# Cinematic Kathmandu: Imaginaries of the City

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# Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of the relationship between the imagined and material city of Kathmandu as represented in films. It centers on the main argument that cities from the Global South and those in the periphery such as Kathmandu can be studied as cinematic cities. By analyzing the screen depictions of migration and urbanization in Kathmandu, this study proposes to understand 'new Nepali cinema' as 'urban popular' films. However, the twin tropes of *maulikatā* and *nepālīpana* attached to 'new Nepali cinema' complicate its understanding. These arguments are derived from visual and textual analysis, qualitative interviews, and participant observation. The study also locates the architectural identifiers of Kathmandu and analyses the screen images of Nepali women in films. Furthermore, it traces the history and patterns of film viewing practices in Kathmandu's cinema halls, multiplexes, film festivals, and digital platforms. This research seeks to address the gap in the study of cinematic cities which is currently dominated by literature on cities from the Global North.

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# List of Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| ADB | Asian Development Bank |
| CD | Compact Disc |
| CPN (Maoist) | Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) |
| CPN-UML | Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) |
| CRBT | Caller Ring Back Tone |
| DUDB | Department of Urban Development and Building Construction |
| DVD | Digital Video Disc |
| FICSON | Film Critics Society of Nepal |
| FSA | Film South Asia |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| IIFA | International Indian Film Academy |
| IM | Indian Mujahadeen |
| INGO | International Non-Governmental Organization |
| KIAF | Kathmandu International Arts Festival |
| KIMFF | Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival |
| KMC | Kathmandu Metropolitan City |
| KUKL | Kathmandu Upatyakā Khānepānī Limited |
| MOEST | Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology |
| NFDB | Nepal Film Development Board |
| NGO | Non- Governmental Organization |
| NIFF | Nepal International Film Festival |
| OED | Oxford English Dictionary |
| PGC | Professionally Generated Content |
| PIMFF | Pokhara International Mountain Film Festival |
| SAARC | South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation |
| TIA | Tribhuvan International Airport |
| UAE | United Arab Emirates |
| UGC | User-Generated Content |
| UK | United Kingdom |
| UNESCO | United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization |
| VOD | Video On Demand |
| VCD | Video Compact Disc |
| YIFF | Yala International Independent Film Festival |

# Notes on Transliteration

In this dissertation I follow the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) transliteration scheme for words in the Nepali and Hindi languages.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis is a visual and spatial analysis of Kathmandu, the national capital of Nepal, in films. It examines the relationship between the imagined and physical city of Kathmandu to elucidate how economic, social, political, and cultural transformations in the country over the past decades have shaped its cinematic imaginaries. This research traces how Kathmandu's urban histories are imbricated in its roads, heritage sites, residential buildings, rented rooms, malls multiplexes, and cinema halls. Drawing from the concepts of imagination (Appadurai 1996), transculturality (Abu-Er-Rub et al. 2019), liminality (Gennep and Gennep 2006; Eisenberg 2016), assemblage (Brenner, Madden, and Wachsmuth 2011; McFarlane 2011; Farías 2011), gender performativity (Butler 1988), and cosmopolitanism (Beck 2006; Hannerz 2007; Werbner 2008) this dissertation demonstrates how cinema becomes a witness, a medium through which urban transformation is reconstructed in Nepali films.

The study mainly focuses on the research question: How has urban change in Kathmandu Valley shaped its cinematic imaginaries? This question is answered through five sub-questions that guide each of the empirical chapters: 1. What is *maulikatā* and *nepālīpana* in discussions of 'new Nepali cinema'? 2. How is Kathmandu situated in English, Hindi, and Nepali films? What are the urban types in 'new Nepali cinema'? 3. What are the architectural signifiers and images used to identify Kathmandu and its village other in films? 4. How are the experiences of Nepali women reflected in their screen images? 5. How has the emergence of a 'new Nepali cinema' affected film viewing practices in Kathmandu?

The upcoming section in this introductory chapter provides the contextual background and rationale for the investigation of Kathmandu as a cinematic city. The second and third sections engage in a discussion of key literature on the subject, and notably, research gaps this study seeks to bridge. It also includes a brief history of Nepali cinema. The fourth section discusses the field, outlines the methods and sources, and mentions the limitations of this research. The fifth section provides an outline of the chapters that follow.

## 1.1 Locating cinematic cities

The study of cinematic cities is based on the relationship between cinema and cities which emphasizes the spatial qualities of films. By focusing on urban environments and social dynamics through the manipulation of space[1], films contribute to the understanding of real cities. However, only certain cities have been discussed as cinematic such as New York, London, Paris, Berlin, Tokyo (Clarke 1997). Film scholar James Hay (1997, 211) analyzes this limitation and calls for a broadening of the study of cinematic cities as they are confined to specific locations.

> What would be most useful are strategies for thinking about a historical dispersal (a historical geography) of "the cinematic," that is, how certain sites are (or have become) distinguished and engaged as cinematic in their relation to other sites. To study "the cinematic" would involve considering the place(s) of film practices within an environment and their relation to other ways of organizing this environment, of organizing social relations into an environment.

Hay explains that filmmaking practices are understood through developments in technology, governance, and social practices. When certain sites become cinematic, they are privileged environments of study, so it is important to question the considerations that designate certain places as such. This means decentering sites of film practice and understanding them in relation to their engagements with other sites, subjects, investments, and mobilities.

The distinction of cinematic cities highlights the exclusion of other cities that cannot be accommodated into this category. Most cities that are studied as cinematic cities are global cities, which as urban scholar Sasia Sasken (1997) notes exercise vast control over economic resources. She observes that their service industries and financial markets have restructured the urban social and economic order of the world like New York, London, and Tokyo. However, to understand cities around the world through the paradigm of global cities fails to consider global economic hierarchies and inequalities. Urban scholar Jennifer Robinson (2006) proposes a need to critique the theory of global cities which presents the dominance of a few North American and European cities based on their relevance to the global economy. She points out that cities from the developing world are excluded from the discussion as their economic, social, political, and environmental problems are presented as an alternative to models of urban development. Cities from the Global

[1] Space is used as a conceptual tool throughout the thesis and understood as "practiced place" (Certeau 1984, 117). This proposition refers to the dynamism of spaces as they are shaped by the everyday practices of groups and individuals. Rather than being static physical entities built by planners, spaces are defined by human activity which alters its meanings.

South even if they are urban centers "find themselves interpreted instead through the lens of developmentalism, an approach which broadly understands these places to be lacking in the qualities of city-ness, and which is concerned to improve capacities of governance, service provision and productivity" (Robinson 2006, 219). Only certain cities are identified and labeled as global cities while others are "off the map" (ibid.), dropped from the discussion on urban experiences. This restrictive analytic undermines the diverse social, economic, and political worlds of other cities, which are shaped by transnational flows of goods and ideas. The criteria for urban significance need to be re-imagined to accommodate a multiplicity of cultural and economic networks.

My effort in bringing attention to Kathmandu as a cinematic city is to reassess its "off the map" dimension and problematize articulations of cinematic as attached to few global cities and some urban centers from the Global South. I aim to bring additional insights into the concept of cinematic cities by addressing bias in knowledge production through its sole focus on cities from the Global North. It departs from earlier works on cinematic cities and at the same time adds to the discussion by bringing a distinct perspective from Nepal.

Through this intervention, I hope to contribute to writings on cinema, media, screen, urban cultures, and film histories of South Asia and research on transculturality, which challenges Eurocentric perspectives and "involves a repositioning of spatial concepts with respect to the overlapping fields of entanglement or/and relationality of cultural practice, and a critical discussion of supposed binary oppositions such as local and global or center and periphery" (Abu-Er-Rub et al. 2019, 30).

## 1.2 Transcultural locales and urban imaginaries

Transculturality as an analytical method allows me to navigate the routes undertaken by Nepali films in the spatial mapping of Kathmandu as it emphasizes "multi-layered movements of images and media on the surface and underground, in diachronic and synchronic ways, in and between different public and private spheres" (Brosius and Wenzlhuemer 2011, 11). The domains of cinematic space and lived urban space are in dialogue with one another moving through screens and digital platforms in public and private spaces. As a conceptual tool transculturality is

> about spatial mobility, circulation or flows, an insight drawn from studies of globalization, but is neither synonymous with nor reducible to these. It focuses on

> processes through which forms emerge in local contexts within circuits of exchange. Contact, interaction, and entanglement make the transcultural a field constituted relationally, so that asymmetry, as one attribute of relationships (together with categories such as difference, non-equivalence, dissonance), is an element that makes up this field. (Juneja and Kravagna 2013, 25)

The emphasis of a transcultural outlook on local contexts, interactions, entanglements, and circuits of exchanges facilitates my research on the Nepali film industry, its relationship with other film industries, and borrowings of attributes of film form from Hindi films and world cinema. I study the historical contacts and continuing interactions between Nepali and Hindi films through political, social, and cultural entanglements rather than bounded differences. The forms and narratives of Nepali films emerge out of local contexts of translations, commenting on urban conditions of city life where originality or *maulikatā* constitutes an asymmetry rather than a contained notion of the 'original', 'authentic' and 'organic'. My focus is on films from 'new Nepali cinema', which I situate in a global phenomenon of new cinemas defined by experimentation in film form or comment on political changes in nation-states. I center on migrant narratives in 'new Nepali cinema', the mobilities of gendered bodies in 'rurban' space, facilitated by globalization which can be best described as the "wider circulation of goods, money, people, ideas and cultures across national borders" or "…the integration of economic, political, and cultural systems across the globe" (Toffin and Pfaff-Czarnecka 2014, 4). The congruence of cinema and migration in Nepali films captures the continuing effects of globalization, rapid social change in the Kathmandu Valley, and the travel of labor from villages to the metropolis and the metropolis to the global city. By illustrating certain urban, migrant figures, I focus on their dwellings, transitional spaces in the city, and the continuities and frictions with the city's autocratic past and democratic present. While discussing various sites and monuments in the Valley to identify Kathmandu in films I engage with national and local histories, memories, aspirations, and identities. I further argue that the screen images of women in Nepali films mirror their experiences of gender bias and quest for equal rights and political participation.

This study also tracks the translocal movement of Nepali films across different physical and digital dimensions, cinema halls, multiplexes, national and international film festivals to YouTube. Here, anthropologist Arjun Appadurai's (1996) conception of scapes is useful to understand the flow of Nepali films as part of 'mediascapes', which describes the circulation of media regardless of geographical borders. He uses scape as a suffix to refer to the fluid nature of global cultural flows,

landscapes that are constituted by different actors and agents; nation-states to neighborhoods, and individuals who create and are part of imagined worlds as mediascapes, ideoscapes, ethnoscapes, technoscapes, and financescapes.

Mediascapes provides a productive framework for my research to define interconnections, scope, and speed of exhibition and distribution channels of Nepali films from local cinema halls to diasporic audiences around the world. Appadurai (1996) builds a relation between mediascapes and ideoscapes underlining that media technologies aid the transfer of ideas through various media platforms. Audiences around the world interact with media messages showcasing imagined, fictional, and realistic, worlds available to them electronically.

> Mediascapes, whether produced by private or state interests, tend to be image- centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places. (Appadurai 1996, 35)

What Appadurai suggests is an analysis of mediascapes as narrative, image-based accounts that gather elements of textual and visual forms to create imaginaries. Films as social accounts of imagined lives embody the attributes of mediascapes and my study of Nepali films benefits from this suggestion which comments on the experiences and transformations of metropolitan life shaped by global connectivities. The films I study are "work (s) of the imagination, which produces locality" (Appadurai 2010, 10). This means that ideas of the 'local' are produced and reproduced through imaginaries based on negotiation and tensions between ideologies and technologies facilitated by global flows of culture. The locality of films, where they are filmed, and screened reflects on local filmic practices evolving as part of the global circulation of film cultures. Cities, cinema cultures, and localities of filmmaking are linked by connectivities and circulation.

Furthermore, Appadurai's suggestion that imagination is a form of social practice that allows the articulation of individual agency in a global flow of cultures complements my study. Appadurai (1996, 31) writes, "imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility." He affirms the importance of imagination in analyzing cultural processes. It provides a critical lens to contemplate urban processes not as fantasy and escape but as articulations of subjectivities and possibilities.

Urban experiences are articulated imaginatively through urban imaginaries in various art forms. The significance of urban imaginaries in shaping ideas of the city is discussed extensively by scholars such as Donald (1999), Cinar and Bender (2007), Huyssen (2008), Lindner, and Meissner (2019). Sociologist James Donald elaborates on the importance of urban imaginary, distinguishable in literature, films, and social theory, in shaping the ideas, embodiment, and spatial organization of cities. He (1999, 8) suggests that cities are an "imagined environment. This environment encompasses not only the cities created by architects, planners, builders, sociologists, novelists, poets, and politicians but also the translation of the places they have made into the imaginary reality of our mental life." By designating the city as an imagined environment, Donald shows how it is invested with memory, desire, and meanings that are assigned to its spaces through daily interactions. Simultaneously, it exists as a planned and poetic entity in the works of planners and artists. He posits that the lived city emerges between representation and imagination, as both contribute to its physical dimensions and social life. Literary scholar Andreas Huyssen (2008, 3) explains,

> An urban imaginary marks first and foremost the way city dwellers imagine their own city as the place of everyday life, the site of inspiring traditions and continuities as well as the scene of histories of destruction, crime, and conflicts of all kinds.… [It] is the cognitive and somatic image which we carry within us of the places where we live, work, and play. It is an embodied material fact. Urban imaginaries are thus part of any city's reality, rather than being only figments of the imagination. What we think about a city and how we perceive it informs the ways we act in it.

He draws attention away from the material environment of the city to its images that are constructed through daily interactions and engagements by city dwellers as experiences that develop into memories. By living in the city, Huyssen notes that individuals simultaneously imagine it, which in turn affects their behavior and perception of their lived environments. Similarly, urban scholars Christoph Lindner and Miriam Meissner (2019, 6) state that urban imaginaries, "meaningfully interlink the different structures and signs, minds and bodies, facts and subjectivities, actualities and virtualities, economies and ecologies of urban social space." They propose that city spaces and their transformations are intrinsic to the realities depicted as urban imaginaries of the city, which connect and interpret social structures, as they are experienced through ecologies of space and economies. Both scholars are referring to the impact of urban planning, architecture, governments, and developers in mobilities of goods and people in the city,

which affects its image. They underline how images of the city, formed, and made recognizable through urban imaginaries, are important in understanding subjectivities.

Urban imaginaries encompass diverse ways of archiving and mapping cities (Mazumdar 2007; Zhang 2008). Film scholar Yingjin Zhang (2008) observes that cinema generates imaginaries that reevaluate city life and critiques instances of urban transformation. He draws examples from Chinese cinema and proposes "cinematic mapping" as a form of urban imaginary "that combines motion, emotion, and commotion in an intensified, often visceral representation of temporality, spatiality, locality, equality, identity, and subjectivity" (Zhang 2008, 219). He emphasizes that cinema spatially maps urban landscapes as reconstruction projects reshape cities, compelling everyday lives to adapt to new economic demands.

## 1.3 Film as a spatial form

My research also benefits from the dynamism and critical reflection offered by the juxtaposition of "'space in films' and 'films in space'" (Brunsdon 2012, 216). This notion refers to the interior and exterior spaces represented in the visual composition of a film and the locations in which films are screened and experienced by audiences. In consonance with the work of film scholars (Clarke 1997; Donald 1999; Vidler 2000; Shiel and Fitzmaurice 2001; Brunsdon 2012) I understand and analyze film as a spatial form and the city as an essential field of study. Geographer David B. Clarke (1997) claims that the relationship between cinema and city is largely neglected by film and urban studies even as most cities possess a cinematic quality and cities have an important role in films. He explains that film as a cultural form shares intricate affinities with the city and generates a range of theoretical insights through an engagement with different genres and contexts. Likewise, film scholars Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice (2001) identify the ability of film to address the spatial complexity and social dynamism of the city and contribute to its cultural economy. They assert that the study of cinema adds to the understanding of society as the relationship between city and cinema, which is set in urban societies, are lived social realities. Both scholars posit that cinema is defined by spatiality.

> Cinema is a peculiarly spatial form of culture, of course, because (of all cultural forms) cinema operates and is best understood in terms of the organization of space: both space in films – the space of the shot; the space of the narrative setting; the geographical relationship of various settings in sequence in a film; the mapping of a lived environment on film; and films in space – the shaping of lived urban spaces by cinema as a cultural

> practice; the spatial organization of its industry at the levels of production, distribution, and exhibition; the role of cinema in globalization. (Shiel and Fitzmaurice 2001, 5)

Rather than being only a textual system, Shiel and Fitzmaurice (2001) call for the understanding of cinema as a spatial form which can comment on the lived experiences of cities and urban societies. Films are based on the organization of space, the location of the narrative, the connections between different sequences, the details, and the placing of subjects and objects in a shot. They are also part of the city, functioning as an industry to produce and screen films, a product, and practice of globalization. The physical space of the cinema hall also has a large part to play in the imagination and materiality of the city. So, drawing upon interdisciplinary scholarship on transculturality, cinematic cities, urban imaginaries, and space, I locate my work within the scholarship of cinematic practices in South Asia.

### 1.3.1 South Asian mediascapes

South Asia, as a political category of nation-states, includes the territories of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Afghanistan.[2] Its usage is often critiqued for being a blanket term that highlights India's hegemony over its smaller neighbors and the difficulty it posits in addressing experiences of India's partition to Pakistan in 1947 and the separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1972 (Kaviraj 2014; Mohammad-Arif 2014). In the study of South Asian media cultures Shakuntala Banaji (2010, 4) identifies three interlinkages between the countries in the region through its "national political histories; media traditions and relationships to ruling elites; and cultural practices" that allow it to be studied as a category. She further points out that "colonial rule in all five countries (mainly by the British though also, in the cases of parts of India and Sri Lanka, by the Portuguese and the Dutch), decolonization struggles and their aftermath offer a common framework for beginning to describe the political contexts of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka" (ibid.,4). Her grouping of Nepal with four other countries in South Asia reveals how scholars see it as a territory sharing the Indian colonial experience even though Nepal was never officially colonized.

[2] SAARC or South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was formed in 1985 to increase regional trade relations between seven South Asian countries and Afghanistan was granted membership in 2007. The SAARC Secretariat is in Kathmandu. For more see http://www.saarcstat.org/content/about-saarcstat (accessed 20.02.2021).

Anthropologist Mary Des Chene (2007) comments on the position of Nepal in South Asia as a 'sometimes category' due to its distinctive linkages to colonial histories in South Asia, both included and excluded from it and based on the need of the academic context. She proposes that,

> Nepal's non-colonized history is precisely what connects it to South Asia. A non-colonial nationalism with deep roots in colonial India, a current political relationship with India that has its roots in Nepal's relationship with British India, a history of labor migration that is similarly rooted in the political economy of British India. And a vision of the nation premised on the Nepali language, the monarchy and Hinduism as its defining features, a vision forged in contradistinction to colonized India. (Des Chene 2007, 218)

Des Chene's understanding of Nepal's history, its discussions of connections with colonialism in academia, is overlooked by its geographical proximity to India, which sees it as both backward and similar to it. When Banaji groups Nepal with four other countries from the Indian subcontinent, she is reiterating this practice. What Des Chene suggests is to recognize Nepal's intricate relationship to colonial and British India as a way to both connect and distinctly identify it within South Asia. She points out how the celebration of Nepal's non-colonized history forms the basis of its national policies with a vision of a unified nation achievable through one language, religion and monarchy posited in contradiction to colonial India.

For this research, it is crucial to position academic work on Nepali cinema within the context of South Asian networks and histories, accounting for the impact of colonialism. This requires a broader conception of South Asian media cultures and cityscapes which emerge out of different contexts of modernity. There are some significant works in this field by scholars (Vasudevan 2003; Mazumdar 2007; Sundaram 2009; Lotte 2013) who base their studies on metropolitan cities like Bombay and Delhi in India, and Dhaka, Bangladesh. Film Scholar Ranjani Mazumdar's (2007) study on Bombay cinema engages with popular cinema to discuss its relationships with urban experiences, functioning as a visual archive of the city. Her work traces the evolution of the portrayal of the city post-1970s in Hindi films, marking the shift from rural imagery that was integral to the concept of Indian nationalism to the depiction of urban spaces. The economic and social shifts in urban India facilitated the emergence of an urban population allowing them to experience the pleasures and anxieties of consumerism. City spaces became rife with an urban crisis. Furthermore, globalization allowed an increased flow of media images, paralleling urban migration and socio-economic inequality that became characteristic of the Indian city. Mazumdar

discusses these experiences of modernity within the context of Mumbai in South Asia through the practice of cinema. She comments on the form of the films, the plot, choice of actors, mise-en-scène, music, language to editing to emphasize the importance of space in cinema.

Similarly, situating his research in India's capital Delhi, media scholar Ravi Sundaram (2010) details the urban history of the city with the development of its technological infrastructures. Sundaram's study emphasizes pluralities in understandings of media cultures and urbanism in South Asia through the experience of every day as an after effect of neo-liberalization. He studies the culture of media piracy in the city as an outcome of bypassing legal barriers by a mass of urban poor thriving in non-legal spheres of squatter settlements and neighborhoods. His research shows that alongside the city's infrastructural development and technological networks, digital media plays a significant role in staging urban fear, security concerns, and surveillance demands of its urban elites. He describes 'pirate modernity' as an illegal form of urban global practices which enables a resource for access to a marginalized population that is unable to participate in the 'legal city'.

In another study focusing on Delhi's public culture, sociologist Ravi Vasudevan (2003) researches the history of cinema halls in Delhi revealing how film exhibition regulations and trade motives shape cinema-going experience. Factors such as show timings, film selection, audience demographics, and the infrastructure of cinema halls contribute to what he terms the "cultural experience of cinema". He explores how cinema halls, as public spaces, reflect class and social distinctions, establish transportation routes, and serve as significant consumer activities in urban settings, whether situated within marketplaces or malls.

Moving to another South Asian city, anthropologist Lotte Hoek (2013) tracks the making of the film *Mintu the Murderer* (2005) in Dhaka to its exhibition in cinema halls all around Bangladesh. She studies the film as a way to investigate 'cut pieces', a short pornographic clip attached, added, or cut into Bangladeshi action films which dismantle the form of the film by titillating audiences and generating controversy. Hoek's study of B-grade films and sexually explicit imagery highlights the need for local conceptual understandings of cinematic practices, conventions, and genres. Her extensive ethnography on the cut piece phenomena in Bangladeshi cinema becomes a window into alternative understandings of Bangladesh's state-run film industry and popular cinema in South Asia. She shows how the site of practices of local film forms in South Asia

demands attention and analysis as they destabilize film genre conventions via the production of assemblages within the film. Her work reveals cinema as a site of contested desires and affectivities built on negotiations of pleasures and obscenities.

Coming to Nepal, there is a diversity of local film practices spread across its territory. Besides films being made in the Nepali language in Kathmandu, there is *Janajāti* cinema, comprising films in languages such as Bhojpuri, Tharu, Gurung, Limbu, Magar, and Newari, among others (Ajit 2010). In the thesis, I acknowledge the thriving presence of cinemas in multiple languages in Nepal. However, as an investigation into the form of the popular, I am unable to discuss other histories and cite examples of films that are not in the Nepali language. I also use the term "Nepali film/s" to refer to the language of the film, as acknowledged by the makers, rather than as a political category or as defined by the state throughout the thesis.

