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Chapter 12

NEPAL CENTRAL HIGHLAND

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NEPAL CENTRAL HIGHLAND

Resistance and the state

Mukta S. Tamang

Landscape and ethnic groups

The Nepal Central Highland region that I focus on for this chapter is located on the southern slope of the Himalaya. In a larger landscape of the Himalaya, extending from Nanga Parbat in the Pakistan-administered Kashmir region in the west to the Namcha Barwa Peak in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China in the east, this area falls within the Central Himalaya. The Himalayan Massif is the highest chain of mountains, extending for a distance of over 200 kilometres that separates the Central Asian Plateau in the north and the tropical Indian subcontinent in the south.

Geographers generally see the southern slope of the Himalayan landscape falling in Nepal into seven natural divisions stretching from west to east (Hagen 1961). These landscapes and valleys are separated by major rivers that transverse the Himalayan Mountains on a north-south axis. The Nepal Central Highland falls between the Budhi Gandaki River in the west and the Likhu River in the east. The Trishuli, Bagmati, Sunkoshi, and Tamakoshi are four major rivers that drain this region. The region is walled in the north by the Greater Himalayan Range, with the summit of Ganesh Himal as high as 7,500 metres. Major Himalayan peaks and ranges in this region include Ganesh Himal (*Yangra kang ri*) in the west, through Langtang-Liru, Jugal (*Leonpo kang ri*) in Rasuwa, and Sindhupalchowk to Gaurishankar (*Tseringma-Rolwaling*) Range in Dolakha District in the east.

The Central Highland region is bordered in the south by the Mahabharat Lekh – a chain of mountains – running from west to east. The southern foothills of the Mahabharat Lekh form the adjoining area of Terai – the northern rim of the Indian Gangetic Plain. The summit of the striking chain of Mahabharat Lekh rises up to 3,000 metres while it is intersected by rivers flowing as low as 100–200 metres elevation in deep gorges. The breadth from the Northern Himalayas to the southern foothills is about 60–100 kilometres, within which one can see the formation of impressive valleys and mid-hill landscapes with varieties of climatic zones.

In the current political-administrative map of Nepal, the Central Highland roughly covers the province of Bagmati. The province was formed in 2015 by restructuring the previous 13 districts encompassing Kathmandu Valley and the surrounding hills in the process of federalising the country.¹ Before the formation of Nepal through the forceful conquest by the king of Gorkha in the middle of the 18th century, this region enjoyed autonomous polities. After the

conquest of the region, the Gorkha Chief Prithvi Narayan Shah shifted his seat of power with Kathmandu as the capital. The Shah Dynasty ruled the country for more than two and a half centuries. Nepal was similar to other Himalayan kingdoms, such as Sikkim and Bhutan (English 1985), and to some extent, Tibet, but also differs significantly compared to most other parts of Highland Asia, including the Southeast Asian Massif and Pamirs. Nepal remained virtually closed until 1950 under the oligarchic family rule of Rana prime ministers. With a brief opening, autocratic monarchy again reigned in the country until 1990. Only after the 1990 peoples' movement did Nepal attain democratic freedom and a multiparty political system by overthrowing autocratic rule (Whelpton 2005).

The above political-historical processes provide a context within which the social scientists and anthropologists have worked and produced their ethnographies of peoples and processes. The existence of diverse ethnic and caste groups in the region with a plurality of culture, language, and religious practices offered a rich ground for their explorations. Due to past migration, the Nepal Central Highland and major cities, including the country's capital located in this region, accommodate almost all castes, ethnicities, linguistics, and religious groups.

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 identified Hill Brahman, Chhetri, including Dasnami, as '*Khas Arya*' and recognises Dalit, Adivasi Janajati, Madhesi, Muslim, and minority social categories. The government of Nepal has recognised 59 ethnic groups as indigenous nationalities or *Adivasi Janajati*. More than 20 of them are found in the Central Upland region. The region, however, is the traditional home to eight indigenous groups who consider this area their ancestral territory. The largest of the indigenous groups in the region belong to the Tamang and Newar peoples. Table 12.1 shows the size of the population of major castes and ethnic groups in the Nepal Central Highland.

A survey of major ethnographic studies in Nepal shows that most of them were carried out with a particular ethnic/caste group located in a specific place. In this chapter, I focus only on those studies with groups that are considered native to the Nepal Central Highland for description.

