squatter without citizenship may be able to claim Nepali citizenship under the “descent” or “birth” category. Under both conditions, citizenship can be “inherited,” in theory, if either one of an applicant’s parents has citizenship status. However, studies on citizenship in Nepal have shown that applicants applying under the two provisions still find it hard to “inherit” citizenship from the mother, due largely to bureaucratic discrepancies showing gender bias in conferring citizenship. Applicants without a landownership certificate must have the Village Development Committee (VDC) or the municipality certify the applicant’s place of birth, his or her relationship with the relevant descendant, and evidence that the applicant has permanently resided in Nepal since birth. An applicant applying for citizenship under the “birth” has to provide a landownership certificate, if not his/her own, then her relative’s (in which case the relationship has to be confirmed by either the VDC or the Municipality). Failing this, one is required to present one of the following documents: a certificate of land tiling rights, proof of housing, or a listing of one of the applicant’s parents’ names on the voters list prepared by the Election Commission (obtaining this documentation involves yet another circular and convoluted process of presenting various documents that certify the applicant’s ties to the land and people). In the event that the applicant is unable to produce any of these documents, there is a final provision called “spot investigation.” This investigation mandates that the applicant provide the names of three legally documented Nepali citizens – relatives from the applicant’s birthplace – who can vouch for the applicant’s ties to that place. This convoluted nexus between landownership and citizenship has
implications for understanding how municipal and local governance create exclusionary modes of citizenship.

For many sukumbasi, obtaining citizenship based on any of these provisions is not feasible for several reasons. These provisions mobilize the same normative understanding of citizenship that is codified in the constitution – that is, that citizenship, and the right to claim a citizenship card, is premised upon the possibility of land ownership. One local sukumbasi expressed the utter frustration that no doubt many feel with the situation (Interview, 12 March, 2010):

The government should just declare us Chinese, Indians or Sikkimese, and we will happily stop bothering them. But as long as they say that we are Nepali, and not from China or India, we have every right to own land, just like rest of Nepalis.

This configuration of state citizenship, municipal citizenship rights and land ownership is quite extraordinary in the way that it is an exception to the norms of liberal citizenship. The absence of citizenship and landownership have meant that many sukumbasi without citizenship or landownership experience limited access to municipal services, bank loans, formal employment, and so forth – all elements needed to meet the basic conditions of livelihood. Smita KC, an activist leader, neatly summarizes this predicament: “Normally you’d need a citizenship card when traveling from one country to another. But here, you need to show a citizenship card for everything, every day, from morning until you go to bed at
night” (Interview, 27 July 2010). Bina Bajracharya, another sukumbasi leader, adds wryly, “They do not need our citizenship card when asking for votes, but when we ask for water or electricity, they need us to show one” (Interview, 20 July 2010). In such a governance regime, those who are “uninvited” to participate create their own terms of engagement with
the local and municipal state that Miraftab (2004) calls “invented” spaces of participation. It
is only fair to assume that in the context of Kathmandu, sukumbasi communities form
constituencies that “invent” spaces for exercising municipal citizenship rights. It can,
however, also be argued that both the invented and invited spaces of citizenship still
represent the segment of urban inhabitants, mostly the urban middle class, who can, for
example, organize to access municipal funds by the virtue of associational life made possible
through inhabitation of similar class position. In the case of sukumbasi in Kathmandu, the
dissolution of locally elected politicians and mayor in 2002, and the increasing
neoliberalization of municipal governance practices have meant that the few and limited
channels they were able to cultivate for accessing the local and municipal state have been
curtailed. While a confounding nexus between citizenship status and landownership in Nepal
highlight how promises of liberal democracy come up against its fundamental basis – of
universal equality – in a hierarchical and class segregated society, thereby excluding a large
number of un-propertied Nepalis from formally obtaining either landownership or
citizenship, or both, the claim of sukumbasi – the un-propertied non-citizens – must be
understood as radical in the sense of asserting a bold vision of transformative social change.
The sukumbasi politics of the right to the city is radical and transformative because the
demand for citizenship that would guarantee political-juridical rights, in turn guaranteeing
the right to have more rights, is rooted not so much in ownership of property but in
inhabitation of the commons – including vacant public land.

5. Methodological Orientation

The following three overarching questions draw the contours of this dissertation research.
First, what are the conditions that both compel and enable sukumbasi to make claims for the
to the city? Here I focus particularly on the practice of everyday life that is forged
through recourse to an organizational framework called the “house with three pillars.”

The second question broaches the issue of how claims for the right to the city come up against
governmental interventions that are dictated by – and seek to secure – norms of authenticity,
environmental sustainability and private property. Subsumed under this question is another
question: How does the threat of eviction and displacement influence sukumbasi political
subjectivity and inform renewed strategies of inhabitation? The third question investigates
what implications these strategies have for diminishing, or modifying, the right to the city
project?

The first question requires documenting the rituals of everyday life organized through
the “house with three pillars” organizing framework. The second question involves
documenting organizational strategies that sukumbasi deploy to navigate their way around
government-led interventions carrying the threat of eviction (The third question relies on the
preceding questions for analytical purposes). I discuss these two modes of researching in

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19 I have briefly discussed the metaphorical framework of ‘house with three pillars’ in the
previous chapter and I discuss it in much more detail in the next chapter. The framework
refers to a network of solidarity between four different organizations led by sukumbasi – one
is a 'house', a central organization, aided financially, politically, and materially by its three
more detail in the following section. To investigate these questions, I use ethnography as a key methodological framework. I use three key ethnographic research methods for collecting data: interviews, participant observation, and oral history. These methods document different aspects of the practice and politics of everyday life in sukumbasi communities, with recourse to two overlapping ethnographic frameworks: institutional ethnography and place-based ethnography. In the next section, I will begin by describing the research site, and then go on to discuss the two ethnographic frameworks and research methods employed in relation to them.

5.1 Research Site

The “field” of this dissertation—the terrain on which I conducted interviews, participant observation and oral histories—can be conceived in terms of two key political sites, which I have named “citizenship” and “governance.” The site of citizenship includes sukumbasi quests both to have their citizenship recognized on the state’s own terms, and to change the terms, to “invent” different modes of citizenship that would counter their exclusion from the former. The site of governance is understood as the domain of the multiply-scaled state and the overlapping administrative and territorial boundaries within which various state agencies exercise the rule of law. It may also be understood as the field of power within which different state and non-state institutions at the local, municipal and national scales overlap, coalesce and compete with different planning visions for the city and its inhabitants.
5.1.1 The Site of Citizenship

Within the site of citizenship, I focus on the everyday life of sukumbasi. Using different modes of organizing during “normal” times as well as during times of urgency as sites of inquiry, I relied on two ethnographic research methods – qualitative interviews and participant observation – to document the practices and politics of the everyday life of sukumbasi in Kathmandu.

There are altogether 66 different sukumbasi settlements in Kathmandu, as documented through a survey conducted by the Society for the Preservation of Shelters and Habitation in Nepal (SPOSH). Under the auspices of the “house with three pillars,” there are four different sukumbasi organizations: SPOSH, Society for Women’s Unity (Nepal Mahila Ekata Samaj, or simply Mahila Ekata), Children Development Youth Network (also known as Baal Bikas), and women’s cooperatives, of which there are three in Kathmandu. Every member of a sukumbasi household is either a member of one or all of these different organizations. The “house” and its three “pillars” together regulate the social and economic organization of sukumbasi everyday life. I sought to identify and understand the modes of organizing under these institutional set-ups; find out how these different modes – of entrepreneurship, rights-based advocacy, and educational programs – were linked to each other and to the social movement for the right to the city in Kathmandu and beyond; document, if and how such processes were relationally co-constituted with the broader political movements taking place

20 In this dissertation research, Kristin Ross’ (1987) description of everyday life frames my understanding of the everyday life of sukumbasi: a mundane space reproducing dominant relations of power; also a space in which utopian possibilities and political aspirations are to be found.
in the city, and in Nepal; and equally importantly, if and how these modes of organizing were mediated through international circulation of discourses and ideology, in terms of how they permeated the different modes of organizing that governed actions and produced actors in the process.

5.1.2 The Site of Governance

Governance is a site inhabited by state actors and institutions with competing interests, visions and ideologies, mandated to enact policies, laws and programs at the municipal scale. I would like to clarify here that in naming this site governance, I do not meant to overlook the “gray space” in/of governance – the contentious field of contesting powers in which the outcome is normally shaped through bargains and negotiations among actors formally located within the institutional boundaries of the state and those that remain outside of it, such as community, residents and non-governmental organizations. Some scholars call it “spaces of political engagement,” referring to spaces of struggle and negotiation between state authorities and citizens (and non-citizens) (McFarlane, 2004). These contests shape the politics of planning in the city. I am well aware that in the existing practices of governing and being governed, the demarcation of “governance” as a site separate from “citizenship” can be faulty at times as the two spheres easily flow into each other. In the politics of everyday life, citizens and non-citizens always coalesce and collide with representatives of local and municipal states in seeking demands for rights and services, blurring the divide of the private and the public. The heuristic separation of these sites, therefore, is confined to the field research—an artificial demarcation having been drawn for the purpose of organizing data collection and conceptual analysis. The objective in taking
“governance” as a research site is to document a myriad of views on poverty, marginality and slums among planners and bureaucrats at the local, municipal and national scales, and in relation to that, perspectives of NGOs working on urban housing and poverty—in order to interpret how different planning interventions encounter the everyday lives, livelihoods and lifestyles of the urban poor.

In so doing, I interviewed representatives of the following state and non-state institutions.

A. Department of Urban Development and Building Construction (DUDBC)

Under the Ministry of Urban Development, this department is responsible for formulating, planning, and implementing urban policies linked to housing, construction and repair of government buildings, and planning settlements with affordable housing.

B. Municipal Association of Nepal (MUAN) and Kathmandu Metropolitan City Office

MUAN is an umbrella organization of all the municipalities of Nepal, including the Kathmandu Metropolitan City Office. It works closely with the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development and in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and is funded by United Nations Volunteers (UNV) and GIZ, formerly known as the German Technical Cooperation Agency (GTZ). Its key focus is on integrating physical planning, municipal financing, and mainstreaming informal sector, among others.
C. Bagmati Civilization Integrated Development Committee (BCIDC)

BCIDC is a government-led committee mandated with implementing a river restoration plan called the Bagmati Action Plan (BAP), a focus of my research.

D. Kathmandu Valley Development Authority (KVDA)

KVDA is a municipal government unit that was formed in 2012 to oversee works related to physical, infrastructural and land development in Kathmandu. KVDA designs, implements and regulates several land pooling

E. United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat)

UN-Habitat Nepal works with the Government of Nepal to reform urban policies, specifically on shelter and land rights. Very broadly, it also focuses on urban climate change, environment, and sanitation.

F. Lumanti

Lumanti is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that closely works on shelter and livelihood with Mahila Ekata, SPOSH, and Bal Bikas. Lumanti also collaborates with UN-Habitat and other international NGOs (INGOs) such as ActionAid working on urban issues.

G. Ward Committees / Citizen-Ward Platform
Ward committees are the lowest level unit representing the central state. At the neighborhood scale, they work with resident associations to identify local development needs, such as water-pipe maintenance or road improvement projects, and serve as a conduit for proposing projects to the concerned municipal government authorities for approval and funding.

5.2 Research Design and Strategy

In this section, I discuss the rationale behind selecting the two different ethnographic frameworks by recounting an ethnographic moment. During the preliminary stage of the field research, I was introduced to Man Prasad Limbu, the president of SPOSH, who in turn introduced me to a few other activists and leaders. Gradually, over informal meetings in teashops and front yards of houses, the phrase “house with three pillars” would make a recurring appearance. The phrase invokes a network of solidarity that sukumbasi forged with four different organizations formed by sukumbasi themselves. This network, as it is claimed, is crucial for accessing basic services as well as advancing demands in a formal and organized manner, and in collaboration with NGOs locally, trans-locally and transnationally.

I determined to undertake an institutional ethnography of this metaphorical “house with three pillars” to explore sukumbasi modes of self-organizing. Among these four organizations, there is a circulation of people, capital, and ideas for self-organizing. They help each other sustain themselves institutionally.

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21 This metaphor refers to a “house,” which is the Society for the Preservation of Shelter and Habitation in Nepal (SPOSH), a central organization led by sukumbasi in Nepal. This “house” is supported by the “three pillars”: women’s cooperatives, a children and youth network, and collective of women advocating rights of the sukumbasi women. Together, they form a network of solidarity.
Institutional ethnography is the study of social organization of everyday life. One of the key strengths of institutional ethnography is the use of methods, such as interviews, to examine and investigate organizational and institutional processes that regulate what, over time, become the rituals of everyday life. In other words, the social that is reproduced within the everyday is something that is organized, which in turn becomes the basis for forging collective action (Smith, 2005; DeVault, 2006). For example, inside a women’s cooperative office, there are usually four to five members. Everyday, they show up around nine in the morning and leave around four in the evening. While in the office, there are leisure times of drinking tea and guffawing. In between, one person might go through the ledger to update loan records for each member while another person sits next to the person accounting to provide a second pair of eyes. There are occasional phone calls that a third person attends to, while a fourth is scanning the little tin boxes that deposit weekly repayment amounts paid by borrowers. Each borrower has a box. At the end of the month, the boxes are emptied and deposited in the bank. There are also scheduled monthly meetings with general members, biannual workshops with NGOs, and annual general assemblies with the broader community base. From the revenue generated through these rituals, the savings group provides financial support to SPOSH annually for running their events – meetings, workshops and rallies. Members of the cooperatives go to these events to put solidarity on display. This mode of organizing provides a peek into the “formalized” organizing of the everyday life of sukumbasi.

The second kind of organizing is what could be considered the obverse of this organized ritual – the unexpected unfolding of everyday life triggered by a threat to habitat in
the shape of government-led interventions that took place in two different settlements, a river restoration project and a road extension project seeking to introduce planning norms and governance regimes that render the urban poor a dispensable category. In response, this new course of everyday life of sukumbasi involves navigating an uncertain terrain, unexpected sets of alliances and unanticipated modes of organizing with the hope of somehow securing access to the city. To track these processes, I adopted a place-based ethnography to document this mode of organizing that takes place outside the confines of the formalized framework of “house with three pillars”. A place-based ethnography was designed to document sukumbasi organizing in response to two government-led interventions that took place in two different sukumbasi settlements. Using interviews, participant observation, and oral history as the methods for data collection, I investigate the unexpected ways in which the principles of “house with three pillars” were transgressed and stretched in uncertain directions through ad hoc alliances and counterintuitive stretching of everyday life.

5.3  Research Sampling

5.3.1  Random Sampling and Sampling Size

For the institutional ethnography on the site of governance, I conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with key members of the four different organizations mentioned above. I made a list of potential interviewees by tracing the membership of these four organizations. SPOSHE and Mahila Ekata have “unit committees” in each of the settlements. Of the total 63 settlements in the city, I interviewed members from 13 settlements; 8 along the banks of the Bagmati river and its tributary, Bishnumati, and 5 on the outskirts of the city core, a few miles outside the Ring Road that circles the city core. I
tracked the membership of the unit committee in every settlement in the city. I selected one member from each committee to interview. With Baal Bikas, I focused only on three members of the central committee. I picked three to five members from each of the women’s cooperatives to interview. The women belonged to different savings and credits groups under the cooperatives. Through these interviews, I wanted to get a clear understanding of the activities of each of these organizations as understood by the members themselves, as well as the member’s views on what they brought to the “house with three pillars.”

SPOSH’s office is located in a relatively new neighborhood on the edge of the city. It is on the first floor of a five-storey building across the street from a squatter settlement. After booking an interview appointment with Man Prasad, SPOSH’s president, I arrive at the office. The floor has three rooms. Man Prasad has a separate office shared by Laddu Prasad Khadka, SPOSH’s vice-chairperson. He arrives fifteen minutes later from his home, which is a five-minute walk from the office in a squatter settlement in the same neighborhood. During the meeting, Man Prasad gave me a list of several contacts he thought would give me their version of how they organized to meet their basic service needs and how they organized to advance their key demands – two separate yet inter-related modes of politics. I was given about five contacts, all of whom were members of either SPOSH or Mahila Ekata, a parallel organization to SPOSH registered as an NGO and formed and led by sukumbasi women.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the representatives of the organizations. I also attended public seminars and workshops organized by these organizations. For example, UN-Habitat and Lumanti jointly organized a ‘Slum Upgrading Forum’, inviting members of
SPOSH and Mahila Ekata to participate, as well as a few other public events on housing and shelter, such as the one on rental housing that I have briefly discussed in the Introduction chapter. Likewise, BCIDC, in late 2012 and early 2013, organized numerous seminars linked to promoting the BAP. I attended these events as a participant observer.

5.3.2 Snowballing

During the course of interviewing the different members of each organization, I also interviewed those that were affiliated with two, three or all four organizations, not as board members or executive members, but as general members. For example, while interviewing Mina Adhikari, a member of the Gyan Jyoti cooperative, she insisted that I meet Radhika, who was a prime example of a sukumbasi woman and an entrepreneur thanks to the loans borrowed from the cooperative. In the process of attending seminars or participating in anti-eviction campaigns, I would come across activists and leaders from the settlements that were not on the board or executive membership of any of the four organizations. The list of interviewees extended beyond the organizational membership through a snowball effect. But tracing the addresses of these new sets of interviewees would most of the time land me in two settlements in the city – Buddha Nagar, Hukum Bahadur’s settlement, and Bamshighat, another settlement along the riverbank, less than a five-mile walk from Buddha Nagar.

Buddha Nagar has 46 households and Bamshighat has 190 households. They are the oldest two settlements in Kathmandu and have dense political networks within the local and

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22 Every adult sukumbasi individual is a member of either SPOSH or Mahila Ekata. The children are part of Baal Bikas. Every member, whether general or executive, of Mahila Ekata, is a member of one of the women’s cooperatives.
municipal state organizations and NGOs. Most of the sukumbasi leaders and activists are from these settlements. But the settlements also house other individuals who show no interest in any form of organized campaign such as the anti-eviction campaign, or attending annual seminars and workshops. To select interviewees from these two settlements, I followed the snowballing technique. I interviewed 10 individuals from Buddha Nagar and 15 from Bamshighat. While tracing organizational solidarity through “house with three pillars” manifested the “formal” mode of organizing, follow-up interviews with the same members outside of the “house with three pillars” frame, and interviews with the new set of interviewees revealed some of the “informal” ways in which resources are accessed, or services put together – mostly borne out of contingencies.

5.4 Research Methods

5.4.1 Interviews

The first set of interviewees included community leaders, those who have historically been at the forefront of sukumbasi organizing in the city, and as a result, for the purpose of this research, some of who also served as oral historians outlining the history of the settlements. The second set of interviewees included ordinary residents of the settlements, who were also members of either one or all of the organizations mentioned above. The overall question that set the parameters of the breadth and depth of research questions was – how do sukumbasi organize to meet their basic livelihood needs? I was specifically interested in charting out modes of self-organizing, be they invented or invited spaces of citizenship. My intention was to trace this question to understand how those at the margin find ways to engage, penetrate, bypass or slip under the structures of policy in the face of illegality. The
third set of interviews was with NGOs workers, planners and bureaucrats representing the 7 different government and non-government organizations listed above from local to national scales.

5.4.2 **Participant Observation**

As a research method, participant observation entails conducting research by “living and working within a community, in an effort to understand people’s everyday lived experiences” (Dowler, 2001:153). Seminars, public meetings, workshops, street protests and press meets were some of the key sites of citizenship and governance for documentation of myriad range of urban politics. During the fieldwork, I actively attended these events that were jointly organized primarily by SPOSH and *Mahila Ekata*. Members of SPOSH and *Mahila Ekata* would also be invited to events organized by the government as well as the NGOs, of which my key sukumbasi contacts would inform me. I attended these events as an overt participant observer, and had consent from the leaders of these events for me to do so. Some of the key themes that became focal points of my analysis in this dissertation came out of these events that were usually full of rhetorical flourish. For example, the phrase “house with three pillars,” which I describe in Chapter 1, came up numerous times in discussions. Similarly, the phrase “sahaar ma basne adhikaar,” meaning, “the right to live in the city,” came up frequently. This theme became a key category of analysis of the dissertation research.
5.4.3 *Oral History*

I am critically aware that an individual’s experiences in relation to a place or an event cannot be generalized, even if such experiences constitute part of a multi-faceted and fluid reality. However, ethnographic research uses generalizable experiences of an individual to shed light on structures and structural changes (Winchester and Rofe, 2000; 2005). In other words, even if the experiences belong to an individual, they are not individuated from the social and structural contexts in which they take place. As such, and in order to develop a longitudinal understanding of the sites of citizenship and governance, oral history forms a crucial component of my research methodology. Six sukumbasi residents and activists from four different settlements were organically enlisted as oral historians. They provided their account of the history of their settlement and the history of the movement in the city. Interspersed in such histories were also anecdotes—about an individual instance of struggle over obtaining citizenship, underlined, at times, by sukumbasi-led violence; a priest from a local church who served as a conduit between a settlement and a local ward office for installing a “meter box” for accessing the electric power grid in the settlement; or a foreign artist whose graffiti work in a settlement was deemed, by artists and writers of Kathmandu, to have offended the local architectural history of an adjoining place, and suddenly a settlement that had hitherto remained “invisible” to the public realm had thenceforth begun to feature in debates and conversations about art and the politics of representation vis-à-vis public art and architecture in and of the city—“whose art?” and “who has the right to public art?” were questions that animated these debates and conversations. A muted ironic response of a sukumbasi resident to this unfolding drama was: “We are glad that our name has suddenly gained public attention.”
Figure 3: The graffiti painting in Bamsighat that turned the “invisible” settlement into the talk of the town overnight.

These anecdotes reveal the myriad and mundane ways through which sukumbasi settlements in the city lend themselves to the city. The different accounts of ad-hoc self-organizing, insurgent practices and informal networks that permeate the alleyways and corners of the settlements, which in turn help sukumbasi navigate their way around politicians, planners, bureaucrats and other residents in the city, together provided a context that helped the field research find more footing in “the slum” – as incoherent and conflicting as the narratives appeared to be. The impressions gleaned from these narratives have made their way into session and occasions dedicated to conducting interviews and attending
meetings and seminars as a “participant observer” provided more depth and dilemma to the research process.