### 1.3.2 A condensed history of Nepali cinema

The history of filmmaking in Nepal can be categorized into different eras based on the political changes experienced by the nation-state; the Panchayat rule in 1960, the advent of democracy in 1990, the Maoist armed struggle from 1996-2006, the signing of the peace agreement in 2006 and due institutionalization of Nepal as a secular republic. Filmmaking began in Nepal during the thirty-year Panchayat rule (1960-1990) (Ajit 2007). After the Nepali Congress won the first democratic elections with a majority in 1959, the subsequent year king Mahendra took over power, dissolved the parliament, and introduced panchayat democracy in which central power was retained by the royal palace but panchayats (councils) were used to rule at the local and national level (Whelpton 2005). Filmmaking was used as a propaganda tool by the regime to promote its message of nationalism, which relied on oneness in language, dress, and religion (Ajit 2007).

The first Nepali language film was *Satya Hariścandra* (1956) produced from Calcutta in India and directed by DB Parihar but the first Nepali film produced from Nepal is credited as *Āmā /Mother* (1964) made by the Information Department of the Government of Nepal.[3] Ajit (2007) reflects on the hesitance behind acknowledging the first Nepali film as *Satya Hariścandra* to be an outcome of the Nepali state's cultural bias and disregard for minority groups and languages. He discusses how critics and official data have hesitated in crediting it as a Nepali film, citing its production in

[3] See https://www.film.gov.np/history-of-cinema-in-nepal/ (accessed 10.10.2020).

India. He believes that it is discredited as a Nepali film also based on the Dalit[4] caste of the filmmaker DB Parihar even though he was an important intellectual and political figure in the freedom movements in India against the British rulers and the Rana regime in Nepal (D. Nepal 2017; Parihāra and Tiwari 2018; Pariyar 2018). This reluctance in the accreditation of the film by the Panchayat regime and subsequent democratic regimes according to Ajit (2007) is based on a narrow definition of national cinema. He observes that it uses political boundaries as criteria to define national cinema, rather than language, which should be prioritized. He proposes that films made in any language spoken in Nepal and by a Nepali citizen or if a filmmaker who wants to associate its production with Nepal should be accommodated as national cinema. However, as he notes, the definition and criteria for Nepali national cinema is unclear and narrow and even the films made in languages other than the Nepali language are not included in the category of Nepali national cinema. There are 125 caste and ethnic groups in Nepal who speak 123 languages of which 44.6 percent of the total population speak Nepali as their mother tongue followed by Maithili, Bhojpuri, Tharu, Tamang, Newar, Bajjika, Magar, Doteli, and Urdu among other languages (Central Bureau of Statistics 2012). However, the history of an official national cinema as discussed by Ajit and the information disseminated by Nepal Film Development Board (NFDB) does not mention other film histories or discuss films in languages other than Nepali as being a part of Nepali 'national' cinema.

According to Ajit (2007), the origins of filmmaking in Nepal can be traced back to king Mahendra, who introduced it as a means to promote the Panchayat system and demonstrate his support for democracy by allowing a certain degree of freedom of expression. He notes that the king invited film director Hira Singh Khatri who was working in the Bombay film industry to film two documentaries and direct *Āmā /Mother* (1964), *Hijo Āja ra Bholī /Yesterday Today and Tomorrow* (1968) and *Parivartana /Change* (1971) which praise the party less Panchayat system and criticize multi-party democracy. The Panchayat regime did not permit private film production except for *Māitīghara /Natal Home* (1966) for two decades and the first three directors to work in the industry; Hira Singh Khatri, B.S Thapa, and Prakash Thapa were trained in the Bombay based Hindi film industry (Ajit 2007). Most early films made during this era promoted and supported

[4] The term in Nepal refers to a group of people who have been historically marginalized and discriminated against due to their low social status in the caste system. The caste system in Nepal categorizes people into different groups and relegates Dalits to lowest position in the hierarchy. The Constitution of Nepal includes provisions to end caste-based discrimination and promote social inclusion.

ideals of the Panchayat regime and reflected a deep impact of Hindi films made in Bombay by promoting Hindu religious-cultural ideologies and using familial social melodrama with singing dancing, and fight sequences as entertainment in films (Ajit 2009; S. Gautam 2014; A. Subedi 2019). During the early years of filmmaking in Nepal, there were also some major contributors from the Nepali community living in the Darjeeling hills of India where films such as *Parālako Āgo/ Fire in the Hay*, *Bacna Cāhaneharū /Those who want to live*, *Ciyā Bārī /Tea Garden* were produced and released (Roy 2012).

Additionally, the Royal Nepal Film Corporation established in 1971 with filmmaker Yadav Kharel as its first president was important in creating manpower for the film industry and a plan for the production and exhibition of Nepali films (Ajit 2007; T. Aryal 2020).Through the Corporation fellowships were awarded for Nepali citizens in the Film and Television Institute of Pune (FTII) in India for film training but few pursued a career in the field later citing economic reasons (Ajit 2007). The decade of the 1970s was regarded as the golden era for Nepali cinema due to its popularity among audiences who enjoyed the economic liberty of cinema-going after more than a century of repression from the Rana regime (Liechty 1998). The audience for Nepali cinema in cinema halls included families to low-wage income workers (ibid). Later in the 1980s video parlors mushroomed in the Kathmandu Valley catering to the needs of a younger audience interested in viewing English and Hindi and films in other foreign languages (Iyer 1989; Liechty 1998).

The democratic change of 1990, which marked the end of Panchayat rule, allowed the film industry to boom further, "from up to 10 films a year before 1990, the numbers shot up to 50 films a year by the mid-1990s" (Newar 2003). However the start of the Maoist armed struggle beginning in 1996 affected the production and screening of films until 2006 when a peace agreement was signed between the Maoists and the government and the monarchy was abolished (Limbu 2014). This was also the time when digital filmmaking[5] began in Nepal with films like *Kāgabenī* (2008) and *Sāno Saṃsāra* (2008). Four years later the release of *Loot* (2012), a heist film made by a graduate from Oscar College of Film Studies, Kathmandu Nischal Basnet marked another turning point in this 'post-conflict cinema' (ibid.). It was reviewed by critics as "breaking Nepali narrative

[5] The usage of digitial technology as opposed to analog methods to make films. This includes the use of digital cameras, software, and other tools in the pre-production, production, and post-production stages of the filmmaking process. While analog filmmaking uses physical film stock to capture images and relies on other manual and chemical processes, during shooting, developing, editing, and projection.

conventions" (A. Dixit 2019d) and "becoming one of the most profitable Nepali films of all time and bringing instant stardom to its makers and profits to its financiers" (T. Aryal 2020). During the release of *Loot*, Nepali films were facing a dearth of viewers in cinema halls unable to compete with Hindi films which enjoy huge popularity across Nepal (S. R. Timalsina 2017).

Nepali films have always been criticized for replicating the form of Hindi films and lacking originality by film critics and reporting in the Nepali media (S. Gautam 2014). The form of popular Nepali films includes songs that are not part of the narrative world and fight sequences, which are similar to Hindi films and since its inception developed in the shadow of the Hindi film industry with its manpower being trained there (Ajit 2009; K. M. Dixit 2013). Therefore, cinema critics and journalists term Nepali cinema as conventional and formulaic (Subba 2008; Ajit 2009; S. Gautam 2014).

The reviews for *Loot* (2012) were however different. The film, "attracted a whole new generation of domestic filmgoers" (A. Thapa 2019). Arts reporter for The Kathmandu Post, Timothy Aryal (2017) credits the film as having, "changed the discourse of the Nepali film industry. The film defied the traditional modus operandi — the majority of films even today invariably include a few fight sequences and songs, borrowed from the formulaic Bollywood films of the '90s." As a heist made without stars the film differed from other Nepali films, referred in the media as a copy of their Bollywood counterparts with a certain number of songs and fight sequences. Its popularity also increased discussion in the Nepali news media about the arrival of a 'new wave of filmmakers' and a 'new wave of Nepali films' ( E.Report 2012, Republica 2013; A. Thapa 2019). The films discussed in the thesis predominantly feature films from the 2010s or as termed by the Nepali media from 'new Nepali cinema'. These films vary considerably in genre and popularity. Film reviewers and opinion writers in the Nepali media often discuss them through questions of authenticity, originality or the rubric of *maulikatā* and *Nepālīpana* or Nepaliness (T. Aryal 2018; A. Thapa 2019; S. Gautam 2014). I discuss the multiple meanings of *maulikatā* in Nepali films and its relation to the desire for recognition as a national film industry and search for a 'new Nepali cinema' in Chapter 2. In the immediate I shall elaborate upon the methods, sources, and fieldwork conducted to comprehend Kathmandu as a cinematic city. I shall also outline the difficulties associated with the research.

## 1.4 Methods, sources, and the field

The landscape of research on media cultures of South Asian cities frees cinema "from its conception as a purely textual object to being a socially embedded set of practices" (Singh 2003) which means a shift from the literary reading of films to its location in public culture as social commentary. The films studied in this research are analyzed through social, economic, and historical contexts of their production, circulation, and reception supported by insights from journalistic writings, interviews with filmmakers, critics, and participant observation of the terrain of the Nepali film industry. This allows an engagement with film in the intersections of multiple disciplines such as film studies, media studies, urban studies, sociology, and anthropology.

As a study of films and observations on the site of its production, my work navigates multiple fields of knowledge production. It is an exercise in media ethnography which studies different aspects of media messages by focusing on the economic and social contexts of its production and participation with its implied audiences while aware of multiple vantage points through which they can be interpreted (Mazzoleni 2015). The significance of visual materials or cinema in my case points to how it is described as a physical space, an industry, and a media form and how these connect with the discipline of anthropology (Gray 2010). Films are images of anthropological interest, part of sensory experiences, integral resources for visual anthropology, which is "is about the visual and about visual communication, even if this is reasserted in terms of a relationship between visual and other elements of experience, practice, material culture, fieldwork, and social relevance representation" (Pink 2006, 131). Anthropologist Sarah Pink's observation on the importance of visual media in anthropological practice defines the possibilities of visual materials in giving meaning to sensory experiences and comments on the social and political environments of its production as part of material culture and the researcher's fieldwork.

My research field which is defined by multiple flows and entanglements of images also benefits from anthropologist George Marcus's (1995, 95) preposition of a 'multi-sited ethnography' which "moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time space." He suggests that an object or field of study can be grasped by following multiple sites of investigation since it involves different localities and trajectories of social life. In this thesis, I research Nepali

films based on their relationship to the capital city of Nepal and discuss the multiple historical, cultural, and geographical contexts they emerge from.

As part of field work, I spent nine months in Kathmandu in two phases between 2017 and 2018. During my first visit in November 2017, I explored the filmscape of the city by attending its many film festivals, interacting with filmmakers, actors, journalists, cinema hall owners, policymakers, and critics, and continuing it during my second visit in June 2018. I was already familiar with the geography of the city as I grew up, completed my undergraduate degree, and worked as a journalist, researcher, and teacher in Kathmandu. Additionally, during and before my doctoral studies, I had the opportunity of working as a researcher on the B20 Rethinking Art, Patis in Patan, and the Nepal Heritage Documentation Project (NHDP), associated with the South Asia Institute, Kathmandu branch and Heidelberg University. All these experiences provided me with invaluable skills in field research.

I reencountered Kathmandu as my 'biographical city', proposed by film scholar Brunsdon (2009, 13) "as a city understood from the point of view of a life lived." The places in the city were familiar to me, having journeyed to them for work and social activities. I lived in the outer Ring Road area, which surrounds the core cities of Kathmandu and Patan in the Kathmandu Valley, and it was undergoing a massive road expansion to facilitate public transportation when I left for further studies. On my return for fieldwork, traffic congestion had increased expediently in the area and the constructions were a major source of interruption. I had to re-familiarize myself with changes in urban infrastructures in Kathmandu and discover my research field. This meant that my initial reading, planning, and structuring of my fieldwork had to undergo a transformation in field when I chose to be there.

Furthermore, Marcus's (1995) multi-sited approach in pursuing a field of study through persons, events, objects was a useful tool for me to structure my fieldwork. I met filmmakers; visited film sets and film-related events, festivals, cinema halls and use films as my primary sources in my research. My time was utilized in attending various discussion series and multiple film screenings, cinema halls, collecting brochures, interacting with filmmakers and organizers. I also visited film schools and government organizations speaking with students and policymakers. Most of my interviews were conducted in Nepali, often lasted longer than the scheduled time as conversations took a semi-formal turn with interviewees sharing challenges of their professional and personal

lives. During visits to a film set, the work hours were long, and outsiders were not allowed into the set. Nevertheless, I was permitted to observe as a crewmember from close proximity. I visited four film sets: a web series, a Newari tele serial, and two big-budget Nepali films. This gave me access to the inner workings of both low-budget and well-funded productions, all of which were dispersed across various shooting locations in Kathmandu.

My senses were my guide during my time in the field where I often participated in meetings, conversations, and film shoots where photographing or recording would disrupt the order of things. Pink (2009,7) in her work on the importance of senses in expanding participatory and collaborative techniques in ethnographic research suggests that the "researcher self-consciously and reflexively attend to the senses throughout the research process, that is during the planning, reviewing, fieldwork, analysis and representational processes of a project". She discusses how fieldwork inherently involves observing (sensing) but self-consciously attending to senses during fieldwork uncovers newer routes for knowledge exploration and understanding the field. Through semi-formal conversations, observing on-set activities and the ambiance of film festivals and cinema halls, witnessing audience interactions, and attending film classes for students, my senses directed me. I employed sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch to experience and understand my time in the field in insightful ways.

Since my field visit to Kathmandu and the completion of this thesis, the filmscape of the city has undergone significant infrastructural changes. While I am aware of these changes, I have tried my best to capture the essence of my fieldwork experiences in writing. My primary sources include Nepali films, interviews with my interlocutors, as well as newspaper and magazine articles that comprise of reportage, opinions, and reviews of Nepali films and the urban and social changes in the Kathmandu Valley. I also reference various other media materials for analysis, ranging from social media posts, advertisements, election campaigns to public speeches. The majority of interviews I conducted were translated from Nepali to English. Additionally, a diverse range of resource materials, spanning from brochures to publications on Nepali films, have been translated as well. In my citations of Nepali texts, I use diacritics, and I provide English translations for all Nepali film titles, excluding proper names.

The selection of the films is based on their relationship to the subject under discussion and their availability on digital platforms such as YouTube or in DVD formats. The thesis references over

90 films in languages including Nepali, Hindi, and English, alongside 22 personal interviews. I use film screenshots to discuss my observations, findings, and time stamps of films when dialogue is involved, crediting all films to their original creators, and sharing YouTube links if available on the website. The purpose and character of the use of the screenshots which is for educational and research purpose will not impact the market value of the original work.

My interlocutors were professionals in the Nepali film industry such as filmmakers, actors, critics, journalists, film festival organizers and cinema hall owners. I have used their official names and pseudonyms in specific cases to safeguard their privacy as they are seen as public figures. The selection of my informants was largely based on reciprocity and availability of time from their work schedule. To initiate the process, I began by emailing my contacts from my time as a journalist at Republica English daily. While I successfully established connections with a few individuals, there was a gap in communication over the intervening years with others. Therefore, I attended film-related public events and, upon their conclusion, engaged with the attendees, introducing my research, and requesting their personal contact details for potential future interviews. This approach yielded positive results in several cases. However, when it came to actors, scheduling proved more challenging, and arranging interviews was not always feasible.

In 2017, I also had the opportunity to attend three film festivals held in Kathmandu: Film Southasia, Ekadeshma International Short Film Festival, and Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival. Similarly, my visits and interactions with cinema hall owners in the Kathmandu Valley who were considering the transition from single-screen halls to multiplexes provided insights into the operations of these urban infrastructures. From establishments like Gopi Krishna Movies and Biswajyoti Hall to venues such as QFX Cinemas, and even digital platforms like Highlights Nepal that houses numerous Nepali films, the trajectory of digital distribution became clear.

### 1.4.1 Lack of academic work on Nepali cinema

One major challenge in writing this thesis has been the lack of academic work on Nepali cinema. When I began my study and introduced my topic to researchers, filmmakers, film crews in Nepal, I often received a similar response, “Oh, you do cinematography!” The title of my research, which includes “cinematic”, was heard, understood, and interpreted as an activity in filmmaking and not a study of cinema cultures. My respondents struggled to situate me as a researcher of film. Most

were unable to articulate the social value of Nepali cinema as they interpreted films only as an economic commodity. As critic Anubhav Ajit observes,

> I was searching for something critical on Nepali cinema in the market and did not find anything besides these reviews, seasonal ones, written on a day-to-day basis in newspapers, nothing critical. However, I see that films are being made every day, you see a film poster on the street and the next day it is torn and there is a new one...Maybe there is a lack of writing on cinema or there is no realization that cinema can be an academic, semi-academic, or para-academic genre, a way into some intellectual analysis. I do not see that realization. (Interview with Ajit, 2018)

Ajit is pointing out the dearth of writing on Nepali cinema in academia and the lack of attention given to it as a field of study even though Nepali films have a significant presence in public life and their production is on the rise. Besides regular reviews and opinion articles in Nepali and English language newspapers based in Kathmandu, there is still no considerable academic writing on them[6]. The inattention to Nepali cinema according to Ajit is perhaps a disregard for it as a field of intellectual inquiry since Nepali films are mostly seen as a poor copy of Hindi films without originality (Ajit 2009; Gautam 2014; Aryal 2020). His earlier study (2007) on the history of filmmaking in Nepal concludes that Nepali cinema is an under-researched field. Ajit's three articles on the beginnings of filmmaking in Nepal, the politics of Nepali cinema, and the identity of ethnic films in Nepal were published in the academic journal *Media Adhyayana*[7] in 2007, 2009, and 2010. More than a decade later, they are still among the few academic writings on Nepali cinema. Some other scholarly works include writings by Mark Liechty (1998) Martin Gaenszle (2011) and Ramesh Parajuli (2019) that discuss different aspects of Nepali cinema. Gaenszle (2011) reviews the Nabin Subba directed film *Numāphuṅga* (2002) as an example of Nepali ethnic cinema and a window into Limbu culture and Parajuli (2019) tracks the early film viewing practice of Nepali audiences. Similarly, Liechty (1998) studies the experience of cinema and video viewing in Kathmandu as a social encounter with modernity. There is also an essay by travel writer Pico Iyer (1989) who shares his observations of video parlors in the 1980s in Kathmandu.

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[6] There are a number of Masters and PhD dissertations on Nepali cinema. A recent one being Jinni Pradhan's work on multiplex culture in Kathmandu (Pradhan 2016) and some Masters and Mphil research work by students from the Central Department of English at Tribhuvan University, Nepal archived at http://107.170.122.150:8080/xmlui/discover (accessed on 10.02.2021).

[7] A yearly journal on media writings in Nepali language published by Martin Chautari, a non-governmental organization based in Thapathali, Kathmandu that facilitates research and academic discussions. For more see http://www.martinchautari.org.np/index.php/2012-08-27-08-47-02/history (accessed on 10.02.2021)

Studies on South Asian cinema too, exclude Nepali cinema and those on Nepali popular culture mostly discuss literature, music, theatre, and dance (Hutt 1999; Greene and Henderson 2000; Shresthova 2010; Kunreuther 2014; Stirr 2017; Mottin 2018). The small geographical scale of the Nepali film industry, its entangled history with the Bombay cinema industry, the huge market presence and popularity of Hindi films and music in Nepal have subsumed it into an invisible category in scholarly work. While there are considerable writings on the national cinemas of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka that discuss its growth and current facets (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1995; Raju 2015; Conrich 2016; Gazdar 2019), a comprehensive history of Nepali cinema is yet to be written.

The lack of academic interest in Nepali cinema can perhaps be attributed to three interrelated factors. First, filmmaking began in Nepal in the 1960s with the efforts of king Mahendra much later after it had arrived in the Indian sub-continent in the 1890s. The state-controlled film media did not allow private film productions for decades and scripts were finalized by the palace and used to promote a message of national unity propagated by Mahendra's Panchayat regime (1960-1990) (Ajit 2007). Second, the early manpower in Nepali film industry was trained in the Bombay film industry. Critics note that their experience and working style influenced the form of Nepali films which began to replicate the structure of Hindi films and continues to do so (Ajit 2009; Gautam 2014; Aryal 2018). Lastly, the history of filmmaking in Nepal with its intimate relationship to the Bombay film industry and the form of Hindi films is perceived through a lens of homogeneity of borrowing and copying. Till date, it is seen as a commercial venture rarely able to make social commentaries. Through the writing of this ethnography, I try to address this research gap by focusing on areas of connections and entangled networks between global cinema cultures and the Nepali film industry.

In this regard, anthropologist Mark Liechty's (2010) work on the rise of the middle class, mass media, and consumer culture in Kathmandu has been a vital resource for my research. He studies transformations in class and gender identities in the Kathmandu Valley from the 1990s as urbanization and economic reforms facilitate consumerism among a new generation who articulate ways of being modern within the parameters of honor and morality. They struggle to come to terms with economic and social changes that demands newer ways of consumer participation. He writes (2010, 5), "In Kathmandu the meaning and experience of modernity lies in daily balancing the demands and possibilities of a transforming social and material context against those of a deeply

rooted cultural milieu of moral values, systems of prestige, and notions of propriety". Liechty presents Kathmandu as an appropriate site to understand the changing meanings of traditional social contexts transforming through contact with global markets of commodities that structure class and gender relations in a rapidly urbanizing 'third world periphery'. He analyzes the patterns of mass media consumption among Kathmandu residents from pirated video cassettes, Bollywood and Hollywood films, radio programs to teen magazines that make up a transnational market of media products. My research is another contribution to the study of media cultures in Kathmandu using Nepali films as a way to understand the transformation in daily lives and urban change in Nepal's national capital.

I am, however, aware of the limitations of my writing. As Pink (2007, 22) suggests about the meanings and results of ethnography, "It does not claim to produce an objective or truthful account of reality but should aim to offer versions of ethnographers' experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced." She discusses how written accounts of knowledge produced from ethnography are based on human contacts and theoretical contexts developed through time. It acknowledges the researcher's role in contextualizing experiences but is aware of the time-bound constraints and negotiations involved. I understand that my work is one route in analyzing the cinematic practices of South Asia located in Kathmandu, Nepal. The meanings, values, and conceptual categories I have developed through fieldwork are one of the many versions of cinematic Kathmandu.

## 1.5 Outline of the thesis

This dissertation includes seven chapters that cover a broad range of topics related to cinematic and urban space, questions surrounding identities and national cinema, gender representation, and screen cultures. The chapters interact with one another and present a multilayered image of a cinematic urbanscape that is emerging in times of national and global change.

Chapter Two details the aspiration for a 'national film industry' and a 'new Nepali cinema' through articulations of *maulikatā* or 'originality' and search for *nepālīpana* or 'nepaliness' by my interlocutors and writings on Nepali cinema. A transcultural lens is used to navigate the multiplicity of meanings and references by the term *maulikatā* to discuss 'authenticity' and 'originality' in film form.

Chapter Three analyses the urban visualizations of ‘new Nepali cinema’. It discusses the portrayal of Kathmandu as a physical, criminal, and mystical transit in Nepali, Hindi, and English language films. The chapter also elaborates upon three urban types in ‘new Nepali cinema’: the villager or *gā̃ule*, the gangster or *dādā*, and the bar dancer.