Origin of Himalayan studies and anthropological representation of the place

The origin of Himalayan studies is often traced as far back as the work of Brian Hodgson in the middle of the 19th century (Waterhouse 2004). However, the possibility of systematic anthropological exploration of Nepal was made possible by changing national and international contexts during the latter half of the 20th century. Nepal's opening to the wider world after the 1950 revolution was conducive to inviting research scholars from various countries. The postwar American political expansion and withdrawal of the European colonial empire from the subcontinent characterised the international context, which increased Western scholars' interest in the hitherto 'isolated' Nepal Himalayas.

During the following two decades, several important anthropological works were initiated on Nepal and the Himalayas. Fürer-Haimendorf (1964), Hitchcock (1966), Nepali (1965), Jest (1966a; 1966b), and Pignède (1966) were the first generation of anthropologists who worked in Nepal. Bista's (1967) classic *The People of Nepal* introduced the diverse nature of Nepal. Berreman's works in conceptualising the Himalaya as a cultural area was an outstanding contribution, which gave birth to the idea of Himalayan studies (1963; 1978).

Although these works left critical imprints on the later development of the discipline, anthropology in Nepal remained formative in nature and limited in scope until 1970. These monographs, at best, followed the colonial tradition of maps of isolated tribes and caste in Nepal

Table 12.1 Ethnodemography of the Nepal Central Highland.

Indigenous nationalities (Adivasi Janajati)	Total Nepal	Population in Central Highland		Hindu caste groups (Khas Arya)	Total Nepal	Population in Central Highland	
		Number	Per cent %			Number	Per cent %
Traditional homeland in the Nepal Central Highland							
Tamang	1,539,830	1,129,323	73.3	Hill Brahman	3,226,903	1,010,906	31.3
Newar	1,321,933	935,312	70.8	Hill Chhetri	4,398,053	955,570	21.7
Chepang/Praja	68,399	63,409	92.7	Sanyasi/Dashnami	227,822	46,110	20.2
Thami	28,671	25,759	89.8	Thakuri	425,623	38,258	9.0
Pahari	13,615	12,587	92.4	Total Khas Arya	8,278,401	2,050,844	24.8
Hyalmo	10,752	8,381	77.9	Dalits			
Jirel	5,774	5,495	95.2	Damai/Dholi	472,862	74,776	15.8
Hayu	2,925	2,581	88.2	Kami	1,258,554	138,368	11.0
				Sarki	374,816	72,825	19.4
				Dalit other	155,354	14,207	9.1
				Total Dalit	3,474,767	300,176	8.6
Spread or traditional homeland outside							
Magar	1,887,733	270,639	14.3	Muslim	1,164,255	36,977	3.2
Gurung	522,641	124,246	23.8	Others	4,089,349	129,680	2.8
Tharu	1737,470	91,899	5.3	Grand Total	26,494,504	5,529,452	20.8
Rai	620,004	84,781	13.7				
Sherpa	112,946	46,176	40.9				
Majhi	83,727	36,777	43.9				
Danuwar	84,115	33,863	40.3				
Gharti/Bhujel	118,650	33,580	28.3				
Sunuwar	55,712	25,426	45.6				
Limbu	425,623	17,820	4.2				
Other Adivasi Janajati	847,212	63,721	7.5				
Total Adivasi Janajati	9,487,732	3,011,775	31.7				

Source: CBS (2014)

with their timeless customs and manners (Des Chene 1996). Most of the monographs of this period fall within the early genre of report ethnography with chapters on kinship, clan and lineage, marriage and religion, and so on. Images of anthropology and anthropologists were that of the explorer who brought ethnographically *terra incognita* Nepal to the eyes of science (Fürer-Haimendorf 1990).

As Mary Des Chene puts it, 'all Anthropological places have their own peculiarities, their particularities' (2007: 210). In the delineation of area studies, anthropologists of Nepal have carved out their space as Himalayan studies, with its ascribed peculiarities being the remote, pristine, unexplored, and exotic landscape. I agree with the reading that the central trope in imagining Nepal was the vision of the place as an interface. The volume titled *Himalayan Anthropology: The Indo-Tibetan Interface*, edited by Fisher (1978), can be taken as a milestone for crystallising the idea of the interface. The notion of Himalaya as 'interface and frontiers' between two of the world's major cultural areas, South Asia and Central Asia, found the highest expression in these studies. Fisher, for example, offers a concept of 'interface' as an analytical apparatus for understanding the complex region of the Himalayas where cultures and geography combine and collide. Accordingly, most of the papers in the volume approach the cultures and societies of the Himalayas as interstitial 'neither fish nor fowl' floating in the contact zone. Although it may have its own logic and utility, this characterisation often deprives the region of study on its own terms.