I was interested in mapping out state–sukumbasi relationships as they are forced through the politics of the poor. Because investigating modes of organizing was the primary concern, I decided to visit first the office of SPOSH. SPOSH is an NGO that was formed in 2002 under the leadership of Hukum Bahadur. SPOSH is a national organization that advocates the rights of landownership and citizenship status for sukumbasi all over Nepal. It has a federated network in 44 other districts across Nepal. I traced Hukum Bahadur’s address through Lumanti, an NGO that works on urban housing for the poor. I went to see Hukum Bahadur in a teashop that he owns. He and his wife, Bombay Lama, founder of a woman’s cooperative, run the teashop. The teashop is run in a rented space – two rooms facing the main street on the first floor of a five-storey building. Hukum Bahadur and his family of four – a son and a daughter, Moti Lama and Dhana Lama, respectively, both of whom are actively involved in the sukumbasi movement – live in a one-floor house in a settlement named Buddha Marg, the oldest sukumbasi settlement in the city. The settlement is just across the street from the teashop, and by the Sankhamul Bridge. The settlement is on the bank of Sankhamul River, one of the tributaries of the Bagmati River in the city. Hukum Bahadur was my first contact, my first interviewee, and in the later days, weeks, and months, over several meetings during which we spent endless amounts of time sitting in his teashop guffawing over very many things, we also became friends. From the research point of view, he became my oral historian and a research gatekeeper. He was often the initial point of contact; he gave me several other contacts, one of which was SPOSH chairperson, Man
Prasad. And through Man Prasad, I was introduced to Smita KC, Laddu Khadka, Moti Lama, and Krishna Paudel, all of whom became my oral historians at one time or the other during the course of the fieldwork.

5.5 Positionality and Ethics

On positionality and ethics, Audrey Kobayashi questions: “How does one deal with the inevitable emotional aspects of working with people whose circumstances may require immediate attention?” (p. 57). I use this question to reflect critically upon the methodology used in relation to the entanglement of my own everyday life in different stages of fieldwork with that of the sukumbasi that I interviewed, worked with, and socialized with. In such times, I have worn different hats that have prompted a few crucial questions about positionality and ethics. Positionality may be understood in two ways: the researcher’s understanding of self in relation to the research ‘subject’; and the implicit and inherent unequal relations of power rooted in difference, perceived or real, of class, ethnicity, nationality and other forms of identity. Together, they raise concerns about the generation of ‘bias’ in research, and as such, they pose questions about the credibility of the data that is collected, and later, analyzed.

During the time of conducting the first case study of the BAP, which was after the first part of the ethnography of the “house with three pillars”, we (some of the key informants and myself) had overcome a considerable emotional and cultural distance. Certain political moments, such as the anti-eviction campaign, for example, further eroded the objective distance that was maintained between the researcher and the informants. This gradual erasure
of objective distance, overtaken slowly by empathy and emotion also came through the
witnessing of a fracture in the everyday life, in other words, when the actual house was under
threat, and the logic of “house with three pillars” around which everyday life was socially
and politically organized, and had served so well during “normal” times ceased to be as
effective during the time of urgency. Even if people spoke with conviction, those times filled
the sukumbasi organizing with nervousness and anxiety, leaving their lives prone to
uncertain outcomes, and in some cases, to an outright execution of violence from the state. In
those times, it was hard not to take off the researcher’s hat, also because the researcher’s
everyday life is entangled with that of a sukumbasi activist, in the streets and meeting halls,
attending protest programs and witnessing heated exchanges between the state
representatives and sukumbasi resident-activists and leaders. Once the objective distance
between the researcher and the researched begins to erode to make way for some semblance
of alliance or comradeship, it is also difficult to sit in the protests, for example, as a passive
researcher. In those moments, the researcher begins to mimic the activist and the reality on
the ground defies the research protocols. Over the course of the two different place-based
ethnographies that I undertook, the line that separates critical research from activist research
was blurred on several different occasions.

Gautam Bhan (2009), in a detailed account of eviction history in Delhi argues that lack of
empathy within the media and the public are all part of changing urban politics within which
eviction should be located. In Kathmandu, “they (sukumbasi) are illegal anyways” seemed to
be a common theme that ran through the media and social media interactions during the time
of anti-eviction that tacitly endorsed the government’s eviction drive. The political acts that I
have undertaken to address this bias, following the belief that critical scholarship and activist scholarship can go hand in hand, raise questions about objectivity in research. In my writings, to the best of my knowledge and conscience, I have tried to adopt methodological transparency without overt bias and deliberate misinterpretation. I have also tried to keep separate the two scholarships at the time of analysis and writing.

6. Dissertation Outline

The dissertation is divided into the following four chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on the theoretical origins and framework of the research. I have relied on some critical contributions from planning scholarship, postcolonial urbanism and critical urban theory to establish a framework to analyze and write about the research. Some key theoretical insights offered in the writings of Henri Lefebvre on the politics of everyday life in relation to the right to the city provide a foundation for my engagements with the contours of postcolonial urban writings found in the works of Ananya Roy, Asef Bayat, AbdouMaliq Simone and Arjun Appadurai, among others.

I discuss the ethnographic details of the dissertation in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3. Chapter 2 describes the practices of everyday life in “the slum” invested in organizing lives. Such practices follow an institutional logic that is borrowed from elsewhere as a blueprint. The practices propose strategies, out of which certain outcomes are expected. For example, there is a certain “formalized” sequence of procedure and events in place that have enabled most of the sukumbasi settlements in the city to access water services from the municipality without having to rendered “informal”, or worse, “illegal”. I describe and analyze these
strategies to show the enabling conditions that they provide, over time, to sukumbasi in Kathmandu to make claims for their right to be in the city – to live in the city as its legal inhabitants with formal citizenship status and ownership of land they occupy. I argue that it is the relational co-constitution of space produced and subjectivities inculcated, over the course of many years of organizing, that allows sukumbasi to evaluate their demands as being legitimate – legitimacy is rooted in the very act of inhabiting the spaces produced; not owning it.

Chapter 3 follows chronologically from Chapter 2 to take into account two episodes of sukumbasi organizing that took place in two different settlements during the course of the fieldwork. These organizing initiatives were in response to unanticipated interventions that ended up disrupting the rituals of everyday life that I discuss in Chapter 2. Such interventions, in form of governmental programs, for example, that privilege the norms of property ownership as the basis for making claims of legality, destabilize the very foundation of sukumbasi claims to inhabittance. To counter these threats, to safeguard or re-establish security of shelter, and to rebuild the foundations on which the claims are built, sukumbasi take recourse to ad-hoc tactical self-organizing practices that are counter-intuitive in nature, in the sense that the sukumbasi foresee the unfolding and logic of such organizing. In doing so, they provide counter-politics from below that on one hand reveal the limits of the logic of “formalized” organizing within “the slum”. On the other hand, they push the frontiers of the politics of the poor to propose what else is also achievable and possible in the time of urgency as new subjectivities are enacted with renewed strategies of inhabitation.
In the Conclusion chapter, I combine key ethnographic insights gained from Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 to bring the heterogeneity and uncertainty evident in the politics of everyday life to bear on the right to the city project. Such politics also have implications for understanding the right to the city as a transformative as well as an aspirational project.
Chapter 1

Right to the City, Everyday Life and Urban Revolution

In order to chart a theoretical outline for his chapter, I would like to revisit the key overarching dissertation research questions. The first question examines the self-organizing capacities of squatter communities in Kathmandu—during ‘normal’ times as well as crisis times, such as eviction threats—that provide enabling conditions for making claims for the right to the city. The second question broaches the issue of how claims for adequate housing with land ownership rights come up against governmental programs that are governed by, as well as seeking to secure, norms of environmental sustainability, elite aesthetics, and private property. Conceptually, the first question examines the politics of everyday life vis-à-vis the right to the city as a transformative as well as an aspirational project. The second question deals with the interface at which the everyday politics of the poor meets with public events that manifest a state-led politics of the environment and aesthetics. Let me begin with the first question. In the communities I came to know, everyday life in “normal” times is organized around a institutional logic referred to as “house with three pillars.”23 The structured logic proves difficult to sustain in times of urgency, namely direct, public

23 I have briefly discussed the metaphorical framework of “house with three pillars” in the previous chapter and I discuss it in much detail in the next chapter. The framework refers to a network of solidarity among four different organizations led by sukumbasi – one is a “house”, a central organization, aided financially, politically, and materially by its three other organizations, the “pillars.” Everyday life of sukumbasi is organized under the logic of “house with three pillars” to devise strategies to access services from the municipal government and then later to consolidate incremental gains into a set of vocabularies to demand their right to the city.
encroachment on sukumbasi by the state and affiliated interests. This chapter enters the field of theory with this fundamental contradiction in mind? It locates the dissertation at the intersection of two key strands of urban scholarship: first, scholarly engagements with the idea of “the right to the city” coming out of a Marxist approach to industrialized cities of the global North (Purcell, 2002; Harvey, 1975, 1976, 2008; Fainstein, 2009; Marcuse, 2009) and second, a “critical global South urbanism” that draws on the contributions of postcolonial studies (Appadurai 2000, 2002; Bayat 1997, 2000, 2010, 2013; Benjamin, 2008; Roy 2005, 2011; Simone, 2004, 2008, 2015; and Yiftachel, 2009). Together, these bodies of literature provide useful concepts for understanding contemporary urban struggles, such as everyday life, citizenship and urban revolution that are further examined through the lens of postcolonial urban studies. On the one hand, a Marxist approach to the right to the city undermines the hegemonic liberal conceptions of “(human) rights” and “freedom” that fail challenge today’s neoliberal hegemony. It does so through an analysis of, for example, “accumulation by dispossession”, as an assault of capital on land and labor (Harvey 2008, 2010). In the process, this approach pushes forward a normative question of “what is to be done?” Postcolonial urbanism, on the other hand, provides a nuanced account of the poor via a “thick description” of the struggles of the poor and their self-organizing capacities and practices. Such accounts offer a more subtle attention to the politics of everyday life via politics of recognition. In the process, they raise critical questions about the prescriptive tendencies contained in the Marxist approach to the right to the city. While postcolonial urbanism demands a radical re-evaluation of the project of urban revolution vis-à-vis the right to the city, Marxist literature on the city pushes around the edges of postcolonial urbanism to broach the normative terrain of “what is to be done”. In bringing them together, I
make an argument about the critical importance of ethnography in challenging a prescriptive problematic of a politics of the poor.

1. Right to The City and Urban Revolution

The foundations of the right to the city as a philosophical concept and a political project were laid in Henri Lefebvre’s seminal work, Writing on Cities. By foregrounding inhabitation as central in the making of ‘right’, Lefebvre’s contribution to imagining right to the city as a radical project lies in transcending formal citizenship and/or legal residency status from the discourse of rights. Lefebvre (1968 in Kofman and Lebas, 1996: 174), argues that, “[t]he right to the city manifests itself as a superior form of rights: right to freedom, to individualization in socialization, to habit and to inhabit.” Critical urban geographer, Mark Purcell, [provides further potency to] the idea of inhabitance as being central to imagining and claiming the right to the city: “If inhabitants hold a central role in the decisions that produce urban space…then property ownership can no longer confer a dominant voice in decisions about what to do with urban land” (Purcell, 2003: 579). Lefebvre’s formulation of right to the city thus transcends civic rights that are governed by the logic of property ownership within the ambit of citizenship and liberal democracy. Following Lefebvre, if right to the city may be imagined as the [right of the city’s inhabitants to urban life], broadly conceived as a social right and a cultural right to work, play and access amenities and spaces.

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in the city, who are these urban inhabitants who are to lead the charge for an urban revolution?

Contemporary critical urban theorists such as Peter Marcuse (2009; 2012) retain Lefebvre’s philosophical commitment to the right to the city project while interpreting the political content of the project in relation to contemporary struggles in the city waged for and by the culturally oppressed and the socio-economically alienated. David Harvey and Peter Marcuse follow Lefebvre’s right to the city framework in their engagement with existing urban struggles. This politically engaged reading leads to an interpretation of a right to the city that Marcuse emphatically argues does not advocate “all rights for all people”. The subtext here is: Within the liberal democratic capitalist framework, some already have more rights than the other, including the right to exploit. Therefore, right to city does not advocate for extending rights for all “urban inhabitants”. Instead, for some, rights have to be limited, while for others they must be extended (Marcuse, 2009; 2012). In this respect, Marcuse poses a critical question: how is it possible to unite politics across seemingly divergent interests between the culturally oppressed and the materially dispossessed? And, how might it be possible to anticipate and forge common ground across this difference? (Ninglekhu and Rankin, forthcoming). Divergent and at times contradictory viewpoints within critical urban theory have attempted to grapple with these questions.

Harvey, for example, uses “accumulation by dispossession” as a conceptual frame to describe a process that underwrites state- and market-led capture of valuable land and resources from low-income communities as a necessary condition for capital absorption and
multiplication. As such, Harvey puts emphasis on the right to the city to be centrally concerned with the relationship between urbanization and capitalism, and the problematic dis-embedding of the economy from the social. Critical urban scholarship focusing on cities in the North has examined “uneven development” processes through the lens of gentrification. Such a focus captures urban development strategies that promote and perpetuate cycles of capital investment and accumulation with the attendant processes of disinvestment and displacement of the marginal and the resultant produces of urban spaces for progressively more affluent users (Hackworth and Rekers, 2005, 2012; Slater, 2009).

In the context of the global South, scholars such as David Asher Ghertner (2008) and Amita Baviskar (2011) have critically examined gentrification by investigating the elitism evident in the city governing processes. Ghertner (2008), for example, reveals how a “good governance” program called “Bhagidari” in Delhi has narrowed the channels of political participation for unpropertied citizens, closing down the state-spaces that the urban poor have traditionally relied on to access municipal citizenship rights. Ghertner uses the term “gentrification of state”, to describe this process, which also provide spawning grounds for coalitions of state and elite interests. Such a coalition was evident in Delhi, India, in preparation for the 2010 Commonwealth Games (Baviskar, 2011; Dupont, 2011) – the Common Wealth Games served as a “special time” (Baviskar, 2011) to forge a politics of “aestheticization of city space” (Bhan, 2009:140) that aspired to elevate the status of Delhi to that of a World City.
These interests coalesce to mutate in multiple forms in the contemporary city. For example, Goonerwardena and Kipfer (2005) use the notion of “aestheticized difference” – “premised largely on the pleasures of ‘visible’ and ‘edible’ ethnicity” (p. 672) – as a way to provide of a critique the “multicultural city” in which policies aimed at promoting “diversity” in the city end up producing practices that fold in an aesthetic of difference with “urban development strategies and economic competitiveness” (Kipfer and Keil, 2002: 236). One of the “darker sides” of such “ethnic packaging” (Hackworth and Rekers, 2005) is that neighbourhoods, businesses and communities within a neighbourhood, such as low-income or new immigrant communities are not “visible” or “edible”, are erased from redevelopment plans and visions—in some cases literally—through coercive means such as eminent domain – the right of the government to expropriate private property for public use. (Rankin and McLean, 2014). Harvey’s contribution to the right to the city project lies in questioning the limits of liberal democracy with respect to its ability to realize the Lefebvrian vision of urban life precisely because it leaves intact unexamined social relations of power within capitalism and specifically neoliberal capitalism. Lefebvre’s (2003) call for “urban revolution” is based on the premise that claiming the right to the city means claiming command over the whole urban processes because it is urbanization that is the spawning ground of capitalism. In other words, urbanization supplants industrialization as a lever of capitalist transformation of cities and societies (Lefebvre, 2003). Therefore, for Harvey, revolution “has to be urban in the broadest sense of term, or nothing at all” (Harvey, 2008:40).

In response to Harvey’s call, an emerging and well-received “just city” literature advocates the pragmatics of the socially just capitalist city over the unattainable utopia of the
socialist city (Fainstein, 2009). Fainstein (2009) situates the ideal for the Just City within the context of the capitalist political economy. The Just City is a cumulatively evolving and expanding project that is an outcome of “progressive urban strategies that take account of both the desirable and the feasible” (Fainstein, 2009:30). Through the invocation of the just city, Fainstein (2009) contends that for the sake of meeting urgent needs, our actions must limit within the context of current socio-economic process; that is, the horizons of our actions must be confined to the existing capitalist system, and look for just redistribution of wealth and services within the system. Such “compromised” calls, one may argue, have partly come from the realization that epochal revolution with the big ‘R’ ultimately leave society disillusioned or dissatisfied. For example, the rise of Maoism as a dominant force in Nepal’s contemporary politics that would realize the socialist utopia, after a decade long ‘People’s War’, has in recent times been declared “dead” by Nepal’s reputed journalists and scholars. Likewise, despite the partial success of the Occupy Movement in introducing the slogan of ‘99 percent’ and raising popular activism against the concentration of wealth among the top 1%, it is fair to suggest that we continue to live in the “TINA” moment – Margaret Thatcher’s assertion in the late 80s that “There is no alternative” has by now assumed hegemonic position in dictating global financial capitalism (Ninglekhu and Rankin, forthcoming). In addition, in the context of the future if Islamic revolutions in the Middle East, Bayat (2010) argues that globalization may incite dissent and movements, but classical revolutions, even the Islamic versions, are no longer possible. On such account, Bayat pushes for a rethink of “revolutions” in “in terms of more diffuse and non-violent mobilization with gradual processes and long-term change” (p.233). Given this disillusionment and rethinking, how might one conceive of “urban revolution” in the time of a relentless ascendency of
neoliberal capitalism within cities in the South as well as in the North? Rethinking revolution in a truly urban sense, as Harvey contends, may lie in paying more meticulous attention to what Asef Bayat terms (2010) “quiet encroachment”: The politics of the urban subaltern that illuminates “the silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied, powerful, or the public, in order to survive and improve their lives (p. 56).

Although driven more by the force of necessity and less by a deliberative politics, as Bayat mentions, this encroachment may be understood as a politics of everyday life incipient in which are the seeds of a socialist mode of relations furnished through the modes of sociality and mutual dependency that have the potential to inspire an alternative collective action. And perhaps a formulation of urban revolution rooted in paying attention to more meticulous and mundane details of the everyday can offer a potent impetus and alternative for securing a generalized right to the city. As such, “urban revolution” may be conceived not so much as spectacular events that often times take violent form but a gradual process in which the seeds of socialist transition is incipient in the mundane rituals of everyday life – meaning, it is at the level of “thought” first that revolution of the “urban” is to be implanted. Lefebvre (2003) alludes to this notion of urban revolution through the phrase “blind field” to challenge the epistemological foundation of society: that our understanding of society is “…shaped by the practices and theories of industrialization…and so the urban remains unseen” (2003:29). If so, how specifically might the politics of everyday life amount to urban revolution?
2. Everyday Life in Postcolonial Urbanism: The Organized and The Unanticipated

Goonewardena’s Lefebvrian reading of everyday life vis-à-vis revolution is as follows:

“The category of everyday life is as urban and political as it is philosophical. It lies at the heart of radical politics, the locus of which is increasingly the city. As such, everyday life also ought to be the central concern of any radical urban theory not simply content with offering us vivid descriptions of cities and capital, but also intent on producing a new concept of politics—beyond the exhausted attachments to party, state and parliament, not to mention ‘social capital’, ‘civil society’ or ‘citizenship’, none of which are adequate to the struggle for the right to the city” (Goonewardena, 2009:216).

Despite the potent political and philosophical examination of everyday life in Lefebvrian critical urban scholarship, there is room for accommodating ethnographic findings in the description to address a potential disconnect between the lived everyday and the theoretical renditions exalting the transformative potential contained within the everyday. In other words, while Lefebvrian theory exalts the everyday for good measure, it does not attend carefully to the everyday disjuncture between theory of the transformative potential of the everyday and the lived everyday, which is contradictory in practice. As such, grounding the literature in a detailed account of everyday life of urban inhabitants, of the alienated and the oppressed is necessary to inform the struggle for devising a political program for the right to
the city. The “new concept of politics” that Goonewardena alludes to may very well be found in ethnographic descriptions of everyday life, and postcolonial urbanism may be a site to situate such an inquiry. On this note, this section discusses the contributions of anthropologist AbdouMaliq Simone, but also brings into the discussion specific concepts from the wider literature on global South urbanism, namely, “deep democracy” (Appadurai, 2002), “gray spaces” (Yiftachel, 2009), “insurgent citizenship” (Holston 1998), “occupancy urbanism” (Benjamin 2007), “informal people” (Bayat, 1997), and “subaltern urbanism” (Roy, 2011). These ethnographic accounts of cities in the Global South shed light on two key themes found in scholarly accounts that claim to witness the resourcefulness of “the slum”: “economies of entrepreneurialism” and “political agency” (Roy, 2011: 227). One may read these accounts as attempts to provide alternative recognition of “the slum” by digging through its “ethnographic present”: “…the realm of the present that is rooted in the heterogeneity of the lived experience, which is to say, in the ethnographic present and not in the utopian futures” (Holston 1998: 48). I evoke this ethnographic present not so much to discard the past given that the ethnographic narrative of the dissertation is rendered through a ‘present’ of the city rooted in a particular political-economic history. Rather, I do so in order to raise a few important considerations. The presence of the ethnographer in the present time allows for capturing real-time practices and processes of sukumbasi organizing that are not just free-floating in the present, but have a deep-rooted trajectory in history (Sanjek, 1991). These myriad politics of sukumbasi organizing and the inherent internal contradiction that were revealed during the field research and through the field notes allowed for taking stock of the rupture such politics create in imagining a teleological unfolding of the future. In other words, the emphasis on the ethnographic present is not to dissuade or discard our interest in
the past,. Rather, the objective is to foreground the present rooted in a trajectory of history, albeit one that could potentially disrupt the logic of prescriptive-ness evident in the imagining the future.

Appadurai (2002) exalts practices of “doing” deep democracy that follows a particular modality of action built around “savings”, allowing women to enact entrepreneurial subjectivities to, for example, step out of stigmatizing stereotypes. While Appadurai celebrates “deep democracy” as “cosmopolitanism from below” as transnational solidarities are forged across markers of difference such as language and culture, there are others, such as Solomon Benjamin (2007), who questions the logic of infusing “deep democracy” with emancipatory politics. The suggestion is that this mode of doing politics may not so much be the “alternative”, in the sense of providing a critique of neoliberal hegemony. Instead, in mirroring the “professionalized” practices of an NGO, “deep democracy” may show a tendency to replicate “grassroots neoliberalism” underwritten by liberal-democratic claims of “self-help” that privilege the local scale (Shakya and Rankin, 2008).