Chapter Four focuses on assemblage thinking to describe the patterns of iconographic representations of monuments and sites in the Kathmandu Valley and forms of urban living. I discuss the entanglements of local and national histories, heritage politics, and urban plans and policies embedded in their screen presence. I study the opening sequences in films used to locate Kathmandu as a spatial assemblage of the city in juxtaposition with *Bhāḍāko Koṭhā* (bk) or rented rooms that manifest as lived spaces, dwellings of low-income migrants in the city.

Chapter Five is an investigation of the screen portrayals of women in Nepali cinema. I trace how experiences of Nepali women in public life seeps into their on-screen lives. Women mostly perform designated roles of the angry wife and bar dancer who have no access to desire in Nepali film.

Chapter Six analyzes film exhibition venues in Kathmandu, as ‘cosmopolitan gatherings’ which include cinema halls both single screens, multiplexes, and film festivals. I set a parallel between the growth of multiplexes and onset of ‘new Nepali cinema’. I also explore film festivals, free screening venues, and digital platforms like YouTube as multiple routes available for Nepali film exhibition.

Chapter Seven is the concluding chapter, which brings together the main themes and findings of the thesis and proposes areas for further research. Here I emphasize the city-cinema nexus and how urban imaginings of the city manifest in films.

# Chapter 2: The search for *Maulikatā*

> The biggest problem of Nepali cinema is its identity or if someone asks us about the characteristics of our cinema, it is similar to another film industry. In a globalized world, filmmaking styles and storytelling might be related but eventually, Nepali cinema must search for its own story and presentation. Should films be made according to audience interest or films that create interest in audiences be made? Both options are available. We made a lot of cinemas in the name of audience interest that has taken us nowhere. Now the only way is to make cinema that creates interest in audiences. (Nepal Film Development Board 2016, 8)[8]

This excerpt from the editorial of *Calacitra Mañca /Film Stage*, an annual publication[9] of the Nepal Film Development Board (NFDB) in Chabahil, Kathmandu raises concerns about the state of the Nepali film industry and draws parallels between Nepali cinema and other film industries. It urges filmmakers to explore new forms of storytelling with *nepālīpana*[10] and presentation to generate audience interest, rather than solely catering to their preferences. The editorial observes that Nepali cinema is grappling with an identity crisis and emphasizes the need to strive for originality or *maulikatā* to create an authentic Nepali cinema (K. Bhattarai 2016; Rajbanshi 2017; T. Aryal 2018). Additionally, the Nepal national fiscal budget of 2020 declares the government's commitment to supporting "the production of *maulik* films that aim to preserve and promote nationalism, national unity, language, and culture" (Kantipur 2020). A search continues for a Nepali national cinema with originality or *maulikatā* or *maulik* Nepali cinema that interests policymakers, filmmakers, and critics (M. Dixit 2013; K. Bhattarai 2016; T. Aryal 2018).

Against this backdrop, this chapter seeks to answer the question 'What is *maulikatā* and *nepālīpana* in discussions of 'new Nepali cinema'? I study the evolution, current facets, and multiple identities of Nepali cinema drawing upon observations of entanglements between

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[8] *Nepālī cinemāko sabaibhandā ṭhulo samasyā pahicānako samasyā ho arthāta hamī kasaile timiharūko cinemākā viśeṣatā ke hun bhanera sodhyo bhane hamīle bhanne viśeṣatāle arunai filma udyogako guṇa bokeko thāha pāuna samaya lāgdaina. Viśvavyāpīkaraṇako yugamā ekadamai pharaka bhaera cīja pani naholā, filma nirmāṇa śailī vā kathya kahiṃ na kahiṃ gayera millā tara pani dhilo cā̃ḍo nepālī cinemāle āphnai kathā ra prastutiko khoja garna jarurī cha. Darśakako rucī anusāra filma banāune ki darśakamā rucī jāgṛta garne filma banāune filmakarmīsaṃga dubai suvidhā upalabdha hunchan. Darśakako rucīkā nāmamā hamīle dherai cinemā banāyaũ yasale hāmīlāī kahiṃ pani puryāyena. Tyasaile aba hāmīsaṃga euṭai vikalpa cha, darśakamā ruci utpanna garāune cinemā banāune.* (In Nepali)

[9] It is usually distributed at the national film awards ceremony organized by the Board and unavailable for purchase. Its publication is however irregular and dependent on changes in the government, which makes political appointments in the organization.

[10] It roughly translates to Nepaliness but it is a contested term further discussed in the later parts of this chapter.

discourses on nationalism, film histories, social transformation, and cultural exchanges articulated by my interlocutors. While aware about the recurrent use, mention, and reiteration of nation, nationalism, and national identities in their responses I attempt to problematize articulations of a 'Nepali national cinema' based on linguistic and geographical homogeneity. I find the concept of transculturality useful in doing so because it critiques methodological nationalism and rejects the rigidity of physical boundaries of nation-states and sees borders as porous, evolving, and changing (Abu-Er-Rub et al. 2019).

A transcultural approach helps me to understand the term *maulikatā* as an anchor through which to navigate multiple meanings, flows, engagements, entanglements, and scales it references regarding a national film industry, a national cinema, and the search for a 'new Nepali cinema'. I embrace a multi-sited view directed by transculturality to focus on the connectivities and asymmetries addressed by the use of *maulikatā* in Nepali journalistic writings, by policymakers, critics, and filmmakers who discuss the identity of Nepali cinema in relation to world cinema, the Hindi film industry, and the search for a 'new Nepali cinema'. Transculturality allows me to see the functioning of the Nepali film industry as processual and evolving since as a heuristic tool

> it explicitly focuses on connections and relations, discontinuities and frictions, not only among nation-states and their predecessors (kingdoms, empires) but also among stateless societies, transnational organizations, institutions, languages and media. It shifts the gaze toward interstices, transitions and exchanges, and thus repositions any studied case in a space of relationality and contingency. These vantage points ensure underlining entanglement and relationality while also acknowledging dynamics of enclosure, friction and dissonance. A transcultural lens focuses not merely on the fact that two sites are connected, but also on how the connections transform what is being connected, and who is involved (and who excluded). (Abu-Er-Rub et al. 2019, 31)

The dimensions of transculturality as discussed by transcultural theorists Abu-Er-Rub et al. (2019) are shaped by social, political, and economic connections between nation-states and not reduced and defined through differences. It allows for a repositioning of boundaries from different vantage points while remaining conscious of frictions, conflicts, and exclusions. A transcultural approach or a transcultural lens allows for the study of state bodies, organizations, and media forms by focusing on connections between sites and how they are transformed in their interactions. It enables me to locate a multifaceted world of interaction and circulation between global cinema cultures by discussing an emerging film industry and films from the Global South. The remainder of this chapter elaborates on the discussion of *maulikatā* in Nepali films, the quest for

legitimization of Nepali cinema as a national film industry, and the emergence of a 'new Nepali cinema'.

## 2.2 What is *maulikatā*?

In the Nepali language, the term *maulikatā* translates to originality. However, it has evolved to encompass broader aspects of authenticity and *Nepālīpana* or Nepaliness in discussions regarding the form, status, and future of Nepali cinema. These discussions investigate the position of Nepali films within world cinema, exploring why it may be lacking and how Nepali cinema can achieve greater visibility. Filmmakers, critics, and Nepali journalistic writing all contribute to these conversations. First, I will discuss *maulikatā* as articulated and discussed by various Nepali filmmakers, critics, and professionals in the film industry charting its association with 'realness' 'originality' 'authenticity' through the writings of scholars Jean Baudrillard (2001), Fredric Jameson (1991), and Walter Benjamin (1969). As a representative voice of the Nepali film industry and film criticism in Nepal, I will begin by highlighting the opinion of film critic and filmmaker Nabin Subba, who has been a strong campaigner for *maulikatā* in Nepali films (D'arcy 2017; Rajbanshi 2017).

Subba elaborates on *maulikatā* in an article titled, '*What is the maulikatā of Nepali films?'* (2019)[11] by relating it to film form rather than the content of films. He suggests that *maulikatā*, in the context of Nepali films, can be explored and analyzed through four key elements: storytelling structure, acting, set design, and sound[12]. According to him, Nepali screenplay writers predominantly adhere to the three-act story structure[13], which bears resemblance to Hindi and English films. Local storytelling traditions from *svasthāni vrata kathā*[14] recitation to *mundhuma*[15] recitations among Limbus which are unique to a multi-cultural Nepal, however, remain underutilized. He

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[11] *Nepali filmko maulikatā k ho?*

[12] *kathya saṃracanā, abhinaya, dṛśya bhandā and dhvani* (In Nepali)

[13] In the context of storytelling in films it refers to three acts of setup, confrontation, and resolution.

[14] Gender and Asian studies scholar Jessica Vantine Birkenholtz discusses the tradition of the recitation of *Svasthānī vrat Kathā* (SVK), or The Story of the Ritual Vow to the Goddess Svasthānī through the politics of gender and iconography in the Hindu context. She explains, "the SVK text expanded from a handwritten eight-folio palm-leaf local legend on the origin of the *Svasthānī vrat*, or ritual vow, into a full-fledged Purāṇa of thirty-one chapters in over four hundred printed pages. The text is read cover to cover, one chapter each night throughout the month of *Māgh"*(Birkenholtz 2013, 200).

[15] Mundhuma is the oral tradition of the Kiratis of Eastern Nepal and dictates their cultural life. It has its own language performed by ritual experts (I. P. Rai et al. 2009).

recommends exploring these traditions to establish a distinct storytelling structure in Nepali films, setting them apart from other global frameworks.

Moving on to acting styles in Nepali films, Subba identifies their origins to the teachings of popular theatre artists Sunil Pokharel and Anup Baral, both of whom received their education from the National School of Drama in New Delhi. These artists established the Gurukul Theatre and Actors Studio drama schools in Kathmandu (Phoboo 2005; P. Shrestha 2010). He points out that theatre actors like Daya Hang Rai and Saugat Malla, who transitioned from a theatre background to films through these schools, underwent a transformation in their acting approach (K. Bhattarai 2016a). However, he hesitates to fully credit theatre actors for their contribution, noting that their theatrical acting style requires refinement to suit the medium of film.

Shifting focus to sound, Subba discusses the significance of incorporating local sounds, emphasizing that the various ethnic languages and dialects spoken in Nepal have yet to find their place in Nepali films. There exists a considerable mismatch between the language spoken by characters and the film's setting, indicating a need for improved localization of sound in Nepali cinema. He concludes his essay by expressing his discontent with the present generation of filmmakers, who perceive filmmaking primarily as a commercial pursuit rather than an artistic endevour. He emphasizes that true *maulikatā* can only be achieved by exploring filmmaking as an art form. In Subba's argument of what is *maulik* in Nepali cinema, *maulikatā* can exist only inside *maulik* films as an authentic, original, real, film form.

In contrast, Nikita Poudel, producer, and former chairperson of Nepal Film Development Board (NFDB) understands *maulikatā* as the possibility of Nepal as a filming location based on its diverse natural landscapes. She says, "You show a culture of a place, its livelihood, and nature, something that is yours. There are already Bollywood and Hollywood movies releasing in Nepal but Nepali films that have *maulikatā* show our surroundings and culture" (Interview with Poudel, 2018). For Poudel the natural landscapes of Nepal bring out *maulikatā* in Nepali films. It is about identifying one's experiences on screen. The Film Board for which Poudel worked was established in 2002 as part of the government's effort in supporting Nepali filmmakers and filmmaking in Nepal.[16] Through the years it has been heavily criticized for failing to do so and often introducing regulations to discourage first-time filmmakers (Republica n.d.). One of its long-term programs

[16] See https://www.film.gov.np/about/ (accessed 10.06.2020).

has been to promote Nepal as a filming destination or explore the possibilities of film tourism (Guragain 2008). Poudel's perspective on *maulikatā*, Nepal's scenic locations, aligns with the organization's overarching vision. Chiranjibi Guragain (2008,110), the Information and International Relations Officer at NFDB, elaborates the organization's strategic approach. in an article as, "We can target foreign film producers (Indian and Hollywood) for some time so that they can be persuaded to use Nepali locations for 'Bollywood and Hollywood' films, and, thereby, generate significant economic benefits for Nepal's tourism industry." This statement underscores the government organization's objective of gaining visibility for its film industry by attracting the attention of larger film industries, and how its legitimization of Nepal's scenic locations is deemed important. NFDB's efforts to promote Nepal as a shooting destination persist through a campaign launched in 2019, marked by the publication of *Filming in Nepal: The Ultimate Travel Guide for Film Sites*. This guidebook serves as promotional material, distributed to representatives of foreign film industries during designated events.[17] This guide serves as promotional material, distributed to representatives of foreign film industries during designated events.

Shifting the focus back to the elements of film, for filmmaker Sangeeta Shrestha *maulikatā* is determined by the script and what is shown as *maulik* in one film could differ from another depending on the locale of the film and its script (Interview with Shrestha, 2018). Alternatively, actor and producer Reecha Sharma finds that,

> This categorization is confusing in itself like what is commercial what is noncommercial and what is art? What is Nepali *maulik* cinema is it *Kabaddi* or *Jhola*, people ask you? I do not know what is *maulik*? But all I can say is a cinema which I can relate to is *maulik* be it from Hollywood Bollywood for something from Nepal or that I can relate to as a woman. (Interview with Sharma, 2018)

Sharma places Nepali *maulik* cinema with other categories of films such as commercial and art that are used as terms to describe films from 'new Nepali cinema'. The *Kabaddi* series is a comedy hit and *Jhola* was praised by critics for its authentic storytelling and were Nepal's entry for the Oscars Awards in the Foreign Language category in 2014 (Fraser 2014; Himalayan News Service 2015). She considers audience identification with a film to be the key to understand *maulikatā* rather than it being an intrinsic quality to Nepali cinema. She sees it more as a universal appeal of films rather than something to be located in Nepali films and it has more to do with representation,

[17] See https://www.facebook.com/nepalfilm/ (accessed 10.06.2020).

something reproducible or identifiable, and less to do with experimentation of film form or something authentic.

The works of cultural critics Fredric Jameson and Walter Benjamin help explain these multiple interpretations of *maulikatā*. Jameson (1991, 56) argues that "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production" which means that art is driven by economic conditions. He posits that as grants, institutional support, and patronage assist the making of art for the continuity of new products, there is a loss of depth and all that exists is a simulacrum, a copy without an original. He also defines the loss of self, which erases personal style, leaving space only for pastiche, which is not parody but satirizes personal style, is humorless and the collection and reiteration of dead styles. He asserts that no original work can exist in these postmodern times when the foundation of art is in imitating dead styles. He calls it as "namely the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion" (Jameson 1991, 65). All style is canonized, as he suggests, and the claim for newness and authenticity is only an allusion to a past of dead signs created to supply the demand for a consumeristic market. According to his interpretations, filmic styles are also reproduced in the present through pastiche attempting to reinvent old styles or often as a homage to the past. The authentic in film form is pastiche as much as a search for something *maulik* or original detached from past signs.

Similarly, cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1969) posits that mechanical reproduction as in the case of films changes the dynamics of the original, copy, and authenticity in art. He describes authenticity in artworks as "the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced" (Benjamin 1969, 221). He explains that rather than being extrinsic to its surroundings, authenticity in art is an outcome of its historical and social context, built on past contributions. The newness or authenticity comes out of the history of experiences in which the artwork is made. For Benjamin even if mechanical reproduction has made replication possible it is time and space, which determines the originality of the work. It retains its value because of its place of origin and the temporality under which it is created. He explains in detail how technological advancements have changed the form of photography and film through time. He proposes that, fundamentally, all works of art are reproducible, but as technology advanced, the process of mass reproduction became increasingly simplified. For example, the invention of the printing press facilitated the production of mass literature and lithography played a pivotal role in facilitating the creation of

graphic art in various forms. Subsequently, photography emerged, effectively diminishing the significance of the artist's hand, and shifting it to the eye behind the camera lens.

Benjamin argues that mechanical reproduction has a dual effect on artworks. On one hand, it diminishes the aura inherent in the artist's craftsmanship—the unique quality that makes an artwork an authentic original. However, mechanical reproduction also grants the ability to replicate or create multiple copies of the artwork. When the aura of an artwork stems from the artist's personal touch, this aura becomes multiplied and distributed through mechanical reproduction. In film, the categories of authenticity, copy and aura are entangled due to the technical medium's collaborative nature. Filmmaking is a joint effort of writers, cinematographers, directors, and actors. Their work interacts with various styles and temporalities to create a fictive world that is based on the distribution of multiple copies- each copy retaining a trace of the original aura despite its mechanical nature.

### 2.2.1 Finding *Nepālīpana*

Besides notions of originality, copy and authenticity, meanings of *maulikatā* are also attached to Nepaliness. Filmmaker Nischal Basnet shares, "stories can be of any kind but something that complements the characters, the ambiance, such that even after watching the film if it makes you feel like it is carrying *nepālīpana*, that is *maulikatā*" (Interview with Basnet, 2018). Basnet whose first feature film *Loot* (2012) was credited by the media for changing the course of Nepali cinema and attracting a youth audience to cinemas sees *maulikatā* in depicting *nepālīpana* in films. He describes it as something essentially Nepali that captures the realities of a locality (Republica 2013; Limbu 2014). *Loot* was termed *maulik* and credited for showing the reality of particular neighborhoods and representing the diversity of migrants who live in Kathmandu (S. R. Timalsina 2017; A. Dixit 2019d). Critic Yagnesh however differentiates between *maulikatā* and *nepālīpana*. He posits,

> The thing is that *maulikatā* is an abstract[18] thing but *nepālīpana,* what is Nepali that question is not abstract that is a legitimate question because Nepal has a distinct culture and if we take cinema as a part of Nepali art it has to represent that too. We need that in our films too. If we continue copying Bollywood we will be Bollywood. We need to be original, that is the main thing, how can we be original? Being original is telling your own story, telling what you feel like, not repeating what others are saying and why are you telling this particular story? Why are you making this story and why is it

[18] He uses the term *amūrta* in Nepali which also means intangible, unembodied, formless.

> necessary for you to tell it if others in the world have already told it? (Interview with Yagnesh, 2018)

Yagnesh associates *nepālīpana* with something 'truly Nepali' or authentically rooted in Nepal, rather than simply equating it to *maulikatā*, which translates to originality. He emphasizes that *nepālīpana*, combined with originality, arises from a filmmaker's understanding of their own work and how it differs or aligns with Bollywood and Hollywood films. He asserts that Nepali filmmakers must engage in self-assessment to attain *nepālīpana* or originality in their work.

In this context, it is useful to discuss the writings of sociologist and cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard (2001) who problematizes the concept of the copy and original by using the term simulacrum as a copy without an original. He discusses in detail the contradictions associated with real and simulated images in the media. Simulation creates what is not present and challenges what is real. The boundary between what is real, and simulation is discussed by him through the example of iconoclasts who destroy idols fearing that the idols substitute a belief in God. Baudrillard (2001) explains that the reason behind the destruction of idols is not based on the belief that idol worship will replace the worship of God, but rather on the notion that there is nothing substantial behind the idols. He further suggests that those who worship God through icons, on the other hand, acknowledge that unveiling the images of God may reveal the absence of any real essence behind them. Nevertheless, they accept that idols symbolize the images of God. In this way, even the concept of God becomes simulated.

Baudrillard outlines four stages through which an image transforms into a simulacrum. Initially, it reflects a fundamental reality, then it distorts and obscures that reality. Subsequently, the original reality becomes absent, and eventually, reality itself does not exist, only "pure simulacrum" remains (ibid., 170). In the first two stages, Baudrillard observes that reality still exists in reflection and distortion, but in the latter two stages, it completely vanishes, leaving behind only a simulacrum. To illustrate this concept, Baudrillard employs the example of Disneyland, a theme park where visitors are immersed in a fabricated world of childhood fantasies. It is constructed as an enclave separate from the real world of Los Angeles or America, where Disneyland is located. However, he argues that the boundaries between the real and imaginary worlds are non-existent. There is no distinction between the real and the imaginary between Disneyland and the rest of America because Disneyland itself represents a simulated reality. Baudrillard challenges the notion of a separate realness that exists outside of Disneyland but not within it. Similar discussions among

film critics and filmmakers arise regarding *maulikatā* and *nepālīpana* in Nepali films. They question whether these concepts represent a pretense of possessing something that does not truly exist or if they serve to mask the absence of a fundamental reality. Both are difficult to locate as they are articulated in varied contexts.

In another discussion of *nepālīpana* filmmaker Nabin Subba uses his film *Numāphuṅga* (2000) as an example. The film, which garnered critical reception at home and abroad, was reviewed as "a sign that Nepali film directors are finally starting to mature, separating themselves from Bollywood's trend of gratuitous sex, violence, and slapstick, producing truly original works that depict the real Nepal" (Tumbahangphey 2002). Based on the life of Numāphuṅga, a Limbu woman in eastern Nepal (explained in Chapter 4) the film is in Nepali and Limbu languages and is credited as being able to depict the 'real Nepal' and promoted as an example of ethnic cinema and experimentation in film form (Tamang 2002; Gaenszle 2016). Subba explains in an interview,

> In thinking about a distinct Nepali form, the film's story, broken up into fragments seen from the point of view of Numāphuṅga's sister, could be treated as a thangka painting in which various fragmented incidents make up the whole painting. Or perhaps some attention could be paid to the rhythm created by the editing. A subtle pattern in the editing – four close-ups and one extreme long shot –can be likened to the familiar rhythm of a *mādala* which can perhaps create a 'Nepali rhythm'. (Sherpa 2004)

He describes his film by drawing a comparison to the visual art form of thangka[19] painting, adopting its form and technique, and incorporating the rhythmic qualities of a musical instrument like *mādala*[20] where its beat is equated with the editing style in the film. He distinguishes both the art forms, *mādala* as a Nepali musical instrument and thangka as a Nepali art embodying the essence of Nepaliness. Political commentator C.K Lal (2012) observes that during the Panchayat rule, certain art forms, such as the pagoda style in architecture, carpet weaving, and thangka painting, were promoted by the state as representative of Nepali culture. He writes, "Mahendra's language-based cultural nationalism was expanded to include 'Nepali' art, architecture, religion, culture, symbols, and system of governance. The Tibetan art of Thangka and carpet weaving became Nepali. The pagoda style of architecture became a heritage of Nepal" (C. K. Lal 2012, 18). Lal notes that king Mahendra, during his Panchayat rule, promoted an idea of a Nepali nationalism

[19] Thangka painting can be described as Buddhist scroll paintings originally made in Tibet. But it has gained popularity in the tourist markets of the Kathmandu Valley and is painted by Nepali artists (Bangdel 2016).
[20] *Mādala* is a Nepali folk musical instrument known for its rhythm and beats.

based on the primacy of a national dress, single language i.e. Nepali and religion (Hinduism) demanding univocal loyalty from his subjects. He also incorporated and endorsed specific art practices and styles as being Nepali.