Des Chene adds another two images of the Nepal Himalaya that conditioned anthropological studies; Nepal as the fossil state and Shangri-la (2007). The image of the fossil refers to the unchanged nature of Nepali society without any influence from Western colonial powers. The image of an unchanging and timeless place gives one access to the authentic past before 1951. The notion of Shangri-la complements the idea of the fossil as a land of mystery. The local beliefs of the existence of Beyul – sacred and secret places blessed by Padmasambhava in the Himalaya, reminiscent of paradise – were crucial in this formulation. A multitude of temples, archaic practices of aesthetic, tantric, and Shamanic rituals found in the upland added to this image.

I would like to highlight yet another representation of Nepal as a 'never colonised' country. The position of Nepal in relation to colonial control in India was anomalous, practically; however, Nepal was under the exclusive political control of the British crown (Cowan 2020; Mojumdar 1973). Nepal only received total independence from Great Britain in 1923 (Whelpton 2005). Despite this fact and the expansive impact of empire on the Nepali state and society, colonial writings depicted Nepal as a noncolonised country. The Panchayat regime glorified the image of noncolonised status for promoting its own variety of nationalism. It was during this period that many ethnographic projects were undertaken. This image of noncolonised Nepal, to a large extent, diverted anthropological studies from the issues of the impact of colonialism. Unlike in other parts of South Asia, where robust postcolonial scholarship flourished, the themes of power relationships, hegemony, domination, and subordination often remain outside the purview of ethnographers.

Is Zomia a useful idea for the Nepal Highland? Scholars have started to explore how the concept of Zomia may be applicable to the Himalayan Massif and suggested it is useful as an additional angle in understanding place and processes (Michaud 2010; Shneiderman 2010). Van Schendel sees Zomia as an idea – neglected by history and geography – and an actual place in the mountainous zones of Southeast Asia and the Himalaya located in the margins of ten countries, including Nepal. As a neglected zone by Western scientific studies, being at the margin of the states and capitalist market and commonality in terms of terrain, the Nepal Highland could certainly come into the fold of the Asian Highland. The Asian Highland, however, is also char-

acterised by a mosaic of cultural and linguistic diversity along with its expansive commonality (Wouters 2019).

According to James Scott (2009), Zomia is primarily a 'nonstate space', created by mobile people in the process of resisting being governed by the great states and spirit of autonomy. This is a highly productive thesis coming out of the Southeast Asian Massif. However, in the Nepal Highland case, the historical-political processes indicate significant variations. It is difficult to construe the highland region of Nepal as deliberately pursuing statelessness. The Gorkha rulers considered themselves an empire and led wars in Kumaun Garhwal, Tibet, and Sikkim (Regmi 1999). Internally, the state imposed excessive taxation, corvée labour, restriction of movement, and unfair laws that treated people discriminatorily based on caste and ethnic identities (Holmberg 2017; Stiller 1976). The dynamics between the highland and lowland valley also get complicated in Nepal as the state power occupied the upland valley of Kathmandu. The state caused the suffering of many marginal groups while the ruling elites prospered. While there are considerable variations, ongoing phenomena, and emerging scholarship on rebellion, resistance, and the struggle for recognition, I believe this shows that the Zomia perspective can be suitably adapted for the Nepal Highland. This can enrich knowledge beyond the ethnographies of isolated people by adding the subaltern counter-narrative to the conversation.

Ethnographers and ethnographic themes

The period between 1970 and 2000 can be taken as a period of expansion and consolidation of ethnographic studies in the Himalayas. The anthropological studies during this period, although largely based their ethnographic work on specific castes or ethnic groups located in a particular place, also had an overarching theme of anthropological concern. A considerable number of anthropologists were engaged in the study of Sherpa ritual and Tibetan Buddhism. A study among the Gurung by Mumford (1989) took an interesting theme of dialogue between shamans and Tibetan lamas. An innovative work was on the Trans-Himalayan salt trade by Fisher (1986) depicted the situation in the 1970s. Shamanism turned out to be the most attractive field of study conducted among the Magars, Rai, Limbu, and other groups.

