

## “WE WOMEN MUST TRY TO LIVE”: THE SAGA OF BHAUJU

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### First Impressions

My first impression of Bhauju<sup>1</sup> remains very clear in memory. I first saw her one early morning a decade ago. She stood, illuminated by pre-dawn light, gazing out over the flag-stoned courtyard across the great river gorge toward the farther hills and mountains. I was struck by her great beauty and poise—her self-possession as it seemed to me then. She looked over to me in time. “Bahini”,<sup>2</sup> she said in soft greeting, raising one hand to her forehead. Then she picked up a bamboo basket, took down a sickle from the porch rafters and quietly departed the courtyard, off to cut many pounds of cold, wet grass for the buffalo.<sup>3</sup>

That clear, simple first impression has never been erased, but to it have been added many complex overlays. Bhauju was the wife of the eldest son of a family with whom I lived in a large Gurung (Tamu) village in West-Central Nepal.<sup>4</sup> We came to know one another slowly,

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- <sup>1</sup> *Bhāujū* is the kin term for an elder brother’s wife. Throughout this essay Nepali kin terms are used as names. To use kin terms as names is in keeping with common practice in the place described, where social relatedness is emphasized and to use proper names is, in many contexts, rude. All kin terms are from the point of view of the author, incorporated into Bhauju’s household as a fictive daughter, to emphasize the vantage point from which this essay is written.
  - <sup>2</sup> *Bahinī* is the kin term for a younger sister. Bhauju is four or five years my elder. Despite being incorporated into her husband’s household as a fictive daughter (and thus her ‘sister-in-law’) she always called me *bahinī*. Initially this was just a choice of the usual general consanguineal kin term for someone not really related to oneself. But as I became more involved in local relations, others switched over to precise kin terms, while Bhauju never did. Though I never asked, I think she chose to mark the tenor of our friendship in that way, rejecting placement of me on the side of her husband’s family.
  - <sup>3</sup> Bamboo baskets are used for all and sundry agricultural labour. A *hāsiyā*, a curved knife, like a sickle, is used for everything from peeling potatoes to harvesting grain. They are the ubiquitous companions of women farmers in the hills.
  - <sup>4</sup> Ethnographic and historical studies of Gurung/Tamu society include Des Chene (1991), Doherty (1975), D. J. Gurung (2043 v.s., 2049 v.s.), J. Gurung (2034 v.s., 2041 v.s.), Macfarlane (1976), McHugh (1985), Messerschmidt (1976), Moisala (1991), Mumford (1989), Pettigrew (1995), Pignède (1966), Ragsdale (1989) and Strickland

and sometimes surreptitiously, as both mundane daily happenings and extraordinary events involved us in one another's lives. Although doing research on other matters, I was at times immersed in what I came to think of as "The Saga of Bhauju". I later came to know that when I first saw her she gazed toward her *māita*, her natal home, but I did not know that—and much else—then.

The trials that Bhauju endured during the time I lived in her household, and the complex responses of others taught me much of what I learned about Gurung styles of managing reputation and negotiating anger. I learned at the same time about depths of friendship among women not readily evident without being immersed in difficult times together. Besides the personal concern for my daily companions which will be evident here, it was about those topics that, at the time, I understood myself to be learning from Bhauju's saga.

Since completing the writing of Bhauju's story itself, several years ago, many people have made suggestions about how to "frame" it. Different readers have urged me to cast it as a life history or as an example of women's resistance to patriarchy (in which case, I was told, and of the main characters, Jethi might be presented more heroically). Others have noticed its affinities with Victor Turner's model of a social drama, with its stages of deepening contradictions, crisis, and eventual resolution into partially transformed social relations. But while Bhauju's story could conceivably be poured into these and other molds, my understanding of its significance leaves me dissatisfied with this social scientific strategy (whatever the chosen mold) for domesticating and digesting others' painful realities.<sup>5</sup> The idea, of course, is that pouring others' lives into such molds will render visible to us general patterns, make evident the broader significance of what are otherwise merely pedestrian details, and thus bring theoretical advancement in the study of society. But is it so?

The effort to produce a written version of Bhauju's saga has reinforced my view that theoretical formulations should be measured against such a

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(1982). For recent Gurung discussions of Gurung society see the magazines *Rodhi* and *Tamu Suñ Tamñ*. For an introduction to Gurung analyses of Gurung society, and to debates regarding their status and rights as an ethnic minority within Nepal, see Des Chene (1996).

5 Thus as I have revised the discussion preceding and following Bhauju's saga many times, I have left the story unaltered, but for plucking a comma here or altering a word there, as my understanding of it changed. The point is that our understanding and analyses should be challenged by the tale, rather than the tale rearranged to fit our understanding or analytic interests.

tale rather than crafting the tale to exemplify a theoretical point. Clifford (1988) and, more forcefully, Said (1989, 1991) have pointed out how social scientific theory serves as the master narrative within which others' conceptions are subsumed and to which they are made to refer. It remains in short, an imperial enterprise at heart. Social science has as yet shown few signs of coming to terms with that foundational criticism, but even such a transformation would not alone be enough. Somewhere along the way—and I suspect it could be quite closely tied to Western social theory's adolescent world tour through the colonies—we got things backwards. Theory was meant to illuminate the world, not the reverse. The Nepal of social science changes like a chameleon to fit new theoretical molds. Social science will have more to say to Nepal if it changes to grapple with Nepali contexts.

Pointing out the broader structural contexts that affect it—one kind of work that social science can conceivably do—has potential to enhance rather than occlude our understanding of the particularities of Bhauju's story. What I reject is an *a priori* placement of it within a theoretical mold. This is not to say that there is some entirely atheoretical descriptive telling that would remain true to "what really happened". My perspective then—and also now, as a narrator—is shaped by years of familiarity with social theory as much as by my involvement in the events described. But there remains a great difference between an account that stays close to events and statements while trying to see, by means of them, how the state, tradition and attitudes toward women impinge on individual lives, and one that intentionally shapes local events, *ex post facto*, to exemplify a theoretical point. If any theoretical concern has shaped this narrative, it is precisely a worry about the tendency to pre-theorize others' lives. Thus I first tell my version of Bhauju's story, and then return to what it might teach those whose story it is not.

While Bhauju will always be, in my mind, the central character, this essay is in fact about two women, Bhauju and her husband's eldest sister, Jethi.<sup>6</sup> In demeanor and in situation, they initially appeared to me to have little in common. Bhauju was quiet, deferential; Jethi assertive, voluble. Bhauju was in the often unfavourable position of daughter-in-law, Jethi the eldest and favoured daughter of the household. Yet they also had two great commonalities. First, each was engaged in a struggle to redefine her place, sometimes transgressing social expectations to do so. Second, all that transpired between and around them took place against a

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6 *Jethī* is a birth order term for eldest female.

single backdrop: a steady decline in the reputation of their household. Bhauju's trials and Jethi's actions were ingredient to this decline, while the reputation of the household had, at the same time, a bearing on their fortunes and on the choices they made. They were very differently positioned, as daughter and daughter-in-law, in relation to this domestic situation. Yet as wider social circumstances—migratory labor, state inheritance law, and so on—affected them, their common circumstances as women were also salient. For all these reasons, while very different as individuals, I think it would be a mistake to understand their actions primarily in terms of “character” or personality. Being women mattered throughout the events recounted here. Being women in particular kinship relations to others, Gurung women of whom certain styles of conduct were expected, Nepali women living under certain state laws, and hill women in a particular economy of subsistence agriculture and wage labor remittance—all these social placements matter at various junctures in the tale that follows.

#### **A Host of Circumstances**

I had been living with Bhauju's household for several weeks before our first encounter. Bhauju had been in town, several day's walk away, undergoing treatment for her tuberculosis. It was the only time she would have such treatment in the two years for which I know the details of her daily life. Bhauju was herself, in a sense, a newcomer. She had briefly lived in the household as a new bride some ten years before, but through most of her marriage she had been in India where her husband worked as a peon in a government office. During those years in India she had borne four children. The two eldest, a boy and a girl, died at the ages of six and seven, within fifteen days of one another from a disease for which Bhauju knew no name. Her two living children, Nani, a daughter nearly two, and Babu<sup>7</sup> not yet walking, returned with her from India.

Around the time of Nani's birth, Bhauju's husband contracted tuberculosis, and sometime thereafter Bhauju, in turn, contracted it from him. Just six months before our first meeting he had brought his family back to live in his parents' house. After visiting briefly, he returned to his work in India. And so Bhauju was, on our first encounter, a long-married

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7 *Nānī* is an affectionate term for the eldest girl child. *Babu* is an affectionate term used especially for young boy children, one which can also be used for respected senior and high-caste men—a confluence that points to the value traditionally given to boy children.

woman but a newly arrived daughter-in-law—the only daughter-in-law—among a household of relative strangers. She was thus, in many ways, back where she had been years before, yet older now, unwell, carrying sorrow, and without the buffer that a husband's presence might afford in her in-laws' house.

I learned these details of Bhauju's past only slowly. At first I simply knew that her husband worked in India while she lived there with her children. Having come to study Gurkha soldiery (Des Chene 1991), the main form of migratory labor, such a situation seemed unexceptional. I was meeting many women whose husbands were abroad. Indeed it was some time before I learned that Bhauju was, like me, a newcomer. Her interactions with household members were so brief and utilitarian that it was not clear from conversation that they did not have a long shared past.

Bhauju's children were the joy of the household. Throughout the day they circulated among their great-grandmother, grandmother and two paternal aunts, Jethi and Kanchi,<sup>8</sup> with whom they also slept at night. I first saw this, naively, simply as an example of the virtues of an extended family for childcare. Only gradually, and as other things made me watch more closely, did I realize that the children were rarely in the company of their mother. Indeed, I slowly came to see that they were actively kept away from her. Bhauju would often say, when Nani begged to be carried, that she was too old and her back too sore. It was a long time before I learned that this was the sacrifice of a woman who did not want her child to learn, by being snatched from her arms, that others thought poorly of her mother. What Bhauju never knew about, and I never told her, were the criticisms of Bhauju that came to be whispered with increasing frequency into her young daughter's ear by her eldest aunt, Jethi.

Bhauju had begun to decide, she told me much later, that her *kismet*—her fate—would not be kind. Marriage, migration and childbirth had marked Bhauju's transition to adulthood. Like other women with young children, she described herself as '*baccāko amā*' (the mother of a baby). This identity assumes marriage and a husband, and being a daughter-in-law, but it is talked about by women in other ways: having a baby on one's hip or back while working, being peed on in the night and knowing, with other women, the joys and trials of being a mother in a place where the health of infants is precarious. Unlike other women with young children, however, Bhauju spoke of herself this way only in the past tense. In her view she had passed quickly through the time of young

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8 *Kanchi* is the birth order term for youngest female.

motherhood and was now in decline—*budhi bhayo* (old). To be young in years yet feel oneself to be old, to have given birth to four children but have only two, and those that were living kept away from one, and to be married ten years yet treated as a new daughter-in-law, all these circumstances combined appeared to Bhauju as marks of a cruel fate slowly unfolding. “When my children died”, she said to me, “I too began to die...Still, we women must try to live”.

Of Bhauju herself, it took me some time to acquire any more sense than that afforded by my first impressions. Her silence and poised demeanor, I took for serenity, knowing nothing of her history. Her careful attention to appearance and her fine clothes, when I thought about them at all, I took to signify a degree of wealth and perhaps a certain vanity, for I thought her beautiful and imagined that she thought the same. I could not have guessed that she wore her best skirt to cut grass so that it would not disappear while she was gone, nor that Bhauju thought of herself as an old woman. It was a long time before I learned that she treated her body with care less out of vanity than because she sensed its decline, and as a means of affirming an identity other than the one attributed to her by members of her household—that of a laborer. Her apparent serenity, I learned to understand as the carefully practiced deference of a newly arrived daughter-in-law escaping into silence—a mode of survival.