Scholars argue that the term *nepālīpana* or Nepaliness is a subject of contention. However, the quest for *nepālīpana* is prevalent and ongoing in civic culture and various Nepali art forms, including music, literature, radio, and films (Henderson 2005; C.K. Lal 2012; Kunreuther 2014; Linder 2019). Music scholar David Henderson (2005, 1) who examines the evolution of rock music in the Kathmandu Valley, notes that "*nepālīpana*, meaning "Nepaliness," is a troublesome word—troublesome because of its pervasiveness in discourse about music and film, art and culture in Kathmandu. Creativity can be many things, but the ideology of *nepālīpana* suggests that it must include elements that mark the national and cultural identity of the work." He observes that the inclusion of *nepālīpana* necessitates the evaluation and critique of Nepali artists and their work based on their selection of symbols that represent Nepali national and cultural identity. He notes that the use of Nepali language, Nepali attire; women in *gunyū colo* (blouse) and *phariyā* (skirt) and a Nepali setting; both village landscapes and urban setting of Kathmandu is shown to constitute *nepālīpana* in music videos and Nepali rock music. Similarly, Lal (2012, 8), articulates the difficulty in discussing *nepālīpana* as the term is, "impossible to render in English, perhaps 'the essence of being an authentic Nepali' captures the spirit of the word." He elaborates that this authentic Nepali self is constructed, and the Nepali state and its people have invested in the idea of *nepālīpana* through centuries. Lal lists some key political figures in the formation of the Nepali nation-state who administered and nourished the idea of *nepālīpana*, which continues to be produced as markers of state identity in present times. These figures include king Prithvi Narayan Shah, Jung Bahadur Kunwar, Chandra Shumsher, and king Mahendra.

In the 17th century, king Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha in western Nepal initiated his conquest of neighboring kingdoms and principalities to expand his kingdom. He was motivated by the idea of a true Hindu state or *Asli Hindustan*, a quest for an undiluted Hindu identity and loyalty to the king (K. Pradhan 1991; Whelpton 2005). The next political figure who nurtured the idea of *nepālīpana* according to Lal was Jung Bahadur Kunwar Rāṇā who came to power after a bloody massacre of court officials in 1846. He promulgated the *Mulukī Ain* (first codified legal code of Nepal) in 1854, which allowed him to concentrate political power in himself and rule Nepal as a

loyal ally to the British Empire.[21] Then "*nepālīpana* acquired two traits in addition to the centrality of Hinduism and kingship—mercenary military and monopolist merchants" (C. K. Lal 2012, 13). Kunwar was a strategist and it was because of his foresightedness that his clan called the Ranas were able to rule Nepal for 104 years (C. P. Singh 2004). They relied on military power and wealthy merchants who were able to profit from an illiterate polity. Subsequently, Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher Rana played a significant role in further shaping the concept of the Nepali nation. The notion of *nepālīpana* evolved as a cohesive concept representing a homogeneous society throughout various historical periods. During the democratic movement of the 1950s, when the Rana dynasty was overthrown and the monarchy reinstated with some modifications (Whelpton 1997), the idea of *nepālīpana* adapted accordingly. However, king Mahendra dissolved the parliament shortly, thereafter, establishing the Panchayat regime that lasted for three decades from 1960 to 1990. This system played a crucial role in promoting a sense of Nepali nationalism centered around the monarchy and unwavering loyalty to it (ibid.). The slogan adopted by the system 'Our king and our country are dearer than life'[22] demanded univocal loyalty from its subjects. It was based on the primacy of a national dress, single language i.e Nepali and religion (Hinduism), which were the essentials of Nepali nationalism as reflected in *nepālīpana* (Lawoti and Hangen 2013). At the same time, it was the education system dictated by the New Education Plan of 1970, which created an official history valorizing certain figures like Balbhadra Kunwar and Amar Singh Thapa in text books (Onta 1996). All these elements wove into a *nepālīpana* that had no place for an inclusive idea of nationalism and diversity of people according to Lal and they continued until the reign of king Birendra and even after the democratic movement of the 1990s and 2000s. Its deep roots are based on a symbolic uniformity of one language, certain art forms, and ideas of nationalism which are still in place (Lawoti and Hangen 2013).

Lal's analysis of *nepālīpana* suggests that it is a historical and political construction by the Nepali state. From the 18th to the 21st century the idea of *nepālīpana* promoted by the Nepali state, for Lal, has been based on an exclusionary politics of imagined cohesiveness among its people, languages, and cultures. Nonetheless, Henderson (2005, 3) observes that *nepālīpana* offers an opportunity for Nepali artists to experiment, "a place in which to try out new identities, to critique familiar identities, and to forge imaginative constructions of identity out of an array of possibilities." He

[21] See Khatiwoda et. all 2021 for a complete translation and study of the *Mulukī Ain*.
[22] *Hāmro rājā, Hāmro deśa prāṇa bhandā pyāro cha.*

notes how despite being a problematic notion, *nepālīpana* also provides opportunities for Nepali artists to explore their identities and express their creativities in different political contexts. In the next part of the chapter, I will discuss how *maulikatā* is framed through the search for a Nepali national cinema.

## 2.3 Making a national cinema

The search for *maulik* films that represents Nepal can be further elaborated through discussions on various facets of national cinema. Film scholar Andrew Higson (1986) observes that national cinemas engage with the question of nationhood and reflect anxieties surrounding the popularity of foreign films as a form of cultural imperialism which hold for Nepali cinema too. Critics, policymakers, and filmmakers feel the need to distinguish Nepali cinema from other national cinemas. They aim to specify differences, identify *maulikatā* and secure a place in the category of world cinema, as specified by the editorial excerpt that opens this chapter. As a category world cinema is often "used critically to contrast Hollywood with other national cinemas" and "connected to the global marketing of cultures" (Köksal 2014, 83). These other national cinemas as pointed by film scholar Köksal are those from 'small nations' described by film scholars Hjort and Priere (2007) through parameters of geographical scale, Gross National Product, population size, and its relationship to another dominant nation. They point out that national cinemas of 'small nations' need to balance engagements between the global market and promotion of local film industries and filmmakers. These characteristics apply to Nepal's search for a national cinema as it aspires to be a part of the global market by distinguishing and marketing its films through *maulikatā* and *nepālīpana* and its film industry developed under the shadow of the Hindi film industry (Ajit 2007). Nepal is a small nation by size occupying only 147,181 square kilometers with a population of 28 million but it is and one of the largest film-producing countries in the world (Central Bureau of Statistics 2012, P. Kharel 2019). Yet its cinema is not discussed by Hjort and Priere (2007) as cinemas from 'small nations' like many cinemas from around the world. They divide their research into three regions i.e Europe, Asia, and Oceania, and the Americas with Africa, and only analyze the cinemas of twelve nations (Hjort and Petrie 2007b). Such exclusion of nations like Nepal calls into question the visibility of and research on national cinemas. To contextualize Nepal's search for a national cinema I will locate other small nations who connect and contest the idea of national cinemas in relation to world cinema. These include the film

industries of Hong Kong, Taiwan; two contested territories of China and one of the largest film industries in the world, the Hindi film industry, and its connections with Nepal.

In his exploration of the concept of nations, historian Benedict Anderson (1983, 3) defines them as "imagined political communities-imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." He argues that nations are essentially imagined communities because not all members of a nation will personally know each other. They are also defined by geographical boundaries, which inherently limits their scope. Anderson notes that print capitalism allowed nations to develop as imagined communities by providing fixity to certain languages, suppressing others, and creating an educated bourgeoisie and consumer markets. He emphasizes that nationalism is proliferated through technologies, administrative and cultural apparatuses, and languages. If nations are imagined communities as Anderson proposes, the parameters of the study of national cinemas have to be rethought through the potential of imagination. Hong Kong becomes an interesting case existing as a city caught between an imperial past and an uncertain Chinese future. Historian and cultural studies scholar Ackbar Abbas (2007) notes that Hong Kong cinema has become one of the most important cinemas in the world but exists without a nation-state or the aspiration for it. He traces the emergence of 'new Hong Kong cinema' beginning from the 1970s not as an outcome of a major political upheaval but in the anticipation of one. In 1997, the British handed over Hong Kong to China after its colonial rule with promises that there was going to be an internal shift in the administration without any changes to its physical infrastructures; it would be part of 'one country two systems' (Carroll 2007). However, the hopelessness of the future was felt by its residents and articulated by a new wave of Hong Kong filmmakers whose works added to constructions of a national cinema and its recognition as a category in world cinema (M. A. Abbas 1997). Abbas explains that Hong Kong cinema

> perceives the nation from the point of view of the fragment. Its relation to nationhood is unorthodox. It does not see the nation as a finished or achieved entity, but catches it at a moment when the nature of nationhood itself is changing, under pressure from globalisation. What comes out of the fragment as nation are not metaphors but metonymies of nationhood: metonymies that signify in an indirect and often tenuous way, to the point where their relationship to nationhood can become all but disconnected. (A. Abbas 2007, 112)

Given Hong Kong's special status with China and its quest for democracy, Abbas understands Hong Kong cinema as a response to its state of transition which sees the nation as an unfinished

project and experienced by Hong Kongers in fragments as the city adapts to the vast changes brought about by globalization. He argues that the understanding of the nation not as a whole but ever-changing and fragmented gives rise to metonyms rather than metaphors based on the city's tumultuous relationship with nationhood where its dissonance with belonging to one Chinese whole is expressed in many forms. In films from 'new Hong Kong cinema', he notes that they manifest as characters who are lost and in turmoil. He reveals that films before 1997 and after it both stage contestations around nationhood and belonging without overtly underlining it. He points out that the spaces of Hong Kong in the films have an affective quality that expresses the simultaneous absence and presence of the nation, a disconnection emerging out of the effects of global capital.

Moving on to Taiwan, another of China's contested territories, most countries in the world do not recognize the island as a separate nation-state because of their diplomatic relationship with China. If Hong Kong was once a British colony, Taiwan was occupied by Japan and it "remains torn between China, the so-called 'motherland', and Japan, the so-called 'fatherland'" (Wilson 2015, 1). The legacy of its colonial history shapes its diplomatic policies but its lack of recognition as a nation-state has not been an obstruction to the recognition of Taiwanese cinema as a 'national cinema' in the category of world cinema (ibid.). The Taiwanese new cinema that emerged in the 1990s put Taiwan on the map of world cinema as the government policy initiated in 1981 directed that films should aspire to perform well both domestically and internationally and a multitude of films helmed by new wave directors like Edward Yang and Hou Hsiao-Hsien found a place in the international film festival circuit (Udden 2009). The distinction of its films came from the use of a Taiwanese dialect and an openness encouraged by the liberal policies of the 1990s and a grant system that gave out funds to new filmmakers. However, the films were unable to achieve box office success domestically and caused criticism from the film industry, which questioned its value, and popularity, which was only legitimized by international film festivals (Hjort and Petrie 2007a). Although it seems like the government contributed positively to the development of Taiwanese cinema, film scholar James Udden (2007) mentions that it was more a medium of cultural diplomacy and the funds of the grant system were inadequate for filmmakers. He argues that Taiwanese cinemas evolved as a national category as a response to stringent government policies to increase tax revenue and an unfavorable production environment, describing the impact

of Taiwanese cinema in world cinema as a small miracle, a result of self-motivated filmmakers who worked independently outside of the industry system (ibid., 158).

The discussion of the national cinemas of Hong Kong and Taiwan shows that meanings of national cinema are case-specific and even emerge without the presence, desire, or institutional support of state authorities. Films by a younger generation working against established norms of the film industry as in the case of Taiwan can generate a body of work, which gains visibility among international audiences and makes a place as a national category in world cinema. These films could very well be commenting on the futility of the concept of the nation-state. In Nepal, a similar trend is emerging with filmmakers commenting on the idea of the Nepali nation and gaining popularity in the international film festival circuit in films like *Kālo Pothī /The Black Hen* (2015) and *Seto Sūrya /White Sun* (2016) (Budhathoki 2017; Mayorga 2018; Shedde 2020). These films benefitted from transnational structures of funding and distribution and outline the challenge in fixing a connection between a film's place of production and the nationality of its filmmakers noted by critics as the attributes of transnational cinema. They were supported by a global network of international film festivals and funding structures that has allowed independent filmmakers of different nationalities access to larger global audiences. Film scholars Ezra and Bowden (2017, 1) suggest that these phenomena be understood through transnationalism which "enables us to better understand the changing ways in which the contemporary world is being imagined by an increasing number of filmmakers across genres as a global system rather than as a collection of more or less autonomous nations." They describe the changing patterns of films in a global system that transcends national narratives and addresses a complex range of issues that appeals to a global audience versed in the contexts of different cultures and national histories. There is also a domestic market of films in Nepal, which are being critically reviewed despite being unable to gain international visibility or financial success and some are even finding a way into digital platforms by discarding traditional routes of film distribution (A. Dixit 2019d; T. Aryal 2020; Moktan 2020). Both festival entries, critically reviewed Nepali films and those that gain popularity among its domestic audiences are attempting to define Nepali national cinema as a category. What all these films have in common is *maulikatā*, as critics note, the capacity to represent the Nepali nation in all its diversity. It is both equated and distinguished from *nepālīpana* or an essential Nepaliness. I will now discuss the relationship of Nepal's film industry to the Hindi film industry to contextualize the efforts in making a 'Nepali national cinema' further.

### 2.3.1 Ties with the Hindi film industry

The Hindi film industry based in Mumbai has always influenced the making of Nepali films (Ajit 2009). Discussions on Nepali national cinema and the identity of Nepali films are largely dominated by narratives about it being a copy of Hindi films and lacking identity (Newar 2003; Pratik 2003; K. M. Dixit 2013; S. Gautam 2014; T. Aryal 2018). Critic Sreedhar Ramachandran (2003, 82) notes that India looms large over Nepal as a powerful neighbor both culturally and economically and "there is not one major political event in Nepal in which India has not been involved, or implicated". Much of current India-Nepal diplomatic relations is based on the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship which has been termed outdated by Nepali scholars and modified in use by both signing parties (Baral 1992; S. P. Subedi 1994). Being a land-locked country that shares its borders with India and China, Nepal maintains a balancing act with its geographically and economically powerful neighbors (Rose 1971). India has often used Nepal's economic reliance on its borders for import and trade to create economic and political pressures like during the impasse of 1988-1989 and five month economic blockade after a massive earthquake in 2015 (R. Karki and Paudel 2015). The blockade (September 2015- February 2016), after an earthquake in April 2015 that took the lives of more than 9,000 citizens, added to the humanitarian crisis in Nepal causing shortages of essential commodities like food grains, medicines, and fuel since India is Nepal's largest trade partner (Pant 2018; Regmi and Kukreti 2018). Khobragade (2016) claims that the Indian government was dissatisfied with the promulgation of a new constitution in Nepal in September 2015 which is criticized for being inconsiderate to ethnic minorities like the Madhesis who are culturally and geographically linked to the people of the Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. He notes that the Indian government supported the protests by Madhesis at the India-Nepal border leading to the blockade of essential supplies to Nepal.

Anti-India sentiments run high in the country and have always been a huge part of political debate in Nepal. Political parties have often garnered publicity by emphasizing a Nepali nationalist identity based on anti-India opinions and protests (Whelpton 1997). In February 1996, before taking up arms against the state the internal committee of CPN (Maoist) made 40 prominent demands of which one demand was a ban of Hindi films (Thapliyal 2012). It reads, "The invasion of imperialist and colonial culture should be banned. Vulgar Hindi films, videos and magazines

should be immediately outlawed."[23] The demand portrays the popularity of Hindi films and music in Nepal as a form of cultural invasion, a threat to Nepali nationalism and Nepaliness and characterizes it as vulgar since it popularizes a certain form of Indianness among the masses. Since the 40-point demands were not met the armed rebellion against the state by the Maoists lasted for ten years from 1996 to 2006 and took the lives of more than 16,000 citizens. Over the years there have been numerous protests and attempts to ban the screening of Hindi films. In October 2012 a faction of the CPN (Maoist) called for a ban on Hindi films to "block foreign cultural invasion" (Republica 2012b). The ban was however revoked after cinema hall owners incurred millions in losses (Republica 2012c).

Shresthova (2010, 314) agrees with the influence of Hindi films on Nepali audiences and its ties with discussions on Nepali nationalism, and writes "in Nepal, Bollywood increasingly becomes representative of the fear of 'Indianization' and victimization situated within a broader context of Nepal's socio-economic and political dependence on India." She suggests that Hindi films and music perpetuate anxiety about Indianization, which supposes that access to, and popularity of Hindi films and music impacts, dilutes Nepali culture, and can lead to homogenization in musical and filmic sensibilities. In other related cases in 2000, riots all around Nepal ended in the death of three individuals and injured hundreds after Bollywood actor Hrithik Roshan was rumored to have made a derogatory remark about Nepal and its people (Mehta 2004) Similarly when actor Madhuri Dixit "said that 'Nepal is a part of India', Indians were astonished that Nepalis should take umbrage to the remark" (Ramachandran 2003, 92). The matter was a concern for Nepalis as critic Ramachandran notes, but Indians saw no reason to be alarmed or take offense since both countries are so deeply connected culturally and religiously. Recent years have seen other instances of protests against the organization of Bollywood events in Nepal. A musical show featuring actor Salman Khan to be held in Tundikhel, Kathmandu was cancelled after protests by the cultural wing of the CPN- Maoist in 2018 which "urged all nationalist and patriotic forces to stop western and Indian cultural interventions" (A. Giri 2018). Another event, IIFA (International Indian Film Academy) Awards, advertised as the most star studded Bollywood event[24] by its organizers, Wizcraft International Entertainment Private Limited, was in talks with the government to be held

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[23] See https://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/nepal/document/papers/40points.htm for list of all 40 demands. (accessed 12.09.2020).

[24] See https://www.iifa.com/about (accessed 12.08.2020).

in Kathmandu in 2019 but faced parliamentary opposition and was canceled (Press Trust of India 2019). The event was to be hosted by the Nepal Tourism Board in partnership with Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC) to boost tourism in the country but investments of 4.5 million Nepali rupees to be made for its preparations caused an outcry and protest in social media and from various political parties (A. Giri 2019).

The popularity of Bollywood[25] in Nepal is a lived reality, enrobed with fear of a loss of culture and Nepaliness. However, its study demands a transcultural reading due to Bollywood's transnational presence around the world and exchanges between Nepali and Indian film industries. Since filmmaking began in Nepal, critics note that Nepali films have been influenced by the content and form of Hindi films (S. Gautam 2014; T. Aryal 2018). The changes in the Hindi film industry affect the making of Nepali films as filmmakers take inspiration from them and have access to the same technological developments in South Asia. Most urban Nepalis understand some form of spoken Hindi due to their exposure to Hindi cinema and music (Whelpton 1997; Liechty 1998).

Anthropologist Brian Larkin (1997) in his study of the popularity of Hindi films among the Hausa people in Nigeria shows that circulations of media in the Global South highlights transnational cultural flows, multiple modernities, and effects of globalization. He (1997, 439) writes, "Indian films gives insight into the local reworking and indigenizing of transnational media flows that take place within and between Third World countries, disrupting the dichotomies between West and non-West, colonizer and colonized, modernity and tradition, in order to see how media create parallel modernities." Larkin examines how Hindi films connect with Nigerian audiences to uncover that, despite the knowledge of the dominance of cultural imperialism, local film practices challenge the dichotomies of center, periphery, west, east, modernity, and traditional. He positions Indian films within a global network, capable of reaching diverse audiences due to their pan Indian nature, a specific narrative style, and themes touching on moral, traditional, familial, and modern conflicts. The stories of these films appeal to communities undergoing economic, social, and cultural transformations mostly situated in underdeveloped or developing nations in the Global South.

[25] Bollywood is a term that has come to mean the Hindi film industry since the 1990s, used and popularized by the Indian diaspora. Although the term is distinguished from the Hindi film industry by critics like (Rajadhyaksha 2010). Dwyer (2014, 22) points that "it is currently the internationally recognized term for popularor mainstream Hindi cinema made in Mumbai (Bombay prior to1995)".

Nepal is a significant market for Hindi films and music in South Asia. The shared cultural, political, and economic ties between Nepal and India adds to its popularity. Filmmaker Nishcal Basnet disapproves of terming Nepali films formulaic or a copy of Hindi films and shares,

> One should not look at it like that, it is not about having songs and fight. That is what the screenplay demands, and the way screenplays are written around the world is similar. Maybe cultural differences play a little part. We have similarity with Hindi songs and fights because we are culturally connected. Inside our own cultures too, there are so many musical events and if there are similarities it is not a bad thing. It is just that it must look suitable. If it is filmed like that it is not a problem for me. I do not think it is a formula. We have our own storytelling. The filmmaker must be clear about what he wants to present. If I go to India and pick up an Indian story and make a film, will you consider it *maulik* or not? (Interview with Basnet, 2017)

Basnet analyzes the influence of Hindi films on Nepali films as a natural outcome of the deep social ties between Nepal and India and not as dictated by a certain formula. Nonetheless, as the Nepali film industry grew under the shadows of the Hindi film industry, its films are referred to as a copy of Hindi films, lacking originality or authenticity (K. M. Dixit 2013; S. Gautam 2014). Most films follow the form of Hindi films with romantic plotlines, fights, songs and dance sequences (T. Aryal 2020). Basnet sees the similarities in song and dance routines in both Hindi and Nepali films as a sharing of elements but situated in particular cultural and social contexts. He questions if *maulikatā* is inherent and exclusive to one film industry or shared as a search for originality in film industries based in different locations. This question is reflected in the many interpretations and discussion of *maulikatā* inside Nepali films as discussed above. While in the context of the discussion of the Nepali film industry through *maulikatā* critic Anubhav Ajit points to its regular mention and reiteration by filmmakers and critics as a negotiation between industry aspirations and self-reflection,

> *Maulik* is a constructed rhetoric. I do not think there is anything *maulik* but why do they say *maulik*, again and again? For example, in *Loot* they were cussing a little and that became *maulik*. I think that it is created. I do not believe in this, there is nothing *maulik*. There is a certain restlessness for something that is *maulik*. Even if you look at India, there is talk of Hollywood. People know that it is dominated and influenced by Hollywood so there is an inferiority complex. You are blamed for always copying so that is demeaning and undermining your work. You are restless to come out of that accusation so that you can say nice things about Nepali cinema. However, you are not able to make good cinema due to your limitations, then you create a narrative that this is *maulik*. It is not like Hindi cinema or Bollywood, it is unique to us. You should watch it. This is the business motive behind *maulik* nothing else. This is not only happening in Nepal, but everywhere. Even in India, Indian regional cinema always struggles with the

> Bombay film industry. So, the rhetoric behind it is that if you say *maulik* they will think it is different. It comes out of an inferiority complex. (Interview with Ajit, 2018)

Ajit emphasizes that discussions surrounding *maulik* cinema and *maulikatā* in Nepali films serve as a rhetorical strategy employed by Nepali filmmakers and critics to position themselves and their work in world cinema. He suggests that the desire to establish a national identity through films stems from a universal phenomenon observed in film industries worldwide. Smaller film industries constantly find themselves in competition with the business models and studio systems of large film industries such as Hollywood and Bollywood. There is an inherent desire to establish a distinct identity separate from films produced in other industries. Ajit identifies certain attributes in films that critics consider *maulik*, such as the use of profane language in *Loot* (2012), which he regards as just one element of the film. He further notes that Nepali film industry tends to replicate past trends and struggles to experiment with cinematic forms (T. Aryal 2017b). To counter accusations of simply copying other films or film industries, filmmakers employ the term *maulik* to create a sense of separation and combat their perceived inferiority complex compared to industries with wider audiences and box office success, such as Bollywood. This not only supports the business aspect of films but also attracts audiences seeking self-identification through works that are perceived as different from Bollywood films. As a result, this narrative continues to grant filmmakers the ability to emphasize the significance of their work, while critics discuss the presence of a thriving national cinema with a unique identity and audience. Another way in which *maulikatā* is expressed by Nepali filmmakers and critics is through the pursuit of a 'new Nepali cinema'. In the final part of the chapter, I will explore how this quest for a new cinema in Nepal can be understood as part of a global phenomenon of "new cinemas" within a translocal and urban context.