James Holston reclaims citizenship as a frame to discuss similar practices of the poor. For Holston, working in the Brazilian context, “insurgent citizenship” indicates a changing character of citizenship, in which “insurgence” indicates opposition to “the modernist spaces that physically dominate the cities today” (p. 39). Insurgence seeks, solicits and cultivates new actors who offer an alternative imaginary of the modern while retaining modernism’s “activist commitments to the invention of society and to the construction of the state” (p. 39).
Drawing from ethnographic research in Sao Paolo, Holston (2007) locates citizenship in the field of practice and possibility, instead of confining it within a fixed boundary of law and policy. Holston’s (1999) notion of “insurgent citizenship” takes recourse to subversive acts that instead of radically resisting the state, remains consensual to the state, while subverting oppressive state practices whenever it is possible to do so. The spaces of disjuncture between formal democracy and its unfulfilled promises are the spawning ground for “insurgency”. Such insurgent acts are struggles over what it means to be the member of the state, or, what it means to be a citizen. The inclusive and aggressive political content that the poor add to citizenship, largely drawing from the experiences of dealing with marginality – using subversive means to access basic services like water and electricity; making “legitimate” claims of land ownership – allows Holston to conceive of citizenship as not just a category to be allowed into or bequeathed upon, but also a practice that enables forceful inhabitation of that category, rendering it not fixed, but elastic. Together, these conceptual frames help to place the politics of the poor within the “ethnographic present” (Holston, 1998).

Oren Yiftachel, likewise, uses the notion of “gray spaces” – “those positioned between the ‘whiteness’ of legality/approval/safety, and the ‘blackness’ of eviction/destruction/death” (Yiftachel, 2009: 88) to discuss the liminal spaces of “informality”. In such spaces, “bare life” is not so much an exception but a daily routine (Roy, 2011: 235). Like Yiftachel, Solomon Benjamin (2007) uses “occupancy urbanism” as a concept to capture urban poor’s politics of contingency for “working the system” to incrementally gain their footing in the city - largely through a process of diverse and de facto tenure regimes that intertwine the everyday life of the planners with that of the poor. Such
working, over time, moves urban politics beyond the fields and logics of policy, private property, and Master Planning, which generally function in the service of neoliberal globalization – usually in the form of utopian visions for city-making in the interests of financial capital. Occupancy urbanism, in the way Benjamin describes it, takes place under the radar screen of “deep democracy” beyond the politics of legality/illegality, and in the realms of “gray spaces”.

However, categories such as “deep democracy” or “insurgent citizenship” also circumscribe the politics of the poor with a certainty and (unintended) prescription that in practice amounts to only part of a more ambiguous picture. By “prescription”, I do not so much mean that those accounts claim to offer solutions to the urban problems and questions. Rather, the prescription is a conceptual and methodological problematic, in the sense that there is a proposition made to approach questions about time and space of the politics of everyday life that privileges certain kinds of politics as being central to determining the fate of everyday life. As such, critical global South urbanism must anticipate the unanticipated ways in which the poor find themselves muddled in relationships and actions that eventually get things done in unexpected and counterintuitive ways. In this context, other contemporary work in post-colonial studies—particularly that of AbdouMaliq Simone (2004, 2008, 2013, 2015)—offers a slightly different perspective rooted in an ethnographic approach to everyday life; ethnography centers on mundane everyday experiences that reveal how the poor use the city in a flexible way to move their lives forward. Simone’s work is informed through a meticulous detail to the heterogeneity of the everyday life in and of the city, in which everyday life, rather than being a prescriptive category of idealized “deep democracy”, is a
field of possibility as well as impossibility. While this approach to everyday life attributes agency to the urban poor, careful attention is paid in resisting the tendency to ascribe a socially transformative potential to the practices of the poor (Ninglekhu and Rankin, forthcoming). Simone’s work thus attempts to provide a new “itinerary of recognition” to subaltern politics by inviting uncertainties and ambiguities as analytical categories (Roy, 2011). Invoking Subaltern Studies Collective as a necessary counterpoint to the elitism of historiography, Roy presents “subaltern urbanism” as a politics of recognition – a necessary condition to challenge the elitism present in urban studies. In other words, “subaltern urbanism” may mark an important intervention in South Asia’s “urban turn,” one that rescues “the city” from the teleology of modernity vis-à-vis the nation, but also from the economistic frameworks of the “World Class” city that undermines the social and the everyday (Rao 2006). Within this mode of intervention, “slum as theory” becomes “an important point of departure precisely because it is located in the interstices of a whole range of mutations whose specificity is no longer locatable within singular frameworks” (Rao, 2006: 232). In making the case, Roy draws upon Spivak’s critique of itineraries of recognition claiming to represent the subaltern “that challenges us to study how the subaltern is constituted as an object of representation and knowledge – in lieu of the conscientious ethnography that claims to speak for the authentic subaltern’ (Roy, 2011: 299).

In attending to the unplanned and unexpected encounters of everyday life, Simone invites us to think that the mode of representation itself can be emancipatory insofar as it refuses to fall for prescriptive categories that draw rigid epistemological and methodological boundaries in framing urban politics, broadly put. For example, Simone (2015: 17) argues,
The articulations and divides are full of complexities and deceptions: histories of apparent resourcefulness have often raised more problems than they have addressed…. What often look like substantial assets of social capital, democratic practice, and social collaboration can be highly murky maneuvers of opportunism and trickery.

In acknowledging this ambiguity that infuses everyday life with multiple logics, Simone enables us, albeit implicitly, to shine a new light on Lefebvre’s (1987:9) endorsement of the emancipatory potential contained within the everyday: “Why wouldn’t the concept of everydayness reveal the extraordinary in the ordinary?” It is important to note that foregrounding the uncertainty of outcome does not diminish the imperative of the right to the city as a political aspiration. Instead, being open to the right to the city as a project with mutable aspiration could allow us to see the everyday as also being rife with the potential to provide a radical opening for transformative change. As such, if the right to the city is to be seen as a politics of possibility, the politics is such that “collective actions coalesce and mutate in light of new urban developments” (Simone, 2008: 197).

3. Concluding Thoughts

Lefebvre’s conception of everyday life is a critique of the actually lived everyday life that Guy Debord (1962: para 23) rightly observes:
Many technologies do, in fact, more or less markedly alter certain aspects of everyday life … telephones, television, music on long-playing records, mass air travel, etc. These developments arise anarchically, by chance, without anyone having foreseen their interrelations or consequences. But there is no denying that, on the whole, this introduction of technology into everyday life ultimately takes place within the framework of modern bureaucratized capitalism and tends to reduce people’s independence and creativity.

The obverse of this take on everyday life is the actually lived everyday of the poor in which the pragmatics of precarity necessitates taking recourse to ‘wealth in people’, as opposed to wealth in things. And it is through this necessity that socialist modes of relations may be born in the spirit of mutual help and mutual regard. In taking into account the differential accounts of ‘the slum’ through the vantage point of postcolonial theory, the intention is to bring the certainties and uncertainties incipient in everyday life of the poor into the project of subaltern urbanism (Roy, 2011), and to bear on the project of revolution (small ‘r’, mind you) – the project of the Right to the City. Doing so allows us to ascribe political agency to the urban poor as authors of their own narratives about what ought to count as the rights to the city. Drawing on the postcolonial theory of the city and its subaltern, I offer two caveats: First, in ascribing agency to the poor, the intention is not to impute a romanticized solidarity amongst the poor, as unequal relations of power underlie social relations within the slum just like anywhere else. Instead, the suggestion is that investment in ‘wealth in people’ in a relational way may offer a possibility for a gradual ‘urban revolution’ (Lefebvre, 2003). The second caveat is that practices leading to such a possibility may be messy, uncontained and
unanticipated. In such a formulation, the right to the city may be more accurately understood as “the right to be messy and inconsistent, or to look disordered… (the right to) thrive in unanticipated ways” (Simone, 2010: 331). In combining Lefebvre’s philosophical contributions with the postcolonial urbanism of Simone and others, I seek to carve a role for ethnography in documenting not just the preordained logic of “deep democracy,” but also the uncertainty of people’s attempts to thrive in the city.
Chapter 2

“House with Three Pillars”:

The Politics of Patience

This chapter is an ethnographic exploration of a metaphorical “house with three pillars” aimed at understanding strategies mobilized by sukumbasi, or squatter communities, in Kathmandu to access everyday necessities like water, electricity, and, equally importantly, money for necessary expenses like groceries, tuition fees, community meetings and commutes. Together, these practices, and their underlying demands, make up the sukumbasi claim for the right to the city – a claim for the right to the have lawful access to the amenities and resources that the city has to offer, including vacant spaces for inhabitation; for the right to stay put in spaces of inhabitance; the right to live in the city with dignity devoid of constant threats of symbolic and physical violence – for example, stigmatic equation with “dirt” and the threats of eviction; and the right to be relocated within the city in case of displacement or eviction. To this end, particular attention is paid to their organizing practices, the building of solidarity and establishing of linkages that sukumbasi deem to be crucial in the making and claiming of the rights on “legitimate”, if not “legal”, grounds. Such practice of everyday life involves forming everyday relations with the state, and mobilizing those relations, with the help from NGOs, to obtain services from the state. In the process, there is
a relational co-constitution of the production of space and enactment of subjectivities that is integral to the capacity of sukumbasi to organize and make demands.\(^{25}\)

On this note, I begin this chapter by sketching two different scenes that reveal the contentious terrain of citizenship and space that sukumbasi carefully navigate to make claims. The first highlights a condition of compulsion that makes it necessary for sukumbasi to organize more effectively, and also “formally”, to obtain citizenship status and secure municipal citizenship rights, such as legally accessing basic services. The second scene provides a critical glimpse into the conditions – both material and discursive – that enable the sukumbasi to make such demands.

1. **Condition of Compulsion: Transgression and Subversion**

According to Hukum Bahadur Lama, one of the earlier sukumbasi settlers in the city and the founder of SPOSH, Krishna Bahadur Karki, a sukumbasi, migrated to Kathmandu in the mid-1970s. After a chance encounter with Hukum, and few exchanges of similar stories of homelessness in the city over the next few meetings, Krishna settled in Sankhamul, Hukum’s tole, or neighborhood, on the bank of Sankhamul, a tributary of the Bagmati River. For the time that he had been in the city, Krishna had never felt the need for a citizenship card. He was Nepali – born and bred. His daughter did experience a need, however, soon after the completing of the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) exam. After graduating from

\(^{25}\) I would like to note that “house with three pillars” does not just provide a logic of self-organizing for SPOSH. Heterogeneity of operations takes place behind the logic that may be construed as a “fourth pillar”. I have alluded to such operations – of relying on ‘informal’ contacts for accessing electricity, for example – briefly under the methodology section in the introductory chapter.
the elementary school, the daughter needed a citizenship card for higher education. This was in 2005, just before the Second People’s Movement.26

As per the mandate of the Citizenship Act 2006, after gathering seven witnesses who would testify to Krishna’s long-term residency in the settlement and a letter of support from the local police station, Krishna and Hukum went to the local ward office for an endorsement letter in support of Krishna’s application27. In addition to the letter from the police, Krishna had also gathered one additional letter from a local office of the United Marxist Leninist (UML), center-left political party that had considerable support from sukumbasi during the time. The ward secretary, however, refused to write a letter for Krishna’s daughter, Rama, stating that the sukumbasi claim was “illegal” because Krishna did not have a legal landownership record of his place of residence. Krishna and Hukum then went to the District Administration Office (DAO). The Chief District Officer (CDO), the head of the administration office, instructed the two to contact the ward office in a week, by which time, the CDO assured them that the local ward office secretary would be ready to write a recommendation letter. After fifteen days, they returned to the local ward office. This time, however, they went with a plan, says Hukum Bahadur: “We went with a few people from our settlement. Our plan was to lock the ward office secretary in his office”. Pointing to a burly man sitting next to us, Hukum Bahadur says, “Suresh Ji also came with us. He is a local neighbor who owns a couple of houses here. He has spent a long time working in Japan. We

26 The Second People’s Movement, which was fronted by the Maoists and that lasted for 19 days, sounded the demise of Monarchy while declaring Nepal as a Federal Democratic Republic.
27 A ward is a local level administrative unit of the Nepali government, one tier below the Municipality level.
went to the local ward office in his private car. He is a good man. It was a jeep, right? Suresh Ji?” says Hukum. In response, Suresh Ji turns to us, half smiles, nodding his head in affirmation, and continues to sip from this teacup as he turns his attention to someone else. The reference to Suresh Ji’s property – “couple of houses” and a “jeep” – may have been meant to invoke ad-hoc alliances across class difference that are important to forge when facing the adversarial local state representative.

Hukum continued his story, recalling how they threatened to lock the secretary inside the ward office after he refused to write them the letter. “He wailed and cried and then wrote the letter, then we got the citizenship card,” notes Hukum, letting out a chuckle. Others around him also had a brief laugh at the secretary’s expense. Later, says Hukum, they learned of a meeting that the secretary had organized at his office. He had invited all the ward committee members – which included representatives of all the major political parties – and some of the local residents. At the meeting, the secretary accused Hukum of using threats under the influence of alcohol to force him into writing the letter. The ward secretary demanded police action on Hukum. “You know what happened next?” Hukum cannot contain his energy. Not pausing for my response, he says, again with a chuckle, “A powerful political leader who knows me personally told the committee that I don’t smoke or drink, and that I am too nice of a guy to violently threaten someone; that my demand was not illegal; and that the call to take action against me should be dropped.” Hukum later found out that many in the settlement who came to know about the incident with the ward secretary went to the ward for recommendation letters in support of their citizenship application, claiming to be Hukum’s nephew, cousin, or uncle. “Many in the settlements would probably still be without
formal citizenship status had I not been around. People in power know me, which makes it easier to get access to services that you require,” said Hukum (Interview August 12, 2010)

This anecdote that Hukum Bahadur Lama shared was from nearly a decade ago. A year after this ordeal, in 2006, Citizenship Act of Nepal was revised. Under the revision, two significant changes were made. First, mothers with Nepali citizenship could transfer citizenship status to their children (in the earlier version of the act, citizenship for children born in Nepal could inherit citizenship only through their Nepali father). Second, landownership – as a necessary condition for obtaining citizenship – was removed from the act. In other words, patriarchal relation and private property were no longer the logic that governed distribution of citizenship. However, due to existent cultural disposition and bureaucratic discretion, news and social media continue to be awash with reports of landless and fatherless individuals who are barred from obtaining citizenship. However, the process for obtaining citizenship is not as restrictive as it used to be, prior to the revision of the Citizenship Act in 2006.

For landless urban poor, there are cases in which the DAO has been accepting a SPOSH-issued “Family ID” in lieu of landownership certificate. The “Family ID” was issued after SPOSH conducted a Kathmandu-wide survey of all sukumbasi households in all existing settlements in 2005\(^\text{28}\). The Family ID confirms that the cardholder is a member of SPOSH and as such, a “legitimate” inhabitant of a sukumbasi settlement in the city. The

\(^{28}\) There has been no such survey after 2005. Meaning, new settlements, including the “urban base” of the Maoist party, have no “Family ID”. As a result, they do not have the same kind of access to municipal citizenship right, as the residents of older settlements do.
practice and process of making claims for citizenship was therefore “formalized” under these limiting conditions. Family ID, that some sukumbasi activist-leaders call, “Green Paper”, a SPOSH-issued counterpoint to the government-issued “Red Paper” (the landownership certificate has a red cover), replaces the “Red Paper” for obtaining recommendation letters for the local ward office that are necessary for accessing water, electricity, compensation for government-induced damages, such as loss of property during road widening, and more importantly, for obtaining citizenship. Now, unlike before, sukumbasi in the city no longer have to take recourse to insurgent and violent means, like Krishna and Hukum had to, to obtain citizenship card. This alternative approach to claims-making had to be “invented” because of the lack of “invitation” from the state, which may be in the form of provisions in the Citizenship Act or the municipal bye-laws. This “invented” citizenship also inverts the liberal democratic logic of property ownership, the “Red Paper”, and renders it obsolete. In other words, citizenship is “legitimately” enacted as well as obtained despite the lack of property ownership. This drama of citizenship, as a necessary condition for performing and aspiring for the right to the city, is instead rooted in inhabitance of the city – and the Family ID is a legitimate carrier of, and bears credible witness to, such politics of citizenship. As the politics of citizenship is spatial in nature, it begs a curious question: How do sukumbasi foreground the spatiality of politics in their everyday life? How are spaces that are produced both materially and discursively, en route to Speaking about the self in relation to the city? How are space and subjectivities relationally co-constituted? I will allude to these questions with the second scene below.
2. Condition of Possibility: Space and Subjectivities

Ramhiti Tole is in the northeast end of Kathmandu, not very far outside of the Ring Road – a road that encircles the city. Ring Road separates most of the city’s core from the peripheral neighborhoods; the traditional from the relatively “modern”. Most sukumbasi settlements are inside the Ring Road. Ramhiti Tole is one of the few that falls outside it. It is also one of the oldest sukumbasi settlements, formed in 1970. Local inhabitants recall a time when what is currently Ramhiti Tole used to be an unsafe part of the city. Mostly a large and unused space of land, it used to be a passageway to get from one neighborhood to another. Very few people dared to take the shortcut after dark because of the fear of being mugged or abused. But that was in the past, before there was Ramhiti. Residents of Ramhiti confide that a walk in the neighborhood in the present day would sketch a different story. A wide paved street meanders its way through the neighborhood connecting it with two other adjacent neighborhoods.
In the evening and weekends, the street serves as a playground for children. At the center *chowk*, a small junction where two small streets separate, an elevated cemented structure supports two big water-tanks that supply drinking water to the local households. Kathmandu Water Corporation supplies water on a regular basis. The more affluent neighbors living next to Ramhiti Tole use this street as a safe passageway to their homes after work without the fear of being mugged, as there is now a collective “eyes on the street.” In this way, the demands of sukumbasi for citizenship and landownership, unlike in the past, are no longer couched in abstract notions of “belonging” to Nepal as a “Nepali”. Instead, they are rooted in concrete spaces that are transformed – they work, play, and live in those spaces. In the process, such spaces also offer new vocabularies – of “good citizens” and “able residents” – when sukumbasi speak about themselves in meetings, in workshops, and in the streets.
Driven by the exigencies of exclusion, over time, for sukumbasi, such a transformation also provides a tangible basis for stepping out of stereotypes – of “dirt”, “filth”, “odor” and “lazy people”. The overall built form of the neighborhood looks much better planned, and cleaner, that many propertied residential neighborhoods of the city, which are littered with dirt, filth, and odor, and generally look unplanned. In helping to step out of the prevailing stereotypes, spaces thus transformed allow sukumbasi to speak of their desire with some semblance of credibility: “Much like anyone else in the city, sukumbasi, too, want to live in a clean and green city,” says Dhana Lama (Interview, 14 December, 2010, a sukumbasi from a different settlement. Bimala Lama, resident of Ramhiti, claims that rather than calling these settlements “illegal,” the state should be thankful to sukumbasi for protecting the empty lands from being “encroached.” The encroacher, in this case, is the “land mafia” – a tacit reference to real estate brokers who allegedly find illicit means to turn public land into private ownership for property development. For Bimala, sukumbasi are, therefore, also “responsible citizens”: “had it not been for us, the land mafia would have all captured the public lands by now and sold them. We have occupied them and turned them into safe neighborhoods. We pay proper levy for using the land. We have protected the honor of the state as able residents and dutiful citizens’ (Interview, 14 December 2010). One notices an interesting paradox in this self-representation because the state calls the settlement “encroached land,” instead of “basti,” which is what sukumbasi call their settlement. Basti comes from the verb basnu, which means, “to live,” as opposed to “encroach.” Instead, sukumbasi pose the “land mafia” as potential encroachers.
The basti, as such, articulates the Lefebvrian approach in thinking about the urban as “lived spaces” in which the attempt is to “apprehend human life as a complex whole and avoid reducing our understanding of experience to small fractions of life, such as class status, gender, race, income, consumer habits, marital status, and so on” (Purcell, 2014:145). The claim made about “able residents” and “responsible citizens” is noteworthy here: the reference to the land mafia encroaching the land is a case of expropriation of space, taking land from inhabitants, the rightful owners, and giving it to property owners who buy land in the speculative market. Instead, the sukumbasi claim to appropriate space, not encroach, so as to “de-alienate” that which could potentially be expropriated by the market. To appropriate “is to take it to oneself, to make it one’s own” (Purcell, 2014: 149). It sets the stage for the city as a site of struggle between use value and exchange value – between “city as a site of accumulation and the city as inhabited” (p.149). It sets the stage for making the demands based on this understanding of self in relation to the spaces transformed, and the role of inhabitation in making that transformation, and inculcating a subjectivity based on that transformation. If the demands for the right to the city come from the relational co-constitution of production of space and enactment of subjectivity, the question is: what are the conditions that allow for such relationality to take place? What are the enabling conditions of possibility for making claims for the right to the city?