Those notable studies among the Tibetan-speaking communities in the Northwestern Himalaya of Nepal include Bauer (2004), Childs (2004), Levine (1988), and Ramble (2008) and cover the Trans-Himalayan space bordering Nepal and Tibet. In the mid-hills of Nepal, Bennett (1983), Gray (1995), and Kondos (2004) contributed their analysis of gender and household processes of the Brahmin and Chhetri communities. There are other ethnographies on different groups in different locations as well as those that deal with crosscutting concerns. Since this is intended to be the only representative of major ethnographies, I have not included all the names for the reason of space as well as accessibility.

Studies in the Nepal Central Highland make up a significant part of the ethnographic corpus of Nepal. A number of rich ethnographies were conducted among the Tamang and Newar, who are the largest groups in the region since the 1970s. Similarly, ethnographic studies carried out among the Hyolmo, Chapang, Thami, and other groups whose traditional home is in this region have enriched the knowledge of the place and people.

The Newars in the valley

The Kathmandu Valley is the heart of Nepal's Central Highland. The valley with 667 square kilometres is located at an altitude of approximately 1,400 metres and is surrounded by hills. The Newar are the indigenous peoples of the valley who have developed a sophisticated urban

civilisation with a rich tradition of arts and architecture over the centuries. Fertile land, a pleasant climate, and its location in the strategic trade route between India and Tibet made the valley prosperous. Although the Newars are found in all parts of Nepal, the three cities in the valley, Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpur, constitute the core of the Newar residents, where more than half of the Newars live. The Kathmandu Valley and the Newars have been the subject of interest of early European writers, from British Colonel Kirkpatrick (1811) to French Indologist Sylvain Lévi. The first brief description of Newar society and culture based on field inquiry and direct observation was produced by Fürer-Haimendorf (1956a).

The first detailed ethnography was by Gopal Singh Nepali (1965), which provided a rich description of the Newar people, society, and culture. This book may be taken as an example of early ethnography depicting the Newars as a bounded group. Although not explicitly articulated, Nepali, who did his PhD at the University of Bombay under G. S. Ghurye, appears to have been influenced by the structural-functional school of that time started by Radcliff-Brown and Evans-Pritchard. Another ethnographic work that provides a general overview of the Newar social system after Nepali is from Toffin (1977; 2007). The collection of his research papers based on three and a half decades of work was published in 2007 in Nepal. Toffin provides a picture of overall Newari communities from both cities and villages and describes the Newari as 'a complex society'. Newari society is indeed a complex society that has synchronised multiple layers of civilisational elements, both Indic and tribal, to form one ethnic group. As his fellow French scholars working in Nepal, Toffin himself is also more interested in digging into the empirical details than in applying universal metropolitan theories (Toffin 2009).

What are the key themes taken up by ethnographers who studied Newar? In my reading, three key themes emerge in pronounced ways. The first is around the caste system in Newar society. After the rise of the Hindu Malla kings in the valley in the 13th century, the cities and societies were rigorously modelled around the Hindu kings, pantheons, and above all *Varnashrama Dharma* and the caste system. The caste system and rituals as practised in a Newari society fascinated anthropologists as an archaic specimen that has vanished from India where it originated. Levi (1990) and Parish (1994) studied Newar society in the city of Bhaktapur, which went through a greater degree of Hinduisation. While Hinduism, the caste system, and the associated social process provide the context for both authors, Levi has construed the city of Bhaktapur as a mesocosm of the symbolic system. Parish, on the other hand, has focused on how Hindu Newars in Bhaktapur express morality. Other key anthropologists who have studied the Newar caste structure include Gellner (1992), Pradhan (1986), and Quigley (1993). What I find interesting in their synthesis is that the Newari caste should be understood in relation to kingship and kinship, where Brahmin priests take the role of mediator. This view rightly draws more from Arthur Hocart and deviates from Dumont with a Brahminic textual perspective or the view forwarded by Ronald Inden and Nicholas Dirck, which see caste as a colonial product.