## 2.4 Search for a new cinema

The search and discussion of a new cinema are not particular to the Nepali film industry. Globally, it is traceable in many film industries around the world during changing political times. Whether be it Italian neo-realism in the 1940s, the French new wave in the 1960s, the Dogme95 movement by Danish filmmakers in the 1990s, the new waves of Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1980s to the recent rise of the new Independent Indian cinema in the 2000s. Each movement has sought to fight conventions of earlier ways of filmmaking practice to develop a new visual language. Their

venture in experimentation has been termed by critics and writers as a 'new cinema', 'new wave' or 'new movement' outlining specific changes in filmmaking.

Film historians Kristen Thompson and David Bordwell describe such changes in and around Europe beginning from 1958 as a "host of 'new waves' 'young cinemas' and 'new cinemas' (which) criticized and rejuvenated the modernist tradition" (Thompson and Bordwell 2003, 439). In Italy, the years after the Second World War saw a group of young filmmakers who wanted to depict the social reality of their times venture into filmmaking. 'Italian Neorealism' came to represent the depiction of the social conditions of post-war Italy with real locations, non-actors, portable camera, and experimentation in narrative form, which often meant ambiguous endings (Bondanella 1990). The elements of neorealism continued to inspire later generations of Italian filmmakers including others across the border to France where a group of film critics turned into filmmakers and their work became recognized as the 'French new wave' beginning from the mid-1950s (Douchet 1998). They were a group of young men who wrote for the Cahiers du cinema journal and did not hesitate to disapprove of the work of filmmakers before them (ibid.). They imbibed the ways of the neo-realist filmmakers but took it forward by basing their cinematography on-location shoots, handheld shots, discarding studio lighting, and interplaying with humor in the narrative of their films (Neupert 2007). They especially admired the works of auteurs[26], mostly American filmmakers of the studio system like Alfred Hitchcock, Nicholas Ray, Howard Hawks whom they felt were able to create a personal style even while working under commercial structures (ibid.). Italian neorealism and the French new wave continue to inspire the works of filmmakers around the world who admire the dissent in their work and the movements also set precedent for the rise of a discussion of 'new cinema' around the world (N. Greene 2007).In Asia, observing the sweeping changes brought by globalization in the 20th century, film scholar James Tweedie analyzes, the logic behind the rise of new waves in Taiwan and Hong Kong with the need of film cultures around the world to differentiate themselves from Hollywood aesthetics but always bearing local specificity. He comments that films of new waves

> are relegated to the festival circuit and the domain of world cinema, where anachronistic survivals of the local continue to dwell; they exist in a liminal position between lived history and anticipated future, between the confines of a material environment and the

[26] French word for author which describes a film director as an artist, the 'actual author' of a film who works with a recognizable style. Auteur theory gained prominence as part of film criticism after the 1940s through the writings of French film critics.

> images that serve as harbingers of a global culture in the making. Neither inside nor outside, the new waves inhabit the chaotic verges of this market revolution and bear witness to an age defining historical phenomenon as it unfolds. (Tweedie 2013, 5)

Tweedie elaborates that in current times the destination of films from new waves is the international film festival circuit which is interested in understanding cinema as an art form rather than a business or entertainment undertaking. He observes that when films from new waves are screened at film festivals, they get a chance to become a part of the world cinema category. These films are usually made under economic constraints and strive for a balanced position of representing their local circumstances and at the same time aware that they are set to become a part of global culture. The films from new waves and new wave filmmakers are challenged with finding a way in between the pressures of the market and the responsibility of being part of a historical phenomenon that shapes the future of filmmaking in their specific regions.

### 2.4.1 The new in 'new Nepali cinema'

In the context of Nepal, a new wave of Nepali films or 'new Nepali cinema' with *maulikatā* and *nepālīpana* is used in multiple contexts by filmmakers, critics, and businesses. It refers to business endeavors, experimentation in Nepali films, and includes films of different genres and varying commercial and critical acclaim. It is usually addressed to a new wave of films and filmmakers who can represent political issues and experiences of a new Nepal. The use of the term 'new Nepali cinema' coincides with a changed political scape in Nepal and voices the expectation of a generation, which seeks change in all spheres of public life including popular culture. *'Nayā̃ Nepāla'* or 'new Nepal' became widely used in Nepal after the second people's uprising or the second *Jana āndolana* in April 2006, which saw the country shut down and protests in Kathmandu lasted for 19 days (Routledge 2010). The Maoists who were fighting an armed war against the state from 1996 joined the protests with other political parties to fight against monarchy and a ceasefire and agreement followed simultaneously. Anthropologists Shneiderman et al. (2016, 2042) report that

> brought about through a combination of democratic, communist, ethnic, diplomatic, and other forms of mobilization, the agreement set the stage for the interim constitution of 2007, which refigured the erstwhile Hindu kingdom as the secular Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal. The country's first-ever Constituent Assembly elections were held in 2008, and Gyanendra Shah was deposed, the last monarch in his nearly 240-year-old dynasty.

This was the beginning of a 'new Nepal' which was supposed to be more inclusive of ethnic and minority rights. Political analyst CK Lal analyzes the fascination with the term 'new' in Nepal after 2006 and its use in the media and among various publics to comment, "in future, Nepal will require (new kinds) of …movies and other forms of arts" (C. K. Lal 2012, 49). He notes that a new political landscape after 2006 would require new art forms to address its issues and grievances. Critics outline that 'new Nepali cinema' as a Nepali art form could do so by representing the livelihoods of the diverse ethnic groups of Nepal (Republica 2013; E. Report 2012).

Besides describing a new wave of films, a new kind of cinema, 'new Nepali cinema' is loosely also used to define networking efforts inside the film industry. There is a website titled 'newnepalicinema.com'[27] owned by Alp Private Limited a company based in Kathmandu with its branch office in Australia that hosts screen-writing competitions, reviews Nepali films, and promotes upcoming film releases. The website promotes itself as an open platform for engagement among young filmmakers but is maintained as a business portal for film promotion and marketing. Observing such variations in the references made by 'new Nepali cinema' scholar Tweedie (2013, 6) reads convincing:

> Each appearance of a "new wave" is itself a symptom: it celebrates the persistence of novelty and local specificity in a world of homogenizing culture industries; but it can also ring hollow, like a marketing slogan designed to achiequve product differentiation in the increasingly crowded international film festival circuit.

He proposes that new waves or new cinemas hint at more than newness in film content or a political statement in challenging times. He understands it as a precursor for a movement that allows experimentation to foster in a global industry that is used to the popularity of specific genres and film festivals provide the market and space for it. However, he stresses that there is always a danger that films then turn out to be just another product in the market of film festivals or films from a new wave, or an example of a new cinema become marketing slogans that emphasize a certain homogeneity. In the case of the use of the term 'new Nepali cinema,' these contradictions and struggles are evident. The term becomes a marketing slogan for a private company and a significant change in the industry for critics who use it. The validation of the term is through popularity in the box office to reviews by critics including film festivals which play a huge role in promoting and

[27] Its Facebook information section reads, "For the betterment [of] Nepali Cinema Industry. 'New Nepali cinema' is more of a movement. Encouraging new film makers to join the industry." See https://www.facebook.com/pg/newnepalicinema/about/?ref=page_internal (accessed on 20.09.2019).

fostering new talent in the film industry and for 'new Nepali cinema'. I will now discuss three films released simultaneously in 2010 and 2012 to present the diversity in genre, reception, and popularity of films termed as 'new Nepali cinema'. The films are part of 'new Nepali cinema', a new wave of Nepali films, and display proof of contestations surrounding the term.

Figure 1: Promotional logo with names of different Nepali films from the Facebook page of newnepalicinema.com[28]

## 2.4.2 *Loot* (2012), *Sick City* (2010), and *Highway* (2012) as 'new Nepali cinema'

Films addressed as 'new Nepali cinema' in the Nepali media vary considerably in genre and popularity. In order to understand these disparities, I will discuss three films, *Loot* (2012) as an example of a critically acclaimed domestic box office hit, *Sick City* (2010) as a local festival

[28] See https://www.facebook.com/newnepalicinema/photos/a.341940249156827/341972185820300/?type=3&theater (accessed on 20.09.2019).

favorite, and *Highway* (2012) as a Nepali international film festival entry that received mixed reviews in its domestic market. Beginning with *Loot* (2012), the film created an upsurge in the discussion of a 'new Nepali cinema' in the news media (Republica 2013). It was reviewed as heralding a new era in Nepali cinema by being different from other Nepali films which are usually seen as a copy of Hindi films (explained earlier in the chapter). Critic and filmmaker Dipendra Lama analyses the reason for the popularity of *Loot* and locates it as the beginning of the portrayal of stories of Kathmandu in Nepali films, He explains,

> The proper story of Kathmandu started coming out after the release of *Loot* in Magh, 2068 BS (February 2012). Many people liked it. The reason was that the characters are located here. There is a local Newar character, then a person who has come from outside Kathmandu and is struggling here, then there is a Gurung character. I mean the characters are balanced ethnicity wise like Newar, Bahun, Gurung, Chhetri. There are four characters in it. After that, the location is not like Dharahara, and Ghantaghar but the banks of Bishnumati river, slaughterhouses, and Kathmandu's *gallis*. (Interview with Lama, 2017)

What Lama means by 'proper story of Kathmandu' are the ways in which various sites of Kathmandu are central to the narrative and the plot is woven around these sites. The film highlights the identity and ethnicities of the characters and local specificity enhances its narrative. For Lama, the caste of the characters and particular sites of Kathmandu presented in the film was crucial for its popularity among audiences. It was released in 2012 while a Constituent Assembly was active in drafting a new constitution for an inclusive future Nepal based on a popular movement that saw the downfall of the monarchy and initiated the way for a republic Nepal where ethnic and minority rights were to be addressed. The film comments on the massive urbanization and social, economic, cultural changes experienced by the Kathmandu Valley in the last decades. Since the beginning of the Maoist armed conflict in 1996, Kathmandu, which is the most populated city in Nepal and its capital, has seen a massive influx of migrants from around the country (Bakrania 2015; Ishtiaque, Shrestha, and Chhetri, 2017). *Loot* has migrant protagonists from different ethnic backgrounds who are struggling to make a living in Kathmandu addressing the lack of ethnic representation in Nepali films which has been noted by film critics like Nabin Subba since the early years of filmmaking in Nepal in the 1950s (Subba 2008). According to Subba, the protagonists of Nepali films have predominantly been *Khas-Parvate*. They can be described as Brahmins and Chhetris, the groups placed highest in Nepal's caste hierarchy who are primarily Hindus, from the hills (*Parvata/Parvatīya*) and speak *Khasa kurā*, later known as Nepali (Lawoti and Hangen 2013, 10).

While the characters in *Loot* represent a range of caste groups (Brahmin, Chhetri, Gurung, and Newar). Filmmaker Basnet explains, "We live in a society where there are people who speak differently than me, from different backgrounds and ethnicities. We wanted to represent them in the film" (Interview with Basnet, 2017). He is aware of the cosmopolitan quality of Kathmandu where migrants from all over Nepal arrive and describes the characters of his film as being from different regions but undergoing similar experiences as part of city life. Kathmandu has the largest inflow of migrants from around the county who come seeking economic and educational opportunities to the national capital (IOM 2019). The language of the characters in Basnet's film was important for him to highlight their place of origin and histories.

*Loot* tells the story of five men (Haku Kale, Gopal, Naresh, Deven Khatri, and Jagat) who plan to loot or rob a bank in Kathmandu. They are anti-heroes surviving on petty crimes and are constantly at loggerheads, cursing at each other. This initiated a dialogue about profanity and the use of explicit language to enhance realism in Nepali films (E. Report 2012). The language used by the characters in the film was reported to be offensive to family audiences while others saw it as a commendable effort in using spoken Nepali with explicit words in the film. Filmmaker Basnet shares that he wanted to capture the diversity of languages and feature particular localities in Kathmandu to bring 'realism' to his film (Interview with Basnet, 2017). Liechty (1998) discussing his findings on the audience preferences of Kathmandu's electronic visual media; commercial films and video in the 1990s writes that they often identified films as being more 'real' or 'realistic' than others. He distinguishes between 'reality' and 'realism' in films and argues, "The power of film realism lies not in convincing people that filmic representations are *real*, but that they are *possible*. What realism constructs as "true" is not some representation of "reality," but a representation of plausibility" (Liechty 1998, 120). Liechty's analysis of realism as an effect in films created through various narrative techniques differentiates it from reality as lived experience. Here Basnet is discussing his effort in creating realism in his films based on his lived experiences. He had previously worked as a crewmember for other Nepali films before taking on the director's seat and noticed that during the shoot the location was specially cleaned and cleared. He wanted to work differently.

> Most of the audiences who have seen those places or who know about those places in the film will relate to it. We have used very common places like a pond in Bhaktapur where couples go on dates on an everyday basis. We have shown it as it is. I told my

> team that let us not sanitize these places, let us not clean and make it shiny let us shoot it as it is because this is how it looks, dirty Kathmandu. (Interview with Basnet, 2017)

He explains that he wanted to use places in Kathmandu in the film as he had experienced them in daily life. Locations like the polluted riverbed of Bishnumati River and alleys of Kathmandu picture prominently in the film besides other city landmarks like Dharaharā and Ghaṇṭāghara (discussed in Chapter 4). The film follows the pace of five men who are loitering, running, chasing, fighting in the backdrop of the alleys of old Kathmandu between clustered houses, street corners and dirty spaces like a *vattī pasala*[29], *masu pasala*[30], street corners in *ṭola*[31], muddy streets and an abandoned building where they often meet to execute their plan. Basnet terms the setting of his film as dirty Kathmandu where filth is the norm, and it becomes the staging ground for the film's many action sequences where the men fight and tussle in the mud, meat, and liquor shops. By featuring locales in the city and portraying migrant lifestyles *Loot's* release and popularity signaled the arrival of a new generation of filmmakers and actors trained in their profession but were new or 'outsiders' to the film industry. Basnet was a recent graduate from Oscar College of Film Studies affiliated with Tribhuvan University that offers the only Bachelors's degree program in filmmaking in Nepal and the actors in the film like Saugat Malla and Dayahang Rai were popular theatre actors who made their entry into films. They are all now the face of 'new Nepali cinema' and well known in the industry (K. Bhattarai 2016).

Besides *Loot* (2012), films like *Highway* (2012) directed by Deepak Rauniyar and *Sick City* (2010) directed by Murray Kerr are also part of the 'new Nepali cinema' narrative but left audiences and critics largely divided about their content and popularity. The responses and reviews of the films disclose contestations surrounding the term and use of 'new Nepali cinema' in an industry where Hindi and Hollywood films are popular among audiences. Agence France Presse (AFP) reports that Highway is "the most divisive and talked-about film in Nepali cinema history" which "polarized audiences, prompting more than 10,000 tweets, provoking contempt in some corners and adulation in others" (AFP 2012). Louevre Films, the production company of Hollywood actor Daniel Glover, backed the film and other funds were collected through crowdsourcing from the internet (ibid.). It follows the journey of nine passengers on a bus from eastern Nepal to Kathmandu

[29] A neighborhood liquor and snack shop where food items are cheaper than a 'restaurant'.
[30] A meat shop where hygiene may not always be a priority.
[31] Small neighborhoods or localities.

where *bandas*[32] interrupt the journey. The film received wide acclaim in film festivals around the world but mixed reception among its Nepali audiences. Nepali films until 2012 had rarely been screened in international film festivals with a few exceptions and *Highway's* entries into festivals like the Berlin International Film Festival (2012) were seen as garnering more visibility for the Nepali film industry and its films (Hui 2013). In its release in Nepal however, audiences and media reports questioned its acclaim by international film festivals. One among the many media reports, "The audience is clearly divided into two groups, the pro-*Highway* gang, who use adjectives like different, daring, and indulging and the anti-*Highway*, who are calling it boring and confusing" (Republica 2012a). The comments made by audiences on its Facebook page further point to its disregard for a 'Nepali' way of storytelling and use of a foreign crew.

> This is the worst movie of all time, says one. Another commentator accuses the film of being un-Nepali because it was shot by an Indian cinematographer and produced by an American, even claiming that Rauniyar intended his film to cater to a European audience rather than a Nepali one (Gorevan 2012).

The responses to Highway were commenting on its *maulikatā* and *nepālīpana* which they could not locate as the film appeared to blur these distinctions and was difficult to place in the repertoire of Nepali films. Rauniyar, aware of the controversy surrounding his film reflects on Nepali film audiences who are used to watching Bollywood narratives for entertainment on-screen, "You have to think, you need to work, and you need to pay attention. They hated that" (AFP 2012). He describes his film as more than entertainment which demands audience engagement with the political issues it raises. He distinguishes his film from Bollywood films and other Nepali films that appear to replicate their form. He sees its unpopularity as an insight into audience taste and reception in Nepal, which is used to a certain kind of cinema. Nepali audiences are however exposed to various genres of world cinema (Liechty 1998). Therefore, responses of *Highway* (2012) audiences appear to be questioning the content and form of the film and its relevance to their lives.

Similar conflicting responses followed the commercial release of *Sick City* (2010) in cinema halls in Kathmandu. The film unlike *Highway* (2012), which had financial backing; was financed, scripted, filmed, directed, and edited by British filmmaker Murray Kerr. It premiered at the

[32] *Bandas* translates as strikes and are a form of protest used by civilians in South Asia to put forward grievances and demands against the state by shutting down all business activities including road blockages.

Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival (KIMFF 2010) where it won the Nepal Panorama Award for the best Nepali fiction film. Then it got a theatrical release in various cinema halls in Kathmandu in 2011. Reviews of the film were largely positive (S. Pradhan 2011; D. Karki 2011; A. Thapa 2019) but the audience reaction after reading reviews and watching the film was otherwise. One response to a review by author Rabi Thapa in Nepali Times weekly is titled "Sickened by *Sick City*" and comments, "*Sick City* is a completely failed attempt to represent the 'underbelly' of Kathmandu. It is so badly done it made me want to look away from the screen" (Rabi Thapa 2011). The film, which was applauded in KIMFF, did not transfer well to commercial cinema halls. The handheld camera shots, the grim locations, and the editing did not appease viewers who found it unsuitable for screening or watching in a cinema hall as described in the comment. Kerr's nationality as a British commenting on the grim side of Kathmandu by choosing Thamel, the tourist hub of Kathmandu to set his film was noted as a clichéd choice by reviewers (KTM Arthouse 2013). Beginning in the 1970s Thamel developed as a tourist attraction in central Kathmandu with bars, restaurants, curios shops, internet cafes, and mountaineering equipment catering to a foreign clientele interested in budget travel (Liechty 2015). Kerr's film follows one night of a hustler in Thamel. Kerr's British nationality was also a problem, in regarding the films as Nepali, for some of its audience. There have been other instances in which filmmakers and their films had to prove their 'Nepaliness'. Ajit (2007) exemplifies *Satya Hariścandra* (1956) directed by D.B Parihar and Éric Valli directed *Himālaya /Caravan* (1999). According to him, Parihar's film, which was produced in India, is yet to receive its due credit as Nepal's first film. And Vallis film had to struggle to be nominated as Nepal's entry in the Best Foreign Film category at the Academy Awards since he was a French national and it was funded by French agencies. Ajit proposes that any film should be considered Nepali if the filmmaker wishes it to be attributed as such including films in any other language spoken in Nepal besides Nepali.

Coming back to the two films, even with mixed reviews, *Sick City* (2010) and *Highway* (2012) are part of the 'new Nepali cinema' narrative. Reviewers confirm the films as milestones for experimentation in the Nepali film industry although they did not achieve commercial success like *Loot* (2012) (Republica 2012a; S. Pradhan 2011). Therefore, films discussed as 'new Nepali cinema' in the media vary in critical acclaim and commercial success. They include well-traveled films in the international film festival circuit like *Highway* (2012), *Kālo Pothī /The Black Hen* (2015), *Seto Sūrya /White Sun* (2016), to films like *Sick City* (2012), *Chasing Rainbows* (2013)

that only received appreciation in a local film festival or commercial successes inside Nepal like *Loot* (2012). There are other films like *Vijulī Machine/ Electricity Machine* (2016), *Gājā Bāja/Weed and Music* (2018), *Nākā/ Check Point* (2018), and *Hari* (2018) which received good reviews in the Nepali media but were not commercial successes or did not travel to film festivals (P. Thapa 2018a; 2018b; T. Aryal 2020).

## 2.5 The Nepali urban popular

Given the variations implied by the term 'new Nepali cinema' I understand it through the films I study in my thesis which I suggest can be described as 'urban popular' films both inclusive and exclusive of *maulikatā* and *nepālīpana*. They explore the challenges of urban living and comment on the lifestyles of people in the city.

Since the beginnings of filmmaking in the late 1900s cinema has explored city life, some iconic examples being *Workers Leaving the Factory* (1895) and *The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat station* (1895) made by the Lumiere brothers in France. Both films depict the novelty of city life in Paris by showing industrial work and the arrival of trains as new modes of transportation. Through the 20th and 21st century various genres in film such as city films and urban films continue to explore the relationship between film and urban life although the cities are not only Eurocentric like Paris, Berlin, or London but located in many parts of the world as in the Global South. Closer to Nepal, there are studies on urban films based in Chinese and Indian cities which allows me to contextualize Nepali films based on urban themes in Kathmandu. Cinema scholar Yomi Braester (2012) proposes that 'urban cinema' be studied as a genre in Chinese cinema which is defined by urban films that depict the vernacular architecture of the city and urban ruins rather than iconic monuments and convey stories of youth rebellion and are social commentaries on China's changing cityscapes. He notes that urban films have a "prominence of urban themes and an umbilical relation to urban culture" (Braester 2012, 347). He is proposing that films that are based on urban themes and discuss different forms of urban culture be discussed as urban films.

In the case of Indian cinema, media and gender studies scholar, Christiane Nadja Schneider traces the emergence of a corpus of Hindi films set in the national capital of India, Delhi, and describes them as urban films. She extends the definition of urban films as used by Horwitz et al.2016 to include the featuring of different "medialities" alongside "certain urban spaces and places acquiring a central meaning for the plot" (Schneider 2013, 86). She locates the presence of various

media technologies in the city and their use by youth protagonists in Hindi films based in Delhi which she defines as urban films. Although the writings of both Braester and Schneider cannot coalesce into one view the definition they propose of urban films is useful to locate and define Nepali films released after 2010, which foreground urban narratives of migrant experiences in Nepal's national capital, Kathmandu. They share affinities with descriptions of urban films as proposed by both scholars but are based on a popular format with the addition of social issues.

By popular I am pointing to their box office success and favorable reviews in the Nepali media based on the presence of *maulikatā* and *nepālīpana*. These films are what Ajit (2009) discusses as 'Nepali conventional cinema' sharing similarities with Indian popular cinema and are both 'commercial and 'mainstream'. Sociologist Ashish Nandy (1981, 96) describes the characteristics of popular cinema through examples from Bombay cinema and writes that it is ahistorical in nature, dictated by the spectacle, coincidences and accidents are replete with a predictable climax, and the form demands an alternate form of logic but "ultimately, is an internally consistent meaning system". He suggests that popular Hindi films be understood as a folk medium and not an art form. Film scholar Madhava Prasad (1998) on the other hand studies Indian popular cinema as an indigenous form and a site of ideological formation, its narratives based on social, Hindu religious codes. The importance of the form is further underlined by Mazumdar (2007) who suggests that popular cinema engages with everyday experiences of the city, the encounters of tradition and modernity, in inventive ways. These reflections on the popular form of Indian cinema enrich my study of Nepali popular films based on urban themes.