3. “House with three pillars”

At the close of an interview with Ram Kumari Rai, a sukumbasi leader, she quizzed: “Is it now my turn to ask question?” As I nodded, she clenched her right fist, pumped it in the air, and declared with conviction, “This is how we organize!” Then she asked me what it
meant, pointing at her fist still in the air. “Aikyavaidhyata? (Solidarity)?” I took a guess. She landed an emphatic pat on my back with a huge grin and a wink. This solidarity that Ram Kumari speaks of is frequently heard in conversations – it is an everyday language that invokes pride in a network of solidarity that has been cultivated among sukumbasi in Nepal over the years. During interviews, informal conversations, and meetings, it is very common to hear everyone and the other make reference to this network of solidarity as a “house with three pillars”. “House with three pillars” indicates a network of solidarity forced between four different sukumbasi-led organizations in Nepal. “House” refers to the central organization that advocates for the demand of citizenship and shelter-with-land rights; and “pillars” signifies three different organizations that provide political and financial support to the central organization. All four organizations are led by sukumbasi. S.POSH-Nepal, the federal-level organization, is the “house.” The Society of Women’s Unity - Nepal (SWU-Nepal) (Or Mahila Ekata), women’s cooperative groups, and Child Development Youth Network (Or Baal Bikas) are three different organizations that are run by sukumbasi. These organizations are the pillars of the house and “solidarity” is the key theme that binds them together. The goal of the next few sections is to excavate this metaphorical house by paying careful attention to the discursive and political terrains that bring together institutions, actors, and ideas from across geographical and ideological differences. This coalition of institutions, actors, and ideas, are in the service of creating spaces that are real, such as the neighborhood described earlier. Spaces thus produced are imbued with political content that lend new meanings in one’s understanding of the self in relation the state and the other residents in the city – the propertied ones, the middle class and upper middle class.
“Insurgent Citizenship” (Holston, 1995, 1999, 2008), “Deep Democracy” (Appadurai, 2002), and “Invented Citizenship” (Miraftab, 2004) are some of the conceptual frames through which organizing such as “house with three pillars” are discussed in scholarship on critical global South urbanism. Together, these frames refer to the tactical ways through which the urban disenfranchised collectively navigate, bypass, and appropriate municipal, and sometimes, national, laws only to ultimately subvert these laws. The acts of subversion are geared towards not so much doing away with the state or overhauling the state. Rather, the intention is not to do away with the state, but to engage the state, as a way to obtain legal membership of the state (Holston, 2008; MacFarlane, 2004). The metaphor is also quite telling in the use of the term “house” because housing is a stage on which “the most public drama of disenfranchisement” takes place, and housing is also the most critical site on which the politics of citizenship unfolds (Appadurai, 2002:27).

“SPOSH is our government”, claims Moti (Interview, 10 January 2010). He continues, “When we work at Baal Bikas, we come across so many different issues that sukumbasi are facing. We learn to deal with them. We build linkage with the state. The experiences help us prepare for the future. Baal Bikas helps us in cultivating future leaders for SPOSH.” He then goes on to mention Smita, SPOSH’s executive board member, as an ideal example that others should aspire to emulate in making that transition from a youth leader to a senior leader of a federation. Smita recently joined SPOSH’s executive board. For Moti, the transition marks how pillars add strength to the house. But more than a transition per se, Smita joined SPOSH out of necessity – SPOSH needed someone who could do accounting and bookkeeping works for them. Smita could help because of her experience
from *Baal Bikas*, as well as her education background as a commerce student pursuing Bachelor’s degree. Nevertheless, this is also an example of how the poor combine their political and material power, and it is in this will to federate that the power of the poor lie as they are brought together by the assemblages under the “house with three pillars”.

SPOSH’s central office is located on the second floor of a three story building in Mandikatar, one of the more affluent neighborhoods in Kathmandu. Laddu Prasad Khadka is SPOSH’s vice-chairman, who lives in a settlement close by. He comes to the office once or twice during the daytime. There are normally two or three staffs working in the office. One of the rooms on the floor belongs to *Baal Bikas*. Smita Acharya, who was the president of *Baal Bikas* during the time of my fieldwork, comes to the office infrequently. Having *Baal Bikas* is helpful for SPOSH because the young people in *Baal Bikas* are technically savvier than the older men at SPOSH. They help their older counterparts with fixing the computer and composing emails. The office spaces are generally empty because most of the executive committee members are also activists and leaders who are for the most times in a week usually out attending a workshop on housing, a public press meet on road expansion, a delegation to the office of district water supply and so on. There are others who are doing formal jobs – Smita works in a local clinic, Moti Lama, *Baal Bikas*’ general secretary, works as a paid volunteer in an INGO. It is only during the annual general meeting that the office is full. The one pictured below is one such meeting and it doubles as an interaction program. The topic is “secure shelter and the fundamental rights of sukumbasi”. Two of the guest speakers are from the government. One is a Supreme Court lawyer, and the other from the office of land reform. Meetings like this are important to renew and sustain the relationship.
with the state. Organizing these events requires funding. Tea and refreshments are especially important to generate a relaxed environment conducive to discussion. Sometimes, if the program is for all day, lunch has to be arranged too, for all the participants. Additionally, those invited do not attend without allowance. On top of these expenses, the monthly rent for the office space is escalating. All of these costs add up to an expense to run an organization whose only source of income is through the funds that occasionally come from its association with Lumanti. Lumanti is a Kathmandu-based national NGO that works closely with Mahila Ekata and SPOSH for advocating for housing right of the poor. Mahila Ekata, a rights-based collective of sukumbasi women, holds a central office not very far from the office of SPOSH-Nepal facing similar issues as SPOSH-Nepal. The women’s savings and credit cooperatives, another of the pillar, have a different story to tell though. Bombay Lama, president of Gyan Jyoti Co-operative Group claims three cooperatives have a little over six million rupees (roughly under hundred thousand Canadian dollars) of total capital in savings. From the surplus generated through savings, all the cooperatives set aside a fixed sum of money annually for SPOSH-Nepal and Mahila Ekata. The financial support obtained from the cooperatives help to defray expenses in rent and organizing events. This sharing of resources is one way of understanding the functional character of the “house with three pillars” and the different solidaristic modes of everyday engagement that help sustain the organizations.

The mode of self-organizing replicates a similar mode of organizing carried out in Mumbai through a network of solidarity called the Alliance. The Alliance includes a non-governmental organization called the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centers
(SPARC), and two other organizations that are led by the squatter communities: the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF), and *Mahila Milan* or Women Together (McFarlane 2004). SPARC was formed initially to document how women living on the pavement understood effects of demolition and how were their strategies for countering such threats. NSDF works for the resettlements rights of slum-dwellers, while the central role of *Mahila Milan* is to operate daily savings and loan scheme, it also works with NSDF on broader policy issues (McFarlane, 2004; Appadurai, 2002). In short, in Appadurai’s words, “Alliance is a politics of accommodation, negotiation, and long-term pressure rather than of confrontation and or threats of political reprisal” (2002: 29). “House with three pillars”, as founded through a long-term collaboration with Lumanti, follows this mode of organizing like a template.

Lumanti brings to the “house with three pillars” what SPARC brings to the Alliance – English-speaking professionals with ties to state elites, global and regional networks; *Mahila Milan* is equivalent to *Mahila Ekata* that bring together women who faced gender-based challenges both at home and publicly; Similar to SPOSH, NSDF founded by Jockin Arputham introduced a radical model of “federation” in grassroots political organization (Appadurai, 2002). The foundational idea on which federation builds “emphasizes the importance of union among already preexisting collectives (this federating, rather than simply uniting, joining, and lobbying)” (Appadurai, 2002: 33). SPOSH and *Mahila Ekata* much like NSDF and *Mahila Milan*, has a federated network in Nepal across forty-four
different districts. Lumanti, while being a political ally to sukumbasi, also serves as a conduit that connects sukumbasi in Nepal with the Alliance in India.29

There are three key principles to which the Alliance adheres: “savings,” which forms the bedrock of alliance; “sharing” – built on an anti-expert strategy that no one knows how to survive poverty better than the poor themselves; and non-affiliation with political parties – that the poor will never serve as a vote bank to any political party (Appadurai, 2002; MacFarlane, 2004). In Nepal, the tenets of savings, sharing, and non-alliance are taken up to institute a mode of organizing under the institutional set up of the three organizations that work collaboratively with Lumanti. The members of the organizations claim that it is important to maintain non-alliance to be eligible for funding from donors. Non-alliance is also beneficial because by not being allied to any political party, sukumbasi can build ad hoc alliances with parties if and when necessary30. For the purpose of this chapter, I would like to focus on the two key principles – “savings” and sharing – as a way to describe the sukumbasi mode of organizing. First, let me discuss savings and how the idea inculcates subjectivities.

29 Arputham Jockin, NSDF’s president, shares close relation with Lajana Manandhar, Lumanti’s president. The institutional relationship between these two organizations gained strength on the basis of long-term collaborative engagement on urban poverty and housing sector in India and Nepal. Jockin is also a president of Slum Dwellers International (SDI), a network of urban poor communities, including squatter communities, in over thirty-three cities in the global South. Through Lumanti, SDI provides funding to SPOSH on a regular basis for covering logistics and organizational expenses.

30 For example, SPOSH form alliances with political parties in the opposition during anti-eviction campaigns.
3.1 Savings: Enacting entrepreneurial subjectivities

“Access to and control over financial resources is key for empowerment of women”, says Lajana. In the first reading, this economistic route to “empowerment” might suggest that the means to improving conditions of sukumbasi women has been confused with an end. There is an implicit assumption that income (as an outcome of having access to and control over financial capital) ensures improvement and empowerment. It may be argued that such equation erases women who are not financially active from the narratives of empowerment because the ability to penetrate the market, mostly through “income generation activities” takes precedence over other forms of social relations, and works, that might satisfy human needs in tangible and intangible ways (Kabeer, 1995). These feminist perspectives coming from the field of critical development studies notwithstanding, “savings” brings more than financial capital to sukumbasi, according to Lajana and many other sukumbasi women who are ordinary residents, activists and leaders; “savings” satisfy human needs in tangible and intangible ways. “Savings” has an ideological and salvational status; “it’s like breathing” (Appadurai, 2002).

Lumanti started organizing sukumbasi first by visiting the settlements, which began in 1993, after it was registered as an NGO. “We visited them (sukumbasi), they never came to us”, says Lajana Manandhar, Lumanti’s founder. The organizing began with establishing first Mahila Ekata. It was formed as a “parallel organization” to SPOSH, which was already formed but was not actively working, according to Lajana. It was impossible for sukumbasi

31 According to interviews with Lajana Manandhar and different members of cooperatives, up until five years ago, more than fifty percent of loan was invested on income generating activities, such as opening teashop and grocery stores.
women to participate on equal terms as sukumbasi men in workshops and seminars because men took up all executive positions in the SPOSH board. “Given the male domination in the leadership position of SPOSH, it would be a long while before women could claim important position in the executive committee of SPOSH”, says Lajana. This strategy of taking male domination head-on has allowed women in Mahila Ekata to take up important positions and participate in events as equals. For example, when events are organized or committees formed to dialogue with the state, board members of both SPOSH and Mahila Ekata attend these meetings. Likewise, in a series of meetings that the Department of Urban Development and Building Construction (DUDBC) organized to reform National Urban Policy, DUDBC asked for representatives from SPOSH as well as Mahila Ekata. It is through such actions that sukumbasi women in Mahila Ekata are able to exert their political presence in public spaces alongside sukumbasi men. Mahila Ekata has allowed sukumbasi women to take on issues and advance demands as leaders themselves – in political forums, seminars, and policy meetings.

Thuli Maya, chairperson of Nava Deep Jyoti, recalls a time when Lumanti had just started introducing and promoting the concept of savings in the settlements in Kathmandu.

We didn’t know about savings before Lumanti taught us. When they first came to our settlement, we were so sacred asking ourselves why they were here. We used to think of them as a big bear or something because they were outsiders. We wished they weren’t there. Our hearts pounded heavily and we could barely speak in front of them. Over time, they were able to teach us how to do savings. We started saving Rs.
5 per week, and then the savings slowly went up. We formed a committed, appointed a secretary and a treasurer. Lumanti showed us a road on which we could walk together (Interview February 14th 2011).

In the beginning, the savings and credits groups were formed and run informally after a visit to India for an event on “sharing” – an “exchange program” (Tanaka, 2009). Lumanti visited Mahila Milan in Mumbai with leaders of Mahila Ekata from Kathmandu. The idea of savings therefore came from Mumbai. However, as the size of financial transaction got bigger, it was no longer possible to run the groups informally.

After a point, as our savings got bigger, we realized that we needed to instill trust in the group, as chances of embezzlement became bigger because we were dealing with bigger loans. After, we decided to register the group with the government, because then it would gain institutional recognition, and the group and its members would be able to invest more trust in it (Bombay Lama, Gyan Jyoti Cooperative, Interview, 26 January 2010).

It was, however, not a straightforward process for sukumbasi women to register a cooperative under the national cooperative act. There were two issues. First, membership base for a cooperative to be registered would have to come from five adjoining wards in the city. And second: that applicants (required number 25) had to be citizens of Nepal. Both posed problem for registering because poverty in Kathmandu is scattered in pockets in different wards that are not adjoining. Many sukumbasi women had no citizenship status. But
after a yearlong ordeal of relentless lobbying alongside Lumanti, the first sukumbasi women’s cooperative was registered in 2003 under the name of Gyan Jyoti. The financial transaction was formalized. Lajana, the president of Lumanti, points out that they may have modeled their initial organizing after Mahila Milan and the Alliance, but as the financial strength of these cooperatives continue to evolve, their role in organizing and influencing the family life and the social within the settlements also continue to evolve.

Loans are disbursed under various categories, which determine interest rates, with or without mortgage. The standard interest on a loan is 16 percent. Loans of up to 1 lakh rupees (roughly over 1,000 Canadian dollars) are disbursed without any collateral; any loan larger than 1 lakh requires a collateral. For example, some people may borrow as high as 6 lakhs for buying land. In such cases, the loan is disbursed under the condition that the borrower collaterals the landownership certificate once they have bought the land. There is 12 percent interest on such a loan transaction. The most popular category of loan is a business loan, which is mostly for purchasing or renovating grocery shops, teashops, and restaurants. Loan sizes vary from 50,000 NRs to 1 lakh (500 to 1,000 Canadian dollars) for such an enterprise; no mortgage is required. There is no fixed term for repayment. One can repay in a lump sum or take anywhere from between six months to one year to repay on a weekly basis, depending on the size of the loan. Loans are provided to members for businesses (for example, for street vending), for traveling abroad (as migrant labors in India, Malaysia, and the Middle East), and so forth, with varying interest rates; as well, the cooperatives also provide funds for covering administrative and logistical costs associated with rallies and workshops organized by SPOSHE.
All three cooperatives – *Nava Deep Jyoti, Gyan Jyoti, and Pragati* – allocate annual budget from their savings that go toward funding events that *Mahila Ekata* and SPOSHP organize together. Women in the cooperatives also take pride from the way savings have contributed to children’s education in their settlement. When asked to recall some of the ways that women have benefitted from savings, Bombay Lama provides many examples of sukumbasi women who now have a stable source of income from various entrepreneurial endeavors such as ownership of grocery stores and restaurants, both of which pay more than “labor jobs.” She also emphasizes how savings have made it possible for women to send their children to “private schools” – an upgrade on public schools for her. Gyan Jyoti Cooperative has even started a scholarship to fund local children’s education, which is not merit based, but need based. One member of *Baal Bikas* had this to say about the savings and credits group:

> Had my mother not been in the savings and credit program, I wouldn’t have passed the SLC [School-Leaving Certificate]. At the time of the exam, I owed the school 2,500 rupees. I was asked to pay a week before the exam, or else they would suspend me from the school. My mother borrowed money from the cooperative to pay the tuition fees. I wrote the exam and passed in the first division. (Moti Lama, March 7, 2010)

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32 Passing the SLC, or School Leaving Certificate, is considered a milestone within the Nepali education system as it marks a successful end of school and a fresh start of college life.
What may be most significant, however, as far as forging new, more empowered subjectivities, is that sitting on top of a collective balance of 60 million NRs (approximately 700,000 Canadian dollars), sukumbasi women strategically enact/mobilize this newly acquired entrepreneurial/financial subjectivity during meetings and workshops with NGOs and government representatives, as well as during street protests and exhibitions, where they have the opportunity to send messages to state representatives in attendance:

If we are given land tomorrow, we have the savings to work on the land, and we have the savings to pay land taxes, if need be. If they try to evict us or provide us landownership under the condition that we have to pay tax, we are now in a position to show them our wealth…We did not start the cooperative with this goal in mind, but this is how we have decided to mobilize the strength we gain from our financial capital – toward meeting our political goals.33 (Bina Bajracharya, Interview, 22 April, 2010)

Lajana of Lumanti attests to this claim that Bombay makes. The enactment of entrepreneurial subjectivity to stake claims for social (and political) citizenship is something that is “taught” to sukumbasi – “we taught them to make such claims.” Financial capital, Lajana says, gives sukumbasi a bargaining power for negotiating their claims with the state.

33 Such a call that indicates sukumbasi as a collective political subjectivity across differences (of gender, or caste) encounter challenges within the settlement. For example, Radhika, the storeowner that I mentioned earlier in this chapter says that it has been awhile since she last attended any event that SPOSH or Mahila Ekata has organized. For Radhika, there is no interest anymore because her store keeps her busy. ‘Empowerment’, here, is individuated and it comes in the way of forging solidarity.
Savings is seen as more than capital uplifts financially; it is ideological and salvational in the way it inculcates subjectivities that allow sukumbasi women to speak more powerfully of themselves as political agents. Having access and control over financial capital has allowed sukumbasi a political capital for bridging across class divide.

Whereas in the recent past we were viewed as people who live in dirt and are too lazy to work, now they [propertied women] see us as entrepreneurs. They see that housewives are capable of stepping out of their homes and doing creative work rather than sitting idly watching TV or going shopping, which is what the rich women do. They have now started coming to us to seek membership in the cooperative. But we are rigid in our policy of not letting non-sukumbasi join the cooperative. We have to be careful because having rich women as members may, over time, form class cleavages. Rich people like to take control of things. (Mina Koirala, Interview, 7 January, 2011)
The political capital accumulated thus has not so much empowered, but enabled, sukumbasi women to engage upper class women in the neighborhood on their own terms and conditions. Meaning, women belonging to property owning classes from nearby neighborhoods have expressed explicit desire in seeking membership in the cooperatives even when they knew that the membership was strictly limited to sukumbasi women. In other words, the very neighbors who had formally opposed sukumbasi’s right to the city were now ready to build cross-class relationship with sukumbasi women owing what many sukumbasi women deemed to be due to the success of the cooperatives. The sukumbasi women have, as a result, not only earned their propertied neighbors’ respect, they now also have a handle on steering this newly forming desires on their own terms. Needless to say, this particular moment has the potential to create an opening for forging what some scholars consider a necessary condition for the “success” of sukumbasi movement in Nepal – an alliance with “non-squatter citizens” of Nepal (Tanaka, 2009).

3.2 Sharing: A “Cosmopolitanism from below”

To use Arjun Appadurai’s definition, cosmopolitanism is a cultivated knowledge of the world attained through the expansion of the self across cultural, geographical, ethnic and language barriers (Appadurai 2002). Such stretching and expansion of boundaries are borne out of privileges and luxuries of inclusion. Appadurai uses the phrase “cosmopolitanism from below” to denote similar expansion of boundaries, albeit one that is borne out of exigencies of exclusion. He deploys the concept to describe cross-border activism and translocal as well as transnational solidarities among squatter communities in different cities in the global south. This crossing of the boundaries, of culture, geography and language, takes place
discursively and materially as the two key tenets of “deep democracy” – savings and sharing – travel across boundaries to reproduce and re-entrench established modes of organizing among the urban poor. As part of “doing” deep democracy across borders, there are annual seminars that Slum-dwellers International (SDI) in collaboration with NSDF travel to different cities in the world. There is a regional seminar for South Asia, and there is a seminar for the Global South. Different cities take their turn to organize. In these seminars knowledge, tactics and strategies are shared. Participants from the Philippines, Thailand, Sri Lanka, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Bangladesh including many other cities participate.

One such meeting was organized in Kathmandu in late February 2012 (picture below). Lumanti, SPOSH, and Mahila Ekata organized the three-day workshop jointly, with members from NSDF and SDI, along with savings and credits groups under Mahila Milan as participants. The majority of the participants are women, and “sharing”, one of the tenets of deep democracy, dominate the discussion in these meetings. The seminar carries an informal tone from start to finish. There are no designated speakers or long drawn-out speeches by chief guests – the hallmarks of workshops and seminars in Nepal. Participants gather around the table in groups – each group representing different cities in South Asia. The stories shared are not national. They are all local, tied to different households in different cities. People discuss the stories of successes mostly. A story of an ideal borrower and how she spent her loan and multiplied her savings in the process. There is another story from a member of a settlement that managed to navigate their way through the bureaucratic maze to elude eviction. Many such stories are shared to foreground experiences and empower imaginaries about the politics of the possible.
Sharing is done verbally with no visual aids, power points or poster display. Anybody in the group can raise their hand to speak. The language of conversation is either Hindi or English because only Nepali participants speak or understand Nepali (while Hindi is understood and spoken by many). During lunch break, I informally questioned Krishna Poudel, chairman of a SPOSH unit committee, about the workshop’s informal nature. He responded, “It is something that Jockin has made clear. He thinks that taking formal turns to speak and using power points, posters, etcetera to tell one’s story makes us look like an NGO.” His response reveals how Arjun Appadurai’s (2002) claim of “horizontal learning” puts a gloss over the ways in which ‘sharing’ – the very cornerstone of “deep democracy” – is itself often orchestrated from the top.

Figure 6: “Sharing”

In informal meetings prior to the days leading up to the seminar, Jockin Arputham, the founder of NSDF and a founding figure of the Alliance, feature regularly in
conversations. Jockin brings with him a political capital to which sukumbasi attach significant hopes and aspiration. Whenever he is in Kathmandu, he holds high profile meetings with government officials – meetings that Lumanti arranges. Sukumbasi leaders holding executive positions in SPOSH and *Mahila Ekata* are invited to attend these meetings. For sukumbasi, the meetings are important because the capital and the international solidarity that Jockin and this team represent can be put on display for the state during such meetings to garner legitimacy and attention. In these meetings, “linkage”, a term that sukumbasi use to refer to their links with the state, is renewed, or new ones formed, as memories of previous meetings are refreshed, and names put to faces. For Moti, member of SPOSH and *Baal Bikas*, it is important to organize events with Lumanti and SDI as the alliance generates prestige. Moti further says, “Government officials do not come to our events if it is just us organizing it and inviting them.” He continues, “but if Lumanti is a joint organizer, they show up, because Lumanti adds prestige to the events” (Interview, April, 2010).