Her grace in speech and action, like her physical appearance, were means, I now think, of preserving a different sense of herself, and a constant, visible critique of the treatment she received—meeting disrespect with respect, gracelessness with grace. I learned this and much more over the months to follow. I counted myself naive for not having seen all this from the outset, but without knowing Bhauju’s history or understanding the challenges being put forth by Jethi, I could never have read the many statements being made in the course of perfunctory daily tasks.

I came to know Jethi much more quickly, or so it seemed at first. She was outgoing, quick-witted and fun to be around. She quickly took me over as her responsibility. Jethi ran a “hotel” as she called it, just down the path from the house. Her hotel was a small thatch hut from which she dispensed home-made liquor (*raksī*) and a few store-bought goods like cigarettes and candles. It was also a place where the porters of tourists might cook their own food and take shelter. In the back were two cots where Jethi, her younger sister Kanchi and Bhauju’s two children slept at night. Someone had to protect the goods in the hotel, as Jethi explained to me. In turn, the children’s presence protected the reputations of the two sisters, particularly when porters were present.

Jethi spent much of her time at her hotel, selling tea to occasional village visitors, weaving carpets on a loom set up by the door, and overseeing the children. Through the open door she could see the path to the water source for the hamlet, and so she carried on many shouted conversations with women as they proceeded to and from that busy spot. She also cooked for me there. On most days I would visit morning and evening and have my meal with Jethi and little Nani, Bhauju's daughter. We were often joined by Kanchi, and sometimes by other family members. After supper other neighbors often joined us there, and we had many pleasant, and for me informative, conversations around the fire in Jethi's hotel. But as crises occurred and relationships soured, this hearth became the site of family conferences and Jethi's plan-making. I was thus privy to many discussions of Bhauju's future and subject to many efforts to gain my allegiance to Jethi's point of view. After supper conversations remained informative, but were less often pleasant as events transpired.

As with Bhauju, I first took the way things were, and how they appeared, to be circumstances of long standing. Eventually I learned that the hotel was a new venture, embarked upon in anticipation of Bhauju's return to the household. Gradually, I learned that Jethi's apparent popularity with the women in nearby households was not so universal as it appeared from the friendly public conversations I heard take place between path and hotel. Much later I learned that the piece of land where Jethi's hotel was built, had been wrested from her father after great argument. It was her first public claim to authority in the household.

After a few months women who had befriended me began to say quietly that I should not "walk with" Jethi too much. In fact, we rarely walked anywhere together, but I knew enough by then to take this as a warning about reputation: that those with whom one associated would be taken as a guide to one's own character. I was also learning that actions counted for much more than words in the judgment of a person's character. Perhaps, I thought, Jethi's entrepreneurial spirit is seen as inappropriate. Are other women trying to keep her "in her place"? At this point I had little sense of a relationship between Bhauju and Jethi, for I saw Bhauju mainly at the house, and Jethi mainly at her hotel, where Bhauju did not visit. And, as it turned out, I knew too little of Jethi's past and present endeavors to see that their apparently quite separate daily lives had everything to do with one another.

What I would learn over time was that Jethi took the opportunity of Bhauju's return to redefine her place in the household. No longer would she do agricultural labor. The addition of Bhauju's labor to the household

was crucial to such a stance, which was nonetheless taken as a sign of non-cooperativeness, and a radical challenge to parental authority, by observant neighbors. By opting out of agricultural labor Jethi removed herself from a primary site of sociality, and a main means of inter-household cooperation, for much agricultural labor was done communally. Her argument was that she would instead contribute cash to the household, through her “hotel” business and the sale of carpets. Jethi’s longer term plan, as it turned out, was to become economically independent and leave the village, preferably for Kathmandu. The notion of a single individual being economically independent is not one that makes much sense in a Gurung social context, thus no one guessed this ambition until events made it unavoidably clear. In the meantime the public faces turned toward Jethi were friendly, but privately her usurpation of her father’s authority within the household met with disapproval. Fewer local customers at her hotel was, initially, the only outward sign.

### **Bhauju’s Daily Round**

It is not a secret that, in many parts of the world, women do an inordinate share of daily labor. *Which* women is, however, less often remarked upon. One of the overriding facts of Bhauju’s life was the division of labor, not just between men and women, but among women. Within the household there were, excluding myself, five women. Bajyai, nearing ninety watched the children, and kept chickens away from drying grain while warming herself in the sun, but was otherwise exempt from labor. Aamaa,<sup>9</sup> in her sixties and healthy, if thin, was still well within the age when many women cut wood and grass, and sowed, weeded, reaped and hauled loads from the fields. But with two adult daughters and a daughter-in-law in the house, she preferred to confine her work to the preparation of meals, watching the children and other tasks around the house. Thus the bulk of the agricultural labor fell, potentially, to Jethi, Kanchi, and Bhauju.

In practice it was to Bhauju that the bulk of daily work devolved. Her routine went much like the following, day after day. She rose from her spot on the floor, quite far from the fire, about four in the morning. Her first task was to make three or four trips to fill the great brass jars with water for the day. While at the water source, she found a moment for a

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9 *Bajyai* means grandmother; *āmā* means mother. Bajyai was the paternal grandmother of Bhauju’s husband and his siblings (Jethi, etc.). Aamaa is the mother of Bhauju’s husband, and his siblings, and thus the daughter-in-law of Bajyai.



daily *pūjā* (worship). The next task was to plaster the porch which ran along the front of the house. Taking clay from a pile she, and sometimes Kanchi, would periodically replenish from a site far above the village, she mixed it with water and, with an old rag, produced a fresh floor coating for the day's activities. This finished, she would feed and milk the buffalo (sometimes one, sometimes two). It was then time to go inside and start the fire, where she would place the milk to boil and set a kettle alongside so that tea could be prepared by Aamaa. As others then arose, she applied a fresh clay coating to the floor around the fire. Sometimes she would have a cup of tea at this point, sometimes it was not yet prepared when she left. Now she departed to cut grass for the buffalo. It was at this moment, well into her morning, that I had first encountered Bhauju. The rest of the day varied by need and season—collecting wood or clay, grinding grain at the water mill and hauling the flour to the house, weeding, harvesting, winnowing, washing clothes...

In such a daily routine she would often descend and climb a thousand feet or more in a day. The loads of grass, wood and grain that Bhauju commonly carried in a basket on her back weighed from sixty to eighty pounds, by the reckoning of my own back. She ate, like others, two meals a day, mid-morning and evening, with an afternoon snack in between. But Bhauju's food, doled out by Aamaa, came last and was most scanty. She was rarely given meat or milk, even when the rest of the household had them. Under this regime, Bhauju's tuberculosis seemed to worsen. She looked drawn, and she coughed.

Bhauju's daily routine is not an atypical one; many Gurung women work hard from morning till night. Indeed, on top of the activities outlined above, many must cook for their households and care for their young children. Bhauju had neither of those responsibilities. Yet her daily routine was the subject of much gossip and thoroughgoing disapproval by all the women who knew the family well enough to be aware of it.<sup>10</sup> Bhauju's increasingly obvious ill health was one reason for this approbation. Even in a poorer household, it was said, a daughter-in-law would be given easier tasks and not made to carry loads in such condition. Bhauju's heavy manual labor was frequently contrasted to Jethi's sedentary routine; it was evident that there were other options. The bulk of the

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<sup>10</sup> This included, first of all, those living in the same hamlet and nearby, but also relatives further away, and those with social ties such that they would hear accounts of Bhauju's treatment. Thus the effect of the treatment of Bhauju on the household's reputation was quite widespread.

criticism, however, had to do with the manner in which Bhauju was made to do her work: in solitude.

Women's labor was eminently social. Major projects, like sowing and reaping were carried out through organized labor sharing within hamlets, involving both men and women.<sup>11</sup> Daily tasks were carried out by the women of each household for that household, yet they too were done socially. Several women would go together to get water. Friends coordinated trips to the mill. Wood and grass cutting were often also excursions with friends, and no one would do either alone except out of dire necessity, for reasons of safety as well as sociality. Yet Bhauju was forbidden to join such groups. Once beyond the vicinity of the house, of course she sometimes did, and it was during these trips that other women learned in some detail of her circumstances. Kanchi, Jethi's younger sister was, however, frequently sent out to ensure that this did not happen, and Kancha,<sup>12</sup> Jethi's youngest brother, who roamed with his friends, was also a source of information. If news of Bhauju socializing while working reached the house, she faced an evening of sustained criticism by Aamaa, Baba<sup>13</sup> and often Jethi, who would sometimes yell at her for gossiping about them and for her lack of appreciation for the food and shelter she and her children were given. That talk would flow was, of course, precisely the motive for attempts to keep Bhauju away from such groups in the first place. But this restriction, contrary to common practice and to women's sense of their rights and of a key source of pleasure in life, produced just the gossip it was meant to foreclose.

### **Women Watching (Out For) One Another**

Here it is necessary to introduce one peculiarity of Bhauju's household. Gurung kinship reckoning is patrilineal, residence after marriage is traditionally patrilocal, and cross-cousin marriages, especially matrilateral ones, are preferred. When joint households split, often when

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11 At these times Bhauju was permitted to join in cooperative work groups, but only so that she could contribute the labour required of the household.

12 *Kanchā* or *kancho* is the birth order term for youngest male. Kancha was about twenty. He had finished school but not passed the S.L.C., a common predicament. He did no regular work for the household and spent much of his time playing ball games with his friends. Only in the most intense part of harvest periods did he ever do agricultural labour, and then a limited amount. He too was looking for ways out of the village, but he did not show the entrepreneurial flair of Jethi.

13 *Baba* is one term for father. Baba is the father of Bhauju's husband and his siblings (Jethi, etc.).

sons were married adults, brothers had, in the past, frequently built adjacent houses. Thus hamlets within the village tended to coincide quite closely with patrilineages, and many in-married women were of the same clan as one another. This situation aided the cooperative arrangements among households for they were formally united through patrilineal relations, and informally related through women's clan ties. Bhauju's household was an exception to this pattern within its hamlet.<sup>14</sup>

Bajyai, the grandmother of the household, had grown up in that hamlet and moved at marriage, as per custom, to her husband's house in a distant part of the village. But at the death of her father, as sole surviving child, she inherited the house and moved back with her husband and children.<sup>15</sup> Thus the clan relations were reversed in this case. Bhauju's husband and his family were Ghotane, the clan of most of the in-married women of the hamlet, while Bhauju was Lamechane, the clan of the men of the hamlet and their children.

The point of this excursion into Gurung kinship is twofold. First, many of the in-married women of the hamlet owed allegiance to Bhauju's household as members of the same clan. They had a number of ritual obligations to the household, and relations should have been and in times past I was told, had been, especially close and cooperative. Moreover, the conduct of the household rebounded on their own reputations in a particularly forceful way, for if its members were stingy or uncooperative, it was members of their own clan who were behaving poorly. The second consequence of this chance of inheritance was that Bhauju, unlike all other in-married women, was in the relation of sister or daughter to the other adult men of the hamlet, as members of the same clan.<sup>16</sup> They thus owed to her the solicitude and aid appropriate to this relationship. Their wives, as members of these Lamechane households, had the further responsibility of seeing to the welfare of their husbands' clan sister. Thus the women of the hamlet had a special interest in Bhauju's welfare, in Jethi's conduct, and in the reputation of the household.