'Nepali urban popular' films are examples of 'new Nepali cinema' with the inclusion of social themes which use an urban, masculine lens to reflect on belonging and navigating the city of Kathmandu. They explore the perils and adventures of living in the city. Driven by migrant protagonists, they visually map specific Kathmandu landmarks alongside marginal city spaces inhabited by certain urban types that are reflective of the economic and social disparity of the city. They make use of urban sites like the street, rooftop, and the dance bar in Kathmandu and the filmmakers themselves acknowledge that the films draw inspiration from their own experiences or those of their generation. In the films, the encounter of the protagonists with the city and encounters with others in the city shapes this form, which uses a masculine lens to trace the fractured mobilities of Kathmandu. It pictures Kathmandu as a liminal site of broken dreams.

The city mirrors the mental anxieties and hopelessness of its inhabitants pictured through its different characters.

## 2.6 Conclusion

By bringing into discussion the elements and usage of the term *maulikatā* in reference to the history, development, and features of Nepali cinema I have mapped an emerging film industry from the Global South grappling with pressures from the global market, competition from other film industries, and a desire to create a place in world cinema. The markers of Nepaliness or *nepālīpana* used to define *maulik* Nepali cinema or 'new Nepali cinema' discloses a tension between methodological nationalism and the fluidities of national identities. *Nepālīpana* and *maulikatā* or originality in Nepali films take on different meanings based on the person who is asked about it from filmmakers, policymakers, actors to critics. Their interpretations present a diversity of views on the political and social experiences of different class, class, and gender groups in Nepal who articulate Nepali art forms through their exposure to media from the Global North by differentiating and noting similarities with them.

*Maulikatā* also encompasses the struggles of defining the parameters of originality through a cinematic form in Nepali films, which is subjective and inconclusive. It becomes a term to validate nationalistic aspirations of a unified whole by state authorities and a way to contend nationhood for filmmakers. When *maulikatā* is read through the works of Baudrillard (2001), Jameson (1991), and Benjamin (1969) it complicates its implied meaning of originality, authenticity, and realness and emphasizes overlapping between them. In tracing an emergence of a 'new Nepali cinema' through a location of *maulikatā* and *nepālīpana* I have tried to show how it is part of a global phenomenon of new cinemas that mark a change in political systems and experimentation by young filmmakers who want to break away from earlier conventions. Specifically, to Nepal, the term 'new Nepali cinema' represents an amalgamation of meanings that combine experimental to business efforts in the making of a new cinema. These films seek to represent the sweeping political, social, and economic changes in Nepal after the end of the 240 years monarchical rule in Nepal in 2008 and the subsequent declaration of Nepal as a republic. *Loot* (2012) which initiated a discussion on the emergence of a 'new Nepali cinema' represents one kind of film in the variety of others referred to by the term, those that are domestic box office hits, local film festival favorites, or those that travel to international film festivals. They all contribute to the body of work being

referred to as ‘new Nepali cinema’. Among them a significant number are based on urban themes of living and navigating the cityscape of Kathmandu which I propose can be understood as ‘urban popular’ films building on understandings of urban films by scholars working on films located in Chinese and Indian cities. My effort has been to comprehend the multi-scalar textures of encounters, transformations, and frictions implied by the use of *maulikatā* in defining and delineating a Nepali national cinema and ‘new Nepali cinema’.

# Chapter 3: Kathmandu as a transit city in 'new Nepali cinema'

This chapter analyzes the cinematic representations of Kathmandu in Nepali, Hindi, and English language films and mainly those from 'new Nepali cinema'. In discussing a 'far out', 'off the map' city from the Global South that continues to be framed from a touristic gaze of medieval pagoda-style architecture and mystic mountains, I use an alternate lens to focus on a visuality that emerges from massive urbanization and economic, social, and cultural changes in the Kathmandu Valley. I employ the term 'transit city' to characterize Kathmandu's representation in film aware of its peripheral status in comparison to other 'global' and 'world-class' cities.

Urban scholar Ananya Roy (2011) in her work on cities from the Global South emphasizes the significance of an outlook from the periphery. She argues that peripheries are not just a geographical location, but a social space formed through the dynamism of political and economic processes. The complexities of urbanization in cities from the Global South are shaped by globalization, migration patterns, economic changes, and transnational movement of people and resources. Rather than focusing merely on the center-periphery relationship, Roy reveals that peripheries reflect on informal urbanism, economic inequalities and social exclusion and highlights the adaptability, resilience, and community networks of cities from the 'developing' and 'underdeveloped' worlds. In this context, I am seeking to understand ways in which Kathmandu as a periphery in the study of cities is recognized as an important transit point in films.

I organize the chapter around the concept of liminality. I investigate how Kathmandu, Nepal's capital, which is the central political and administrative power hold of the country but also one of the most polluted cities in South Asia, is depicted as a liminal site in Nepali films. The hopes of migrant dreams and touristic aspirations contribute to the making of liminality, which is encountered by certain urban types in Nepali films as ambivalent outsiders. The first part of the chapter begins with a history of modern Kathmandu and is followed by an analysis of the liminal states of the city as a transit point for social, economic, criminal, and social activities in films. The city takes multiple forms of transit from being a physical transit to other global cities via the international airport, to a criminal transit for its South Asian neighbors who use the open India-

Nepal border and a mystical transit for its foreign visitors seeking a spiritual experience. I assess the multiple meanings of these transits understood through Kathmandu's path to modernity, rise in a migrant population, unplanned urbanization, and social and economic inequalities. In the second part of the chapter, I locate three urban types in Nepali cinema: the *gā̃ule* or the villager, the *dādā* or the gangster and the bar dancer as liminal beings, migrants and outsiders who struggle to belong and make a living in the city. They stand as testimony to the changing urban fabric of the city that emerges in films as the agricultural landscape of the Kathmandu Valley is transformed by high-rise buildings, a rise of criminality, and consumer culture. These urban types are attached to certain marginal, liminal, transitional spaces in the city like the street, rooftop, and bar dance restaurants. By bringing together the worlds of a transit city in South Asia and its transitional spaces and inhabitants through the narratives of 'new Nepali cinema' I aim to chart out a framework in understanding cinematic cities beyond the dominance of global cities.

## 3.1 A brief history of modern Kathmandu

Until the nineteenth century, the name Nepal was used in reference only to the Kathmandu Valley also termed the Nepal Valley or Nepala mandala (Circle or Country of Nepal) (Slusser 1982; Hutt and Gellner 2010). Topographically, the four mountain ranges of Shivapuri, Phulchowki, Nagarjun, and Chandragiri surround this bowl-shaped Valley situated in central Nepal at 1,400 meters (4,600 ft.).[33] It is one of the most fertile agricultural regions in the country supported by appropriate climatic conditions for the production of different seasonal crops (Haack and Rafter 2006). The Valley "has served every principal dynasty of Nepal as the political, cultural, and economic center, the site of the capital city, and the seat of royalty" (Slusser 1982, 7). In 1768 king Prithvi Narayan Shah annexed the three kingdoms of Lalitpur, Bhaktapur, and Kathmandu to the Gorkha kingdom and declared Kathmandu the capital of Nepal, which allowed it to develop as the center of political administration (R. B. Thapa, Murayama, and Ale 2008). The Mallas and Lichhavis ruled it before him who are credited for the arts and architecture of the Valley (Bhattarai-Upadhyay and Sengupta 2016). The Shah rulers and their patronage of the arts of the Valley continued and gave way to Rana rule from 1846-1951 when palaces and mansions inspired by European architecture and bronze statues were made around the Valley (Hutt and Gellner 2010).

[33] See https://www.kathmandu.gov.np/en/node/4 (accessed 10.11.2020).

After Rana rule ended in 1951 and post the democratic movement of 1990 the Valley experienced vast social, political, and economic changes like the rest of the country and its population grew expediently. The Tribhuvan Highway constructed in the 1950s linked it to India and the Araniko Highway built in the 1960s linked it to China increasing commercial activities and at the same time facilitating migration to the Valley from other parts of the country (R. B. Thapa, Murayama, and Ale 2008a). Presently the Kathmandu Metropolitan Area comprises the municipalities of Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Kirtipur, Bhaktapur, and Madhyapur Thimi (ibid.). It is South Asia's most rapidly urbanizing city "with an average urban population growth rate of about 6 percent per year since the 1970s" (Muzzini and Aparicio 2013) and the most crowded city in Nepal with a population of 1 million amounting to 24.3 percent of the total urban population (Central Bureau of Statistics 2012).

The agricultural landscape of Kathmandu changed drastically to accommodate housing and commercial activities since the 1970s with the building of Ring Road to connect its urban core with adjoining rural areas (Thapa and Murayama 2009). In time these rural areas situated at the periphery have transformed into built areas occupied by internal migrants. The pull factors of migration into the Kathmandu Valley have been economic opportunities or better living standards and the ten-year Maoist armed conflict (Muzzini and Aparicio 2013). Beginning from 1996, the decade-long civil conflict forced an estimated 1 million or more people to flee their homes resulting in an escalation of migration into Kathmandu (ibid.).The influx of migrants from all parts of Nepal and unplanned urbanization have progressed together as environmental problems plague the city (Ishtiaque, Shrestha, and Chhetri, 2017). It is, however, the center of economic and political activity and occupies a privileged status within the imaginary of the Nepali nation. There is a strong divide between Kathmandu and the rest of rural Nepal with its villages observed through dichotomies of urban-rural, center-periphery, and contextualized through understandings of *bikās* or development which functions as a social category of progress and modernization (Pigg 1992).

Since the 1950s, donor agencies and foreign aid continue to influence the development policies of Nepal as international and local non-governmental organizations (INGOs and NGOs) have grown as an industry in Kathmandu and around Nepal with a large middle-class population and expatriates employed as development professionals (Khadka 1997; Liechty 2010). The models of empowerment and modernization formulated by international agencies with government

policymakers dictate understandings of social progress in urban Kathmandu and rural Nepal (ibid.). 'New Nepali cinema', uses the backdrop of Kathmandu and visualizes the dichotomy of modern Kathmandu and its rural village counterpart by highlighting the transit state of the city as evolving and changing, both marginal and central rather than rigid, fixed and separated through the denominators of development. In contrast, films by Euro-American filmmakers that attempt to capture the realities of urbanization, inequality, and poverty often tend to fixate and exoticize the struggles and realities of its inhabitants as exemplified by works like *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) filmed in Mumbai, another South Asian city. Roy (2011) proposes the term 'Slumdog city' to locate the fractured view of urban life in cities from the Global South as shown in films like *Slumdog Millionaire* that do not extend beyond the infrastructure of slums. She calls for the recognition of local understandings of spaces, infrastructure, and enterprises beyond a homogenous view of slums. Building upon such an understanding, my effort here is to unpack the layers of meaning attached to the transit state of Kathmandu in films.

## 3.2 Transit Kathmandu

Conventionally, the journey to Kathmandu from other parts of Nepal entails a self-referential understanding, a move from the village to the city, from the periphery to the center, a journey towards the fulfillment of aspirations. Khagendra Lamichhane, writer and actor of *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke* (2014), *Paśupati Prasāda* (2016) and *Dhanapati* (2017) reflects on his own journey to Kathmandu and those of his protagonists in his films, "No one comes to Kathmandu without a dream, to travel is also a dream" (Interview with Lamichhane, 2017). He understands that journeying to Kathmandu is a dream in itself, a travel dream fulfilled by protagonists in his films by arriving in the city. However, the destination site often turns into a liminal one in which the migrant protagonists are unable to make a living in the city and it is unlike their imagination. This state of ambivalence experienced in Kathmandu is evoked effectively in Nepali literary writings.[34] The poems of Bhupi Sherchan and Banira Giri in particular articulate alienation, frustration, hopes, and desires of living in Kathmandu. Sherchan (1967) writes,

> Those who come
> come with hearts full of fire,
> with flames on their lips,

[34] Some English literary writings on Kathmandu by Nepali writers include works by (Upadhyay 2001; M. Thapa 2005; P. S. Rana 2015; Rabi Thapa 2016; Ghale 2018).

but those who live here
live with hands full of ash
and eyes full of smoke.
Those who leave take with them
a bundle of extinguished beliefs,
the stub-ends of their dreams.
Such is this Valley of Four Passes, it's a cold ashtray,
this Valley of Four Passes.[35]

He compares Kathmandu Valley's bowl-shaped topography to a cold ashtray where the fire of migrant dreams and desires are doused by urban realities of economic struggle. A momentary reflection on a household object is used for a political comment on the urban conditions of Kathmandu. He writes on behalf of those who arrive, stay, and leave the city as their ambitions are crushed by their daily struggles. Since the 2000s living in Kathmandu has become similar to living in a grey ashtray as air pollution marked by stagnant smog has made it one of the most polluted cities in Asia (Saud and Paudel 2018). Poet Banira Giri (1972) expresses a similar fascination and helplessness experienced in encountering Kathmandu in another poem. She writes,

Kathmandu is a heater inflamed
by one hundred thousand volts;...

I have come to live in Kathmandu,
but Kathmandu does not live in me....

It is an interesting epic, beloved Kathmandu,
full of stories, sweet and bitter:

the opening verses of tremendous speeches,
the communal song of wants and needs;
wages—the happy chance of increase,
prices—the miserable rise,
an unremitting struggle of loss and gain:
oil for the lamp, and sugar,
everything is here.

Wretched Kathmandu,
dear to everyone, abused by all, [36]

Giri is sharing her admiration and disdain for the city which inspires and disappoints her. She struggles to find a place for herself in it, or distance herself and ends up eulogizing it, nonetheless.

[35] Translation from Nepali to English by (Hutt 1991, 131).
[36] Translation from Nepali to English by (Hutt 1991, 137).

Both works indicate that Kathmandu's poetic representations revolve around its liminal position, of being "familiar, yet unknown; secure, … and yet intimidating" (Downey, Kinane, and Parker 2016, 3). Kathmandu's cinematic representations in 'new Nepali cinema' display a similar understanding of the metropolitan city as a liminal site for arriving migrants and residents.

Kathmandu has been consistently critiqued for its inability to function as a metropolitan city[37] as it struggles to meet urban needs of housing, water, and transportation (Haack and Rafter 2006; Rajesh Thapa and Murayama 2009; Ishtiaque, Shrestha, and Chhetri, 2017). It embodies the paradox of liminality, as it is both entitled as a metropolitan city but struggles to meet the criteria to function as one. Its stalled urban infrastructures of roads, housing, and drinking water are understood through Nepal's corrupt national politics giving rise to failed economic and infrastructural policies (Dennis 2017a). The city appears to be in a permanent stage of transition with unfinished roads and infrastructural projects that are designed to fail (Khanal, Gurung, and Chand 2017). The physical state of the city allows it to be discussed through the concept of liminality, which is reflected in Nepali films that further build on its cultural, religious, and social aspects.

Anthropologist Arnold Van Gennep first introduced the concept of liminality in his famous work *Rites de passage* (1909) to describe different moments of change that apply to forms of cultural phenomena and rituals in particular. He discusses 'rites of passage' as a symbolic act from which individuals transition between social positions. He argues that human existence is driven by transitions from one spatial, symbolic, or social group to another and the transitional rites or liminal moments involved in it define the human condition. Social events like birth, marriage, death, puberty are characterized by symbolic passages from one state to another involving rituals, which he observes allows one to traverse from one position to another. He notes that rituals involved in wedding ceremonies to funerals enable the shifting of social positions as older identities take on a new form or are discarded and dissolve into new forms. Gennep stresses that in order to pass from one social order to another transiting through a 'liminal state' or a threshold is necessary. This

[37] Local bodies in Nepal are classified as a metropolitan city, a sub-metropolitan city, or a municipality based on the criteria of population, availability of basic urban infrastructure and services, and size of internal revenue by the Municipality Act of 1991, 1997 and the Local Self Governance Act of 1999. A metropolitan city is defined as "a settlement with a minimum population of 300,000, at least NRs 400 million in annual revenue, and access to basic infrastructure" (Muzzini and Aparicio 2013, 30).

means liminality occupies an intermediate stage, which is preceded by ‘pre-liminal rites’, and ‘post-liminal rites’ that follow it. The phase of liminality demonstrates a state of ambivalence for the subject, or an intermediate condition experienced by being in the threshold or boundary of experiences before arriving at a new state. Liminal sites are defined by social mobility and performative actions.

Victor Turner (1995) furthers Genneps discussion of liminality by explaining it as a middle phase of a social condition in which one has not become and is in the state of becoming. He understands Gennep’s ‘pre-liminal rites’, ‘liminal rites’, and ‘post-liminal rites’ through the phases of 1. Separation 2. Marginality or Liminality and 3. Incorporation. Similar to Genneps’ pre-liminal stage, he notes that during the separation phase there is a detachment from earlier social conditioning and structures. Then in the second phase, the liminal figure who has become marginal passes through a state that is in anticipation of the next phase but has nothing to do with the later stage that is in the past and the upcoming stage, which is yet to arrive in the future. Finally, in the third phase, the figure achieves some sort of stability through incorporation into a structure. Turner through his theorization broadens the scope of liminality to understand ritual processes by locating it in social, cultural, and political processes. He describes liminal entities as, “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1995, 359). Turner is pointing to moments of change in which positions assigned by traditional conventions, and customs undergo transformations as individuals are pushed into a liminal state positioned in between tradition and newer social practices.

In this chapter, I use the concept of liminality to discuss the city of Kathmandu in Nepali films as, “a state or location that is transitional, subjective, ambivalent, unstable, and marginal and that opens up new possibilities in a binary system; liminal phenomena occupy “middle-way” positions between two states or locations by being—paradoxically—neither or both of them at the same time” (Eisenberg 2016, 31). This definition of liminality put forward by sound scholar Annika Eisenberg captures the complex interplay of imagined and real experiences in the cinematic representations of the urban as it emphasizes the middle grounds of marginal spaces that emerge with productive potential during encounters in the city. It is a useful concept to discuss the transit state of the city in, ‘new Nepali cinema’. In the films, I analyze Kathmandu as a liminal site, a transit for its migrant protagonists who as liminal beings are villagers, outsiders, or strangers trying

to be urban citizens. Kathmandu is a passage, a pathway; an in-between place in which one has departed from one point and is yet to arrive at another. The protagonists in the films are in the process of adopting new identities, as they are leaving their pasts behind and hopeful for an uncertain future. It is in this provisional state where identities and futures are suspended that allows the creation of a new identity and order or simply the erasure of one. The form of transit that the city takes are many. Kathmandu is a mystical transit in English films like *Night Train to Kathmandu* (1988) and *Doctor Strange* (2016), a criminal transit in Hindi films like *Hare Rāma Hare Kṛṣṇa* (1971), *Baby* (2015) and *India's Most Wanted* (2019) and in Nepali films, it is both a physical and metaphorical transit for economic and social mobility.

### 3.2.1 Kathmandu as a physical transit

In films like *Loot* (2012), *Chasing Rainbows* (2013), *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke* (2014), *Paśupati Prasāda* (2016) and *Dhanapati* (2017) all the protagonists enter Kathmandu with a certain dream. These are dreams of material aspirations, which the city is unable to fulfill. In entering the cityscape, they bring along memories of their childhood and youth in their villages, of acceptance, denial, and displacement. The four young men in *Loot* (2012) want to make money. They are jobless and do not see a future for themselves. The three siblings in *Chasing Rainbows* (2013) are studying in Kathmandu to get a degree for a better life, Talak in *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke* (2014) is escaping a life of ostracization in the village, and Dhanapati in *Dhanapati* (2017) wants to make more money to take better care of his family. The protagonists of these films often articulate their anger and frustration at their liminal state caught between their aspirations and reality.

Haku Kale in *Loot* (2012) and Krishna in *Sick City* (2010) both emergent criminals refer to Kathmandu as a decaying landscape. Both films begin with a bird's-eye-view of Kathmandu, filled with high rises and scattered buildings, emphasizing the changing filmic imaginary of a previously fertile Valley now growing into an overpopulated city. In a similar reading of the opening sequence of the Hindi gangster film *Company* (2002) where a bird of prey encircles high-rise towers in the suburbs of Mumbai, anthropologist Vyjayanthi Rao (2011, 14) observes that "the scene specifically conveys the city's encirclement by the forces of evil and violence, and indeed its spatial imagination and circumscription as a result of this encirclement." She explains it as a comment on the changing urban environments of Mumbai that allows a spatial imagination and

territorialization of the city from high rises. Her insight resonates with the scene in *Sick City* (2010) and *Loot* (2012) set in Kathmandu where a rise in criminality disrupts social ties. Kathmandu like Mumbai for India functions as the center of economic activities in Nepal. The bird-eye view of Kathmandu in presence of a bird of prey creates identification between audiences and the protagonist in the film. The protagonists' point of view of the city introduces and directs the narrative of the film clarified by their monologues in *Sick City* (2010) and *Loot* (2012). Both Haku and Krishna describe their ambition of taking over the city, becoming a 'vulture' and an 'eagle' respectively to rule its skies. The predatory bird reference hints to their criminal lifestyle, dreams of becoming gangsters, and ruling the cityscape.

*Sick City* with its title refers to Kathmandu as a 'sick' landscape. The film opens with Krishna's monologue over a scene of an eagle flying above the Kathmandu Valley. The monologue summarizes the film's premise, which follows one night in the life of Krishna, a hustler in Thamel. He wants to make quick money or become an 'eagle', so he decides to steal cocaine from his boss but is unable to escape with it as he is caught in the end. *Loot* (2012) also opens with Haku Kale's monologue pictured in the skyline of Kathmandu. As he looks over Kathmandu from the top of an abandoned high-rise building, he is planning to build a team to rob a bank. He tells himself and the audience who are introduced to his world,

> The city of Kathmandu! As enticing as a lover! A city of vultures! Use your brain and money will rain from the sky. The city of Kathmandu! As enticing as a lover! You will get nothing if you beg for it. Snatch it and it is all yours. I will show you within five months, just five months. But for that I need men for whom money is God.[38]

[38] Translations referenced from subtitles in the film. *Kāṭhamāṇḍu śahara herdā lāgcha rahara sālā gīddai gīddako śahara, dimāga calā pāsā jharcha paisā pharara yo kāṭhamāṇḍu śahara herdā lāgcha rahara hātha thāpera kehi pāinna paisā dhutnu parcha.* (In Nepali)

Figure 2: Krishna (Arpan Thapa) reflects on the loss of his dreams in Kathmandu. Film Screenshot *Sick City* (2010).

Laughter accompanies the monologue to emphasize Kale's gangster motives and repeats at the end of the film. His intentions and the film's premise are clarified through it where he is struggling in a vastly urbanizing world of material aspirations and the only way out for him is robbery. Kathmandu is a transit, in both Haku Kale and Krishna's destination for a better life. They desire to escape from the city after they have made enough money. They blame the city for their poverty and are part of the criminal world to fulfill their material aspirations. While Haku Kale succeeds in escaping. Krishna's fate is left undecided in the hands of his boss. Though both these characters turn into criminals to escape from Kathmandu there are others like Resham, Hariya, Kaji, and his friends who are waiting to migrate for labor jobs to Gulf countries in films like *Reśama Philili/Silk fluttering in the wind* (2015), the *Kabaḍḍī* and *Chakkā Pañjā* series.