The on-going political time in Nepal has made such linkage with the state more important than ever before. Owing to several rapidly changing political circumstances, some of which I have alluded to in the Introduction, there has been no local election in Nepal since 2002. Since the dissolution of all local governments in Nepal, bureaucratic appointees affiliated with the Ministry of Local Development replace the displaced elected representatives at irregular intervals. As government regimes change, or government employees move to different departments or locations, new relationships have to be forged – linkage has to be renewed. These events afford important spaces and times for establishing and renewing linkages with state representatives. In the absence of a locally elected
government (and local elections), replaced by an ad hoc committee assembled by the central government, such events are the only avenues where the sukumbasi, stripped of a political capital tied to electoral votes, come face-to-face with the state, for building relation with the state. The relationship is not so much built with the state per se, but with various individuals representing different government regimes and multiple political parties at various points in time.

If we have linkage with them (the local and municipal states), then we can easily get government facilities. Otherwise, for accessing the municipal services, we have to present a landownership certificate, or pay more. For example, instead of paying 1,000 rupees, we have to make the initial payment of 5,000 rupees for electricity. But if we have a good linkage, one signature from them can solve all our problems. (Moti Lama, April 2010)

The “formalized” practices of everyday life in the way such practices are in service of producing more functional spaces – physical, institutional, as well as discursive – of livelihood and entrepreneurship is what comes to view when one begins to make inquiries into the “house with three pillars”. These practices are centered mostly on meeting basic service needs that arise from the ritualized practice of everyday life around the needs for water, electricity, and also, equally importantly, financial capital. Unlike propertied residents in the city, who have municipal citizenship rights to access all of the above services, including capital from financial institutions and private banks, what makes formal access to these services “illegal” for sukumbasi is the status of the sukumbasi themselves. As such,
sukumbasi have to find new ways to access these services largely by accumulating a “moral capital” via association with NGOs such as the Lumanti, as well as by performing social citizenship made possible through the enactment of entrepreneurial subjectivity. Over time, these ways of claiming “quiet encroachments” offer vocabularies that are rooted in and that reflect the concrete politics of everyday life, which lend legibility and legitimacy to the demands of the poor.

4. Entangled Everyday Life and Alternative Imaginations

This chapter has broached the right to urban life for the urban poor. It advocates an interpretation of rights that extends beyond political liberalism to encompass a deeper interpretation entailing the right to the city that is rooted in inhabitance. We are concerned with the rights specifically of the economically marginalized and culturally oppressed who constitute the urban majority. The metaphor of "house with three pillars" is indicative of the quest of sukumbasi for a house, both in a material and discursive sense, as a way to claim space and legitimacy. The “formalized” procedure evident in self-organizing and self-management under the organizing logic of “house with three pillars” resonates with how the professionalized world of NGOs and civil society function, in the process, raising questions about the “informal life”. For the politics of “informality” may not always be separate and insular from the formal. In fact, its political efficiency may rely heavily on forming strategic relations with actors or agents that may not have the experience of the lived everyday of “political society”. These actors constantly oscillate between the realms of political society and civil society to make claims on behalf of the poor. In other words, Chatterjee’s (2004) “political society” invites investigating "the entanglement of elite and subaltern politics"
(p.40). However, the point here is not so much to call for an expansion of the horizons of civil society, for example, to encompass the “informal life”. Instead, through recourse to the logic that regulates the practice of the quotidian everyday life in “the slum”, this chapter shows "the entanglement of elite and subaltern politics" (Chatterjee 2004). I have attempted to reveal the entanglement by taking recourse to the practice of everyday life in the way it is invested in the production of space, “formal” life, and subjectivities. In the absence of rights, the basis of claims, are tied to the spaces produced, both material/physical and discursive spaces. These are the spaces of livelihood and entrepreneurship, of negotiation and agreement, and of hopes and aspirations that some scholars claim is “mobilizing alternative geographical imaginations in the creation of political engagement” (MacFarlane, 2004:890). I would like to pick on two key themes that I have alluded to in this section: the elite-subaltern entanglement and mobilization of alternative geographical imaginations. I will comment on these themes towards the end. First, let me share some thoughts on everyday life as it at the center of the entanglement and the imagination.

There is no explicit account of everyday life in the Lefebvrian accounts to address these questions. In terms of locating everyday life on the context of a concrete space and time, it may be found as a critique of the actual lived everyday conveyed through the words of Guy Debord (1962: 23):

Many technologies do, in fact, more or less markedly alter certain aspects of everyday life … telephones, television, music on long-playing records, mass air travel, etc. These developments arise anarchically, by chance, without anyone having foreseen their interrelations or consequences. But there is no denying that, on the whole, this
introduction of technology into everyday life ultimately takes place within the framework of modern bureaucratized capitalism and tends to reduce people’s independence and creativity.

When everyday life is located as a site of transformative potential, it begs some questions – what kind of everyday life and whose everyday life? Going by Debord’s critique, with regards to “what kind of everyday life and whose everyday life”, the answer may not be located in the kind of everyday life committed to commodity consumption. With regards to the ethnographic discussion around the “house of three pillars”, it can be argued that a socialistic mode of everyday life in “the slum” enables the right to the city; this mode of everyday life is necessitated by conditions of precarity. Although I make this argument with a caveat: First, the idealized account of the poor partaking in socialist mode of life is not meant to suggest that the poor are averse to engage in the habits of commodity consumption that Debord alludes to in his critique of everyday life. Nor is it my aim to impute the solidarity amongst the poor with a romance for such practices are rife with conflict, self-interest and ego that mirror those that are found within the formal practices of NGOs and “civil society” that the poor emulate. Rather, my emphasis is on the pragmatics of precarity that prevent the poor from participating in the self-interested acts of commodity consumption and instead push the poor towards collaborating and cooperating with others in relations of community and comradeship. This socialistic mode of everyday life, one might argue, is borne out of the necessity to accumulate “wealth in people” as opposed to merely wealth in things (Ninglekhu and Rankin, forthcoming).
However, a socialistic mode of everyday life in and of itself is not sufficient to forge solidarity towards concrete outputs. As the ethnographic discussion shows, without the elite-subaltern entanglement that is constituted in and through “house with three pillars”, it may not be possible to forge solidarities, networks, and “linkages” with the government, with NGOs, and with squatter communities in other cities in the world. I have described some of such entanglements in this chapter that are central in the making of alternative geographies of imagination. Instead, the entanglements show that informal practices and actors not just overlap with formal practices, but in some cases, they also begin to mirror the formal sphere and formal practices. The replication of the Alliance model in Kathmandu and the role of Lumanti as an indispensible figure in making the replication possible allude to the necessary role of the entanglement in making the “alternative” politics possible.

This claims for the right to the city that is rooted in inhabitance may be considered what McFarlane (2004) calls a mobilization of alternative geographical imaginations – the different ways in which “geographical imaginations become imbued with politics” (p. 894). Through the workings of alternative geographical imaginations, the poor create spaces of political engagement, which are spaces of negotiation with authorities. Spaces of inhabitance and the enactment of subjectivities that inhabiting allow and enable over the years are the containers of enduring politics of citizenship unfolding in the city. They are the working of alternative imaginations producing spaces of engagement for making and remaking claims. The spatiality of sukumbasi politics is central to citizenship formation. It is the centrality of space, the inhabitance of it, in citizenship formation and claims-making that marks a radical departure from the liberal democratic mandate of citizenship which requite ownership of
space; within the latter logic, merely inhabiting without owning is not enough. Inhabitance, as I have shown, provides conditions of possibility for demanding the right to the city. Inhabitance provides stability to everyday life, on which practices of self-organizing take place. Over time, lived spaces as they were transformed allow sukumbasi to take ownership of the spaces occupied, as if they were the rightful owners. However, what happens to the right to the city project when it encounters interventions that disrupt the organized practices of everyday life invested in building the “cosmopolitanism” from below and are informed through the organizing logic of the “house with three pillars”, and in the process, pose threats to the very inhabitation on which the claims for the right to the city are founded. I discuss these questions in detail in the next chapter.
Chapter 3

The Politics of Urgency

1. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I have so far discussed the sukumbasi practice of everyday life that is organized through the metaphorical framework of the “house with three pillars.” SPOSH is the “house” that is being referred to – the central organization with a federated network of sukumbasi communities spread across Nepal. The three “pillars” are: women’s savings and credit cooperatives, a youth network, and an advocacy group for women. Together, they provide financial and political support to SPOSH – help to pay the monthly rent, help organize the “mass” during street protests, and so on. This framework follows a template that is borrowed from Mumbai, India. More specifically, the organizational set up of the sukumbasi movement is framed through and regulated by the principles of “savings” – cooperatives mobilize capital that allows for enacting entrepreneurial subjectivities – and “sharing” of self-organizing capacities and strategies that allows one to navigate around local and municipal laws and bureaucratic red tape. These principles, which work originally developed and instituted through “The Alliance” of NGOs and squatter-led organizations in Mumbai, have, over the years, served as a template on which sukumbasi in Nepal forge a network of solidarity and a method to self-organize. These practices within the sukumbasi are an example of what critical urban scholars, such as Arjun Appadurai, have described as “deep democracy” or “cosmopolitanism from below” (Appadurai, 2002).
“Deep democracy” entails building networks of solidarity horizontally across nationalities, cultures, and languages in cities in the Global South; these networks, in turn, have helped squatters to “deepen” their roots in city (both in Mumbai and Kathmandu) while providing a mechanism for celebrating the agentive capacity displayed through such organizing. Framed by Asef Bayat as the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary”, such practices may also be understood as unspectacular everyday resistance that results in “the silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of ordinary people on the propertied, powerful, or the public, in order to survive and improve their lives” (Bayat, 2010: 56). I have also argued that the demand for the right to the city formed through the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” in Nepal is rooted in the inhabitance of public spaces such as a vacant piece of land – not ownership of private property. But what happens when the patient and “quiet” rituals of everyday life organized through the framework of “house with three pillars,” is disrupted through government-led interventions? And how does the encounter that ensues between everyday life and the interventions influence the right to the city as a project containing aspirational politics and with transformative potential? These questions allude to the colliding competing interests vis-à-vis contested visions for both particular spaces within the city as well as contested visions of what constitutes fair and democratic practices in relation to one’s right to use and appropriate such spaces. Engaging these questions in practice pushes the practices of everyday life of the poor beyond the confines of what Appadurai calls the “politics of patience” – “…politics of accommodation, negotiation, and long-term pressure rather than of confrontation or threats of political reprisal” (Appadurai, 2002:29) – and into the realm of that I would like to call a “politics of urgency” – ad hoc self-organizing that sukumbasi are forced to quickly assemble when “politics of patience” that
requires long term patient engagement cannot be sustained, or is not feasible, against the urgent threat to inhabitance.

In this chapter, I provide an ethnographic account of two government-led interventions that put the inhabitance of sukumbasi under threat, prompting them to forge new strategies of inhabitance and subjectivities for claiming municipal citizenship rights by pushing them beyond the confines of the “politics of patience”. The first is a river restoration project, and the second, a road-widening project. Together, these projects seek to promote norms of private property, bourgeois environmentalism, and elite aesthetics. In response, sukumbasi have “invented” new tactics and strategies of organizing to counter the threats to inhabitance34. I argue that these government-led interventions that push the practices of everyday life into the uncertain terrain of a “politics of urgency” reveal some key insights about the politics of everyday life in relation to the right to the city. First, they reveal the limits of “house with three pillars” that are exposed during the time of the “politics of urgency”. Second, they show how the boundaries of everyday life initially drawn through the organizing logic of “house with three pillars” are redrawn and stretched in new and uncertain directions in the face of urgent political demands. Together, the uncertainties and the outcomes offer new ingredients for imagining the potential and limits of the right to the city as a transformative and an aspirational project.

34 Faranak Miraftab (2004) describes “invented” spaces (of citizenship) as those spaces occupied by the grassroots and claimed through collective action that directly confront the authorities and the status quo. “Invited” spaces contrast with “invented” spaces, in that they are also grassroots-based collective action with NGOs as allies; they are supported and endorsed by donors and the government.
2. River Restoration

I begin this section with a provocation by Partha Chatterjee. In a poignant essay titled “Politics of the Governed,” Partha Chatterjee (2004) asks, “Are the Indian cities becoming bourgeois at last?” In the essay, Chatterjee narrates the demise of the post-Independence cities of the 1950s and 1960s in India. A dense network of neighborhood institutions such as: sports clubs, teashops, community libraries and parks had ensured that there was a prevailing sense of urban community across differences. There were strong unions that provided active links between the middle-class intelligentsia and the slum-dwelling workers. Later, in the 1970s and 1980s, the urban poor’s access to public life in the city was increasingly being negotiated on the terrain of “political society” largely through the “competitive electoral mobilization of the poor” (p.166). The decades after have witnessed cities that are globally connected through financialization of capital and services even as they continue to be locally disconnected to populations that are deemed either surplus or disruptive to the ideals of the post-industrial metropolis.

Chatterjee’s question is equally salient in the context of Kathmandu, especially since the 1990s. Like Chatterjee’s rendition of the post-Industrial cities, Kathmandu’s transformation in the last two decades may be characterized by several factors: “gentrification of state-spaces” (Ghertner, 2011) that favour the propertied residents for accessing municipal services; the vision of “urban gigantism” underwriting direct investments that fund the construction of high-rise buildings and apartments; and the conformity of such transformations to elusive logics such as “aesthetics” (Baviskar, 2003, 2011; Ghertner, 2011; Sassen, 2015). Against these political and policy backdrops, this
chapter examines a government-led river restoration program called the Bagmati Action Plan (BAP). It does so by locating the project at the intersection of two competing domains – the conflating desires of the municipal state and the middle-class and upper-middle class for “the good city” on the one hand, and the urban poor’s struggle for the right to stay put in the city, on the other.

While the metonyms attached to cities of the global south are well rehearsed through the imaginaries attached to terms like the “Third World City,” “Mega City,” or “the Slum” (Roy 2011), Kathmandu has yet to fully be integrated into this global imaginary in the same way as other cities in the global South. Cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore in South Asia are constantly vying to be the next “World City” (Baviskar, 2006; Dupont, 2011; Mehra, 2009). Such aspirations are enabled through their proximity to the global financial capitalism made possible through the rapid growth of Information Technology (IT) in Bangalore, the “Silicon Valley” of South Asia. Or the aspirations gain ascendancy during a “special time” (Gilmartin, 2009) – the time of beautification and branding aimed at claiming the “Global City” status largely during the time of mega sporting events. Baviskar (2006) and Dupont (2011), for example, make a case about the link between the planning of Commonwealth games in 2010 and “World Class” ambition for Delhi among the ruling elites. The utopian ideals that these “special time” events harbor are realized through the erasure of “dirt” and “debris” that do not fit into the hyper-modernist narrative, as scholars have argued in the case of cities everywhere. Likewise, slums in Mumbai have ignited

35 They are a “special time” because even if “marked off from the everyday, they are separate from the everyday, yet transforming the everyday-yet-to-come with their long term legacy of will end up transforming of economic, social and ecological change” (Baviskar 2011: 155).
popular imagination leading to a Hollywood phantasmagoria, such as Slumdog Millionaire – a stereotypically romantic rendition of a heroic escapism of life from “the slum”.

Kathmandu, however, is yet to capture scholarly and popular imaginations in the same way that these cities in the global South do. The city is as peripheral from global circuits of consumption and capital as it is from the global circuits of knowledge and imageries about the Third World City, be it the “World City”, “Mega City,” Or “the Slum”, in whatever other guise – Mike Davis’ dystopia or Slumdog Millionaire’s utopia. BAP is not exclusively driven by the demand of the market or private alliances. While the BAP is partially funded by the Japan Water Agency (JWA) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the funding is still not part of the circuit of capital and ideas that are dictated by the global financial capitalism. As such, it is inappropriate and unhelpful to make a wholesale comparison between the neoliberal projects of city building and the BAP. Yet in its portrayal of the imaginary of the “good city”, BAP takes recourse to creating a field of perception linked to, what might be called “bourgeois environmentalism”, in the same way certain variants of the “World Class” project promotes elite aestheticism. Jacques Ranciere calls it creating a “community of sense”. However, unlike other world-class city projects, the field of perception is yoked not so much to the “fantastic futurism” (Ghertner, 2015), but to the past, to the ancient time in which the river and its banks, as the BAP claims, were the habitus and harbinger of “civilization”.

In a report that describes the BAP plan in detail, there is a specific reference to a rehabilitation of Nanjing-Qinhuai River in China as an example from which to draw inspiration. Citing the apparent success of the rehabilitation project that faced similar
problems that the Bagmati River faces – “illegal squatters”, “filthy environment”, and “contaminated smelly river” – “now, Nanjing-Qinhuai River has become a historical scenic zone, a cultural scenic zone and tourism scenic zone characterizing the ancient civilization of Nanjing” (Government of Nepal, 2008: 5). The reference to “civilization” as one of the logics for rehabilitation of the Bagmati River comes up frequently during interviews with the planners involved in the BAP. But beyond this logic, no other symbolic or material links can be traced to the Nanjing-Qinhuai. The Bagmati water has always been a potent carrier of purity within Nepalese culture and the history of Kathmandu. Traditional waterspouts, rest homes, and temples are found on the banks of the Bagmati. There are “ghats” on which Hindu mortuary rituals are performed. Pointing to these structures and rituals, Mahesh Basnet, now ex-head of the BAP, claims, “The civilization of the city hinged on the river and its purity. Therefore, it is important to protect the river” (Interview February 13 2012). In the nostalgic pursuit of what may be called the “authentic” city, photographs and maps of the river and the riparian landscapes depicting the pristine-looking river are highlighted during meetings, seminars and interviews to advance certain aesthetics necessary to reclaim the authentic city. In the gentrified spaces of public planning meetings, the imagined future for the Bagmati today, is not based on the here and now, the existing conditions of the settlements on the riverbanks. Rather, the future is yoked to “elsewhere” – the “elsewhere” time when Kathmandu was a civilized city, and the “elsewhere” space of Nanjing-Qinhuai.

However, the realization of this politics of aesthetics and authenticity, intended to make the BAP legible, legitimate, and desirable, hinges on the eviction of the poor from the spaces they inhabit. To this end, one necessary tactic the state deployed, as a result, was to
mobilize the discourse of “inauthenticity”. On this note, below, I discuss this politics of aesthetics as it encounters the practices of the urban poor, and reflect on how the poor address the politics to make renewed claims for the right to the city.

2.1 Aesthetics and Authenticity

Politics of environment may be seen as a mode of expressing anxieties of the self in relation to one’s physical surrounding (Baviskar, 2011). Bourgeois environmentalism invokes a middle class pursuit of order, hygiene and sanitation. Baviskar (2003) describes bourgeois environmentalism as an organized force that links upper class concerns around aesthetics, public health, safety, leisure and civic order with environmental concerns. These concerns combine to see, and portray, the urban poor as “the specter of dirt, disease, and crime, a monster threatening the body civic” (p.92). Bourgeois environmentalism, as it is enacted, Baviskar argues, also challenges us to critically investigate the configuration of public sphere that enables the voice of the upper class as legitimate, excluding, in the process, the concerns of the urban poor around the most basic service needs. A similar mode of class politics is evident in Kathmandu when one traces the discursive and political terrain from which the BAP gleans a “moral” authority. I interpret the bourgeois project of environmentalism, which got taken up by the state in the form of the BAP, in terms of such class politics. In the following sections, I discuss the alignment of middle-class aspirations with the ideals of the state insofar as it relates to the BAP, and the modalities of the exclusion of the urban poor that such an alignment would engender. Such modalities of exclusion would raise a pertinent question: How does “the environment” serve as an optic through which poverty and the poor are reframed en route to building the good city?
September 3, 2010, signaled a watershed moment in the Bagmati restoration efforts, with the unveiling of the BAP. Discussion for the plan had begun in 2007 with a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) signed between the United Nation’s Environment Program (UNEP) and the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC). A complete document of the plan was finally developed in December 2009. Madhav Kumar Nepal, prime minister at the time and a prominent leader of Nepal’s United Marxist Leninist (UML) Party, marked the occasion with a jubilant remark: “Just like everyone here, I dream of being able to jog along the Bagmati banks early [in the] morning and breathe fresh air. I urge all to support the government bid of restoring the Bagmati to its original pristine condition” (The Himalayan Times, 29 December 2005).\(^{36}\) He followed the call by declaring the BAP as a project of national priority (The Kathmandu Post, 06 August 2012).\(^{37}\) The following year, in 2010, an implementation committee within the BAP committee was formed, which was curiously named – Bagmati Civilization Integrated Development Committee (BCIDC). Under the plans developed for implementation, the BAP is a five-year project whose goal is to clean up the Bagmati River by installing wastewater treatment plants on the riverbanks, and restoring the river’s aesthetic and cultural values (Government of Nepal, 2008). The project includes a mandatory stipulation that 20 meters on either side of the river be cleared of any occupation and activity for constructing the treatment plants and pipes. Eviction of fourteen settlements, approximately two thousand households, on the banks of the Bagmati and its tributaries was therefore deemed mandatory for implementing the BAP.

\(^{36}\) http://thehimalayantimes.com/kathmandu/pm-nepal-inaugurates-bap/
The plan’s proposed construction takes place along the stretch of the Bagmati riverbank between the northeast and southwest ends of the city. Under BAP, the Kathmandu Valley is divided into five different zones: Natural Conservation Zone I, covering hilly regions surrounding the city; Rural Zone II; Peri-Urban Zone III (areas lying between the rural and urban core); Urban Zone IV (five different municipalities in the Kathmandu Valley); and Downstream Zone V. In the plan, it is mandatory that 20 meters on either side of the river be cleared of any occupation and activity for constructing the treatment plants and pipes. Eviction was deemed mandatory to implementing BAP in the city; specifically, the fourteen settlements on the riverbanks of Urban Zone IV had to be removed. After the river flows past the Ring Road, a road that encircles the city core, BAP enters the contested space of Urban Zone IV over which sukumbasi make competing claims regarding the right to appropriate the space for living and playing. According to the BAP committee, the settlements and the claims of sukumbasi over this space create an “obstacle” to the implementation of BAP. The problem at first is rendered as being purely “technical” – that the settlements sit on parts of the riverbank where wastewater treatment plants have to be constructed. Upon probing “the sukumbasi problem” further, however, Anil Bhadra Khanal, BAP’s vice-chairman and chief engineer, notes, “As an engineer responsible for installing the plan, all I know is that the settlements have to go as they are not only contributing to the river’s degradation of health, but also their own health in the process” (Interview Feb 21 2012). The fourteen settlements fall under the Urban Zone, for which there are four different goals outlined: improve the river quality; improve the riparian landscape; manage the squatter settlements along the riverbanks; and conserve and regenerate tangible and
intangible cultural heritage (Government of Nepal, 2008). In this way, aesthetic and environmental claims of the BAP are conjoined with cultural heritage claim. In seminars and workshops organized to promote the BAP, these claims would gain increasing currency among planners and journalists invited.