The second theme revolves around Buddhism as practised in Newari society. Just like Hinduism in its archaic form, undisturbed by the British Raj and Muslim rule in India, Buddhism among Newars is also thought to be the last testimony of the Indian Mahayana Buddhism with Sanskrit textual traditions. The study of Buddhism among the Newars is equally complex as it is practised in the overall Hindu milieu. The Newar Vajacharya Buddhist priests themselves have adapted to higher caste status along the hereditary line. David Gellner (1992) provides one of the detailed ethnographies of Newar Buddhism based on his study in the city of Lalitpur. His book, *Monk, Householder, and Tantric Priest: Newar Buddhism and its Hierarchy of Ritual*, offers a first-hand account of Buddhist ritual practices in the larger sociological context supplemented by textual analysis. In Newar Buddhism, according to Gellner, three Buddhist ways of salvation,

a monk (*Sravakayana*), a householder (the *Mahayana*), and a tantric (*Vajrayana*), are ordered in encompassing hierarchy.

Other scholars who are involved in the study of Buddhism among the Newar include Todd Lewis, who studied the popular Buddhist texts (2000). Two other contributions describe the changes within Buddhist practices among the Newar. The first is by Tuladhar–Douglas (2014), who looked at reform during the 15th century, and the other is by Sarah LeVine and David Gellner (2005) on the Theravada movement in the 20th century.

The third theme covers rites of passage, rituals, and festivals. Michael Allen (1996 [1975]) worked on the cult of the living virgin goddess Kumari. Allen and Gutschow worked on rituals of marriage and death among the Newars (Gutschow 2012; 2005). The study of the town of Sankhu by Shrestha (2012) is another good example of a study of rituals. The festival of Bungdya (*Matsyendranath*) was taken up by Bruce Owens (1989), among others.

The Tamang in the Tamsaling

The Tamangs are the largest Tibeto–Burman–speaking ancient inhabitants of the central hills and valleys of Nepal. The traditional territory of the Tamang in Nepal is referred to as Tamsaling in contemporary discourse. Tamang follows the religion that combines Shamanism and Buddhism along with other folk religious practices. They appear to have adopted the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism during the period from the 7th to 10th century. Buddhist learning, pilgrimage, small-scale trade, crossborder pasture, and social exchanges between Tibet and the region of Tamsaling were relatively dense until the 1950s. The social organisation of Tamang is governed by the rules of clan/lineages and their interconnectedness, known as *rui* or *rus*. With regard to the political system, they had their own independent chiefdom like polities before the 18th-century invasion of the Gorkha. The historical records show that there was a confederation of 12 kings referred to as *gyalbo chhungi* comprising 18 great Tamang clans until the invasion of the Gorkha King Prithvi Narayan Shah in the middle of the 18th century (Tamang 2008).

Even though they constitute one of the largest populations in and around the Kathmandu Valley, the Tamang remained the least studied group until the 1970s. Furer–Haimendorf (1956b) was the first to produce a brief ‘Ethnographic Notes on the Tamang of Nepal’. In 1966, Alexander W. Macdonald produced a partial translation of the book *Tamba kaiten hvāi rimthim* by Santabir Lama Pakhrin, which briefly outlined the traditional customs and songs of the Tamangs. He remarked that materials available in Western languages even after 15 years of Nepal’s opening to the outside world were descriptions ‘generally of indifferent quality’, mostly produced in relation to the work of the administration of the Gurkha army under the aegis of the British Empire in London (1983 [1966]: 129).

The situation has changed considerably now. Some of the major ethnographic work among the Tamang that emerged since then have left notable marks on Himalayan anthropology. A survey of ethnographies conducted among the Tamang in Nepal defies categorisation. I propose three broad themes that the ethnographers have taken in their studies for this discussion. The first is on ritual and religion; the second on demography, environment, and ecology; and the third on women’s perspective and gender relations. Society, culture, and history weave into these studies as both context and subject of the inquiry.

András Höfer, a German anthropologist, took the painstaking task of textualising Tamang ritual recitations from the western territory of the Tamang region in Dhading and Nuwakot districts. He produced three volumes of ritual texts (Höfer 1981; 1994; 1997). These texts include recitations by shamans and bards performed during the ritual of worshipping clan gods/goddesses, territorial deities, Shamanic healing, and songs performed in different festivals and

ceremonies. He followed the philologist's approach of rendering oral recitations into written texts with translations but combined them with descriptions of rituals and their context. Höfer demonstrates that the Tamang oral texts integrate Hindu and Buddhist elements, but their language and practices are irreducible to Indic or Bodic worlds.