Figure 3: Haku Kale (Saugat Malla) condemns Kathmandu as he plans to make quick money by looting a bank. Film Screenshot *Loot* (2012).

Kathmandu is an ‘arrival-transit’ point for Haku Kale, Krishna, Resham, and Hariya’s journeys into other cities and bigger dreams. Since Kathmandu houses the only international airport in the country, one must arrive in Kathmandu to depart, return, and travel to other parts of the country. One such returnee is Roshan, in *Chaḍake* (2013), who arrives at the Tribhuvan International Airport (hereafter TIA), before taking a bus to his hometown, Chitwan. He is among the 2,000 Nepali youth who use it to go abroad for studies and labor jobs every day or return back besides tourists who arrive in considerable numbers (Rai 2019; Chitrakar 2019; Lama 2018). The opening sequence of *Chaḍake* follows Roshan’s return to Nepal from the TIA gateway. He rolls his suitcase out of the arrival gateway as visitors wait eagerly for their loved ones to come outside. The airport looks well managed but it is ranked as one of the worst airports in the world with poor customer and security services (Prasain 2019). The passenger traffic at the airport in 2018 was 7.19 million (ibid.). Its precarious situation is condemned widely in the media and as social entrepreneur Anil Chitrakar observes, “The experience of going through the Kathmandu Airport is not simple, not easy, not smooth, not efficient, not welcoming, not respectful, not friendly, and definitely not fast” (Chitrakar 2019).

Figure 4: Visitors wait eagerly outside the arrival area at the Tribhuvan International Airport. Film Screenshot *Chaḍake* (2013).

The poor management of the airport is linked to corruption and lethargy on the part of the government to take any significant action to improve its condition. Chitrakar sees the airport as 'Nepal in a microcosm' (ibid.) barely functioning for its people. Like TIA, airports around the world are tied to governments and the development of nation-states. Urban Geographer Donald McNeil (2011,151) understands airports "as a facilitator of globalization…conceived in geopolitical terms both as a means of uniting large, dispersed national territories, as well as engaging with extraterritorial actors." TIA is closely linked to Nepal's quest for modernity and besides facilitating air travel for foreigners who arrived in the decades of the 60s and 70s, it allowed the exchange of ideas and commodities between Nepal and the world (R. B. Thapa, Murayama, and Ale 2008a). The airport was built in 1949 and was initially named *Gaucarana* (cow pasture) Airport and renamed after late king Tribhuvan in 1955 (ibid.). Its terminal building was made to mark king Mahendra's coronation ceremony in 1956 who wanted to use the occasion to "signal Nepal's arrival on the world stage and publicly affirm Nepal's allegiance to the new global ideological narratives of modernization, development, and democracy" (Liechty 2015, 41). The new terminal building for the airport according to anthropologist Mark Liechty aided Mahendra's aim in attracting foreigners and displaying an exotic yet modern version of Nepal and Kathmandu to the world. Through the years, the airport underwent several renovations and king Birendra

inaugurated its current terminal design in 1990 (Pokhrel 2018). Its brick facade unlike other international airports in the world has prompted government officials to show promises of developing it as a unique 'boutique airport' which are yet to be fulfilled (Himalayan News Service 2019). With a massive population rise in the Kathmandu Valley and the use of TIA, there are government plans to divert air traffic and build an international airport in Nijgadh, southeast of Nepal. However, this is marred by a controversy surrounding the loss of land and wildlife in the Tarai plains (O. A. Rai 2018). For now, even though poorly managed, TIA is the hub for international air travel for Nepali migrants who continue to use it to seek opportunities elsewhere.

Considering the state of the airport and the massive urbanization in the Kathmandu Valley since the 1990s, filmmaker Manoj Pandit compares the city itself to an airport.

> Kathmandu became mediocre. It could not fulfill all the desires of the people and it showed that there is a bigger world outside of here, which means in the context of modernity it was just a midpoint, it was always an airport. People come, they come to leave a place where they must rest before they leave. It became an airport not only in the context of cinema but in the context of Nepal itself. (Interview with Pandit, 2018)

Pandit reflects on Kathmandu's journey towards modernity, observing that the city serves as the country's economic and social power hold while also acting as a gateway to the world, facilitating the influx of consumer goods and people. He equates the city to an airport that allows the transit of individuals, without necessarily promising permanence or a long-term future. Kathmandu's cinematic imaginings reflect on its perceived mediocrity and the challenges it faces in establishing itself as a destination site. There are other well-planned global cities, Kathmandu remains a transit point on the way to reaching them.

### 3.2.2 Kathmandu as a mystical and criminal transit

Kathmandu serves as a physical transit or a passageway to bigger or other cities, as depicted in Nepali films like *Loot* (2012), *Sick City* (2010) and *Chaḍake* (2013). On the other hand, international film productions like *Night Train to Kathmandu* (1988) and *Doctor Strange* (2016) portray Kathmandu as a 'mystical transit'. In both films, the protagonists embark on a quest to find a sacred land, with its gateway located in Kathmandu.

Since the 1950s when Nepal opened its doors to foreign tourists, the country has attracted visitors as one of the last mystical destinations of the world. Liechty (2015, 5) who studies the history and

growth of tourism in Nepal discusses how "westerners have imagined Nepal as a land untainted by modernity and its capital, Kathmandu, a veritable synonym of "Oriental mystique"." This view is reflected in films like *Night Train to Kathmandu* (1988) and *Doctor Strange* (2016) where Kathmandu is set as a 'mystical transit' to sacred lands that attract westerners. In each film, the protagonists are in search of a mystical place whose gateway is in Kathmandu. Dr. Strange in *Doctor Strange* (2016) is searching for 'Kamar-Taj' and Johar and Prof. Hadley Smith are in search of 'Sharloon' in *Night Train to Kathmandu* (1988).

The Marvel[39] film *Doctor Strange* (2016) tells the story of a neurosurgeon who suffers nerve damage after a fatal car accident. In a search to cure himself, he begins a journey for the search of 'Kamar-Taj, home to the masters of the mystic arts'[40] , situated somewhere in Tibet in a Marvel universe. However, in the film, Kamar-Taj is in Kathmandu. The shift of Kamar-Taj from Tibet to Kathmandu coordinates with the presence of a well-settled exiled Tibetan Buddhist population in various areas of Kathmandu. After the 14th Dalai Lama took exile in Dharmasala, India escaping from Chinese authorities in 1959, a large number of Tibetan monks settled in Bauddha and Svayambhū areas of Kathmandu which became Buddhist meditation and preaching centers (Moran 2004; Liechty 2015).

Sick and desolate, Dr. Strange arrives in Kathmandu. He has no guide and walks around the streets of Kathmandu with a notebook asking people if they know the whereabouts Kamar-Taj. He circumambulates prayer wheels in Svayambhūnātha temple, walks through New Road and Thamel, and gets beaten by a group of thieves in Patan's alleys. Finally, a disciple of the Ancient One finds and takes him through a hidden door into 'Kamar-Taj. In its courtyards and library, Dr. Strange learns the mystic arts to preserve the energies of the power centers of Hong Kong, New York, and London. Strange's search for healing and meaning in his life beyond his western medical practice as a neurosurgeon and life in London through a visit to Kathmandu is an example of how "Nepal serves as an enchanted, exotic destination in which to find, experience, and even heal the selves that the modern West has constrained or even sickened " (Liechty 2015, 366).

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[39] Marvel Comics is an American comic publishing house that has introduced a list of superhero characters like Spiderman, Ironman, The Hulk, Dr Strange. For more see https://www.marvel.com/ (accessed 10.10.2020).
[40] In the world of Marvel comics Kamar-Taj is the home of sorcerers and mystics like the Ancient One and the Sorcerer Supreme of Earth. It is believed to be an isolated Himalayan community in Tibet. See https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Kamar-Taj (accessed 10.12.2019).

Strange is in search of ‘Kamar-Taj’ in Kathmandu, the same way as Johar and Prof. Hadley Smith are in search of ‘Sharloon’ in *Night Train to Kathmandu* (1989). Johar, a Shakya prince who can speak “Hindi, Urdu, French, German, Italian and the 13 languages of Nepali”[41], needs a pendant that is somewhere in Kathmandu which will help him get into his home, this invisible city. Kathmandu is a sacred transit point for all their imagined mystical sanctums.

Figure 5: Dr. Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch) in Kathmandu. Film Screenshot *Doctor Strange* (2017).

On the contrary, Kathmandu becomes a haven for drugs and criminal activities and mainly a ‘criminal transit’ in Hindi films like *Hare Rāma Hare Kṛṣṇa* (1971), *Baby* (2015), and *India’s Most Wanted* (2019). In the Dev Anand directed *Hare Rāma Hare Kṛṣṇa* (1971) Kathmandu is a hippie haven where ancient artifacts are bought and sold. The hippies were individuals considered to be part of a “romantic social movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, mainly populated by teenagers and (people) in their early twenties who through their flamboyant lifestyle expressed their alienation from mainstream American life” (Miller 2011, 16) and were later joined by Europeans. Anand, one of India’s most prominent actors made three films in Nepal; *Johnny Mera Nam* (1970), *Hare Rāma Hare Kṛṣṇa* (1971), and *Isk-Isk-Isk* (1974) and spoke elaborately on his deep connection to the ‘Himalayan kingdom’ and its people during his lifetime (S. B. Pradhan 2005; Parashar 2012). *Hare Rāma Hare Kṛṣṇa* details the life of Montreal-born Indian siblings, Prashant (Dev Anand) and his lost sister Jasbir (Zeenat Aman) who has changed her name to Janice, run away to Kathmandu and lives with hippies. When Prashant asks Masina, a young guide

[41] (16.22 minutes into the film). He never speaks in Nepali throughout the film and there are no official variants of the language, only dialects. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GbmxI6ICTpc (accessed 12.12.2018).

in Kathmandu about his sister's whereabouts and the foreigners she hangs out with. He replies, "They are very nice people. They never fight with anyone, they stay happy, just sing, drink, sleep, eat. We call them 'English hippie log'[42] in Kathmandu." Janice in the film is "Bollywood's first hippie…smokes ganja and practices 'free love' at the local commune" (Gehlawat 2012, 53). Zeenat Aman as Janice the hippie "herald [ed] the 70s look of the Westernised, 'liberated' young woman in Hindi film" (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 1995, 41). Her lack of social restraint and public display of desire and sexuality marked a drastic change in the figure of the Hindi film heroine who was earlier based on the celebration of Indian female virtues (Mazumdar 2007). "The legacy of the hippie [is] flamboyant dress[ing], theatrical war protests, promiscuous sex, psychotropic drug use, trippy lingo, and communal lifestyles" (MacFarlane 2007, 3) which is manifest in the figure of Janice. She is introduced in the film through one of the most iconic songs in Hindi cinema *Dum Maro Dum* dancing in a short red dress in a nightclub in Kathmandu. This is the place where she can discard her past, take a new identity and start a new life. In Kathmandu tradition exists simultaneously with the modern, the "Svayambhūnātha temple and Soaltee, the most fashionable hotel in Kathmandu"[43] as explained by Prashant's co-pilot when the latter is giving the newly arriving tourist in search of his sister an aerial tour of the Valley.

Kathmandu was also an important part of the hippie trail which was an overland travel journey from Europe to South Asia through parts of Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Nepal undertaken by hippies (Gemie and Ireland 2017). Liechty (2005) in his study of the hippie era in Kathmandu (the late 1960s to the 1970s) locates it as the last point of the hippie trail, a meeting point for Americans, Britons, and Europeans both seekers who were on a spiritual journey and escapers who wanted to leave home, travel to South Asia, experience freedom and have fun on a shoestring budget. Freak Street, located between Jhoche and Basantapur in Kathmandu Durbar Square was a trading point for cannabis and hashish including a junction for tourists to consume continental food and listen to English music (Liechty 2015). Nonetheless, the ban on the use and sale of cannabis under the Nepal governments Narcotics and Drug Control Act (1976) following pressure from the Nixon government which wanted to deter Americans from counterculture movements and drug use ended the trail of hippies to Nepal (Liechty 2005a; S. Shrestha 2017;

[42] He speaks in Hindi and *log* translates to people (35:50 mins in the film).
[43] He is referring to Soaltee Crowne Plaza, a five-star hotel in Kathmandu (18:20 mins in the film).

Ghimire 2020). The hippies in Kathmandu symbolized a youthful decadence evident in the demise of Janice who commits suicide at the end of *Hare Rāma Hare Kṛṣṇa* unable to face her past as Jasbir or continue her carefree, drug-using lifestyle as a hippie being Janice.

This larger plot of drug abuse in the film unfolds in the backdrop of another subplot of idol theft and forgery highlighting Kathmandu as a transit for criminal activities. Hindi films in later decades continue to use similar criminal plotlines based in Kathmandu. In *Baby* (2015) Indian security agents, Ajay (Akshaya Kumar) and Shabana (Tapsee Pannu) come to Kathmandu to catch Wassem Sheikh who manages logistics for terrorists planning attacks in Mumbai. The film includes chase sequences in Bhaktapur and hotel room fight sequences in Kathmandu before he is arrested and boarded on a flight back to New Delhi. Similarly in *India's Most Wanted* (2019), five unlikely Indian undercover agents (Arjun Kapoor, Sudev Nair, Rajesh Sharma, Prasanth, and Shantilal Mukherjee) come to Nepal via Birgunj in southern Nepal to search and capture an Indian Mujahideen (IM)[44] terrorist. The film is largely inspired by the arrest of real-life terrorist Yasin Bhatkal, the co-founder of IM who was arrested from Nepal-India border in Raxaul in 2013 (Deshpande 2013). The Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Bihar, and Uttarakhand line the 1,700 km open border with Nepal in the east, west, and south directions which means that Nepal has been and continues to be used as a transit by criminals (OSAC 2019).

In a high profile case, on December 24, 1999, Indian Airlines flight IC814, enroute from Kathmandu to New Delhi, was hijacked by five terrorists and diverted to Kandahar, Afghanistan (R. Giri 2019). The flight with 160 passengers on board was held hostage for eight days. They were exchanged for three terrorists who were serving prison time in India after negotiations with the Indian government. These terrorists would later be involved in the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the US and other acts of terrorism in India (Giridharadas 2019). Kathmandu has thus always been a strategic point of movement for Nepal's South Asian neighbors sometimes as a criminal transit and even for the planning of terrorist attacks. Hindi films continue to depict Kathmandu as a criminal transit, whereas international productions present it as a mystical and enchanting pathway. Meanwhile, the transformations of the city inspire a diverse range of urban types in Nepali films who embody the pleasures and anxieties of living in Kathmandu.

[44] Indian Mujahideen (IM) is a terrorist organization responsible for numerous bombings and killings in India since 2008. For more see (Subrahmanian et al. 2013).

## 3.3 Urban types in 'new Nepali cinema'

City life has been studied extensively through several literary and cinematic figures like the detective, flâneur, gangster, and prostitute who are addressed as urban types. They are a product of urban environments, an essential figurative category in films, and Rao (2011, 3) suggests that they are imbued with urban charisma, "a quality that circulates through urban imaginaries and in the gestures and practices of everyday urban figures." She observes that the biographies of urban figures in films are inspired and built upon everyday events of interactions and shifts in the ethos and architecture of cities. These analytic and sociological figures legitimatize the importance of transitional spaces and marginal living in the city.

Mazumdar (2007) in her study of Bombay cinema locates specific urban types, the angry man, the rebellious *tapori*, the vamp, the prostitute, and the gangster as a way to understand the crisis of urban life. Her investigations into Bombay cinema are important for my understanding of urban archetypes in Nepali films as she demonstrates how urban figures illuminate contestations within urban space and the intricate relationship between migration and the supply of the labor force to the city. She discusses how the angry man and the psychotic figure interact with the city, experiencing emotions such as anger, revenge, and obsession in response to social injustice and class inequalities. For her, the *tapori* is a man of the streets who navigates both legal and illegal worlds, representing the multilingual diversity of Bombay's hybrid cultures. In the figure of the gangster, she observes an association with the Bombay underworld, articulated through expressions of masculinity and criminality. She writes about the prostitute in Bombay cinema as a public woman who poses a threat to the moral fabric of urban society, signifying urban decadence. Similarly, she notes how the sexual energy and unrestrained lifestyle of the vamp evoke parallel anxieties about female sexuality, where her dance is seen as both fascinating and revolting. These urban types in Bombay cinema share affinities with urban figures in Nepali films, yet they are rooted in a vastly different social, political, and cultural milieu. Bombay, India's financial capital has been the prime city of representation for Hindi films, while Kathmandu, Nepal's capital city, emerges as a focus of 'new Nepali cinema'.

The relationship of urban types in 'new Nepali cinema' with certain city spaces explores the nature of urban life in Kathmandu and reveals contestations around space, national histories, and gender

identities. They emerge in 'new Nepali cinema' as the Valley undergoes massive social, political, and economic changes in the aftermath of economic liberalization and urbanization. I am choosing to elaborate on figures of the villager or the *gā̃ule*, the gangster or the *dādā*, and the bar dancer as urban types in Nepali films and especially in films referred to as 'new Nepali cinema'. These urban types are migrants to the city and live as liminal beings desiring and struggling to transform into urban citizens. Their presence in Nepali films provides a critical understanding of the changing urban fabric of Kathmandu.

### 3.3.1 The villager or *gā̃ule*

In the Gyanendra Deuja directed *Gorkhālī* (1999), Babu (Shree Krishna Shrestha) is the quintessential villager or *gā̃ule* who arrives in Kathmandu. He is a Gorkhālī or someone from Gorkha, a district to the west of Kathmandu. Beginning from the eighteenth century, Prithvi Narayan Shah, the king of Gorkha, and his successors annexed surrounding states including Kathmandu to Gorkha to form the modern nation of Nepal (K. Pradhan 1991). Through the years *Gorkha, Gorkhālī, Gurkha, Gurkhali* have emerged as contentious terms referring to colonial, martial, diasporic Nepali identities (Golay 2006). It bears associations with a certain caste group from the hills of eastern Nepal i.e Gurungs, Magars, Rais, and Limbus, or brave warriors who were and are recruits of the British and Indian army including a diasporic community who are its descendants and others who claim affinities with it due to distinction from a Nepali national identity (Hutt 1989; Gellner 2013; Low 2016). Hutt studies the 'Gurkha' soldier in twentieth-century Nepali literary writings and discovers that the term Gorkhālī, Gorkha, and especially the British Army's use of the words 'Gurkha' and 'Gurkhali' bears the legacy of an Anglo-Nepalese past (Hutt 1989, 23). Once Nepal itself was referred to by the state of Gorkha from which the annexation of other states to it formed the modern state of Nepal. Later in the eighteenth century, the Sikh battalion stationed in Lahore and simultaneously the British and Indian army in later decades recruited Nepali soldiers and called them *Gorkhālī* (Onta 1998). The British Army continues to use 'Gurkha' to refer to its Nepali recruits. In the film, the identity of Babu is built on these legacies. Once when he is heckled at a party he proclaims,

> I am a Gorkhālī
> My chest like cliffs, my head like that of Mount Everest
> I do not bow down during atrocities, my self-respect in place
> Offspring of world-renowned Amar Singh Thapa and brave Bhakti Thapa

Offspring of brave Bhīmasena Thapa, I am a Gorkhālī, know me[45]

Babu upholds his identity as a Gorkhālī by highlighting its ties with the Nepali nation and Nepali identity. He speaks of embodying the geography of Nepal, the cliffs of Nepal are his chest, and his head is as high as Mount Everest. He prides himself on being the descendant of Amar Singh Thapa, Bhakti Thapa, and Bhīmasena Thapa, all renowned military leaders. The first two fought against Britishers in the Anglo-Nepalese war (1814-1816) while Bhīmasena Thapa was the prime minister of Nepal during the early 19th century. Babu claims to be a warrior who is not afraid of fighting against misdeeds and is aware of his self-respect. However, his caste and ethnicity are never mentioned in the film. He is simply 'Babu'. The closest association with his being a Gorkhālī is that Gorkha is his hometown. Yet the exclusion of all markers of a Gurkha soldier in the figure of Babu and the highlighting of certain features like wearing the Nepali national dress *daurā-suruvāla* for men and carrying *khukurī* [46] to create a generic villager close to his roots alludes to the image of a 'true Nepali national'. It appears to be a celebration of Gorkha identity by erasing all questions surrounding it and reducing it to markers of national unity as proposed by the Panchayat regime i.e based on one language, one national dress, and a sense of valour as symbolized by the carrying of a weapon (Lawoti and Hangen 2013).

He is introduced as a naïve villager in the film, unknown to the modern ways of the city, who is about to journey to Kathmandu. As the opening song of the film announces, "Now this *Gorkhe* is going to ride a motorcar or vehicle."[47] The figure of Babu is an archetype for the portrayal of the villager or *gā̃ule* in Nepali films. He is mostly shown arriving in Kathmandu and finds it difficult to navigate its ways. The figure of the village bumpkin and his journey in the city is a trope utilized by films since the early years of filmmaking in the 1900s. As film scholar Barbara Mennel discusses,

> …early films often featured the figure of the country bumpkin... who enters the city and is unable to read its clues appropriately, finally becoming the object of a crime or

[45] *Gorkhālī hũ ma*
*Pahāḍako chatī sagaramāthāko śīrabhayeko*
*Anyāyamā najhukne svābhimānamā nagirne*
*Viśvalecinne vīra Amarasiṃha Thāpā vīra Bhakti Thāpā*
*Vīra Bhīmasena Thāpāko santāna Gorkhālīhũ cinirākh*
(In Nepali/ 35:16 mins into the film).

[46] Considered the national weapon of Nepal, it is a curved knife, of medium length, identified as a Gurkha soldier's weapon and prized possession in battle.

[47] *Aba Gorkhele caḍcha motor car* (In Nepali)

> reacting foolishly to a film. Such stories posited an imaginary film audience that, unlike such characters, was urbane enough to negotiate cities and cinema successfully. (Mennel 2008, 9)

She locates the country bumpkin who behaves inappropriately and is not sophisticated like people from the city in early films. He fails to engage with the many pleasures that city life offers. She notes that storylines with this figure are directed to an urban audience who know how to navigate different city spaces and understand the humor in his foolish acts.

Figure 6: Babu (Shree Krishna Shrestha) arrives in Kathmandu, sees Dharaharā, a monument in central Kathmandu, and exclaims, 'What a tall building!' Film Screenshot *Gorkhālī* (1999).

The *gā̃ule* or the villager in Nepali films is usually a village bumpkin like in *Gorkhālī*. He is a migrant and a stranger to Kathmandu. I want to bring examples from three films *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke* (2014), *Paśupati Prasāda* (2016), and *Dhanapati* (2017). In *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke*, Ṭalaka flees his village and arrives in Kathmandu. Similarly, in *Paśupati Prasāda* Paśupati makes his way to Kathmandu after the loss of his parents in the 2015 earthquake and the need to repay their debt. While in *Dhanapati* the protagonist's family faces political prosecution in the hands of rebels and he migrates to Kathmandu. After arriving in Kathmandu all three characters struggle to find a place in the city. They are strangers to the city and in the city. Yet their encounters with other strangers help them navigate it. These encounters and friendships would have been impossible in the village.