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14 Real life introduces other variations on this general pattern too. One, which is on the increase, is the absence of many household members working elsewhere in Nepal and abroad, and the migration of whole families. But the residential pattern of large Gurung villages like the one where I lived was built up in this way, and those who still live there tend to be related in the ways described.

15 All her father's brothers were deceased by the time she inherited the house. Nevertheless, this is an example of the exceptions that Gurungs sometimes make, in individual cases, to the general pattern of male inheritance.

16 In a few cases she had a more specific kin relation.

Neither Bhauju's circumstances nor Jethi's behavior met with their approval, but for many months I was puzzled by what seemed a dissonance between private talk and public behavior. Privately I heard criticism of the conduct of household members. Empathy for Bhauju, and sometimes empathy for Jethi's father, who was perceived to be publicly humiliated by Jethi's usurpation of household decision making, was frequently voiced. Some women spoke of their anger over the treatment of Bhauju; household members were said to be no longer Gurung at all—as evidenced by their conduct—a grave indictment. I was even urged by a number of women to move out. No one, they said, should have to endure such disharmony. Yet the public faces turned toward household members remained friendly, Jethi's shouted pathside conversations continued daily, and cooperative labor exchanges remained operative. I began to understand that to make a rift public is avoided whenever possible. Everyone might know, but if it is not publicly stated, the breach may yet quietly be mended, whereas a public breach produces further disharmony (cf. Brenneis 1984).

What took longer to understand was how women's skill at taking care of one another was at work. It was only by maintaining the public appearance of harmony that Bhauju could be helped, for a formal breach would cut off access. Indeed, those who voiced the strongest disapproval maintained the greatest appearance that nothing was amiss, and had the most interactions with the household. They were thus more free to come and go from the house, and Bhauju was less heavily censured if seen pausing by their courtyards or cutting grass in proximity to them. That these women brought extra food to the forest for Bhauju, hid her clothes in their houses, and provided moral support, went unnoticed despite the careful scrutiny to which she was subjected.

It is a common sight in the hills of Nepal to see women carrying heavy baskets on their backs through field and forest, and along village paths. I first saw just that, and only gradually came to see much more in the travels of a group of women I was coming to know. Those who have lived for years together read yet more knowledgeably the social significance of who walks with whom, and who does what labor where—ever changing patterns of allegiance, friendship and rift. I made the mistake of imagining the daily routines I first encountered, like those of Jethi and Bhauju, to be quite timeless ones. But even as I learned they were the result of recent circumstances, they were becoming routine. When after seven months I left for a visit home, both Jethi and Bhauju had for some months been settled into the daily routines I have described.

The implications of those routines, and the likelihood of conflict resulting from their entanglement—Jethi’s sedentary routine depended precisely on Bhauju’s peripatetic one—was just then becoming evident to me. Of course, what precisely would happen I could not foresee, but trouble seemed to loom ahead.

### Changing Fortunes

I was away for several months. When I returned there was, of course, news, but things seemed much the same in the household. I brought Bhauju pictures of her and her children, and one night soon after my return she came late in the evening to see them.<sup>17</sup> She looked at them with evident pleasure, naming *chorā*, *chorī* (son, daughter) with a catch in her voice, but then handed them back. “They’re for you, take them”, I said. “No, Bahini”, she said, “you keep them and I will come and look at them sometimes”. Prior to my departure Bhauju had commented to me only in oblique terms about her situation in the household. Now she stared long at me assessing, I think, whether she could trust in my discretion. Finally she said in a low, low voice, “If I take them, they will take them away from me”. And after this, a flood of stories about the disappearance of her best skirts and other things, came forth. She told and told, of small hardships, of having no place of her own. The key to her one trunk had, she said, been taken from her and was now kept by Aamaa. I kept the pictures, and adjusted my vision once again.

Change, and with it conflict, came quickly. Within a few months of my return Bhauju’s health (although, as it happened, not her tuberculosis), finally brought about a change from her daily round. Bhauju’s right hand and forearm became, over several weeks, swollen beyond recognition. She carried on her work in this condition for weeks, but finally, nearly delirious with pain, it was evident that she could not continue her heavy daily labor. Kanchi was despatched in her place, fetching water and grass, the minimum for the day’s requirements. For several days Bhauju lay on the bed furthest from the hearth, moaning quietly, lapsing in and out of sleep. No one could diagnose the cause. Neighboring women speculated that a grass cut infection was the source, but privately I was told that it was only in her weakened state that it could become so severe. I took this to be a reference to her tuberculosis but was

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17 Posing Bhauju for pictures was one of the rare occasions on which she was allowed to hold her children.

quickly corrected. It was the state of her souls (*plah*) and her *sae* that were meant.<sup>18</sup>

I had tried unsuccessfully in the past to take Bhauju to town to be treated for her tuberculosis. Since my return I had renewed those efforts, to no avail. With the onset of this new health problem, I feared that soon she would not be able to walk, but despite my offer to pay, departure was continually delayed. Finally Aamaa had explained to me that they could not do without Bhauju's labor even for a few days. My retort that they might soon have to do without it altogether had only served to increase ill feeling. Now it seemed that both prophecies were coming to pass: Bhauju could no longer walk to town, but neither could she work. Thus an impasse and a crisis were simultaneously reached. On the third day I stayed nearby to watch and try to feed Bhauju when she awoke, working on transcriptions in my small loft room. It was a day of *simsim pāni*, a light steady rain falling from low cloud, mountains hidden, sounds muted yet distinct. As it turned out, it was the lull before the storm.

Around four o'clock I heard Kanchi return and deposit her load of grass by the buffalo shed below. As I prepared to come down to check on Bhauju and make sure she was not sent out to feed the buffalo, I heard Kanchi, instead, ascending the ladder. She came, shaking rain from herself, and pulled an envelope from her skirts. Looking pensive, she handed it to me and asked me what it said. As Kanchi watched me, I read, in the blunt shorthand language of telegrams, that Jetha, Kanchi's eldest

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18 I have a limited knowledge of these concepts, acquired *ad hoc* as I encountered their use in times of misfortune and illness. According to McHugh, the *sae* is the site of cognition and memory, and the locus of the will. She likens assessments of the state of a person's *sae* to Western folk notions of personality, but notes that it differs "in the connections that are drawn between internal states and external events...the idea of the *sae* describes an interactive process between an individual's inner condition and the outer events of the world. Misfortune or humiliation causes the *sae* to shrink, and a small *sae*, in turn, leads to bad judgment, incorrect behavior, and unfortunate events" (1989:82). She goes on to say that the concept of *sae* "acts as an ideology that enforces the moral order of the Gurung world, offering an image in which social virtues are rewarded by personal well-being and social failings are punished by a diminishing of self" (1989:82). Views about Bhauju and Jethi show how complex such assessments can be, for Jethi, who remained in robust health, was spoken of in just these negative terms, whereas Bhauju was held blameless for the series of unfortunate events that befell her. Her *sae* was said to be growing small out of despair not because of her own misdeeds. In keeping with McHugh's analysis, the primary concern was with the state of her *plah* (souls), which were thought to be in danger of fleeing her body, bringing death, due both to her weak physical condition and, crucially, to the cumulative effects of constant acts of unkindness and enforced asociality.

brother, Bhauju's husband, had "expired", and that his wife was to be sent forthwith to India. I looked at Kanchi peering anxiously at me and I thought of Bhauju lying, semi-conscious, below. Rain pattered gently in the long silence. Finally, I spoke:

X, that's your oldest brother's name isn't it? It's about him.  
Is Jetha all right?  
You know that he's been ill don't you?  
Yes, is it worse?  
It got worse, and now...  
No!  
Yes, bahini, it says...three weeks ago...  
Jetha's dead isn't he?  
Yes, Bahini, three weeks ago...he died three weeks ago<sup>19</sup>

She sat stunned beside me, finally saying amid her tears that she could not tell her mother and grandmother. We made no mention of Bhauju. Finally she went below and, like me, forced to give the news, she did. I soon heard keening from below and went down.

Bhauju had risen from her sick bed. Clutched in her good hand was the photo of her husband that usually adorned the *pūjā* place. Kneeling, photo pressed to her forehead she was crying and at once singing, in the staccato lament of Gurung women's mourning songs. She sang of her sorrow, of her pitiful condition. Not only ill, not only alone in her in-law's house, not only a mother deprived of the affection of her children, now she was moreover, a widow. 'Life is over, yet life will go on', she sang. 'What is to become of me now?'<sup>20</sup> Aamaa, Bajyai and Kanchi huddled, sobbing, in a corner. Jethi soon arrived and, hearing the news, wept long and inconsolably. Hearing the commotion, and recognizing the sounds of mourning, women from nearby houses soon began to arrive, shawls tightly pulled over their heads and joined in the crying and laments even while urging Bhauju and the others to stop. Bhauju's children wailed in bewilderment and clung tightly to me.

Neighboring men also began to arrive, sitting in the courtyard and examining the telegram, which I was called to interpret. After a long

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19 A few words may be changed, but this is a close rendering of the conversation, which is carved in my memory.

20 I paraphrase here. I heard this and similar laments sung by Bhauju over the following days. Although overt criticism of her treatment quickly became more muted, the refrain "What is to become of me now?" persisted.

discussion of the etymology of the word “expired”<sup>21</sup> they accepted the news and promptly began to debate the likelihood of a pension being forthcoming. Baba, father of the now deceased Jetha arrived home and heard the news. He sat in stony silence staring at the cold hearth, joining neither the mourning female members of his household, nor the neighbouring men’s debate in the courtyard..

After several hours I was drawn away to a nearby house. There the women of the hamlet, except those of the immediate family, gradually congregated and discussed Bhauju’s fate. All agreed that her life would become yet worse. Now there would be no income from India to compensate for her presence, and no worry of a son or brother’s disapproval of maltreatment. But above all these women, who frequently took risks to make Bhauju’s life better in small ways, said to me again and again, “Now your Bhauju’s bangles will have to be broken. We will have to do it. You’ll cry when you break her bangles. It’s too sad. Our hearts will break.” Saying this, or something much like it, they began, again and again, to sob uncontrollably.

I knew that a widow could no longer wear the red bangles that signify married status. But so much else, besides the imminent loss of bangles, seemed more important. Bhauju appeared to be seriously ill; now she was widowed with all that portended. This focus on bangles seemed to me petty, or perhaps, I thought, a displacement of grief. Or perhaps bangles are an especially evocative symbol of all that being married means to a woman. I was soon to revise my opinion by joining in the making of a widow.

### **Making a Widow**

Many Gurung men, serving as soldiers, have died abroad. The armies that recruit them provide Hindu *paṇḍits* to perform rituals, including those of death. Like a soldier abroad, Jetha had been cremated and Hindu ritual observances performed.<sup>22</sup> From a Gurung point of view, his body had been taken care of, but it remained to care for his soul. He must be made to realize his state, be prepared for his journey and, finally, guided to the land (or “village”, as most people said) of the dead.<sup>23</sup> Thus all funeral rites

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21 The telegram was written in English.

22 We knew that with certainty only later, but it was assumed from the outset because he had died in India.

23 Detailed descriptions of Gurung funeral rituals and beliefs about the state of the recently deceased can be found in Pignède (1966) and McHugh (1985). The most powerful presentation in print that I know of, of how that experience is imagined, is a



except those concerned with preparation and disposal of the corpse were carried out at home, wherever and whenever a person may have died. The day the news arrived was counted, for these ritual purposes, as the day of death. So it was that, after a few days of spreading the news to scattered kin, the lamps that would bring Jetha to his former home were to be lit. First, Bhauju would be stripped of all symbols of marriage.