Holmberg's work (1989) brings Himalayan ethnography to a new height with richly textured ethnography and insightful theoretical analysis. Holmberg analyses the Tamang ritual fields comprising *bonbo* shamans, *lambu* sacrificers, and Buddhist lamas. Grounded in structural approaches and historical analysis, he provides a rich discussion of connections between social formation, cultural logics, and practices of ritual fields. Holmberg locates Tamang myth and ritual in their social context and explains how they help resolve the tension between the symmetrical cultural logic of exchange and an implicit asymmetrical hierarchy of the Tamang world. His contribution to the understanding of Himalayan state formation and its impact on local social processes remained pivotal not only in breaking up the earlier essentialist notion of ethnic and caste identities but also in analysing the role of the local elite and the state. These works also proved the apparent nonviability of the concept of Nepal as an Indian-Tibetan interface and stressed the need to understand Nepali society on its own terms.

Brigitte Steinmann's two ethnographic works, *Les Tamang du Népal: usages et religion, religion de l'usage* (1987) and *Les Enfants du Singe et de la Démone: Mémoires des Tamang récits himalayens* (2001), broadly deal with ritual and religion based on her work in the eastern district of the Tamang residence. In the first work, she is concerned with material culture and religion and provides incisive information on the role of the *tamba* – a bard, historian, and repository of tradition among the Tamang. In the later work, she offers a lively description of rituals ranging from clan god worship, exorcism, and death rituals. By combining textual sources and ethnographic details, Steinmann shows that Tamang society and their ritual practices should be understood in the specific social and historical circumstances of Nepal.

The second theme of the ethnographies revolves around issues of demography, environment, and ecology. Fricke (1994) analysed a remote Tamang village in Dhading from the perspective of demography and cultural ecology and offered a detailed account of how families diversify their agropastoral livelihood by working in layers of vertical ecological zones in resource-scarce Himalayan economies. Campbell, on the other hand, offers an account of communities heavily impacted by aggressive state intervention through the national park and shows how the modern development and environmental regime deprived them of traditional livelihoods and natural resources (2013).

The third theme I categorise here is women's perspective and gender relations in Tamang cultural contexts. In an ethnographic account, *If Each Comes Halfway: Meeting Tamang Women in Nepal*, Kathryn March (2002), based on her two and half decades of fieldwork, shows the lives and words in the biography of ten Tamang women. The book not only tells the life stories of women touching a range of contexts and issues, including family, property, employment, hope, uncertainties, duty, and living but also contributes to ethnomusicology with a rendering of songs from the participants. This work is also innovative in terms of ways to generate anthropological knowledge collaboratively.

The Hyolmo, Chepang, Thami, and other groups

There are other ethnographic works in the Nepal Central Highland that are focused on indigenous groups with a traditional home in the region. They include the Hyolmo, Chepang, Thami, Pahari, Majhi, Hayu, and others. Clarke (1980) was the first among the anthropologists who studied the Buddhist Hyolmo and introduced the people and region through the study of

temple villages and kinship. Desjarlais (1992), in his study of shamans, looked at how healing rituals transform the emotional distress and bodily suffering of patients among the Hyolmo community. Putting aside early brief notes during the 19th century, the first anthropological ethnography among the Chepang was conducted by Nabin Rai (1985). Diana Riboli's (2000) study focused on Shamanism and described how *Tinsurbon* shamans play a central role in people's lives in communicating with spirits, deities, ancestors, or in divining distress and illness. The most recent ethnographic study among the Thangmi/Thami was carried out by Shneiderman (2015). In her book, *Rituals of Ethnicity*, which is based on crossboundary fieldwork, she offers a theoretically sophisticated account of how the Thangmi community engages in the self-conscious construction of identity in the context of politics of recognition. Comprehensive studies on other groups of smaller sizes are yet to come.

Conclusion: rebellion and resistance

The year 1990 was a watershed in the political history of Nepal. The advent of democracy and associated freedom of speech and organisation substantially expanded the possibilities of intellectual life and the nature of anthropological inquiries for all students of Nepal. With a body of ethnographies written, the country entered into a new time and space: Nepal in the nineties remained no longer ethnographically *terra incognita* but a part of global processes and space for multiple readings.