*Figure 7: Image of the future Bagmati riverbank as envisioned by the BAP.*
One such event was organized for journalists. A handful of prominent political leaders representing Nepal’s major political parties were invited to the event as speakers. After an opening presentation by one of committee members outlining the BAP’s implementation timeline and its intended targets, the politicians took turns speaking. The common theme running through their speeches was nostalgia for the river that no longer was what it used to be. Every now and then, the “inauthentic” sukumbasi were described as responsible for the river’s degradation, rendering their expulsion from the riverbanks necessary. As her opening remarks at one of the meetings, a top leader of the United Marxist Leninist Party (UML) revisited her experience of the Bagmati from almost a decade ago. She had visited the Bagmati River to pay tribute to her dead husband, who had also been a prominent UML leader. As part of the ritual, she had dipped her hands into the river to pocket a cupful of water. The speech recounted how she let the water rest in her palms momentarily, and then let it slip through her fingers as she said prayers for the departed. Returning home that day, she could smell something but wasn’t sure where the smell was coming from – from herself or her surroundings. This smell lasted for a few days. It was only later that she realized she had been walking around with a pair of stinky hands, still carrying the stench from the Bagmati water. She lamented the loss of “purity” of the river. A follow-up speaker later endorsed BAP by referring to the stinky pair of hands of the UML leader: “As long as the river is not clean, just like the fellow speaker’s hands, the civilization of this city, too, shall always stink.” The anecdote presents water as a potent carrier of “purity.” The reference to “purity” serves the purpose of combining threats to religious practices with threats to the city, home, body and the nation – “civilization” being the overriding theme. In posing threats to the “purity” of the river, and by extension, “civilization” of the riverbanks,
it was implied that sukumbasi were more than just a “technical obstacle” settled on the riverbank; the bank not so much “land” as the river’s “right of way.”

This is not the first time that the sukumbasi have been targeted as incongruous with a harmonious city. The state’s prior attempts to clean up the river and the riparian landscape have similarly entailed portrayals of sukumbasi as ‘dirt’ and ‘danger’. Anne Rademacher (2008) develops an example in her account of restoration of the Bagmati; in the immediate aftermath of the state of emergency in late 2001, during the time when the People’s War was at its peak, sukumbasi were portrayed by the state as a “security concern.” The sukumbasi settlements on the riverbanks, the state feared, were “a relatively uncontrolled space where rural dissent and rebellion might assemble and take refuge in the city” (Rademacher, 2011: 520). Relocating a sukumbasi settlement to the outskirts of the city is therefore further marginalizing sukumbasi to theoretically limit the potential of class-based uprisings in the city. Contemporary, state-led environmental interventions, therefore, have to be understood in the broader context of the People’s War as well as a long-term popular understanding of sukumbasi as “dirt” and “eye soar.” Further, official documents indicate that what sukumbasi claimed as land was not “land” per se, but the Bagmati’s riverbed. It was so because channelization of flow from harvesting of sand had reduced the water level, and prevented the Bagmati River and its tributaries from flowing at their previous levels for many years. Dams built in response as restoration schemes for re-submerging exposed sand flats would trap sediment during the annual monsoon and thereby raise riverbed levels. The raised riverbed, according to the planning documents, was claimed by sukumbasi for encroachment. “Sukumbasi were thereby considered obstacles to restoring that flow, having claimed river
territory as land in a way that was inconsistent with perceived ecological order. Their land claims were rendered illegitimate in urban environmental terms as they were in legal terms”, claims Rademacher (2008). Maintaining water flow, however, is crucial to the environment as much as it is to “culture” – which the BAP committee frames through the discourse of “civilization.” “It (restoration) is not just about the river. It is also about religious and cultural heritages that lie on the riverbanks. These are structures that ensure sustenance of our cultural and religious practices, which are tied to civilization. Our festivals and mortuary rituals that we perform on the river needs water flow. To ensure that the festivals and rituals continue to exist, we need to make sure that the river continues to flow”, claims Anil Bhadra. The particular strategy of enmeshing culture and morality with the environment in attempts at river restoration has a long tradition that has relied on “othering” migrants as people without the ability of understanding the river’s culture.

These claims of environmental health in relation to cultural practices seek legitimacy with recourse to nostalgia for a civilized Kathmandu and, subsequently, which is intended to cultivate a desire to restore civilization by renovating traditional infrastructures along the riverbanks. When I questioned Mahesh Basnet, the BCIDC chair at the time, about what “civilization” indicated, he said: “[the] Bagmati carries not just the river’s civilization, but civilization of the entire city. Therefore, to revive the city’s civilization, it is important that we bring back our traditional structures like water-spouts, temples, and so on” (Interview February 13 2012). Restoring structures on the riverbanks to revive civilization has functional as well as aesthetic values. Clean and green riverbanks also generally add quality to the experience of urban life as the public space of riverbanks fulfills myriad social, cultural
and religious functions. But when deployed as a discursive tool, as it is during meetings like
the one discussed above, “civilization” becomes a potent weapon to delegitimize the poor.
Within this politics of “civilization”, there is a coalescing of the state and middle class
interests around the discourses of “civilization” and “inauthenticity” to endorse the project of
environmentalism.

2.2 The Authentic City

Hutta Ram Baidya is a Kathmandu native who comes from a middle class family. An
engineer by profession, he has earned a moniker for himself as “Bagmati Baa” or “the
Bagmati father” – a tribute to the lifelong dedication to saving the Bagmati. A native of
Kathmandu, after working independently for several decades to clean up the Bagmati River,
he has now retired from the activism that gave him the moniker of “The Bagmati father”. For
all the recognition that is granted to him as an environmental activist, the river has little to
show for Hutta’s lifelong dedication. The section of the river that flows through the heart of
the city looks like an open sewer. When I went to see Hutta in his residence, my hope of
speaking with him at length about his Bagmati restoration efforts were momentarily dashed.
His opening was rather dismissive, “So you want to know about the Bagmati? What do you
want to do with it? There is nothing to know.” He then lifted himself up and walked away
from the patio overlooking the busy street and returned to his bedroom, leaving me puzzled
and waiting. A pungent smell coming from the nearby Tukuche – one of the Bagmati’s
tributaries – did little to allay my confusion.
A few seconds later, from inside his room, Hutta raised his coarse voice instructing me to come inside his bedroom. Excited, I stepped into his room. He gestured with his right hand that I sit on the chair next to him, while his left hand played with the mouse, frantically moving the cursor up and down on his desktop screen. He then turned to me, feigned a wry smile and asked, in a hopeful tone, if I would be able to read an email from his son in the United States. He said he couldn’t, “the eyes hurt.” After I hesitantly read the email, he pointed to a corner of the room. There were three old suitcases, one on top of the other. He then asked me to fetch him the one in the middle, place it on the bed next to the computer, and open it. As I followed his instructions, I kept asking myself what all of this meant, until I opened the suitcase. There was a pile of documents: newspaper cut-outs, old photos, certificates – all of them related to the Bagmati River. Most of them in black and white, the newspaper cut-outs and photos depicting the Bagmati of yore: the river robust and the riverbanks devoid of settlements. He picked one from the pile, a picture that he took of the UN Park, built by the Ministry of Environment and Population in the 1990s to commemorate the 50th-year anniversary of the UN’s presence in Nepal. It was also an initiative by the Ministry to protect the riparian environment by prohibiting the riverbank from encroachment and preventing pollution. On top of the main entrance of the park lay a signboard that read, “Managed by Nepal Engineers’ Wives Society.” Through the thickness of the lens of his eyeglasses, Hutta Ram stared at me as he put a firm grip on his tone, “Why are the wives of the engineers involved in managing the park?” The river cannot speak; therefore Hutta Ram speaks on its behalf, in the process abstracting “nature,” or the river, from its social entanglement and ontologically according it a “culture” of its own that has eroded after being in contact with “development.” As one walks past the gate and across the park to the other
end of the park, there is an embankment made of concrete walls. Referring to the embankment, Hutta Ram asked,

“Why regulate the flow of the river? Are we supposed to clean up the riverbank by building parks and dams, or do we first try to understand what Bagmati’s heart desires and follow accordingly. Who are we to control nature? How can we say we are protecting her when we are regulating her?”

Hutta Ram insinuates that the UN Park is a case of “development” disrupting the river’s natural state.

“It is impossible to clean the Bagmati just by spending millions. There is no need to murder the river’s culture in the name of development. Development is not good when there is no consideration for nature and culture.”

Across the river, at the opposite end of UN Park, there is a sukumbasi settlement called Paurakhi Basti. It is not very far from Hutta Ram’s house. Therefore, from the confines of his windowless bedroom, when he lets out an invective – in defense of the Bagmati – by pointing at one of the walls of his bedroom, it means that he is talking about Paurakhi Basti and other such settlements on the riverbank that are to be blamed, just like the state is to be blamed, for ruining the river. “They (the sukumbasi) are the culprits that disrespected Bagmati’s culture. They encroach because the government is too weak to do anything about it. Because they find the government weak, they then started making
demands.” He continues, “Why demand land? Why not other necessities of life? What about employment?” After pausing briefly, he bemoans, “The Bagmati was not always this bad.”

Before 1951, migrants to the city needed official permission from the state to enter Kathmandu. With the advent of the first democratic era in 1951, the government removed the requirement. Citizens were free to enter the city without any paperwork. According to Hutta Ram, it was after that time that migrants, mostly from the Terai region bordering the Indian plains in Western and Eastern Nepal, started settling on the riverbanks.

Those who came early on were hard working people. Even if they lived on the riverbanks, they worked hard to make a living, and would later move elsewhere. It was those who followed the early migrants that would never leave. They have remained on the riverbank ever since. These people [the sukumbasi] do not know about the river’s culture because they are not from Kathmandu. They do not care. (Interview, 12 March, 2012)

In drawing a marker of difference between the knowledge bearers, the natives of Kathmandu and the “outsiders,” Hutta Ram shows antipathy towards sukumbasi. The former abstract the environment from its social integuments in order to preserve it, while the latter groups’ lives are embedded in the environment. The objectification of nature, the river, as something with a culture of its own, is lent further credibility via subjection of sukumbasi as polluters of “culture.” “I think sukumbasi are lazy people. They are not sukumbasi really.
They come to government functions on motorbikes and are dressed rather expensively in jewelry and such,” Hutta Ram concludes.\textsuperscript{38}

Hutta Ram passed away in December 2013; he has left behind his imprints on the ongoing restoration efforts led by social groups as well as the state. He is credited with coining the term “Bagmati Civilization,” which articulates a desire to restore the city’s civilization through restoration of the Bagmati River. “Civilization” continues to be an enduring “environmental” theme in citizen-led environmental activism for river restoration. Making “civilization” central to the project of the “environment” would allow for making the environment also about people – albeit as polluters of the river’s culture. “Civilization,” in such a sense, is indeed about restoring old temples and traditional taps, as is officially invoked. Additionally, it is also about restoring the “culture” (of the river) by getting rid of the polluters. As a result, citizen-led efforts to “Save the Bagmati,” which have subsequently taken inspiration from Hutta Ram’s activism, have continued to form cleavages among inhabitants in the city – specifically between “protectors” and “polluters.”

“It was Hutta Ram who made the government realize that preserving the Bagmati was not just about restoring the health of the river water but also about restoring civilization,” says Megh Ale, president of the Friends of Bagmati (FoB). FoB is an NGO committed to the goal of restoring the Bagmati’s environment. While it is not clear from their website what “environment” means, it is evident that restoring it implies addressing more than just the

\textsuperscript{38} This comment echoes a general angst that widely circulates among elites, about how low castes, the poor, marginalized ethnic groups and other marginalized groups in Nepal could accrue wealth and opportunity that traditionally was limited to high caste elites.
water quality. The organization laments the loss of “purity” and “integrity” of the “scared” river, and it is committed to saving the Bagmati’s “cultural, natural and heritage significance from pollution and other threats.” One of the flagship events of the Friends of Bagmati is an annual festival called the Bagmati River Festival. Over the course of the day, the event turns into a spectacle for the public. Public officials, political party leaders, NGO representatives, and media personnel are all invited to the event as “stakeholders.” Together they participate in the river-rafting trip that wades through the middle of the city—a spectacle designed to catch the public eye. It is monsoon; therefore the river has enough volume to carry the raft, unlike during the rest of the year when it is reduced to a trickle. The following day and for a few days after, news dailies are awash with coverage of the festival events.

As the impact of the spectacle subsides, its side effects begin to show. For the urban poor or sukumbasi who were not invited, the one-day river festival is a special time in which they are made to feel as outsiders. “We think it is not fair that we are not included in organizing the river festival. They call all the stakeholders to help in organizing the event and attend. I do not know how we are not stakeholders when we live on the banks of the river,” bemoans Dhana Lama (Interview, 12 January, 2012), one of the prominent leaders of the sukumbasi movement in Nepal. Ghertner (2010) contends that in the absence of maps, statistics, and documents, the raw materials that legitimizes rule, and on which rule is founded, aesthetics serve as a governing logic for doing development. The politics of aesthetics is one of the central logics of the BAP. Aesthetics becomes a political site around which state and middle and upper-middle class interests coalesce as a force, a force of bourgeois environmentalism that puts under threat structures and people that are deemed to
potentially disrupt the making of the order of aesthetics. The environmental and ecological practices led by the upper class in collaboration with different state bodies, actively and passively, therefore seek to draw the lines between migrants and the natives of Kathmandu; between those who belonged to the city and the river versus those who did not; between those who knew the “culture” of the river and those who do not. Throughout the politics of aesthetics, what is apparent is not the pitting of “nature” against “civilization”. Instead, what is made visible is the coalescing of nature with civilization to create a “natural civilization” to be reclaimed through the BAP – the reclaiming of the authentic city. What is it about the urban environment that selectively allows only the upper and middle-class citizens to make claims about matters of public interest? Why are the “public,” and their other variants such as the “Friends of Bagmati” so exclusively defined that it would leave out the urban poor?

2.3 The Inauthentic Sukumbasi

It is a commonly held belief among members of the BAP committee that a majority of the sukumbasi populations in the city are “inauthentic” because “they own land – if not in the city then elsewhere” (Mahesh Bahadur Basnet, Interview, 12 February, 2012). Basnet, the ex-chairman of the BAP committee, further claimed, “I live next to the Buddha Nagar settlement.”[^39] I have lived there for many years now and know many sukumbasi people there very well. I can say for sure that many I know have land either in Kathmandu or elsewhere. I don’t really know of any Nepali that are landless.[^40] Under the logic of ascribing “poverty”

[^39]: Buddha Nagar is the oldest settlement in the city. Its origin, according to a survey, dates back to the 1970s.
[^40]: No one including sukumbasi or Lumanti, who work with them, disagree that there are landowning sukumbasi either in Kathmandu or elsewhere. However, the land owned elsewhere is uninhabitable for several reasons. For example, it is in a remote area without
to place and people, these two categories are often conflated and used interchangeably, i.e., there is tendency to use “poverty of place” interchangeably with “poverty of people” (Gilbert 2007). The dwellers (people) have to represent the dwelling (place) – normally a decrepit shack – in their appearance for them to be counted as real, or authentic. In other words, one has to look like a sukumbasi to be one. Therefore, a common expression that pervades middle-class conversations about sukumbasi in the city is: “How can they be sukumbasi when they are so well-dressed and ride motorbikes?” In other words, they have to look like “matter out of place”, to use Mary Douglas’ (1966) metaphor of “dirt” as a conceptual frame. In the case of sukumbasi, planners at the BAP use the optics of “slum” as a figurative reference to gauge the “purity” (as an “authentic” figure) of the sukumbasi identity.

In 2007, the Department of Urban Development and Building Construction (DUDBC) published a seven-page document proposing a resettlement plan for “authentic” sukumbasi settlements on the riverbank in Kathmandu. The Action Plan outlined five categories for identifying “authentic” sukumbasi:

- A letter signed by the local government that determines one’s residence on the public land for a number of years (does not specify for exactly how long)
- The resident has formal access to basic services such as land and electricity

access to services. Additionally, in the last five years, there has been a notable increase in the number and size of loans borrowed from cooperatives for purchasing land in the city. Lajana Manandhar, who works closely with the cooperatives, claims that sukumbasi purchasing land in the city own the land but cannot afford to build a house. The bigger question is, as Manandhar suggests, how do we address housing and shelter as poverty moves from the countryside to the city – from the rural to the urban (see also Rademacher 2008)?
- If the sukumbasi is paying land or residence tax to the government, proof of the payment
- A letter from a concerned authority or organization confirming the residence
- A letter that serves as evidence that the sukumbasi has no landownership anywhere in Nepal.

During the time of anti-eviction campaign, however, the government no longer deemed these categories necessary, or valid. Instead, a one-page document was considered enough to determine sukumbasi authenticity. DUDBC printed several copies of this document and left them in the their mailbox for sukumbasi to pick up, fill in, and submit back for assessment. A few in the settlements obliged and filled out the form out of fear of being forcefully evicted and without any compensation. But a majority of sukumbasi felt that the government’s efforts to ascertain the “authentic” sukumbasi were inappropriate and dubious. Importantly, many alleged that the form was simply a government strategy to weaken sukumbasi solidarity. According to the government, households that were identified as “authentic sukumbasi” would be provided with a resettlement site, which would include a rental unit and a compensation package of 15,000 rupees per month for three months. After three months, it was unclear how the resettlement plan would work. As for those determined to be “inauthentic”, they would have to leave or face the prospect of eviction, without a guarantee of alternative settlement from the state.

Starting September 2011, Nepal’s Home Ministry and subsequently DUDBC started issuing eviction notice to the riverbank settlements via different news dailies on a regular
basis. In response, sukumbasi filed a case in the appellate court challenging the validity of the order by referring to an earlier case that had played out in 2001. That year, under Kathmandu’s then mayor, Keshav Sthapit, the municipality had signed an agreement with SPOSH that in principle provided amnesty to sukumbasi from eviction. The agreement was signed between Society of Preservation of Shelter and Habitat-Nepal, Society of Women’s Unity-Nepal, two main organizations led by Lumanti, an NGO based in Kathmandu that works with sukumbasi organizations, and the Kathmandu Municipality. First, the appellate court had issued a 35-day stay-order to the plaintiffs, the sukumbasi. Ten years later in 2011, the Supreme Court of Nepal issued a ruling in favour of the government’s notice of eviction after rendering the agreement as having no legal mandate to protect sukumbasi from eviction. The involvement of the court in such processes has continued to take place in the promotion and implementation of BAP.

2.4 Inhabiting inauthenticity

Ananya Roy (2009: 160) describes “civic governmentality” as neither top-down nor bottom-up, but rather as a “dialectical movement between insurgency and institutionalization.” In response to the allegation of inauthenticity, one of the tactics that sukumbasi deployed against eviction was to acquiesce to that allegation. Borrowing from Ananya Roy’s framework of “civic governmentality”, I see the acquiescence to inauthenticity neither as “governmentality from below”, as Arjun Appadurai would suggest, nor “counter-governmentality”. Rather, the acquiescence may be seen as a technique of civic governmentality that relied on three key devices: a self-enumeration that was conducted in 2008 by SPOSH jointly with Lumanti; a biometric survey tool that was introduced during an
annual seminar in late 2012; and another self-enumeration survey that was conducted in 2014 in collaboration with Social Science Baha, a research institution in Nepal.

In 2008, SPOSH conducted their first self-enumeration survey. This was done for its own identification purposes, as many sukumbasi did not have citizenship certificates at that time. Enumerators from SPOSH visited sukumbasi settlements to survey household conditions, household size, and the demographic composition of families in the settlements. All family members were asked to stand in front of their house to have their photo taken and the enumerator would assign the house a number. Family IDs issued thenceforth would contain the person’s name, age, sex, as well as household number and length of stay in the settlement. Issuing the ID cards also meant that sukumbasi communities would have their information formally recorded and archived by SPOSH. During the same year, SPOSH decided that they would no longer issue any Family ID cards for new settlers or migrants claiming to be sukumbasi. This effectively meant that the newer sukumbasi would not be allowed to build houses in the older settlements, nor would they be able to access the different municipal citizenship rights the “older” sukumbasi had access to. In the previous chapter, I have discussed the connection between Family ID and citizenship as such: The Family ID confirms that the cardholder is a member of SPOSH and as such, a “legitimate” inhabitant of a sukumbasi settlement in the city. Family ID, that some sukumbasi activist-leaders call, “Green Paper”, a SPOSH-issued counterpoint to the government-issued “Red Paper” (the landownership certificate has a red cover), replaces the “Red Paper” for obtaining recommendation letters for the local ward office that are necessary for accessing water, electricity, compensation for government-induced damages, such as loss of property during
road widening, and more importantly, for obtaining citizenship. When I asked Hukum Bahadur Lama, ex-president and one of the founders of SPOSH, why they no longer distributed Family IDs, he seemed to evade the question and suggested that the call was made to enable them to manage the sukumbasi movement more effectively. A larger number of sukumbasi, he explained, would mean a larger number of issues that must be deal with. Whatever the rationale was to stop issuing the Family IDs, the consequence of the decision, over time, was that it became harder for newer migrants without property, or the ability to rent one in the city, to claim formal citizenship rights, landownership, or inhabitance.