On that day I awoke to find on the porch an old woman in the process of slicing Bhauju's swollen hand with a rusty razor blade. Over my protestations she made three long slits on thumb and palm. As I explained about rust and infection, she explained that the pus must be let out. But all that came was blood, and as we debated Bhauju's eyes rolled back and she fell into a coma. For two hours she lay unconscious, pulse alternating from pounding to barely perceptible. It seemed she might follow her husband to the village of the dead. But at last we roused her and fed her hot milk. Thereafter she lapsed in and out of consciousness, finally dozing on the porch. By noon the porch was needed for funerary rituals, and Bhauju, bundled in a blanket, was carried inside and laid by the cold hearth. So began the making of a widow.

Later in the afternoon the lama called into the house that it was time to "make my little sister a widow".<sup>24</sup> Bhauju was sleeping, but the women who sat watch beside her shook her awake and pulled her into a sitting position. She could not sit unaided and was barely conscious. Her face was slapped, lightly but insistently, to revive her and she was held in a sitting position. We surrounded her, so no one could see her. None of the other women of the household were present, all were in the courtyard, but the house was full of neighbors and relatives. It was those of us who had become Bhauju's quiet supporters who gathered around her, half a dozen Ghotane women from nearby houses and myself. All cried, but everyone except me also evinced a strong resolve to carry through with what must be done. Following curt orders, I took off Bhauju's red *colo* (blouse) which she could wear no more, removed her *pote* (wedding necklace) from around her neck, and dressed her in an old t-shirt, turned inside-out. Then the other women began beating at the bangles on Bhauju's wrists. Those on her swollen arm were by then so tight that they cut into her flesh. I had tried to remove them days before when she lay sick, but with a soft smile she had refused, saying that she must

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short story by Ganusingh Gurung (1965), written from the point of view of a recently deceased person gradually discovering his condition.

24 The local lama, who lived in a nearby house, was of the same clan as Bhauju.

always wear them to honour her husband. We wept and they beat at Bhauju's arm while she again lost consciousness and I propped her up. Finally the last glass shards fell to the floor. A wife had died; a widow was born.

Bhauju was then carried outside where we loosened her hair and poured water over her head in the cold fall weather. She moaned, but did not regain consciousness. Her part in the ritual over, we took her inside and tried to warm her, though without aid of a fire because of the mourning period. As we sat quietly around her, wondering if she would live, I no longer thought that the talk of bangles was an oblique way of referring to her other, more serious troubles. For the breaking of the bangles was, in the doing, not a "mere symbol" of becoming a widow; it was the act itself. At least it was so for those who performed it; Bhauju thankfully remembered little of the ordeal. Still, when she awoke later that night she looked first to her arms and said: "No bangles, it's finished then".<sup>25</sup>

#### **"What is to Become of Me Now?"**

A week later preparations for the main funeral ceremony were in full swing. Jethi had left for Kathmandu to get money that, so women whispered to me, she had acquired for her business by selling Bhauju's wedding gold. Whether this was true I never ascertained, but it was "true" for all intents and purposes, for it was what people now believed. It was instead to be spent on her brother's funeral, and people remarked on the appropriateness of this karmic retribution.

A Gurung *pae* (funeral) is a large event, entailing much expense and requiring much labor. Besides its significance for the deceased, it also is meant to realign and reaffirm social ties now transformed by absence. Careful track is kept of attendance and contributions, and not to attend a *pae* or contribute appropriately, is one way to publicly mark a breach of relations. Some distant relatives and a few powerful village families took this chance to break their ritual ties with this increasingly ill-mannered and unfortunate household. Close kin and neighbors, however, whatever their sentiments, were not willing to create a public breach. Nonetheless, Jetha's father was forced to make rounds requesting assistance in the work of preparing for the *pae*, a most unusual occurrence. This, women

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<sup>25</sup> Although red glass bangles were a relatively new mark of married status, borrowed from Hindu Nepalis, they had clearly acquired centrality in women's thinking and experience.

explained to me, was a way to make public their disapproval without overt statement of it. The message, of course, was lost on no one.

Bhauju remained very weak and ill. Yet one morning I did not find her on the cot that was temporarily hers. From neighbors I learned that she had been sent to grind rice flour in preparation for the ceremonies. I quickly followed, for I knew the weight of a basket of flour (80 to 100 pounds) and did not think Bhauju could carry it back up the long steep hill. Grinding flour took many hours and though she had left in the darkness, it was not yet finished, giving us our first chance to talk privately since the news of her husband's death had arrived. As soon as I arrived Bhauju began to talk. "I have been quiet, like a good daughter-in-law", she said, "but now I am *khatam*" (finished, done for). She now faced life as a widowed daughter-in-law. The thought of their son's return could no longer, even theoretically, temper her treatment by household members. There was no life different from the one she had been leading to anticipate. Even the solace of caring for her children had already been taken from her.<sup>26</sup>

Bhauju explained all this to me as part of her *kismet*, her fate. She did not know why she was destined to suffer, but it was clear to her as she assessed her situation, that she was so destined. It was at this time that she looked back to the death of her two older children as the moment when her fate had turned, as she said, to ash. She saw only two possible futures for herself. She could stay and soon die from her diseases and hard work. If she did this she would at least have the pleasure of watching her children for some time. Or she could try to make a life outside the hills in a town where she would not be forced to do such demanding labor. The most likely way to make such a life, she said, would be to remarry. She thought herself old and undesirable, not a good candidate as a wife, but thought that if she had the reputed pension she might have better hope, likening it to a dowry. She told me then what others had already said: that her husband had had a lover in India and that it was from that woman that

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26 Both before and after her husband's death, Bhauju always said that her greatest sorrow was that she was allowed little contact with her children. Jethi and Kanchi acted like their mother, with Jethi even instructing them at times to call her *āmā*. Bhauju watched them with pain-filled loving eyes whenever they were in the same room, and she always addressed Nani as *chori* (daughter), perhaps to reinforce a tie that others sought to break. Kanchi once told me it was to protect them from Bhauju's TB that they were kept away from her. But neither my advice nor that of a local relative whose medical knowledge was highly respected, about how to avoid TB transmission was ever listened to.

he had contracted tuberculosis and then passed it on to her. He had not written to her in over a year and this, she said, proved that he had no longer loved her.<sup>27</sup> Given all this, she reasoned, it would be all right to use some of his money as a means to a better life. At least half, she said, she would put in a bank for the children when they were older. But if she left the household, she must leave her children. That was the irreconcilable dilemma with which Bhauju struggled during the weeks after her husband's death.

All this we discussed under cover of the rushing stream and grinding grain. Then, when it was finished, we loaded the *doko*, and I crouched to place the tumpline on my forehead. At first Bhauju protested, but as I looked up at her, and then up the path toward the house, she quickly envisioned the end of the journey, back in the courtyard. Cracking the first grin I had seen on her face in a long while, she acquiesced, saying only "we will go slowly". With many pounds of flour on my back we did, indeed, go slowly—slowly enough for many to see and more to hear of our little journey. My slow walk was taken, as intended, as a clear public statement, yet not an overt one, of my disapproval of Bhauju's treatment by her household.<sup>28</sup> Back in the courtyard I could, and did meet sharp queries from Jethi and Aamaa with the simple assertion that I worried for Bhauju's health and so went to carry the load, even adding sweetly—such was my anger at the time—that I of course wanted to help in the extra work of preparing for the *pae*. Many people over the following days remarked to me with a smile that I was "learning to be Gurung". Certainly I was learning to negotiate Gurung women's worlds, where help and protest both had to be indirect or amenable to an alternate explanation, though always without the risks incurred by others.

### **Jethi Makes a Bid for Independence**

Jethi had often spoken to me of her eldest brother. She clearly held him in great affection, and she often displayed to me the gifts he had

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27 He had written to Jethi at least once during this time, and sent some money with a man returning from India. One reader suggested that if he was not providing monetary support, this could be one explanation for Bhauju's harsh treatment. I do not know details of Jetha's financial contributions to the household, before or after Bhauju returned to live there, but I never heard any complaints about lack of contributions and Jethi, for one, frequently extolled his generosity.

28 I regularly carried agricultural loads—that in itself, had long since ceased to be an event to be noticed and exclaimed upon. It was the context that made this trip worthy of comment.

brought her. When he died she mourned deeply. But at the same time, like Bhauju, she looked to her future. As the men's debates about whether or not a pension would be forthcoming from the Government of India went on, Jethi was never far away. Indeed, she encouraged them to come to her hotel, where she provided free tea and *raksī*. Within a few days Jethi was declaring that her brother had intended the pension for her. He had, she claimed, made out papers to transfer it to her, but had died before they were properly filed. She would go to India and get it.

These declarations were met with shock and derision by turns. In her presence the men merely said in mild voices, "It is a long way. Do you know Hindi?", and the like. Out of her presence they said "She's become a *lāhure*" (a soldier). That is to say, she acts like a man and, moreover, a man who has knowledge of the wider world. Spontaneous skits by former soldiers rendered the spectacle of Jethi, cast now as an out of place hill woman, stammering in ungrammatical Hindi-Nepali patois in front of an unimpressed Indian government clerk. These performances met with roars of laughter, not least from Jethi's father, whose laughter shored up his declining position with the other men who saw him becoming subservient to his daughter within the household hierarchy.<sup>29</sup> In Jethi's presence, however, he did not say no to her plan, but rather said that she would need a male companion and should take her brother, Saila,<sup>30</sup> along.

### A Public Breach

Debates and funerary rites continued apace. Funerary rites (though not debates) at last concluded, but not without a final turn of events, taken to be the death knell for Bhauju. Among those attending were Bhauju's relatives. The final event of the *pae* is a complex exchange of gifts among affines which, among other things, publicly marks the continuance of relations among those who were connected through the deceased. This proceeded in the courtyard and all, including Bhauju's mother, distributed

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29 I have concentrated here on women's views and talk because it was women who were involved, on a daily basis, with Bhauju's welfare. But because of my research—which continued on despite all—I knew many of the men involved in the pension debates quite well, and they let me know their views on the state of my household.

30 *Saila* is the birth order term for third-born male. Saila shepherded, so even when he was "at home" he was away from the house for long periods. He had, unwillingly, taken over this work when Maila (about whom more later) had followed Jetha to India five years before. At the time of Jetha's death Saila had been away in Kathmandu trying, with some success, to get work in the trekking business, but he returned when he heard the news of Jetha's death.

their gifts. But as others made their distributions and as speeches affirming close ties were made, Bhauju's mother began to speak from her seat, softly first and then more loudly. Finally she rose and entered the circle where Jetha's relatives sat. Shaking her fist she decried the treatment that Bhauju had received in that house, listing her grievances, one by one.

This outburst was met momentarily with stunned silence. Then Bhauju's other relatives and the Ghotane women of the hamlet tried to drown out her words. People tried to drag her away, but she stood her ground. Bhauju fled, sobbing, into the house. The rest of the family began to pace the courtyard, up the steps and along the porch, and back down again, saying nothing. Finally Aamaa, then Jethi began to deny the charges, one by one. They proclaimed their love and affection for Bhauju, the care they rendered to her because of her illness, and their desire that she stay in their household now that she was a widow. Jethi briefly changed her tune, saying once in a furious voice, "If you want her, take her. Take her back to her *māita*. We don't want her." But then she returned to the earlier denials.