The political change of 1990 was followed by ten years of violent political insurgency led by the Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) from 1996. Thousands of youths from rural areas took part in the Maoist rebellion. The revolution left a deep scar in terms of human and material cost; it challenged the state, existing power relations, and discriminatory sociocultural values. The Maoist movement ended in 2006 with a peace accord, followed by some major changes in the ensuing years. Three fundamental shifts took place in the postconflict era: the country became a republic by removing a 250-year-old autocratic monarchy, declared itself a secular state from the previous representation of Nepal as 'the only Hindu Kingdom in the world', and adopted a federal state structure moving away from the previous unitary model. The new constitution promulgated in 2015 institutionalised these changes. At the societal level, massive labour migration to the Gulf and other countries, movements by historically excluded communities, and the impact of neoliberal development projects have brought substantial changes in both urban and rural communities (Hutt 2020; Sales 2011). The country is going through a long political transition accompanied by political resistance from the margins.

As a result, the anthropological focus shifted beyond the previous modes of study of caste and tribe as bounded entities to the issues of identity politics, resistance, revolution, nationalism, and the state, as well as remittances and transnationalism. The anthology of essays published in the volume *Nationalism and Ethnicity* brings myriad changes in cultural politics underway in post-1990 Nepal (Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka, and Whelpton 1997). The essays in this book locate the roots of ethnic, regional, and linguistics-based movements in the processes of nation-building, and the authors examine the often contradictory efforts of the state to create a homogeneous nation out of diversity through measures such as political and legal control, decentralisation, and education programmes. Ethnic activism, civil society mobilisation, and politics of belonging and recognition have been sustained as major research interests among scholars (Gellner 2009; Holmberg 2016; Lawoti and Hangen 2013; Pfaff-Czarnecka and Toffin 2011; Toffin and Pfaff-Czarnecka 2019). The state-society relationship in contemporary debate is often referred to as internal colonisation by subaltern groups (Holmberg 2017; Tamang 2009).

Studies on the Maoist revolution taken up by anthropologists after the year 2000 explored the everyday experiences of ordinary people in the time of war, the application of Maoist ideology and practices, the sociopolitical context of an uprising, as well as its link with the state, kingship, and other movements (Lecomte-Tilouine 2009; Pettigrew 2013; Steinmann, 2006). The study of the state, which used to largely escape from the purview of pre-1990 anthropological studies, has now become one of the major focuses (Gellner 2003; Toffin 2013). Social movements in the highlands took exclusionary nationalism, federalisation for ethnic autonomy, inclusion, secularism, and multiculturalism as their agenda. As a result, state and resistance have become a critical theme taken up by recent scholarly analysis (Gurung, Tamang, and Turin 2014; Malagodi 2013; Mocko 2016).

Disaster and resilience have emerged as another major theme in anthropological studies of the Nepal Central Highland in recent years (Holmberg and March 2015; Tamang 2020). On 25 April 2015, a 7.8-magnitude earthquake shook the earth violently in Nepal's central mountains, followed by several aftershocks. The disaster took the lives of 8,970 people, and 22,300 were seriously injured. The earthquakes destroyed or damaged approximately 800,000 houses. The devastating disaster dramatically changed the situation in Nepal Central Highland. The communities in the mountain, on the one hand, exhibited an outstanding resilience amidst shock and, on the other hand, organised themselves against the centrally imposed ineffective technocratic solution to recovery by the government.

The early anthropology fostered a master narrative of representing Nepal as an 'interface' between India and Tibet, which influenced almost all spheres of study, including religion, social structure, kinship, marriage, and rituals in later anthropological works. Ethnographic studies conducted since the 1970s established a ground knowledge of Nepali society and culture from divergent interests and perspectives, rendered the trope of 'interface' somehow inadequate, and emphasised the need to study the place and people in their evolving dynamism. In this trajectory, I see Zomia to be a potentially productive idea for bringing the dissenting rebellious voices and state response in Nepal Central Highland which has now become a part of the transnational processes.

Note

- 1 The thirteen districts included in Province 3, which was later named in 2019 as Bagmati Province, are Dolakha, Ramechhap, Sindhuli, Kavrepalanchowk, Sindhupalchowk, Rasuwa, Nuwakot, Dhading, Chitwan, Makwanpur, Bhaktapur, Lalitpur, and Kathmandu.

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