Basanta Jaisi, one of the leaders of SPOSH and someone considered “authentic”, alludes to the distinction between ID holders and those who didn’t hold IDs with respect to claims to authenticity:

SPOSH-affiliated settlements have citizenship cards and birth certificates. We are not from the settlements where the majority of residents are the members of All Nepal Proletariat Association (ANPA).\textsuperscript{41} In those settlement, there are sukumbasi, \textit{hukumbasi} and \textit{dalal}.\textsuperscript{42} We have never said that we are all authentic. But the government has rolled us all into one…the government does not listen to us. Instead of proposing scientific and justice-based solutions as we have proposed, the government wants us all to move from our homes. They just want to get rid of the headache. (Interview, 28 October, 2012)

\textsuperscript{41} ANPA is a breakaway group that was formed after it split from SPOSH-Nepal. It is registered as a political wing of the Maoist Party of Nepal-Revolutionary.
\textsuperscript{42} Hukumbasi is a term that is used derogatorily to denote landowning sukumbasi; dalal is a derogatory term for a land broker.
The “justice-based” and “scientific” solution that Jaisi mentioned is the one proposed by SPOSH to the government. All the “authentic” sukumbasi fall under category A. They own up to five *ropani* of land, but in a remote area that is infertile and un-farmable. Therefore, the family is in the city but with no employment guarantee. Under category B, there are families with similar landholding, but they have a year-round employment guarantee and they also have kids. They cannot go back to their village with the kids. Under category C are families that own a home and land elsewhere. Property ownership ensures that they have liveable conditions. They move to Kathmandu for employment and education and later get married and have kids. However, Jaisi contends that families belonging to category C have the option of moving back to their hometown and surviving because there are material conditions already in place. Under category D are the families or individuals who claim to be sukumbasi and live in the settlements after renting out their private property.

After outlining these categories – which he claims are “scientific” because they take into account soil fertility, land holdings, and household needs for education and employment – Jaisi declared that families under category A should be eligible to legally own the land they currently inhabit free of cost; category B families are also eligible to own the land for free because the families have spent decades in making it “fertile and liveable” and have imbued it with “culture.” In return, the state would be able to claim ownership of the families’ landholdings elsewhere. Families under Category C can also own the land they currently occupy, but only after paying the fees and taxes agreed upon with the state. Finally, those in category D should pay higher fees; if not, they should leave the settlement.

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43 In Nepal, land area is measured in *ropani* (1 *ropani* equals 5476 sq. ft.)
Jaisi signals a concession that there are *in fact* inauthentic sukumbasi; this concession, in turn, opens up political possibilities for authentic sukumbasi residents, leaders and activists to collaborate with the government. Leaders like Jaisi seemed prepared to engage the state-produced discourse of “inauthenticity” in the hope of forging a working collaboration with the state. A three-day annual conference organized by SPOSН that took place during the time of the anti-eviction campaign was an opportune time for sukumbasi to mobilize “inauthenticity” from the discursive field over to the field of practice via enacting, what might be considered, a “scientific” subjectivity to add credibility to their demand. January 2012 in Kathmandu, however, was not a “normal” time in the settlements. It was a time when the “politics of patience”, as described earlier in the chapter, was beginning to make way for a “politics of urgency” amidst the specter of eviction that loomed large. Therefore, the conference, for the most part, focused on the modalities of the anti-eviction campaign. It was during the discussion that a new quantitative measurement technique was introduced. The survey tool, in theory, would replace the one-page form (discussed in the previous section) that the government demanded sukumbasi fill out to find “inauthentic” sukumbasi in the settlements. In contrast, this tool was more reliable as was deemed to be more “scientific”.

On the second day of the workshop, we all went to a settlement on the southwest end of the city, where the survey tool would be tested. All seemed to radiate excitement at the prospect of incorporating a scientific technology that was believed to add credibility to the demands upon the state. Members from SDI, or Slum Dwellers International, Lumanti, and SPOSН-Nepal were huddled around a teashop. A few curious local residents of the settlement surrounded them. A few others, choosing to remain inside their homes, looked out
their window from time to time without knowing what to expect from the sudden arrive of people carrying a laptop, attached to which was a device that was part of the survey tool. After taking a picture and collecting fingerprints from individual household members, the biometric survey software would digitally overlay the householder’s headshot, fingerprints, and the number on the front door of the person’s house into a digital database. The number, as discussed earlier, would have been issued during the self-survey conducted by SPOS. In theory, such a system would prevent sukumbasi householders from renting or selling their homes amongst one another. Basanta Jaisi explained the survey too as such:

The biometric survey helps to identify sukumbasi along with their settlement and house number. Having that scientific information will make it easier for the government to locate sukumbasi in the city. Right now the survey is at an experimental phase. People from India are doing it. But some of us will learn how to use it soon. We want to show the results of the experiment to Mahesh Bahadur Basnet.44

44 Mahesh Bahadur Basnet was the chairman of BAP during the time of the fieldwork in 2012. His term ended in 2013.
For Jaisi, the hope he expressed was not so much in the survey itself, or its efficacy, because no one was really clear how the tool would be able to distinguish the authentic from the inauthentic sukumbasi. Rather, the investment in the “scientific technology” was a political move that would help create a social field of possibility, indicating the will of sukumbasi, the *authentic* sukumbasi, to collaborate with the state.

More recently in 2014, SPOSHP Nepal spearheaded a joint-project with Social Science Baha to create digital maps of the settlements in the city. A research team comprising members of Social Science Baha, SPOSHP Nepal, and Child Development Youth Network, an organization led by sukumbasi youth in Kathmandu, finished conducting the survey in 2014. Social Science Baha trained the researchers and provided them necessary research tools such as GPS machines. “When we google Kathmandu, our settlements are not mapped. We are
invisible. The long term goal of this survey is to make ourselves visible through google,” says Smita, one of the sukumbasi leaders, and member of SPOSH-Nepal. The mapping project, however, also has a tendency to re-inscribe the cleavage among sukumbasi. Smita further claims, “Once we have the map, it is easier for us to manage the settlements. In that, we can prevent addition of new households to the existing settlements, which is important for staying away from the accusation of ‘inauthenticity’.” What also becomes “visible” in this project is the means of reproduction of authenticity/inauthenticity discourse, as well as the privileging of “time” as a maker and logic of authenticity – that there is a cut-off mark regarding claims over authenticity. The prevention of “new additions” indicates that there are and there will be sukumbasi who will not be eligible for making claims as the “authentic” sukumbasi though the logic framed by SPOSH because many of the new migrants in the city continue to turn into sukumbasi. In Kathmandu, these groups are among the sukumbasi who have a relatively more recent history of settlement in the city, and as a result, do not share as strong a “linkage” with the local and municipal states as the older ones do – those, let’s also say, without enough political and symbolic capital to weather the storm of eviction. Equally importantly, one may argue, digital maps and biometric procedures conducted through the deployment of technologies such as laptops, cameras, and GPS systems, are a project of visibility that speaks to a certain idea of sensoriality that has a tendency to aestheticize the politics of the poor in the process. This kind of aestheticization of politics led by the sukumbasi is necessary to keep open the field of possibility for collaborating with the state.

The politics of aesthetics as it is deployed portray the poor and poverty through the frame of what Ghertner (2015) calls “codes of civility and appearance” (p.14). Meaning, if
the urban poor, or sukumbasi, appear like they can afford to follow these codes, they are automatically “inauthentic”. They have to “look” poor; a logic that Ananya Roy calls “aestheticization of poverty”, which alludes to the reduction of relationship between the viewers and viewed to one of “aesthetics rather than politics” (Roy, 2004). The use of the different devices to strategically inhabit the state’s claims of “inauthenticity” enable sukumbasi to enact a scientific subjectivity with the hope that such a move would help create governable space that could be co-inhabited with the state. In other words, through the adoption of the biometric survey tool, sukumbasi, those organizing and participating in the seminar, were willing to accept the fictitious authentic/inauthentic dichotomy in order to be able to work collaboratively with the government. This may be considered the sukumbasi’s attempt at “investing their collective identity with a moral content of a community” (Chatterjee, 2004: 57), whereby, a certain politics of aesthetics begins to take shape in the form of digital maps and photographs. The adoption of biometric survey tools and the selfenumeration survey result indicate that the urban poor are not just passive recipients of instruments of governmentality imposed on them from above. Rather, these tools are actively utilized on “scientific” grounds, to engage with the state’s tools but on their own terms.

In this section, I have discussed two key ideas, aesthetics and authenticity, which coalesce to frame the environment along with the poor. To recall, certain imagery of aesthetics was conjured to cater to the middle-class sensibilities. The content of the politics of aesthetics, the riparian aesthetics, was to be reclaimed via revival of “civilization” and restoration of the river’s purity. In the process, poor and poverty are reframed through similar logic of aesthetics as the riparian environment. Gautam Bhan adds to this problematic by
arguing, “thus reduced, evictions and resettlement become not tales of destruction of individual people’s lives and livelihoods, but simply the erasure of an image of a slum, emptied of the people who live within it” (Bhan, 2009:140). But politics of aesthetics and authenticity, as deployed, become not just tales of erasure of livelihood and lifestyle. There is more to it. Poor people are not merely passive recipients of the politics of aesthetics deployed by the state or other powerful actors. Instead, they devise ways to inhabit the state-produced discourse of inauthenticity and turn it on its head to propose newer strategic ways to address the problematic posed by the authorities. As such, the acquiescence to allegations of “inauthenticity” may be seen as inclusionary as it may encourage (some) collaboration with the state. However, the strategy of gaining state legitimacy reproduces the discourse of authentic and inauthentic, without transcending the ideology and politics that produce such a discourse in the first place. Crucially, sukumbasi acquiescence produces new class cleavages among sukumbasi while also re-inscribing older ones. The problem with this strategy is that although this may help to achieve participation in the planning process for some sukumbasi households, it does so at the expense of a collaborative mode of engagement among wider sukumbasi communities. Adopting the state’s frames to distinguish between “authentic” and “inauthentic” sukumbasi, the movement’s leadership produces class cleavages among sukumbasi – between those who were alleged to be “landed” and those given a “landless” designation. Finally, the relational co-constitution of bourgeois environmentalism -- that aspires to produce the authentic city -- with the politics of the poor, ends up steering the politics of the poor into the realm of aesthetics, and in the process, creates a rupture amongst the poor, not just on terms of authenticities, but also on terms of aesthetics.
In the next section, I turn to another case study involving a road extension project. Like the river restoration project, the road-widening project is state-led, which puts sukumbasi in a similarly uncertain terrain. What follows is a creative ad-hoc self-organizing that leads to an outcome different to the case just discussed. Unlike the organizing in response to the river restoration project, the organizing in Acharya Tole was successful to securing their demands – the right to stay put and the right to compensation for the loss of property.

3. Road Extension

In 2011, a citywide road extension program had started getting major momentum under the leadership of Baburam Bhattarai, ex leader of the Maoist party (give proper name?) and then current prime minister of Nepal. The Public Road Act of 1977 was identified as the legal basis through which the extension plan was to be implemented mostly through the demolition of private properties. The Act mandated that the government could use eminent domain to demolish private homes that were deemed to have encroached upon the road’s right of way; the Act exempted the government from providing compensation to property owners. However, the promulgation of a new constitution in 1990 required the government to compensate for any private property acquired for public purposes. After much deliberation, the government agreed that only those properties that encroached upon the road’s right of way and were built after 1990 would be demolished. When the demolition of private properties finally began, there were numerous protests from the properties’ residents in the city with demands for compensation. Based on an ethnographic case study, this section takes account of one such protest for claiming compensation, led, albeit, not by propertied
residents, but by sukumbasi – those deemed to be landless in the city and as such, without the right to compensation.

3.1 The Politics of Claiming Compensation

Acharya Tole is a sukumbasi settlement in Kathmandu, located between two middle-class neighbourhoods – Gaurighat to the east and Boudhadhwar to the west. There are around 300 households on the Gaurighat-Acharya Tole-Boudhadhwar stretch, twelve of which are sukumbasi households. A majority of the 300 houses, and all of the twelve houses in Acharya Tole, were partially demolished to make way for a municipal road-widening project in late 2013. Subsequently, the twelve households were successful in claiming compensation from the government for the expropriation of their homes. The sukumbasi residents and activists from Acharya Tole hailed the compensation as a victory. This victory was unprecedented because, historically, the state has always acted with impunity to displace and dispossess the sukumbasi from their space of residence – to make way for road widening, environmental rehabilitation, or simply, for controlling nuisance and “threat”. In the following sections, I discuss the organizing undertaken by the residents of Acharya Tole that was mostly located on an uncertain terrain. The organizing framework of “house with three pillars” underlined by “deep democracy” could no longer be sustained because there was no time for patient politics. Everything had to move fast. Devoid of any coherent logic that would inform organizing, such as the “house with three pillars”, this ad-hoc organizing was at times tactical and proactive, while at other times, it was arbitrary and reactive. This was another kind of “politics of urgency” in action.
This case study tells a story of how the legacy of socialized modes of everyday life in Acharya Tole came to underwrite a somewhat haphazard but, nonetheless, effective resistance to encroachments on sukumbasi’s right to the city. The resistance in turn set a major precedent in municipal bureaucratic practice that could contribute to a wider urban revolution oriented to securing citizenship rights and associated rights to inhabitance. In response to a citywide road expansion project, a committee comprising the residents of all three neighbourhoods was formed in the summer of 2014. The Gaurighat-Boudhadhwar Committee was the first of its kind in the city – a collective that transcended the class cleavage between the property-less and property-owning middle-class residents. The committee (referred to as the residents’ association, or just association) formed around a collective demand that inhabitants be compensated by the municipal government should their houses, or some portion of their houses, be expropriated for the purpose of widening roads in the congested city. In making this demand, the residents’ association made no distinction between property owners and the property-less. The backstory behind how the association came to be formed and came to its collective stance is critical for understanding the connection between everyday life and urban revolution (Ninglekhu and Rankin, forthcoming).

3.2 Specters of Violence

In order to make way, literally and metaphorically, for Kathmandu’s newly executed road widening efforts, Acharya Tole residents found themselves subject to, in December 2013, a non-negotiable notice that these efforts were underway and the road that their houses, or portions of their houses occupied, would be widened by an additional 3 meters. Citizens were
understandably stricken with fear and alarm given the weight of this notice and its implications. Their homes would need to be moved, otherwise decidedly destroyed. Panic emanated from the sukumbasi despite the fact the road widening efforts had been underway for several months at this juncture and should not have been a complete surprise. “Our homes do not have wheels to be taken with us”, said one resident (Interview, July 15, 2015). The efforts had been underway for months at this point – homes, sidewalks, plant-filled road dividers, and other structures that blocked these efforts, with the exception of temples, were ordered to move or be removed. The goal of the road extension project was to create 11-metre wide standard roads for all major roads within the city. This notice was issued by the Kathmandu Valley Town Development Commission (KVTDC), which serves as the municipality’s planning, developer and regulatory agency of the city.

History was repeating its cyclical patterns. In the early 2000s, a plan for a road and metropolitan garden, a beautification project, to run through the sukumbasi settlement was formulated by the city’s bureaucrats and the neighbourhood’s property owners. Despite the initial panic of the residents and pleas to halt their displacement, they eventually self-organized and with clear and measured resolve, obstructed the road expansion project in their neighborhood. A local sukumbasi resident stated “we told them that the street is ours…the only way you can go past it is by either riding over us, or through imaginary flyovers.” The local sukumbasi residents took most emphatic of actions that systematically obstructed the municipality bulldozer’s path by digging up potholes and lining the streets with rocks. When it became clear that these more tangible efforts would not suffice, more tactile and less transparent measures were resorted to. Leveraging already existing and established networks
through which they accessed public services, those at risk of being dispossessed somehow got a hold of the list of local residents who had supported this “beautification” campaign (the metropolitan garden) and their own eviction. Their informants were not limited to their community but also included low-level municipal officials with whom they regularly negotiated to access basic services. This tactical move resulted in a more sinister maneuver to halt their eviction. Residents identified as petitioning for the removal of the sukumbasi were targeted – spat on, jeered and shamed. Eventually, at the request of the very same residents who lobbied for the road and the garden, the project has been brought to a standstill. Without overt violence and sophisticated methods of opposition, the sukumbasi achieved their demands through coercing a response that protected their right to maintain residence in Acharya Tole regardless of how this right may have interfered with the “beautification” project. Similar tactile maneuvers have manifested in the north and south as a way for residents to anchor themselves in the cities in which they seek to reclaim rights – to counteract any steps taken to displace or disinherit them. This more imperceptible form of remonstration and violence paved the way for winning a distinctive and unique set of rights “outside the normative and the institutional definitions of the state and its legal codes” (Holston and Appadurai, 1996: 197).

45 For example, a recent report carried out in The Guardian covers volatile and violent tactics that residents of Boleyn Heights in Los Angeles use to fend off potential gentrifiers. Such tactics involve physical intimidation and verbal threats. Similar tactics of violence and shaming seemed to work in Acharya Tole. The government halted the road extension and beatifying project at the request of the homeowner constituency. (Caroll, 2016)
Figure 9: Residents of Acharya Tole making way for the road extension.

The divisive impact the “beautification” project had on the Acharya Tole neighbourhoods in the early 2000s was not to be found during the 2013 road extension project. Instead, the fear of dispossession was evenly spread among the sukumbasi and property-owners alike. There continued to be one principal difference however, which was that property-owners could demand compensation for their displacement through both their land tenure and citizenship status. But the sukumbasi held no rights to compensation should public infrastructure developments threaten their private homes and render them displaced. The marginalization of the sukumbasi as a stateless community due to being unpropertied left them vulnerable to accessing and realizing fundamental municipal rights. The difference in
Despite these distinctions, unified, the residents of Acharya Tole and Gaurighat, Boudhadhwar, petitioned tirelessly for a six-month period. This collective effort led to all residents, regardless of property ownership status, being compensated should their homes be displaced by the road extension project. This unified stance and its consequences challenged a status quo where any act of the state was allegedly for the broader public good and reflected to some degree, public demands. But in this case, the coming together of propertied and unpropertied citizens to demand accountability of the state, should they impose their license to expropriate the homes of the sukumbasi, catapulted in a mini-victory that paved the way for incremental gain toward achieving their central demand for the land rights and all the amenities and services that accrue to property owners. The solidarity within the community in this struggle was an essential and contributory factor in the resulting response of the state. The state was no longer able to act under the pretext of public works for a collective ‘greater good’ because the collective, which is the coalition that formed between property-owners and the sukumbasi demanded the same rights be accessible to all dwellers thus leveling the field for those typically disempowered and marginalized. A parallel urban revolution from an African context is recounted by Simone (2004: 13) who observes “an event [had triggered] … an entire neighbourhood into apparently unfamiliar courses of action … with a synchronicity that [made] … it appear as if some deep-seated logic of social mobilization [was] … being unleashed.” There was jubilation over this shared victory in Acharya Tole.

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46I have explained in the Introduction the links between property ownership and citizenship in Nepal that blocks the ability of landless Nepalis to obtain official citizenship status.
The nature of the cross-class alliance established through the residents’ association as well as what it was able to achieve is unprecedented. “It is hard to know how people change their minds,” says one resident, when asked what it was that enabled the formation of the association locally, and that pushed the municipal government body to provide compensation. What might have been the conditions of possibility for this unlikely and unexpected unfamiliar course of action that led up to the victory over compensation? This is a crucial question that requires a serious engagement with the politics of organizing at the level of the everyday.
3.3 Everyday Organizing

One condition of possibility for the success with compensation was undoubtedly a prior experience with activism—organizing cooperatives for access to services—born out of a socialistic mode of everyday life, itself necessitated by conditions of poverty and marginality. In addition, new kinds of rights (not just for inhabitance but also for recognition as householders) were made possible through unanticipated networks of solidarity with the very neighbours who had formerly sought the sukumbasi’s eviction. Perhaps those neighbours had learned their lesson. Perhaps they feared another shaming or obstructionist response if they sought to protect their own property in the face of the 2013 road-widening initiative, while ignoring the fate of their sukumbasi neighbours. Perhaps the sukumbasi had earned their neighbours’ respect as fellow inhabitants through their successes with local co-operatives or through the passionate demonstration of their history of belonging and their right to the city.

As one member of the residents’ association that formed in response to the road widening put it, as if endorsing the calls of critical urban scholars for the right to the city, “[t]hose who have already inhabited should not be uprooted”

Whatever the reason, the residents’ association constituted a forum where sukumbasi demands were given legitimacy and an institutional form from which to undertake more direct advocacy with the municipal state (compared to obstructing bulldozers with rocks and potholes). The association’s members included an ex-officer of the Nepal Police, the principal of a local elementary school, and a respected entrepreneur (quoted earlier). The association used formal channels to organize meetings with the head of the Kathmandu Valley Town Development Authority mandated with road extension works. The regular
meetings were, however, made possible through informal connections afforded by the ties of these members of the residents’ association. Scholars researching sukumbasi movements in Nepal have alluded to this experience of alliance with propertied residents expanding legitimacy and access as a necessary strategy for obtaining the right to the city (Tanaka, 2009). It is too early to know if this particular alliance would endure, or reflect a fleeting and merely ad hoc alignment of interests. What served a critical function in the sukumbasi’s struggle for the right to the city was an unanticipated link that the sukumbasi were able to forge with the local propertied residents. It would afford the movement another basis for claiming a right to the city on terms that would be legible to the state. Though squatters still lacked landownership documents, they now had compensation receipts from the municipality. The residences had now obtained legal recognition from the state.

3.4 Inhabitance

Another factor must surely have been the fact that, unlike most sukumbasi settlements in the city, for Acharya Tole, which is one of the oldest, a cadastral blue print provides evidence of the sukumbasi inhabitance. The residents of Acharya Tole had obtained the blue prints, via another murky manoeuvre, from the District Land Office before 1990 enabling the residents to be eligible for compensation. The blue print maps different land-use patterns of the city, mostly built form, and only those that have a ‘legal’ function in the city. It is an official document that identifies all 12 houses in Acharya Tole; this is an unusual circumstance, because sukumbasi reside on public land that is usually characterized as ‘vacant’ or ‘unused’ in government documents and maps. The blue print provided a key basis for sukumbasi of Acharya Tole to claim their rights on the basis of inhabitance. This
evidence of inhabitance inscribed on an official document did not provide any guarantee of compensation, as the blue print is not a document of ownership. However, it furnished a clear material condition for legitimizing the right to demand more rights – on the basis of inhabitance.