At last Bhauju's mother was dragged out of the courtyard by the women who had broken Bhauju's bangles. Damage control began, as Bhauju's other relatives, with her elder brother as spokesman, and the rest chiming in as chorus, denied all that had been said. They explained that Bhauju's mother had been drinking and knew not what she said. "Our ears can't hear, our hearts can't understand this talk" said Bhauju's brother. "It never happened", he declared. The family listened but did not respond. At this juncture Bhauju burst from the house and, to my astonishment, began to recite her lineage. She explained how she was born of a *rodhi* union, that her mother had not brought her up, but rather she had been taken in by her father's first wife and raised as one of her own.<sup>31</sup> That

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31 *Rodhi* is an association of girls who form a cooperative work group, organize cultural programs together, and sleep together in one designated house. Boys may come in the evening and sing songs and court the older girls. *Rodhi* are less common now (though some Gurungs are advocating their revival), but at the time of Bhauju's birth, were very common. Gurungs have strongly critiqued outsiders' interpretations of *rodhi* as a kind of "night club". What is objected to is the lack of appreciation for its economic importance, and a venue for teaching the Gurung ethos of cooperation (e.g. K. Gurung 2049 v.s.; C. Gurung 2051 v.s.). Bhauju's biological mother was the second wife of her father, also not uncommon at the time. What was less acceptable then (and for some, now) was the difference in *jāt* status between her parents, her mother being *Sorajat* and her father *Carjat* (a higher status, with intermarriage traditionally forbidden). Bhauju's parentage was public knowledge and in no way a revelation. What was remarkable was the message of her speech, disavowing her own mother

woman (also present and still in the courtyard) was, she declared, her true mother. She then proceeded to deny all that her mother had said, averring the fine treatment she received in the household and her desire to continue to live there. I could only read this performance as a desperate act of self preservation.

I had been photographing the gift exchange at the request of the relative in charge of its organization, but when Bhauju's mother exploded in anger I had stopped. My last photograph shows her, risen from her seat, arms outstretched, beginning her harangue. Since then I had been sitting quietly on the porch, watching and listening. At this juncture I too was practically dragged from the courtyard. "Come", commanded a friend, "this is not talk to be heard". This woman, who lived nearby, was quite closely related to Bhauju by marriage ties within their natal families. She was widely agreed to be among the kindest and most generous people in the village. She had supported Bhauju throughout all her troubles at great risk to her relations with the rest of the household, yet managed to remain on good terms with Jethi and the others as well, not only publicly, but in their estimation. Thus trusted, she had been able to help Bhauju substantially. This delicate negotiation of opinions and knowledge over months was regarded as an extraordinary feat by the other neighboring women who observed its daily execution.

When we arrived at her house she was shaking. I thought she might be crying for Bhauju, but on taking a closer look I saw she was shaking with anger. Dragging me up to the attic, a relatively private place, she thrust wool and carding tools at me and sat at the loom where we often wove and chatted. Pounding the loom, she began fiercely to weave, her angry speech punctuated by the flying shuttle. She began by denouncing Bhauju's mother as vehemently as the mother had just denounced the members of my household. Still I thought she was angry because of the repercussions for Bhauju, and I said so. "No! I hope I never see her again. I hope she dies. She is nobody. I will never speak to her again", she said of Bhauju's mother. I was initially baffled by her passion and by the position she took. But as she spoke further, I heard her genuine despair at such a public breach of relations, at ill will publicly expressed. When she dragged me from the courtyard, she meant precisely what she said. Hearing such talk,

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whom she often fondly described to me as her greatest supporter. Though polygamy was, and to a lesser extent still is, accepted practice, all the second wives I knew lived precarious existences, sometimes deprived even of use rights in their husband's families' property.

she explained a bit impatiently to her sometimes dull-witted student, will make your *sae* shrink. You will get those thoughts inside you and become the same. So too for everyone else. Bhauju's mother had placed everyone in danger.<sup>32</sup> She then explained how hard it was for her to endure, with friendly face, daily interactions with those in the house below. She placed herself at risk by doing so, she said, but it was necessary for the sake of Bhauju. Now her mother, "her own mother!", had come along and destroyed everything. "Bhauju's life was bad before, now it will be unbearable", she finished in a low voice. Then she began to sob. It dawned on me that she had, quite literally, come back to save me from ill effects, just as she always showed up when I sat in the courtyards of those she considered to be witches and found pretense to take me away. And I learned one more lesson about the risks Gurung women may take for others.

### **India, Land of Pensions**

At this juncture it seemed that, surely, nothing more could happen. Bhauju would have to leave the household. She told me this, with finality, that very evening. But in doing so she would have to leave her children. This was unbearable, but better than having them witness her death. She was convinced she would not survive if she stayed. Between the health of her body and the health of her *dharma*, she said, she could not last long there. Later that same evening we sat, in silence, in the main room of the house. All family members were present and still fuming over Bhauju's mother's accusations earlier in the day. Bhauju lay on the far bed, hidden by darkness. Into the house walked a man I had never seen before and sat down on the cot by the fire. This was Maila,<sup>33</sup> the second eldest son, returned from India. He had not been home in five years. His entrance went unremarked except that Aamaa, stoking the newly relit hearth, placed a kettle to boil.

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32 Ernestine McHugh (personal communication) says this is an idiosyncratic view of the danger of overheard talk—that although it is common to consider one's own anger or grief as damaging to the *sae*, as well as anger or blame directed at oneself by others on whom one is dependent or about whom one cares, it is not generally believed that simply witnessing expression of ill will can cause physical or emotional deterioration. The woman who expressed the above views was often called upon as a mediator in others' arguments. Perhaps because of this role, she was especially sensitive to the deleterious effects of hearing too much negative talk.

33 *Māīlā* is the birth order term for second eldest male.



When tea was brewed he began to speak. He described Jetha's death, in a hospital, of tuberculosis. He described how he had taken care of the cremation and of Jetha's belongings, and itemized the money he had spent. At this point Aamaa gave him food. He took his plate, walked into the gloom at the far end of the room, and handed over to Bhauju the dried meat he had just been given.<sup>34</sup> I saw where he stood in the unfolding drama.

Like Bhauju, Maila was the son of a *rodhi* union. His mother had died when he was quite young, and he was sent to shepherd, and was rarely at the house of his father. He had followed his elder half-brother to India five years before, living with him (and with Bhauju prior to her return) and working there. He had had no further contact with his family. Relations were outwardly civil, but it was clear that there were few ties of sentiment between them.

After feeding Bhauju, Maila came to me—as yet we had not met—and asked me to read the papers he had brought with him. Evidently he had made some stops along the way, being brought up to date on events at the house, including my presence and my allegiances. The papers I read stated that someone from the household must work a further four years in order for a pension to be received. As I began to read this out Maila, with a quick jut of his lower lip indicated Bhauju on the far bed. I quickly revised my reading: Jetha's wife must complete the period in order to receive a pension. Further inspection of the papers revealed that the pension beneficiary was indeed Bhauju. There was no mention of Jethi.

Long negotiations followed Maila's sudden arrival. I will not recount them all here. Jethi continued to claim that the pension was intended for her. Privately she stated her belief that Maila had destroyed the relevant papers. She made plans to go to India. The skits continued, still out of her sight, and now out of sight of her father as well. With Maila in the

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34 Several readers have remarked on the sexual connotations of feeding choice foods to a woman. It's true that remarriage to the brother of a deceased husband is not unknown or taboo among Gurungs. Maila had lived for some years with Bhauju and Jetha in India. My own sense is that he was deeply appreciative of the kindness she had shown him there, and that they shared two added bonds as marginal members of the household and as offspring of second wives and mixed *jat* parentage, which sometimes placed them in equivocal positions. Though Jethi tried to start a rumour of a sexual relationship between them, locally theirs was understood as a friendship between two people who "mixed", a common way of talking about people whose outlooks and sensibilities draw them to one another. Some readers' easy generalization from kindness to romance shows the strength of stereotypes regarding the possible range of relationships among South Asian women and men.

house, Bhauju was not sent out to work. He continued to give her most of the milk and meat he was given, under the disapproving eye of Aamaa. There was no hold on him in this household, he explained to me. But they needed him to arrange the pension which they hoped to keep for themselves. It was fitting, he concluded, that he feed Bhauju their meat. Maila, a man of few words—at least in this situation—said no more. By the end of a month Bhauju's hand and arm were again recognizable, and she took up her daily round, but a somewhat less onerous one, perhaps because of Maila's presence. He saw to it that Kanchi continued to do some of the labor that usually fell to Bhauju and himself worked in the fields, though he did not haul water or cut wood.

Bhauju's enduring dilemma was her children. She could leave with Maila and return to India. But without her children, she said, she would be cut in two. In the end there were several trips to India. Jethi left first, in the company of her brother Saila, about two months after the funeral. Publicly her father supported her action, though privately he had urged her, to no avail, to wait. Other men had convinced him that a woman could not do this male business. From her rather mournful letter it seems that the soldiers' skits were not too far off the mark. She returned, somewhat chastened, and resumed weaving carpets. Maila and Bhauju were now to go, but their departure was continually delayed and the children were closely watched. One by one, however, Bhauju's clothes and belongings found their way into other women's locked trunks. Finally food for the journey was prepared late at night in other houses. Maila and Bhauju left for India without the knowledge of other members of the household, but also without the children. Two weeks later Jethi and Saila followed. Stories of shouting matches between Jethi and Bhauju at the home of a village man resident in India trickled back to the hills. Out of the house, it seems, Bhauju felt at last that she could speak. Then Maila reappeared, alone. He had come, he stated publicly, "to take the children for a visit". With Jethi and Bhauju away, Kanchi had become both the main laborer of the household and the main caretaker of the children. "I am", she said, "a mother and daughter-in-law anyway; perhaps I should get married". She smiled at her own joke, but looked tired as she said it. After some weeks, Maila returned to India without the children. All three—Bhauju, Jethi and Maila—remained there at the time of my departure.<sup>35</sup>

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35 Saila, after an unsuccessful attempt to get work in the Middle East through an Indian labour broker, had returned to Kathmandu to look for trekking work.

Fittingly, the saga of Bhauju has no neat conclusion, for the struggles I have recounted did not end here. Bhauju did escape the household, but she left without her children. Jethi asserted her independence in clear terms, travelling to India in search of the means to support herself. Ironically, Jethi and Bhauju now live in the same town, not too far from the village where so much passed between them. Jethi eventually returned home and resumed her hotel and carpet business. But a few years later she married a man from a nearby town and moved there. She bore a son, but evidently she continued her quest for financial independence, for the last news I heard of Jethi was that her business dealings had gotten her into trouble with the law, and that she faced a jail sentence.

Bhauju too returned to Nepal. Maila stayed to work for his brother's, now Bhauju's pension. Bhauju, when I last heard was living with her elder half-sister and had not remarried. I don't know if she in fact received the pension, nor do I know whether her situation as a widowed sister is a happier one than that of widowed daughter-in-law would have been. She achieved her aim of leaving the household and agricultural labor behind her. But her children remained in the village, cared for by Bajyai, until her death, and by aging Aamaa and still unmarried Kanchi. More recently I have been told that they were brought to town by Jethi and that she has placed them in a "boarding school".<sup>36</sup> I do not know Bhauju's feelings about this, but my guess is that it is a bittersweet thing to have them in the same town, but living elsewhere. I do not know if she has any access to them.

This is about all I know of recent happenings in these women's lives, for letters are stubbornly quiet on daily details. Jethi's marriage, child and legal troubles were suitable news and gossip, recounted with some relish. But otherwise, letters have a distinctive cast—elaborate assurances of health, enumerating each person, brief recordings of deaths, and in between attempts to sustain, through reminiscences of past mutual activities, relationships now sundered by distance. Coming from a place where health is never a given, death walks too often, and distance separates too many, the form of these letters, as much as their content, conveys the news—that people are going on building the best lives they can with the materials at hand. But I hear about Bhauju only when I ask directly, and then ever so briefly.

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<sup>36</sup> This could mean either that they actually live at the school or, as is more common for local children, that they live at home (i.e., with Jethi) and are day students at a school that also accept boarders.

Where initially Bhauju and Jethi seemed to me to be dissimilar, both in personality and in circumstances, I have come also to see some commonalities. Both looked to alter course from those which their structural positions dictated for them. For Bhauju it was the bleak existence of an overworked, unloved daughter-in-law and then the bleaker future of a widowed one. For Jethi it was, looking ahead, the precarious position of an unmarried woman dependent on her brothers and thus beholden to future sisters-in-law. Even before Jetha's death she had determined to avoid such dependence. Both took genuine risks to resist these futures. Bhauju risked her health and suffered separation from her children. Jethi risked her reputation and, to some extent, that of her father and entire household.

Other women viewed both Bhauju and Jethi as experiencing a descent into misfortune. Where assessments differed was with regard to causes and agents of misfortune, and thus in moral judgments of it. Bhauju was regarded as, if you like, a victim, herself behaving with grace in adverse circumstances. She thus deserved support and protection. Jethi, on the other hand, was seen as the source of her own misfortunes and some of Bhauju's. She was thus perceived as dangerous, to herself and others, a source of disharmony and, potentially, illness. Other women gradually disengaged from her, yet did so cautiously and with some subtlety, for they did not want her wrath directed toward them.

Jethi's vision was, in many respects, the more radical one. Bhauju sought decent life circumstances, a daily life lived out in accord with Gurung standards of sociality and civility. This she sought both before and after her husband's death, though her strategies and goals had to be modified as circumstances changed. Jethi sought something quite different. She sought economic independence and social independence. She opted out of cooperative forms of labor, and though she continued to make deals, these were recognized as an altogether different kind of exchange. She exerted authority in transgression of gender and generational norms within her household. She did these things publicly, thus appearing to be in brazen disregard for local standards of comportment. And she risked exposing herself, through her business and her travels, to whispers of sexual promiscuity.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> I know only that Jethi later married and moved to town, and not the order in which these events occurred. It may or may not be that, in the end, her route out of the village was the more traditional one of marriage. Nor do I know anything about her own situation as a daughter-in-law.

Before she decided that I was too much in Bhauju's corner to be a confidant, Jethi told me many times that she did not care what others said. She held her head a little higher, spoke more loudly, and redoubled her public, pathside sociality. It seemed that she did care, but her strategy was to challenge others, within and outside her own household, to directly rebuke her, or to overtly reject her. She thus effectively circumvented the usual indirect forms of social control. But in doing so she often created havoc in her wake, not least for Bhauju. Readers' may hold different views about who paid the greatest price, and in what coin, for the clashes that ensued from these two women's effort to redefine their places and to exert some control over how structural arrangements would affect the circumstances in which they lived. I will always think it was Bhauju.

### **Writing Bhauju's Story**

Read as "ethnography", this story has a peculiarity, for it is not really based *on* fieldwork at all, but rather based *in* fieldwork. It is a story from daily life—mine, Jethi's, Bhauju's and others—not a story collected, but a story reconstructed from life. Thus I have not found the life history mold suggested by some readers to be appropriate, for it is not that. Nor has any other model for which Bhauju's story might become the scaffolding seemed right or useful. That my path crossed with hers had everything to do with my being an ethnographer. But once we had come, by our very different routes, to inhabit the same house, it was not as ethnographer and "interlocutor" that we met or interacted. This has made for evident gaps in the story I could tell: what was the history of relations between Bhauju's natal household and her husband's household? I know little about that and many other details which, as an ethnographer thinking to document a social drama, I might have pursued. But I also believe that whatever power the story has comes precisely from the lack of an "ethnographic stance". Had I been trying to collect every detail, or to remain aloof in order to see how things transpired without my intervention, I would not have been immersed in the events recounted here, and it precisely from that immersion that my understanding, however limited, of Bhauju's saga as real life emerges. Ironically, social scientific efforts at comprehensive documentation can themselves prevent such understanding by keeping us apart from the trials of daily life.

Why tell this story? Should this story, for whatever purpose, be told at all? Some among those described in it would likely say that it should be told, others would likely say no. Among readers there may also be yeasayers and naysayers. In previous versions (e.g., Des Chene, in press) I

tried, in particular, to address the objections of some Nepali intellectuals who, for many good reasons, are critical of foreign scholarship on Nepal.<sup>38</sup> But as I continued to revise while simultaneously reading some of the public debate over women's property rights (see below), the sensibilities of intellectuals came to seem far less important in this instance. So long as laws, policies and custom provide a blueprint for building society on a sturdy, silent, hidden frame of female bones, such stories must be told.<sup>39</sup> Whoever is in a position to tell them, foreigner or Nepali, should do so, for neither ignorance nor comprehension on the subject of the structural oppression of women accord neatly with nationality, gender or any other social attribute of authors. But the narrator then has a further responsibility to connect the particularities of such stories to broader social structural arrangements. And when, as in contemporary Nepal, there is public debate about the possibility and desirability of rewriting the blueprints that render women at once foundational and disenfranchised, then such stories should be brought to bear upon it. The point of telling Bhauju's story is to insert into that public debate realities that are too often glossed over.

The privacy of those described is a separate, more difficult issue. Unlike in fiction, there are real individuals behind the "characters" in Bhauju's saga, most of them still living. Various identifying features have been omitted (such as where Bhauju lived in India) so that only those who were close enough to these events to already know about them should be able to identify individuals. Similarly, events have been left out where I felt that I had too partial a knowledge of the different points of view of those involved, and ran the risk of an unfairly harsh characterization of motives and intent. Finally, I have written Bhauju's story explicitly from my point of view, with an effort to make clear the basis for my perspective, including the basis for my understanding of others' points of view.

But efforts to write respectfully about personal matters have their limits, about which I think social scientists need to be quite clear. This telling, for example, is not based on "informed consent", that little inspected comfort phrase of social science. I would argue that there is rarely informed consent, strictly speaking, when writing about any

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38 These were objections I have encountered in general discussions of foreign research. Thus far no reader has raised them in reference to this essay.

39 This point—both the structural oppression of women and the need to make it visible—is by no means limited to Nepali society.

collective, however small or apparently homogeneous in outlook (cf. Bourgois 1991). There may be a few instances where a text is thoroughly critiqued by its subjects, revised accordingly, and so on, until consensus is reached. But far more often the final depiction rests, as in this case, very much in the author's hands. Moreover, even when writing is to some extent collaborative, the current propensities to write about struggle on the one hand and, on the other, to "democratize" ethnographic practice, do not mesh neatly with one another.

Precisely when writing about conflict, struggle or contestation, the likelihood for agreement on the finished text among a text's subjects will be smallest. If informed consent means simply knowledge that one will write something, then it addresses none of the issues about how others' lives are represented that are at the heart of debates today. In the end writing, if it has anything to say, is an intervention, and everyone will not be equally pleased.<sup>40</sup> In the end writers make choices. I have chosen to listen to Bhauju's words when, on the eve of her departure to India she expressed the hope that I might one day "write her *duḥkha*" (hardship), so that others might better understand "*āimāiko duḥkha*"—what women suffer.

In keeping with the above understanding of why Bhauju's story should be told, I seek in what follows to reflect on various social contexts in which it can be understood. I first reflect on its place among writings on the lives and circumstances of South Asian women, then on the ways that social placements of various kinds mattered to the events described, and finally on how this story can speak to debates about the status of women taking place in Nepal at the present time.

### Reading Bhauju's Story

This account has sometimes taken on the true complexity of a saga but its twists and turns all issue from a few central tensions between structural arrangements and contingent circumstances. There is, first of all, indeed resistance by two women to a prescribed course of life, though it is of a personal nature. As daughter-in-law and eldest daughter within the same household, their struggles brought them, inexorably, into conflict. They were, however, not just members of a household, but of a larger community. The second constant is the tension between community ideals—of household harmony and of female comportment—and the individual desires and wills of these two women who defiantly

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40 Cf. Dixit (this volume) who makes the same point about effective *bikās*.

imagined different futures for themselves. The third constant is yet broader: state legitimized conditions that defined and confined them in a dependent status, caretakers of the material world who yet had recognized rights of access to the material necessities of life only through relatedness to men.

During most of the events recounted here, Bhauju and her husband's eldest sister, Jethi, occupied, respectively, what are generally agreed to be disadvantageous social positions for South Asian women—widow and spinster. Bhauju was, moreover, the only daughter-in-law of her household, also commonly a disadvantageous position for a woman. The combination of daughter-in-law and widow adds up, by common consent, to tragedy. Jethi, by contrast, while marked as unfortunate by apparent spinsterhood (she was unmarried into her thirties), held a favoured position as eldest daughter within her household. The two women thus had different problems and different material with which to attempt to fashion solutions. But each, for disparate reasons, was working to create a measure of independence for herself in a devotedly relational world.

I have tried to narrate points of view, motivations and plans as far as I am able. But I have tried to make evident, that such “agency” does not just take place against a backdrop of norms for conduct or sociological attributes (gender, jāt, kin position and so on). Rather, people think through their position and act from within a host of structured but also contingent circumstances. Thus, for example, the long-standing structural arrangement of patrilineality and inheritance rules are realized in the contingent circumstances of Bhauju's dilemma over her children. These traditions she was well aware of, but they were not her focal concern. Rather, with knowledge of these structural arrangements, and experiencing their impact on her life, she tried to navigate toward a solution with which she could, quite literally, live.

Renato Rosaldo has remarked on the frequent disparity between “dense case histories and slender conclusions” (1993:96). Discussing two of the most influential ethnographic models he argues that, in the processual analyses narrated by Victor Turner this is due to a final reduction of richly described human dramas to mere illustrations of structural principles while, in the “thick descriptions” of Clifford Geertz, it is due to a stress on “free-floating cultural idioms”, insufficiently situated within structures of power. While this correctly points to the different theoretical weaknesses of Turner and Geertz there is, I believe, a common cause for the “slenderness” of their conclusions. Conclusions that seek simply to make the particularities of life illuminate general principles or theoretical



points about culture will be found to be thin, for they necessarily strip away detail, idiosyncrasies, even cultural specificities. Neither Geertz nor Turner intended to teach readers much about the places they described. Rather, they provided “sufficient” setting (by academic standards) for events that could then be extracted from the historical, social and cultural contexts of their occurrence and inserted into theoretical debates as “interesting cases”. There is no sign in their writings that they ever imagined a reader for whom their case studies might be, not exotic tales from abroad, but portraits of home. Thus it is incompleteness that renders their conclusions slender: what is the relevance of their case studies to the places they describe? The question is neither posed nor answered.

Enslin (1994), and within her text Pramila Parajuli, question the adequacy of any merely textual representation of women’s struggles. Undoubtedly, no amount of debate, without further action, will transform women’s situations. But words too, have effects. And in the debate over the status and situation of Nepali women it is too often the abstract words of Women-in-Development (WID) reports (e.g., Acharya 1994; Shtrii Shakti 1995a,b; Singh 1995),<sup>41</sup> or the bright, happy superficial pictures of *bikās* celebrants (e.g., Kipp 1995), that social science has offered to activists. Such portraits are inadequate to contest the confident, uninformed pictures of Nepali women’s lives put forth by opponents to women’s property rights. For this reason too, stories like Bhauju’s need to be added to the collective word portrait of Nepali women .

In thinking, belatedly, about women’s lives, anthropologists first tended to focus on points of transition, especially those that are publicly marked, like marriage and childbirth. There are good reasons for this focus. The first is that women’s lives, as M. Rosaldo (1974) argued some time ago, are frequently defined by domestic sphere activities. The second reason is that much writing on women has necessarily been corrective: women too must often achieve adult status; women may be exchanged á la Lévi-Strauss, but they may also be brokers in marriage markets, and the nexus of relations among lineages or households.