4. Right to the City in the Time of Urgency

In much of the scholarship on struggles for right to the city movement in the Global South that focuses on the everyday life of the urban poor, there is an idealized account of the politics of the poor (Appadurai, 2002; Holston, 1996; Chatterjee, 2004). Critical development and post-colonial studies scholars who give voice to the struggles of the urban poor do so from the standpoint of a “politics of patience” – to use Arjun Appadurai’s framing (Appadurai, 2002:30). This kind of politics is gleaned from “ordinary” everyday acts of subversion outside of the more urgent times, such as the time of eviction in which threats to shelter and habitat looms large. In these accounts of the politics of the poor, it is through their contribution to the production of space, and the emotion and labour invested on it, that the poor are understood to claim the right to the city. The claims for the ownership and shelter are rooted in inhabitance of spaces that are claimed first through encroachments. But eventually, they are produced as a new form of inhabitance that evokes a sense of place and that cultivates a sense of community; one that also allows for the enactment of empowered subjectivities, such as “able residents” and “good citizens”. Sukumbasi enact these subjectivities without being either legal residents of the city or formal citizens. The claims made for the city and for citizenship are rooted in inhabitance and transformation of the spaces, the physical spaces, which inculcate new subjectivities. However, when the “politics
of patience” encounter a government-led politics of aesthetics, the poor devise a new kind of politics in which some of the logics that regulate the “politics of patience” is forsaken. In other words, there is very little time to fight back against state-led violence. In such times, everyone’s immediate interest is to save their homes and their settlements from being razed to the ground. Critical urban scholarship that has documented the interface at which state-led development programs encounter the livelihood of the poor do so from the standpoint of governmentalization of the state. Such an approach focuses on the techniques of governmentality that the state adopts by mobilizing certain discursive practices that render expendable the poor, their settlements, and practices therein. However, an inquiry into the “politics of urgency” during the time of crisis can show that the poor are not merely passive recipients of developmentalist intervention from the top patiently devising “governmentality from below” (Appadurai, 2002: 35). Politics of urgency can reveal the tactical ways in which the urban poor renegotiate their claims for the right to the city by turning on their heads the discursive tools that the state mobilizes to subjectivize the poor. In the case of the river restoration project, sukumbasi couch their renewed demands with the state not on the same terms that were set in the “normal” time dedicated to the politics of patience, in which space and inhabitance are central to their claims. Rather, realizing the importance of time that is in short supply during urgent moments, sukumbasi acquiesce to the state’s allegations to make renewed claims. Forged in the time of urgency, the sukumbasi’s new demand is for a “justice-based resettlement.”

Under this form of demand, there is a set of rights being stipulated for those under threat: the right to be informed of eviction ahead of time; the right of their children to be able to go to school despite eviction or relocation; the right of access to legal facilities, should the
communities feel the need to challenge eviction on legal grounds; the right of access to health facilities, should eviction processes lead to health effects; and the right to resettlement within the city and within two kilometers of the settlement from which they were being evicted. This set of rights articulated under justice-based resettlement are postulated in the United Nations Human Rights’ International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), of which the government of Nepal is a signatory. This new set of demands, unlike the original demand, is no longer rooted in inhabitance that would articulate decades of struggles for building home, belonging, and citizenship. One might at first argue that justice-based resettlement was founded upon what James Holston calls “planetary rights” – the kind of rights that are moored to an abstract notion of being human rather than being a political citizen or inhabitants. Sukumbasi adopted human rights rather than rights rooted in different variants of citizenship, such as “insurgent citizenship” (Holston, 2007) or “invented (spaces of) citizenship” (Miraftab, 2004), as a tool to negotiate with power. In other words, in the time of urgency or crisis, the politics of the poor is reduced to what might be called “sentimental humanitarianism” in which the struggle for protecting shelter out of a biological need to have one, it would appear, robs the urban poor of engaging in making political demands in any meaningful way. Aware of the limits of the “politics of patience”, sukumbasi leadership employ tactical ways to renew their demands by making surprising attempts to act jointly with the state, not against the state, in distinguishing the authentic from the inauthentic sukumbasi. The state, therefore, is not merely adversarial but also instrumental to the goals of realizing the sukumbasi demand to maintain a place in the city, in the sense that it permeated a new mode of subjectivity geared toward differentiation rather than solidarity amongst sukumbasi.
In the second case, the politics of claiming compensation invites us to think about the right to the city as an incremental and open-ended process. It is true that the residents of Acharya Tole already had an official documentation of longstanding existence on the land. But it was in the form a cadastral blueprint map. This map helped to formally locate where in the city the sukumbasi of Acharya Tole were, and for how long they have been there. In other words, the residents and their location were archived in the memory of an administrative body of the state – the Department of Land Mapping and Survey. However, in and of itself, the cadastral map did not so much endorse the inhabittance of the residents as acknowledged their location in the city. Thus the residents did not have a legal ground on which to make claims for the right to stay put when faced with the prospect of eviction. In this context, being able to secure the right to compensation for expropriation of land and home without the legal ownership was an important incremental step toward the possibility of expanding the right to the city, as one resident-activist of Acharya Tole stated:

The road extension, as it turns out now, was a blessing in disguise. We will never feel completely safe because we do not have home or landownership documents yet. But we now have compensation receipts from the government. The receipts will add further credibility to our demands [for the right to shelter and title to squatted lands].

(Interview, 12 July, 2015)

Such an understanding gleaned through a socialized response to the denial of rights invites questions about conditions under which socialistic mode of everyday life might alert us to the possibilities for unanticipated and spontaneous cross-class alliances; which, in turn, might
create political grounds for igniting processes of transformative change (Ninglekhu and Rankin, Forthcoming). Such an understanding of everyday life in the city opens space for thinking about the right to the city as a project of aspirational politics. The right to the city, as such, as a struggle is filled with ‘mutable aspirations’ with ‘varying degrees of realization’, in which, as Simone (2004: 323) puts it, “the pursuit of aspirations itself largely depends on what kinds of connections residents can put together between diverse infrastructures, spaces, populations, and economic activities of the city.”

There is indeed an organized solidarity that formally regulates and governs everyday life. But there are also spontaneous moments of unexpected alliances that do not articulate the organizing principles of “house with three pillars”, as the two cases that I have discussed show. To reiterate: the claims for the right to the city are rooted in inhabitance. These claims are articulated in two ways: Politics of patience and politics of urgency. To understand the former, I have discussed the “house with three pillars” in the previous. The latter has been discussed through the illustration of two cases of politics of urgency. First case explains deliberate acquiescence for concessions in resettlement while the second case illustrates tricky maneuvers and unlikely alliances that obtained the compensation. Taking stock of such uncertainties pushes us to look methodologically as well as theoretically toward reframing the right to the city. It prompts us to acknowledge that there is more than a single logic that governs everyday life in “the slum”. To put it in Simone’s words (2004), these stories are “instances of disarticulation from quarter to quarter”. They furnish a way to understand how the disarticulation becomes “a resource or a mode of operation for social collaboration aimed at accomplishing a broader use of the city” (p.19).
Conclusion

“The Ethnographic Present” and an Uncertain Future

I would like to begin this chapter with recourse to a discussion that ensued among sukumbasi at a meeting. In the wake of the earthquake in the spring of 2015, SPOSHand called the meeting with two particular agenda items. First: get a better sense of damage done by the earthquake to the sukumbasi settlements in the city. Second: plan a strategy to protect a settlement that the government targeted to make way for the Bagmati restoration plan. The earthquake had partially damaged the settlement. The government saw this as an opportune moment to completely demolish the settlement – this was the consensus in the meeting. Deepak Rai, the ANPA president whom I briefly described in the introduction chapter, was one of those invited at the meeting, a rare occurrence in SPOSH-held meetings. Deepak had quit SPOSHand formed his own organization after he joined the Maoist party in 2006. But for this meeting he was called in to see if it was possible to renew solidarity. The damages of the earthquake, compounded by the increasing threat from the state, required the renewed attempt to forge solidarity. Towards the latter stages of the meeting, it was Deepak’s turn to speak. He spoke, reminding everyone in the room why SPOSHand ANPA split in 2006: “For how long are we going to do this? Run to a settlement in Kathmandu today. After six months, find another settlement to save.” Without wasting a breath, he then declared, “We need to plan for a nation-wide resistance and galvanize our membership in every district. This piecemeal approach (of SPOSHand referring to the effort to assist one settlement at a
time) will not work. You think talking about ‘savings’ (cooperatives) endlessly as if it is the be all and end all of everything will change anything?”

In response, Raju Lama, SPOS’H’s general secretary, countered, “The last time we all came together was in 2012. It was probably the biggest street protest we had organized in decades. It collapsed halfway through, because you, Deepak, quit!” Raju was referring to the anti-eviction protest against the BAP (Bagmati Action Plan) that I discuss in Chapter 3. Deepak quit to join a lucrative position in a government-formed sukumbasi commission; the position was offered to him in the middle of the protest (perhaps in part precisely to divide sukumbasi organizing). Raju continued, “We have to admit that we do not have the wherewithal to forge a nation-wide resistance. During the time you [Deepak] were SPOS’H’s president, did we not always use one little success in a settlement in one city as an inspiration to do something similar in another?”

This debate between Raju and Deepak is important to recount because it cuts through the heart of the right to the city project and the politics of everyday life as it relates to the right to the city as a project that is not just aspirational, but also feasible. This debate between Raju and Deepak is strikingly reminiscent of similar debate taking place in critical urban scholarship between those who consider the right to the city as a project of the “heart’s desire” (Harvey) and those who have reframed the project through the trope of “the just city”: “non-reformist reforms directed at improving the lives of the residents of the cities…”
This debate places a search for “the just city” at the center and pits the desirable against the feasible.\footnote{I attend to this debate in more detail in the Introduction.}

In a useful articulation of what might be feasible, Marcuse argues that the right to city does not demand “all rights for all people” because some already have more rights than they need or deserve. So right to the city also requires limiting rights for some (right to oppress, manipulate, exploit) and extending rights for others (Marcuse, 2012). But going back to Mayer’s concern, how do we make sense of Marcuse’s call for “limiting rights for some,” when there the inevitable contradictions and cleavages arise \textit{within} the category of “urban inhabitant” on whose behalf right to the city is being advanced? Further, how do we make sense of the idea of inhabitance expounded by Lefebvre and later by Purcell et al. if and when the inhabitation of the urban underclass in the city is under threat? To be clearer, as Gautam Bhan argues, when the threat to inhabitance is urgent and collective action is forsaken for individual gain because every one needs to protect their shelter, how does one begin to make sense of a right to the city that is rooted in inhabitance? I would like to revisit ethnography to deal with these questions with a nod, once again, to James Holston (1999:48) who describes “the ethnographic present”.

1. “The Ethnographic Present”

The overall objective of this dissertation research has been to interrogate the right to the city as a category of analysis with recourse to an account of extreme marginality of the urban
poor in Kathmandu – “the slum” in a South Asian city coming to terms with rapid urbanization on the one hand, and on the other hand, a perpetually fluctuating political environment. Using everyday life and inhabittance as the central concerns of the dissertation research, I have discussed the institutional and everyday dimensions of the politics of the right to the city. Such myriad politics and processes indicate how “items, objects, relations are put to many unanticipated uses” that reveal how the city is “full of unanticipated associations, visions, confluence, noise, and things to consume” (Simone, 2004: 214, 240). Together, these myriad relations and politics *thicken* the connection of sukumbasi with the city. In the process, the city *becomes* a site of possibility for engaging and mobilizing “alternative geographical imaginations” vis-à-vis the right to the city that is inhabited (McFarlane, 2004). The possibility, *not the process itself*, is radical because contained within the possibility is a promise for substantive rights of citizenship that are rooted in inhabittance of the city. As such, the right to the city as advanced by sukumbasi in Kathmandu is a radical demand because it seeks to overturn state-society relations underpinned by the principle of private property that is fundamental to class relations within a liberal democratic system. The right to the city is therefore a call for social and political actions necessary to reclaim as well as create rights against the transformation wrought by capital; and the onus is on urban inhabitants to lead the charge (Lefebvre, 1996). Mark Purcell engages the notion of inhabittance to foreground imaginations of rights of inhabitants – “the right to appropriate urban space,” and “the right to participate centrally in the production of urban space” (Purcell 2003: 577). He argues, “If inhabitants hold a central role in the decisions that produce urban space, property ownership can no longer confer a dominant voice in decisions about what to do with urban land” (Purcell, 2003:579). Likewise, everyday life is foregrounded as a
political site with the potency to ignite transformative change. Much of the inspiration vis-à-vis everyday life is gleaned from the duality that is contained within the everyday, which incubates space not only with dominant relations of power, but also with utopian possibilities and political aspirations (Ross, 1967).

The following three overarching questions draw the contours of this dissertation. First, what are the conditions that enable sukumbasi to make claims for the right to the city? Here I focus particularly on the practice of everyday life that is forged through recourse to an organizational framework called the “house with three pillars.” The second question broaches the issue of how claims for the right to the city come up against governmental interventions, some of which are governmental programs seeking to secure norms of authenticity, environmental sustainability and private property. Subsumed under this question is another question: How does the threat of eviction and displacement forge sukumbasi political subjectivity and inform renewed strategies of inhabitation? The third question investigates what implications these strategies have for diminishing, or modifying, the right to the city project? The ethnographic findings that I recap below provide insights that bring together in productive ways critical global South urbanism with Planning theory informed through the right to the city formulation.

Chapter 2 addresses the first question; Chapter 3 provides the basis for the second two. In Chapter 2, I consider the ways in which “house with three pillars” illustrates the principles of “sharing” and “savings” – the bedrock of “deep democracy” (Appadurai, 2002) – through which the practice of everyday life of the urban poor, in this case sukumbasi, is
organized and regulated. I have discussed that demanding a right to the city requires setting up institutions, alliances and coalitions. The institutional and political capital accumulated as a result have enabled sukumbasi in Kathmandu to skillfully navigate their way around a city managed and controlled by bureaucrats, NGOs, politicians and propertied residents. This “politics of patience” that is practiced and enacted over a long period of time allows for a gradual production of spaces – black-topped inner streets; water-tanks; a community center; a praying hall; teashops; electricity; aesthetically pleasant homes, or just “shelter;” toilets; meat shops; restaurants; meeting rooms – that are imbued with a sense of place and community.

The meanings of the self that are gleaned from these spaces produced, in relation to the space of the city, in turn enable sukumbasi to inculcate and enact empowered subjectivities. I have argued in Chapter 2 that the “rights” in the right to the city – to shelter with land ownership rights; to citizenship status irrespective of landownership; to municipal citizenship rights of access to water and electricity and other such basic services; to secure resettlement in case of eviction or displacement; to be free of stereotypical representations such as “dirty” and “inauthentic” – begin to take shape and are gradually endowed with legitimacy and credibility through the relational co-constitution of the production of space and subjectivities.

I have also argued, that therefore the right to the city is also spatial in nature, the essence of which is rooted in inhabitance of the commons.

Chapter 3 shows the limits of “deep democracy”. It undertakes a critical exploration of two government-led interventions – a river restoration project and road extension project – that, under different circumstances, put under threat the inhabitance in which the sukumbasi demand for the rights to the city is rooted. Against the backdrop of these interventions that
disrupt the mundane rituals of everyday life, this chapter discusses new strategies of resistance and inhabitation that sukumbasi deploy in the face of such challenges. These strategies reveal how sukumbasi resist the state, but in the meantime also acquiesce to the allegations and demands of the state in the process of seeking necessary collaborations with the state – and more specifically, with specific state agencies regarded as helpful for securing much-needed municipal services. In such times, the state is both adversarial and indispensable. In such times, it is not just space, but also time, that dictates the logic and rules for organizing against intervention. Meaning, the “politics of patience”, the hallmark of “deep democracy”, is set aside for a “politics of urgency” assembled against the tyranny of emergency; there is no time for patient politics. This transition from patience to urgency creates a disarticulation in the right to the city movement, which takes two distinct forms. First, under these new conditions, a new set of rupture and discord is introduced into the politics of the poor and the demand for the right to the city loses its aspirational spirit, metamorphosing into a demand for a right to live in the city – this right is articulated as a right to “justice-based resettlement”, as I have discussed in Chapter 3. This new right does not so much speak of the “heart’s desire;” it rather conforms to what is feasible in the crucible of crisis – a right to not so much stay put, but to just be relocated somewhere in a city that provides shelter, even if it is a short-term rental space. The case of Paurakhi Basti lays bare this tendency. Of the two hundred and fifty households, nearly two hundred have relocated in their original location, albeit under more meager conditions; worn-out temporary-looking shacks made out of tin roofs and tarpaulin walls now replace the organized built form, razed to the ground by a state slum-clearance program on 13 March, 2012, which used to imbue the settlement with a sense of place and a community. The
remaining fifty-eight sukumbasi households that the government identified as “authentic”
cannot find shelter anywhere in the city. They are not welcomed back in their old settlement
because they deserted their neighbours, abandoned long-developed solidaristic ties, in a bid
to engage the state to secure their own inhabitance in the middle of a crisis. Second, as
aspirational content of the movement is continually put under threat by similar interventions,
they also disrupt the rituals of everyday life organized around the framework of “house with
three pillars.” The disrupted ritual ends up stretching the boundaries of everyday life in new
and uncertain directions, forging unanticipated coalitions and unexpected results. The case of
Acharya Tole reveals as much; it invites us to focus on the everyday as a spawning ground
for forming a continually mutating “politics of the possible” that Simone (2008: 201) has
described as such:

Urban residency is thus valued for its potentials for putting together collaborations
where individuals can hedge their bets, pursue disparate, even contradictory,
aspiration, and fashion different ways both to recognize themselves and support these
multiple recognitions. The city is a way of keeping things open and materializing
ways of becoming something that has not existed before, but which has been possible
all along.

When the city becomes “something that has not existed before,” as Simone argues, it
becomes more uncertain what “the city that is yet to come” will look like; the emergent city
could consist of a range of contradictory possibilities from progressive to regressive
transformations intermixed with piecemeal changes. As such, the city is in the process of just
becoming – for the poor it is a city in which “flexibility, pragmatism, negotiation, as well as constant struggle for survival and self-development” is the content of everyday life (Bayat, 2007: 579).

The ethnographic findings of this dissertation research discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 have shown that “urban inhabitant” may not be a singular category; it can have cleavages that are fractured along the lines of class and aesthetics, for example. Likewise, instead of being confined to a duality that Ross speaks about – as an incubator of dominant relations of power, and in the mean time, also a container of utopian possibilities – everyday life instead, articulates a multiplicity – the mundane spaces of everyday life can explode into both progressive and regressive tendencies, as has been shown throughout the ethnographic discussion. If the right to the city is to be imagined as a project of not just transformative potential and mutable aspirations, but also one that is realistically attainable, we must then ask: how might one take stock of the insights about everyday life and inhabitance gleaned from “the ethnographic present” for forging a right to the city?

This dissertation has shown that sukumbasi struggle and self-organizing move between myriad enactments of subjectivities. At one time acting as if the city already belongs to them by successfully collaborating with the local and municipal states. At other times, the organizing also turns into a dangerous solidarity containing tacit threats of violence. As such, the interpretation of the right to the city is to be distilled through the dialectical relationship that is forming in these uncertain interstices of complicity with the state and solidarity within the sukumbasi community. I have shown ethnographically that in the course of claiming a
right to the city, sukumbasi assemble myriad range of politics that, at times, bring them in opposition to the state, while, at other time, they aligns them with the state. That is, in seeking to establish grounds for seeking inclusion into the city, such a politics also end up producing modes of exclusion of among sukumbasi that are portrayed as not belonging to the city, such as the “inauthentic sukumbasi” that I discuss in Chapter 3. In this process, such a politics of solidarity produce the very processes of dislocation and dispossession that they sought to combat. It is with regard to this back-and-forth dialectal tilt between the real struggles taking place in the city and the conceptually ambiguity over the right to the city that this dissertation seeks to advance a formulation of right to the city that embraces its inherent tendency towards mutation and uncertainty.

2. An Uncertain Future?

When revolution is seen not so much as a dramatic galvanizing of a mass erupting into a smoldering resistance, and instead as an everyday instance of incremental gains, then utopia as an end goal of revolution may be seen not so much as a fully elaborated program for the city yet to come after overhauling the existing city. Instead, utopia may be understood in the sense of impulses that are piecemeal, social democratic and even liberal in the sense of seeking reform. Such impulses may not themselves be the program for a utopian society, but they can point in the direction of future programmatic realizations (Fraser, 2013), such as the protection of some modes of socialized ownership and management of property. The impulses encompass a much broader domain of everyday life, which may include both social movements and “non-movements.” The right to the city project led by sukumbasi in Kathmandu may be understood as one that is both a movement and a non-movement,
together containing utopian impulses. At one time, they are a movement because they are an “organized, sustained, self-conscious challenge to existing authorities,” such as the “quiet encroachment” organized under the framework of the “house with three pillars” (Bayat, 2013:20). At other times, they are a non-movement – “a collective action of non-collective actors” without any organizational structure and formal leadership (Bayat, 2010: 114).
Within such impulses, solidarities and ad hoc alliances are cultivated gradually through an assemblage of languages, vocabularies, sentiments and experiences, that are rooted in instituting practices for generating income and capacities to organize, producing spaces, to work on, play in, and live in, and in the attendant processes of building relations – with the state, non-state actors and institutions, neighbours, friends and acquaintances, who share similar political sentiments. Together, these activities and rituals, and the meaning gleaned from them, make up the politics of everyday life. This politics of everyday life of the poor is constantly stretched in new directions, which, in the process, reveal new ways of getting things done to challenge the exigencies of exclusion of the present, and to plot modes of inclusion for the future. Some of such politics follow a template. Some are always in the process of becoming.

Given this uncertainty incipient in the everyday life of the urban poor, what kind of future programmatic realizations might be specified? Further, how might we call on planners, who work with their own time horizons that respond to their own politics of urgency, to pay attention to the ethnographic present that reveals the complex spatialities and temporalities? If the seeds of socialist mode of relations is incipient in the uncertainty of everyday, and urban revolution, as such, may not be planned in a linear way, but instead born of an unpredictable intersection of people, institutions and infrastructures, then taking stock of the
conditions of possibility for urban revolution can perhaps be best achieved through comparative ethnographic research on the everyday life of the oppressed and the alienated. Under what conditions could everyday life generate urban revolution? Under what circumstances is the radical potential of everyday life subverted to state projects or market deepening? Such a comparative project could go a long way toward assessing a role for planners with longstanding commitments to an inclusive urbanism in engaging everyday life of the poor as a site for imagining transformative politics and urban revolution.
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