But to bring into view the structural significance of women in social orders, or to focus on life cycle rituals still leaves in the background the bulk of anyone’s life, female or male. How often, after all, do any of us go through puberty or, for that matter, get married? Clearly such events

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41 For a close analysis of the limitations of WID literature, see Upadhyia (1996) For a policy-oriented work that tries to overcome limitations of the WID framework while using some of its methodological tools, see Shrestha (1994).

may color the future in important ways; yet they are not the whole story. What of the more mundane aspects of life, daily happenings and concerns? What of extraordinary events that are not planned, not formal, not ritualized? And when we speak of women in “households”, or in “the domestic sphere”, should we not also mean houses and homes—places people live and the ways they think about those places—as well as kin units and theoretical constructs? It is in the minute practices of daily living, mundane and extraordinary by turns, that the working out of chance, pattern, and worldview that anthropologists seek to portray is best discerned. I make no claims to have gotten under anyone else’s skin, inside another mind, or any other metaphor of penetration. My account of Bhauju’s story, is but one account by a deeply implicated participant, though I have worked hard to try to understand others’ points of view. A story like this one can probably not be learned or told from any but an involved position. And this leads me to reflect that, while this may lend partiality (in both sense) to our accounts, it is precisely what makes them accounts of social life.

Accounts that privilege structure have produced, overall, quite a dismal portrait of South Asian women’s lives, caught within the confines of patriarchal systems, permanently displaced (whether in natal or affinal home), systematically devalued by ideology and in practice (cf. Raheja and Gold 1994). These portraits, some now argue, were not necessarily wrong, but they were partial.

Recently, in an attempt to redress the balance, much attention has been paid to South Asian women’s expressive traditions (e.g., Appadurai Mills, and Korom, eds. 1991; Holland & Skinner 1995; Narayan 1986; Raheja & Gold 1994; Trawick 1990). Collectively these works mark an important turn to the privileging of women’s points of view and to women’s efforts to shape their own destinies. They teach us that listening to women’s songs one often discovers pungent critiques of patriarchy. Attending to context, it becomes clear that ritual moments, like marriages and public festivals, in which women are sanctioned to speak publicly, may be turned into opportunities for critical social commentary (e.g., Enslin 1992; Skinner et al. 1994). These works, together with some earlier ones (e.g., Wadley 1980) provide an important corrective to the stereotype of South Asian women as passive and submissive.

I have tried to continue on the path opened by such work in that pride of place was given to women’s own viewpoints and actions, including reactions by other women to the situations and actions of the main characters. Where the story I have told differs is that it is not focused on

an expressive tradition—song, poetry, story—nor does it analyze a marked social occasion, like a ritual. There was an occasion when Bhauju sang laments, and several rituals figured in this saga, but the focus here is on a longer span, with equal attention to what happens after the lights go down and everyone goes home. This seems to me critical, for while moments of *communitas* can be profoundly important, they are never constant. Bhauju's life is as much shaped by her days of quiet agony in a dark corner while her hand swoll up beyond recognition as it is by the moments when others gathered around to support her in her grief as a new widow. Even when observing formalized social occasions, we should pay equal attention to what precedes and follows them in order to understand how they matter in people's lives.

Another way in which this account departs from the current emphasis on expressive traditions is that it is often focused on nonverbal or otherwise indirect ways that women make statements of support or disapproval, and thus exert influence on others' ways of being. The present emphasis on discourse and verbal performances, productive of insight as it has been, should not lead us to overlook the significance of a glance, a carried load, or where the children sleep for understanding what people are saying to one another. In a Gurung village at least—and I doubt this is unique—a great deal of the commentary on moral conduct is not verbal, but is expressed in action, deed and gesture. When and if we learn to read that commentary, it strikes me as important that it be rendered, as far as possible, in the idiom in which it is originally "said", not subsumed into a reported set of moral precepts. This is important not only in the interest of attending to cultural form, but because it makes evident the disagreements and the varying viewpoints that people hold of proper and generous conduct and of their opposites.

The tale I have told can be read as one of resistance to social definitions and to familial authority. "Resistance" is a term much in vogue at the present time. Always suspicious of sudden confluences between the preoccupations of those we study and our own theoretical concerns, I use this term with some hesitation. The caveat I would introduce is that resistance not be conflated with heroism nor with victorious outcomes. The romanticist note I perceive in some work on resistance would be out of tune in this case. Both women make many compromises; there are no obvious winners and many painful losses. Jethi's resistance to her situation, in particular, ramified in the lives of others in unfortunate ways. And, crucially, each woman's "resistance"

stymies that of the other, in part because it is self and not socially directed.

Finally, it is important to note that this paper is about the lives of two Gurung women. It is thus not about women whose lives are structured, first and foremost, by Hindu notions of women's place, purity, or value, as in much literature on South Asian women. Gurung women are often described by Hindu Nepalis (men and women) as strong and autonomous. This may be said in criticism (strong-headed, willful) or in admiration (resilient, courageous). Until very recently Gurung women have been clearly identifiable when they travel to town or plains by their blouses of burgundy velvet, their numerous gold hoop earrings, gold nose rings and large turquoise and coral necklaces. Gurung women are as likely as not to look one in the face, to joke and to drive a hard bargain. No one meeting a group of middle-aged Gurung women in a situation in which they are comfortable, would be likely to describe them as shy and retiring. Even the British officers who recruited their husbands remarked on their demeanor:

Gurkha women...enjoy a freedom unusual in the East and are well able to stand up for themselves. They smoke and drink only slightly less than their menfolk, and are very outspoken (Leonard 1965:48).<sup>42</sup>

Whether their "freedom" is "unusual in the East" is not a question I would care to pursue. But between the life of an orthodox Brahmin woman and a Gurung woman one could doubtless find many differences. There are few gendered ritual restrictions and the sexual division of labor is, as Gurung women frequently pointed out to me, all in favour of men. That is, Gurung women do almost every kind of work. Yet there are many quiet forms of constraint on the "freedom" of Gurung village women woven so finely into the texture of daily life that they can be difficult to discern, and particularly so with eyes blinded by stereotypes of Tibeto-Burman women as unfettered by social restraints. In Bhauju's story, both social structural and cultural constraints on women become visible: the structural constraints of the marriage system, inheritance, and domestic authority, and the cultural constraints of public opinion, family

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<sup>42</sup> Although Leonard says "Gurkha women", Gurungs were considered the very best example of Gurkhas. Thus the statement can fairly be read as one about Gurung women.

honour, and definitions of possible female comportment. Bhauju, like others, crafts a life out of such materials.

There are many contexts that mattered in the story I have narrated. I briefly discuss some of them here under the rubric of ‘placements’—physical and social—in order to stress that they served as contexts for understanding, conditions for action and, very often, constraints within which difficult choices were made. The division is not absolute. All physical placements have social significance. social placements have direct consequences for traversal of physical space, like *pardah* for example, or the position of daughter-in-law.

The most encompassing physical placement of Bhauju’s story is between India and Nepal. She had lived in India and returned. Her husband had returned to India and died. Maila came from there bringing news of the death and the possible pension, and help for Bhauju. Two pairs, Bhauju and Maila, Jethi and Saila, again went there seeking the pension. These comings and goings place Bhauju’s story firmly within the political-economy of the *pahād* (hill region) of Nepal where male migrant labor is ubiquitous and necessary for the economic survival of many households. With different details highlighted, Bhauju’s story could become a case study in the exigencies of such labor.

The physical place ‘India’ because of this context as a site for labor migration, has particular social salience. It is, at once, a place of opportunity and a likely site of *duḥkha* (hardship). Indeed, Bhauju, her husband, and his family experienced both. Involvement with India provided them with some cash income not otherwise available to them. For Bhauju it provided an alternative, for a number of years, to living in her in-laws’ house. But India also took two of her children and her husband from her. It is well known as an unhealthy environment for those from the hills of Nepal. Whether it would yield a pension in compensation that might provide her with some independence remained an open question.

India is also a site of humiliation and degradation. Many men do work there that they would consider unbecoming of their social status at home. Performed abroad, it can be converted into cash, and thus opportunity and some prestige at home. Still, Nepali workers in India expect to be looked down upon by *madiśes* (plains people, Indians), treated as unintelligent in accord with stereotypes of Nepali hill people, swindled and ridiculed. To traverse Indian social space thus requires skill and savvy. The skits that parodied Jethi at a government office were born of hard experience. But

they also marked India as a space only men could successfully traverse, at least in the course of business.

A woman might accompany a man, as Bhauju had done, but to go there in search of profit was an exclusively male prerogative. Thus a woman could not enter India independently in search of work—and thus one of the primary means of improving one's economic condition was closed to women except as dependents of men. The only Nepali women who are well known for working in India are those who work as prostitutes. The "traffic in women" from the Nepali hills to the brothels of Bombay and Calcutta has received a great deal of press lately, even featuring as the cover story of *The Nation*. This widespread publicity has probably made it even more (socially) impossible for a hill woman like Jethi to enter India on independent business.

Within Nepal, the other locale besides the village that figures prominently in this story is the nearest market town, at that time a day's walk away. Its proximity, its large Gurung population, and many resident relatives make it a place much more accessible to women. Still, they must have reason to go there, travel in company, and their activities will be well known before their return. It is a source of commodities and entertainment (the cinema for example). It represents a chance for respite from physical labor. As a place to which to migrate (rather than simply to visit) it is, for some village residents, a conceivably reachable place. Land prices are high, but a retired soldier who reached officer status may be able to build a house there. It represents many kinds of opportunity—medical care, better education for one's children, running water. For men, there is the possibility for entrepreneurial activity as an alternative to wage labor abroad, though chances are scarce and difficult to manufacture. For women, the town variously represented an alternative to the physical demands of agricultural labor, wood cutting, and the daily carrying of water, a place where saris are worn and the bazaar is at hand. Some don't desire that lifestyle, others romanticize it. But for some, like Bhauju, it can come to look like the difference between life and death.

Within the village itself and its environs, there are also many distinct physical spaces that conditioned events. Women are freest to move within this space. In the course of their daily labor they must. But their routes are not random nor do they go unnoticed (by men or by other women). Fields, forest and courtyards are sites of work and sociality. But to wander without business to perform can evoke gossip, especially for unmarried women like Jethi, and women whose husbands are abroad, or for young widows, like Bhauju. For some older women it is quite easy and natural

to arrange to meet those they want to visit in the course of their daily work and I think that the idea that their movements are “constrained” by what is considered appropriate female comportment might be quite foreign to them. But Bhauju’s movements within the village were tightly controlled. If she deviated from direct routes she would be berated. If she lingered in a courtyard she faced criticism. She had to be allowed mobility in order to do the labor desired of her, but the other members of her household attempted to sever that movement from the sociality that is its normal companion. As I have said, other women conceived of this as crossing the line from maintenance of the household’s reputation to violation of a basic right and pleasure.

Jethi was freer to move but also sustained criticism for it. She regularly went to the village store. I never knew of Bhauju going there. She sometimes gave me a few *paisā* to buy a sweet for her children, saying she could not go there herself. Jethi had business at the store because of her hotel, but she was considered (by other women and some men) to go more often than warranted and to linger too long. The store was also a place where men congregated for tea and, at some times of day, a hangout for teenage boys and young men. It was thus considered an inappropriate place for an unmarried woman to frequent. Others who went there did so infrequently (though they enjoyed going), went in groups, and stated their business (on behalf of their households) in tones that others could hear. This is just one example of the careful ways that women moved within their own local place.

Much visiting took place in the evening hours between women in nearby houses. Churning, carding, and spinning can be done while visiting. Bhauju could rarely join in such occasions, for it was not necessary to allow her that movement for her to perform her work while it would, of course, allow ample opportunity for telling others about her treatment. Nor was our household one of the places where women congregated, for the simple reason that they did not find it a pleasant environment, though their lack of visiting signified much more. While the rest of us could visit elsewhere in the evenings, Bhauju was thus cut off from the usual avenues of sociality among women through the restriction of her physical mobility.

Each of these physical spaces, and the ways they can be traversed, have social analogues. Some are fixed attributes of the person, like age or gender. Others are more situational, like kin relation to others. For Bhauju, the overarching social placements were as a daughter-in-law, and then as a widow. But many finer-grained distinctions also mattered.

For those who rise through the ranks, work as a soldier in India can bring local prestige. But Bhauju's husband was a government *peon*, which afforded no special distinction to his household. His work did not require them to keep up appearances as a wealthy household whatever the material reality, nor did it gain for Bhauju any special privileges (as the wife of someone contributing locally large sums of money to the household). For Bhauju, the main social significance of her husband's work abroad, once she had returned to the village, was that she lacked the social support a resident husband might have afforded her.

Her mixed Cārjāt/Sorajāt parentage was usually in the background, but it perhaps served as some rationalization of her treatment, for she was considered to have married up by marrying into a Cārjāt family. I cannot be certain that this affected her treatment, but it would go some way to explain how household members could feel justified when they demanded more than the usual hard work of a daughter-in-law.

Bhauju was also a mother. This usually reduces the extent to which a woman's actions are monitored—whether because they are felt to be committed to the household (of their children)—as many social science analyses of joint family dynamics have it, or because they are expected to be too busy, distracted and tired to waste much time or seek out extra-marital liaisons. But in Bhauju's case, motherhood had no such effect. This role was usurped and she continued to be treated more like a childless daughter-in-law might be with regard to control over her movements and associations.

When Bhauju became a widow, her choices became quite stark. She had no longer to worry about the approbation of her husband (upon his return) if she acted in ways that produced disapproval from his family. Yet she could equally no longer anticipate his future support. She was wholly dependent on his family if she stayed in their household, and if she transgressed the boundaries set for her, she might be obliged to leave—leaving her children behind. This social placement as a dependent woman is the fundamental ground on which the dilemmas that Bhauju faced and the events she endured, transpired.

Although many readers have been moved by Bhauju's story, it has only been Nepali readers who have remarked on its resonance as a Nepali story. They have been male and female, Gurung and non-Gurung, of rural and urban upbringing, and from various parts of the country. It is not that they are positioned just as Bhauju was, not an identification but a recognition—of things that happen to women within their country. Those responses taught me that the place where Bhauju's story matters most is



in a Nepali context. But which one? While there are some specifically Gurung details that mattered to the course of events, it is hardly a “typical” Gurung story as clearly shown by the reactions of Bhauju’s friends and kin. And I find it neither illuminating nor acceptable to try to turn Bhauju into a representative of “Gurung women”, and yet worse to make her stand for “Nepali women”. But her story should stand as that of a Nepali woman.

The Nepali context to which this story has the most to contribute at the moment is, I think, the debate over women’s property rights. At another time it might be another context in which this story would gain significance. The point is that its most important place for this tale is not the abstract—and remote—world of feminist or anthropological theorizing—but the contexts that have an impact on Bhauju’s life, and those of many other Nepali *bhāujūharu* and *buhārīharu* (sisters-in-law and daughters-in-law).

After the Supreme Court of Nepal ordered the parliament to table a bill on equal property rights for women within a year (by August 1996), there was a raging debate in the media.<sup>43</sup> What would happen if daughters were to inherit property equally with sons? Consequences as dire as the destruction of family structure and a death knell for Hindu *dharma* have been predicted by some. Others see it not only as a fundamental right guaranteed under the new Constitution of 1990, but also as the single most transformative act that could be taken on behalf of the improvement of women’s socioeconomic status and well-being. The lines are fairly starkly drawn although some who support a will system portray their position as one that supports property rights for women yet would avoid the destructive consequences for Nepali social structure predicted by the anti-property rights lobby. Virtually every intellectual, politician and public figure appears to feel obliged to weigh in on the question. The issue has become something of a litmus test for feminist credentials or, to those opposed, for commitment to Nepali (particularly Hindu) tradition.

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43 The parliament has failed thus far, nearly a year after the deadline, to bring a bill under debate. Though there continues to be a steady stream of writings on the issue, it is my impression that, despite the best efforts of some journalists and women’s rights organizations, as the parliament failed to act., the topic has been domesticated. It remains a topic for debate, but without the urgency of the first year after the Supreme Court order. See Pant (2054 v.s.) for an analysis of media coverage of this issue, and Sangraula (2053 v.s.) for a discussion of the limitations of the Supreme Court order.

Some of the most common predictions marshaled in opposition to equal inheritance for daughters that I have seen are the following:<sup>44</sup>

1. Property disputes already account for a large proportion of court cases. Women's property rights would be contested, further overburdening the legal system.
2. There is already conflict between brothers over property rights. If daughters were also to inherit, there would be property disputes between brothers and sisters too, spoiling the *dāju-bahinī* relationship.
3. Men of propertied families are lazy and unambitious because they know that they will inherit property. If daughters were also to inherit, it would ruin their character and work ethic in just the same way.
4. If women inherit as daughters and also acquire rights in their husband's family's property as wives, then they will be doubly propertied. That would be unfair [to men] and, moreover, would result in women taking over everything.
5. If women inherit property their economic independence will remove the source of familial [male] authority over them, leading to extra marital affairs, divorce, and an increase in sexually transmitted diseases.
6. If women own property, Indian men by the thousands will dupe innocent, ignorant Nepali women into marriage, and thus take over Nepali property.
7. Women already have rights to paternal property. All they have to do is to remain unmarried until they reach the age of 35 in order to acquire their share. Thus they already have equal rights if they choose to exercise them.

There are three main cards played in these and other common "arguments" against women's property rights: women's character, tradition, and nationalism. If women are not controlled by men, their wanton (sexual) and ruthless (controlling men and the public sphere) nature will emerge, to the destruction of society. There is nothing culturally specific about this argument, used against every movement for women's rights. It is just given local cultural detail to give it an authentic flavour. If women are, against current tradition, given property rights, it will result in fundamental changes to the social structure and the demise of time-honoured traditions and customs. This too is a common

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44 See Pant (2053 v.s.) and Sangraula (2053 v.s.) for overlapping but different lists.

argument, one marshaled against elimination of any socially sanctioned system of servitude, from slavery to debt-bondage to female disenfranchisement. If women gain property rights it will imperil the country's sovereignty. The nationalist card is played to effect in every issue of fundamental importance in Nepali politics. The only difference here, is that it is joined not to aspersions of politician's character, but to an insult to the intelligence of women.

On the other side the point is precisely that women's property rights will bring about fundamental social transformation. Disagreement is over what those transformations will be in some cases (e.g. an increase in sexually transmitted diseases vs. a decrease in the birth rate), and whether they are healthy or destructive changes (e.g. female autonomy as a virtue or a danger) in other cases. Oddly, the mass of gender research that has been done in Nepal since *The Status of Women* series of 1979-81 figures very little in these debates. One wonders whether it has been found irrelevant or just ignored. In either case, academics who have made studies of women their specialty, despite sometimes weighing in with their opinions, have also failed to bring their research to bear on the debate. This is a serious failure on the part of social science, rightly inviting questions about its social relevancy.

One thing lacking in the debate has been detailed cases. Many remark on the need for research on the current situations of women and on the consequences of various forms of property law revision. Clearly the issues are complex and more could and should be known about current conditions in order to draft realistically designed and strong new laws. Yet the need for study appears mainly to be invoked as a stalling tactic by those opposed to such reform. By looking at what is already known with these questions in mind, the most sweeping statements can be challenged. It is in this spirit that I now reflect on Bhauju's story. Her situation was neither the best nor the worst that a survey would find. Bhauju experienced no physical violence; neither was she nurtured. In Bhauju's case there is some property at stake; that is not so for women in destitute families. But neither can her household in any way be described as wealthy or elite, either in local or in national terms. Some claim that it is only for elite women that an equal inheritance law would have any significant impact. So let us consider that claim too.

Bhauju's father was deceased. Under an equal property law she would have had a share of his property at the time the events described here

occurred.<sup>45</sup> Would that have made any difference? Bhauju rejected the idea of returning to her natal home, even before her mother's breach of etiquette during funeral ceremonies. That morning at the mill it was one of the options she discussed and rejected. She could conceivably live there she said, but she would be wholly dependent on her brother who had his own wife and children. That would be a miserable existence, akin to the one she now led. If Bhauju along with her sisters had owned equal parts of the land and house, she might have felt differently. She would not have been wholly dependent on her brother—the reason she evinced for rejecting the possibility of returning to her natal place. Even if patrilocal residence continued and her brother, in practice, managed all the property, she would have had a source of income from her portion, a right to return and farm it, and a right to live in her natal home that was not wholly dependent on the good will of a brother to a sister. None of this determines whether such coexistence would be harmonious or not, but that is beyond the power of a law to dictate whatever its provisions. Bhauju would have had a place of her own, and however contested the claim might be in practice, or however difficult the realization of rights recognized under law, such recognition would provide an opening—an alternative to dependence on the household of her in-laws. Moreover, if women's rights to equal property inheritance had been in place for years, then her mother and the many women who risked to help her in small ways would have had considerably more resources with which to assist her. In the debate over property rights, consideration of these effects over generations has thus far not been in much evidence. It is the—inevitably jarring—institution of such a system that is alone contemplated, particularly by opponents.

Now consider Bhauju's children. That they belonged to the household of her father was not in dispute. Patrilineal descent was a taken for granted ground upon which all else transpired. Although women do, by law, have a claim on their husband's portion of joint household resources, including after they are widowed, in practice this can be—as in Bhauju's case—a matter of negotiation within a domestic context in which women, precisely because they have rights only indirectly, are unequal players. Bhauju never considered recourse to the courts. That was beyond her means as a woman without independent property, and beyond her imagination as an uneducated hill woman. Her children tied her to a household that was not going to care well for her. To even consider taking

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45 See Thapaliya (2048 v.s.) for analysis of current family laws.

them away from the household was a challenge to expectations and tradition. The reasons that the household was determined to keep them were, I think, many and complex. That the children were loved and were living reminders of a much loved son is one important reason. But they also represented the next generation of labour (there were, as yet, no other grandchildren), and Bhauju's son was the sole male heir in his generation. His father's pension could be (ostensibly or actually) held in reserve for him, denying Bhauju its use even though it was in her name. Thus patrilineal inheritance returned again in another guise to render Bhauju powerless.

These are just a few of the ways that women's lack of rights to inheritance mattered in a material way for Bhauju. When one considers who did the work of maintaining the household, growing food, procuring wood and water, preparing food, and virtually all other necessities of daily life, claims that women should be content with indirect access to resources look bizarre. Although the law was not invoked by anyone, and was probably imperfectly known, the presumption that woman must forge lives via dependence on men and their control of property powerfully conditioned all that took place. In Bhauju's life, as opposed to her story, these structural and cultural constraints are vivid realities with particular shape and, most importantly, particular effects.

Bhauju found general significance in her particular circumstances. As she said to me in an anguished yet resigned voice, "We women must try to live". At present she and other Nepali women must try to live within a state that claims they are revered according to Hindu tradition while implementing laws that ensure they are at the mercy of men's good will and love even for basic survival. Such laws also pit women against one another, as was the case for Bhauju and Jethi. For while the law was in the remote background, the scramble for an Indian pension was so intense precisely because, within their own country, village and household, they had no means to gain control of resources that could better their lives. These are the places where women live; places opponents of property rights for women appear not even to have marked on their maps of Nepal, never mind visited.

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