Sociologist Vince Marrota observes how migration allows different interactions in the city and states, “In the social modality of modernity, those who are socially and culturally distant are now physically close” (Marotta 2005, 3). In *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke*, Samten who is a gang leader and Ṭalaka, a villager in the city who arrives alone can be friends. Paśupati in *Paśupati Prasāda* develops a friendship with a mother-like figure in the Paśupatinātha old age home and Dhanapati can start again in the city in *Dhanapati*. These interactions in the city also change the *gāũle*. He learns the trade of the city and transforms gradually.

Figure 7: Ṭalaka (Khagendra Lamichhane) arrives in Kathmandu and meets Samten (Dayahang Rai), a *dādā*. Film Screenshot *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke* (2014).

Figure 8: Ṭalaka, after spending some time in Kathmandu with Samten and his gang selling tickets outside a cinema hall. Film Screenshot *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke* (2014).

The villager in these films is also referred to as a "working-class hero" and "common man" in Nepali journalistic writings (T. Aryal 2017; A. Dixit 2019d). The villager embodies naivety, innocence, and in some ways as in the case of *Gorkhālī* an image of the nation that differs from the urban, modernizing ways of Kathmandu. He is the way through which the audience navigates and experiences the city. His sensorial contacts facilitate their understanding of it. His life in Kathmandu, narrated in the films, are episodes of becoming and belonging. He uses his life experiences from the village to understand the mannerisms of city life but must learn to be accepted. He inculcates certain attributes that allow him to adjust to the ways of the city.

In *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke* (2014) Samten, a local gang leader, gives Talak a new occupation and lifestyle. He learns to thieve and pickpocket under his guidance. While Paśupati agrees to work under Bhasme, a local *dādā* to make a living in *Paśupati Prasāda* (2015). In *Dhanapati* (2017) the protagonist struggles to work as a waiter. He might not be well off in the city as in the village, but he speaks and acts as a landlord and constantly instructs his family not to forget their legacy. In *Chasing Rainbows* (2013), three siblings struggle to make ends meet with their allowances, as they must keep up with their city friends. They must change their food and other habits for acceptance in the city.

Sociologist Stacy Pigg (1992) in her research on the constructions of ideologies around the village, village life, and villagers in Nepal's development politics argues that villages are described as a space of backwardness and villagers as ignorant, unknown to cosmopolitan ways of development. She proposes that within Nepal's national project of development or *bikās*, the status of a villager and the village as his social setting are described and defined by international agencies and Nepal's government policies as being in a state of under development. She writes, "Distance, poverty, and the ignorance of villagers are the problems of Nepal. Therefore, while villages are the objects of development and villagers its recipients, they are also obstacles to national development" (Pigg 1992, 506). She argues that development programs in different sectors ranging from education, health to communication, marginalize the voices of villagers, considering their way of life as outmoded and ignore their subjectivities. The villager's livelihood practices need to be uplifted and their behaviors, attitudes, beliefs changed and fixed with the economic incentives of *bikās*. In Nepali films, the villager is consistently in need of direction and guidance and functions based on inadequacy, a belief of being unequal, and ignorant about cosmopolitan Kathmandu.

In *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke* (2014), Ṭalaka arrives in Kathmandu without any money and meets Samten, who pities him and takes him to eat at a *khājāghara.*[48] While Ṭalaka eats *dālabhāta*[49], Samten eats momos. Liechty (2005) notes that momos first appeared as a 'Tibetan style dumpling' in street-side stalls and small restaurants run by Tibetan refugees in Kathmandu who had fled Tibet after China's invasion in the 1960s. Buff momo (dumplings with buffalo meat) or momos, in general, are a very popular snack or meal in Kathmandu. Momos share their qualities with different kinds of dumplings around the world like *mandu* in Korean cuisine, *khinkali* in Georgian cuisine, *jiaoxi* in China, and *gyoza* in Japan among others (Dasgupta 2017). The food has a cosmopolitan quality traveling as Nepali and Tibetan street food around South Asia.

Ṭalaka is amused by momos that Samten is eating and is offered to try one. He mixes the momo skin and its filling with his rice. Samten then demonstrates the proper technique of eating a momo in one bite, using a fork. Ṭalaka burns his mouth as he tries to eat it in the same way. The act of learning how to eat a momo correctly is an initiation into the cosmopolitan world of Kathmandu where momos are a popular snack and momo shops populate its streets. Samten who himself lives on the edge as a criminal hiding from the police initiates Ṭalaka into the world of the city. As he starts living in the city, what Ṭalaka wears and eats has to change for him to navigate its ways. He becomes a gang member; pickpocketing and selling movie tickets illegally outside cinema halls. Likewise, Paśupati in *Paśupati Prasāda* (2015) must forsake his desire for prosperity and adjust to his godfather's rented room. The struggles of survival he faces in his village continue in the city and Dhanapati in *Dhanapati* (2017) needs to adjust to a new life without any social and economic status in the city. Similarly, the elder sister in *Chasing Rainbows* (2013) watches a show on her neighbor's television through her room window since they do not own a TV. She is updating herself on an English series in order to converse with her friends in Kathmandu.

[48] A small family or individual run neighborhood eatery, which is cheaper than a 'restaurant'.
[49] A diet of "lentils (*dāla*), rice (*bhāta*), and curried vegetables (*tarkārī*) [which] form the traditional staple of (Nepali cuisine), and are eaten twice daily" (Sapkota et al. 2017, 377).

Figure 9: Ṭalaka eats momo the same way he eats *dālabhāta*. Film Screenshot *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke* (2014).

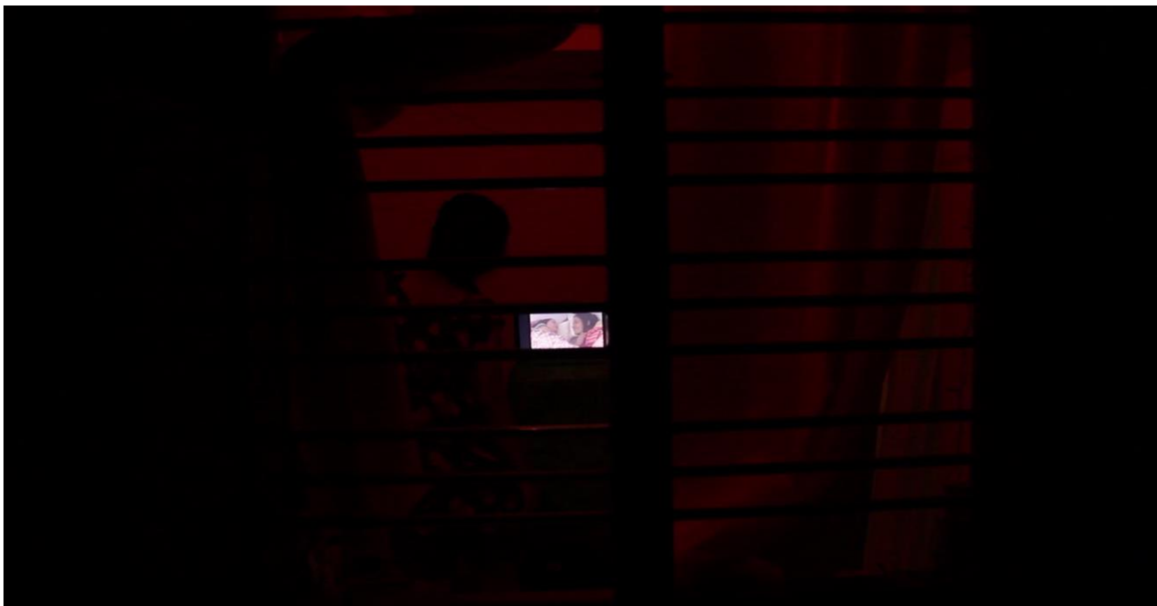

Figure 10: The elder sister (Sanam Pyakurel) watches her neighbor's TV from her room window. Film Screenshot *Indreṇī Khojdai Jā̃dā/ Chasing Rainbows* (2013).

This set of experiences, focused on perfecting mannerism of eating, walking, and talking that prepares a migrant to enter and become part of the world of the city is the urban habitus of the migrant. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu developed the concept of habitus to discuss the symbolic aspects of material conditions portrayed in the actions of agents as "a set of dispositions which generates practices and perceptions" (Bourdieu and Johnson 2011, 5). Here, the urban habitus of the migrant is a set of adjustments inculcated by him or her in the form of life set skills. Bourdieu demonstrates how taste is symbolic of class practices and becomes the basis of social judgement. Ṭalaka's lack of taste situates him as a villager unknown to cosmopolitan foods and ways of city

life. He has only known how to eat *dālabhāta* in his village. Bourdieu writes, "Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier. Social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make, between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar, in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed" (Bourdieu 2000, 6). Taste, for him, serves as an indicator for the classification of social groups and individuals who develop similar tastes through their consumption of products available at their disposal. The way one acquires and expresses certain tastes for Bourdieu "are expressions of social power or powerlessness and that social inequalities are reinforced and perpetuated on the basis of cultural distinction" (Stewart 2013, 56). He decscribes taste as an acquired trait that highlights social inequalities. It is embodied through availability and access to economic resources, which later becomes the basis for class distinctions that define norms of appropriate and inappropriate behavior. These behaviors consolidate as cultural distinctions creating divisions based on taste. In the figure of the *gā̃ule* the tastes of a migrant lower class are distinguished from that of a Kathmandu urbanite who is aware of its cosmopolitan mannerisms. The *gā̃ule* alludes to a nostalgia for the village, and alienation experienced with city life in Kathmandu. This archetype also refers to Nepal's historic *bir* past based on a Gorkhālī identity and its national project of *bikās*.

### 3.3.2 The gangster or *dādā*

Another urban figure of the *dādā* based in Kathmandu in Nepali films emerges against the backdrop of the end of the 10-year Maoist armed struggle in Nepal in 2006. The new political environment which was in a state of transition during the peace process beginning in 2008 when Maoist ex-combatants were being reintegrated and rehabilitated into society saw a steep rise in urban crime and violence in Nepal (D. B. Subedi 2014). As researcher Dipesh KC points out, "Kathmandu's infamous gangster bosses emerged after 2006, benefiting from the instability, political patronage and attraction of money and power" (KC 2014). Similarly, Nepali political parties are infamous for their youth wings who have been accused of being gangs rather than groups (Madhesi 2008). These include YCL (Young Communist League) of the Maoist party, Youth Force of the UML (United Marxist Leninist Party), and Tarun Dal of the Nepali Congress Party.

The amalgam of politics, crime, and youth is reflected in the storyline of popular Nepali films after 2008 when gang culture and criminality become integral to the narrative. Gangsters based in

Kathmandu like Kaji Sherpa, Chakre Milan, Deepak Manange, and Dinesh Adhikari, their exploits and political protection have been widely reported in the media (Samay 2004; Online 2009; P. Report 2018). Their lives and death as in the case of Chari who was "killed in a movie-style police encounter in Samakhusi" (KC 2014) provide inspiration for filmmakers who stage similar incidents in their films. The police encounter and death of Samten, a gang leader in *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke* (2017) being an example. Researcher KC refers to such killings and activities as the "criminalization of politics and the politicization of crime" (ibid.) in Nepal.

This relationship between crime and politics is explored in films like *Chaḍake* (2013) and *Loot 2* (2017). These are not gangster films but somewhat inspired by the genre. In a similar reading of Bombay cinema Mazumdar (2008, 153) investigates how the Bombay underworld is defined through themes of "masculinity, brotherhood, identity and aspiration" in films like *Satya* (1998) and *Company* (2002). She describes *dādā* culture to be intrinsic to these films, which deal with the rise of gangsters and the making of a mythology surrounding them. She presents the meanings of *dādā* as the colloquial term for boss and *bhai* both as a brother and a member of a gang in Bombay. Both terms with the same meanings are useful in the reading of Nepali films.

The *dādā* in Nepali films is both a gangster and a neighborhood goon. He leads a group of young unemployed men to crime as in the case of Haku Kale in the *Loot* series (2012 & 2017), Samten in *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke* (2014), Bhasme in *Paśupati Prasāda* (2015), Chewang in *Chaḍake* (2014), Dorje Don in *Resham Fililli/Silk fluttering in the wind* (2015), Magne Don in *Chakkā Pañjā/Six and Five* (2016), Visma Don in *Jātrā/Festival* (2016) among others. The actors playing *dādā* or the villain are rarely from high caste groups and played by actors from what the *Mulukī Ain*[50] described as *janajātis*, *matvālīs* or liquor drinking castes. Critic Nabin Subba points out that villain characters in Nepali films have always been actors who did not look like *'Khasa-Parvate'*[51] (Subba 2008). He sees such portrayal in line with state functioning, which promotes oneness based on Nepali language and Hindu religious ideology as propagated by king Mahendra. He describes the villains, anti-heroes, or minor characters of Nepali films as someone wits mongoloid features or Madhesis from the southern plains of Nepal and Dalits. He understands this as a lack of

[50] *Mulukī Ain* or first codified legal code of Nepal formulated during the reign of Prime Minister Janga Bahadur Rana, which instated the caste system.
[51] Hill Brahmins and Chhetris or high castes.

acceptance of minorities in lead roles based on their ethnicities and physical features with thes promotion of a certain kind of aestheticism. This however seems to be changing with the anti-heroes and villains being central to the narrative of Nepali films and their popularity among audiences. The films themselves are about these *dādās* as in the case of the *Loot* series (2012 & 2017) and *Chaḍake* (2013) where the villains lead the gang, while their members are minor crooks or *dādās* in their neighborhood. They inhabit street corners and teashops and spend their time loitering and harassing locals and passers-by. They are described as *sukula gunḍās* or as Leichty (2007, 70) who translates the term literally as "straw mat ruffian" and "a moral critique of the lower class" youth who leave beyond their means by the middle class in Kathmandu. One such example is Gopal, a pickpocket, and Jagat in *Loot* (2012) who spend their days in the neighborhood corner playing board games. They are jobless and penniless but aspire for a life with money, which leads them to crime. Their characters are set with an ordinariness, which is shown through the places they inhabit like neighborhoods and street corners. Nischal Basnet, the director of the *Loot* series describes the inspiration for the characters in his film who plan a bank robbery,

> The characters you see in *Loot*. I had read about cases of bank robberies in Kathmandu. The background of the robbers was such that they were all ordinary people doing ordinary jobs and just looking at one person he was running a tiny shop…he was also the robber and someone else doing a menial job was also a robber. This means urban desires are growing, patience is decreasing, and these are normal people attempting to do something very abnormal. I read about them in the media and wanted to build such characters. (Interview with Basnet, 2018)

Basnet acts in the film as a pedestrian reading about the bank robbery in a newspaper on the street. He laughs at the story and says that reading about the convicts it is unbelievable that they could be robbers. The newspaper headlines state that the mastermind of a bank robbery is caught, and another describes Kathmandu as "a city of illegal arms".[52] The film follows the lives of five men who want to make it big in the city and plan a bank robbery. Their leader, Haku Kale, forms a gang and manipulates others. He starts by running a *battī pasala*[53] on the banks of the Bishnumati river, becomes a gangster, and runs away from the place.

The gangster story, if successful, is one of upward economic mobility. His mobility can be traced through the interplay of vertical and horizontal spaces in the city he inhabits. While much of the

[52] See 1:54 mins in the film.
[53] Local neighborhood liquor shop.

interaction of the gang members, in the beginning, takes place in the streets and Kale's liquor shop, it is on the rooftop of an abandoned building where they meet and plan their robbery. The film begins with Haku Kale contemplating his plight and his plan while observing the cityscape of Kathmandu from the rooftop of an abandoned building, and at the end when he is successful in looting the money, he relaxes with a pint of beer somewhere on a 'rooftop restaurant'.

The rooftop is both an area of seclusion and excess. Urban scholars, Chow and Kloet (2013), study the use of rooftops in Hong Kong cinema and demonstrate how it is rooted in a local environment because of its materiality but connected with global capitalism. They explain its nature and use by gangsters to lovers in films, who point their guns in rooftops or find moments of solace in it. For them, it is an urban liminal zone where even criminals are free. They elaborate,

> …the rooftop allows for moments of radical reconnection, when the protagonists of the films recuperate the possibility to know, to feel, to remember who they are. It is at the vertical fringes of the city, when we are literally on top of the city, that we are offered such moments of immobility, of interrupting the 24/7 dynamics of the global city, of defying the laws of meaning and purpose. (Chow and Kloet 2013, 144)

Both scholars observe that the vertical upgrade provided by rooftops without control or dictated by authorities below on the street allows for spontaneity and vulnerability. They are restricted zones because of the risk they pose of fall but appeal to criminals who can contemplate their lives and plans. They see it as an urban vertical fringe because it does not demand any sort of appropriate behavior or reflect the orderliness of the city. They note that the pace of the city is ignored to stage crime or the planning of it without interruption. It is the realm of the gangster where he shines in broad daylight discussing crime and carrying out criminal activity openly in films. This contrasts with dark, poorly lit rooms where the gangster is usually seen talking to gang members or carrying out a crime. By analyzing rooftop scenes in three Hong Kong films Chow and Kloet (ibid., 152) emphasize the need to study rooftops in Asian cinema as "they resist the aestheticization of the global city, offering an alternative mode of experiencing the city".

Rooftops, much like those found in global cities like Hong Kong, are an essential element of buildings in 'non-global', 'third-world periphery', 'off the map' South Asian cities like Kathmandu. As the realm of the gangster in Nepali films, they offer a unique viewpoint of criminal struggle and material aspirations. The five men in *Loot* (2012) meet and plan their crime in an abandoned rooftop building, sharing their dreams and planning the future.

Figure 11: The gang in their rooftop hangout. Film Screenshot *Loot* (2012).

Figure 12: Naresh (Karma Shakya) and Khatri (Prateek Raj Neupane) contemplate their lives on the rooftop. Film Screenshot *Loot* (2012).

High rises and concrete residential houses in Kathmandu are the outcomes of the housing boom in the Kathmandu Valley which began in the mid-1990s when the government approved the involvement of private parties in the housing sector (K. Parajuli 2008; Mathema 2011). The government's venture into public housing by implementing housing projects in Kuleshwor and Golfutar through The Kathmandu Valley Town Development Committee (KVTDC) by selling land units to civil servants ended in 1990, easing regulations and opening doors for private housing companies to develop apartment buildings and move into real estate (B. K. Shrestha 2010). This process of urbanization was supported by migration into Kathmandu from all over Nepal by people displaced by the Maoist armed struggle (1996-2006) and others seeking better economic and

educational services (R. B. Thapa, Murayama, and Ale 2008b). The Valley's burgeoning unplanned localities without proper access to roads, water or electricity and in close proximity gave rise to the term 'Baneshwor-isation' referring to Baneshwor, a locality in Kathmandu once known for its open spaces but now occupied with congested housing lacking basic facilities due to rapid urbanization and lack of government regulations (K. Parajuli 2008; Nelson 2017b). The cityscape through the years continues to be dispersed with buildings in the making, "steel bars protruding from the top slab of buildings, in anticipation of future additions" (Shah 2010). One of these high rises in the making, abandoned, for the time being, its rooftop offering a vista of the city is the meeting place of the gang members in *Loot* (2012). The skyline of the city is filled with houses or what Parajuli (2008) cites as 'Bihar boxes' since they are made by artisans from Bihar using cement, bricks, and concrete pillars.

The presence of the gang in the building is also hinting at the connection of criminal gangs in the Kathmandu Valley with land brokerage and housing estates. As Nelson (2017, 60) discusses, "Land brokers, known locally as *dalāla*, profit from speculation, developing land (known as 'plotting') or slyly counter-developing neighboring plots. These practices account for the piecemeal development and patchwork appearance of the urban periphery." The land market regulated primarily by land brokers in the Kathmandu Valley as Nelson notes has allowed them to control and develop land plots to suit their economic interests, facilitating the appearance of the cityscape, which is scattered with piecemeal plots and houses. The *dādā* can be associated with *dalāli* as it allows a lucrative profit from speculations of land brokerage often to susceptible middle customers who want to own land and build a house in Kathmandu. As an urban figure based in Kathmandu, he gains prominence in the storylines of 'new Nepali cinema' as the Valley undergoes infrastructural, social, and economic changes due to migration and criminality sees a rise. The lives of the gangsters and storylines of films like *Loot* (2012) are drawn from these urban changes.

### 3.3.3 The bar dancer

Moving on to the figure of a bar dancer in Nepali films, she emerges from the material excess and luxuries that Kathmandu offers. Dance bar restaurants, dance bars, or cabin restaurants mushroomed all around Kathmandu since the early 1990s with the rise of a middle-class population and during the ten-year Maoist rebellion (Liechty 2005b; Furber 2010; Rosenbaum 2013). Liechty (2005, 8) refers to the emergence of 'restaurants with dance' also called dance bars

in Kathmandu as “prostitution, commercial eating, and drinking establishments com(ing) together in a new market-driven, male-dominated, middle-class leisure sphere.” He (ibid., 9) discusses places like New Road and Thamel in Kathmandu as “convenient liminal zones” facilitating transactions between prostitutes and clients as they grew to be commercial centers beginning in the 1970s. Kathmandu now has a large number of dance restaurants spreading across its territory and reports suggest it to be around 200 with 30,000 women working in the entertainment industry (Caviglia 2016; Shresthova 2010). These places service an all-male clientele, mostly Nepali middle-class men and Indian tourists who consume local spirits and snacks and are entertained by women dancing to popular Hindi and Nepali songs (Furber 2010). Most women bar dancers are migrants to the Kathmandu Valley and many are even displaced by the ten-year Maoist armed conflict (Shresthova 2010). Although stigmatized as a cover-up for prostitution bar dancers often see themselves as respectable entertainers who make a decent living in the city (Caviglia 2016; Rosenbaum 2013).

Media reports and narratives surrounding bar dancers link it to prostitution and women trafficking in Nepal. The annual report by National Human Rights Commission in 2019 records that 15,000 women were trafficked from Nepal and 1,000 women and children were rescued from India (Mandal 2019). It further states that the most vulnerable population includes migrant workers and individuals from the entertainment industry where bar dancers work. Women trafficking has been framed as a national problem since the early years of liberalization in Nepal. The various narratives proliferated and circulated in the media about the trafficked woman as a victim, India as a market for Nepali women, and the western interest in helping solve the national crisis has resulted in an INGO interest in the issue (Joshi 2004). Development scholar, Sushma Joshi (2004) in her essay on discourses of trafficking and gender construction in Nepal investigates the phenomena as a national myth and cultural construct based on state power relations and gender hierarchies. She problematizes the term *celī-beṭī* or daughters used for Nepali women who live and work in India which “consolidated and reified the status of women-as-dependent-kin within the nation, blurring attempts to restructure women as citizen-subjects” (Joshi 2004, 244). By addressing all women as *celīs* she notes that the state assumes the logic of protection of woman while her rights as a citizen is written off. High caste Brahmin-Chettri women activists from various NGOs who head the movement against women trafficking are key in articulating the movement as ‘*celī-beṭībeca-bikhana*’ or the movement against the selling of daughters, which Joshi finds problematic. Her

understanding is crucial in interrogating the figure of the bar dancer as she breaks out from the dependent kin logic and attempts to articulate her desires of selfhood and independence. There are only a few films where she has an important role in the film like in the case of *Loot 2* (2012) or *Highway* (2012).[54]

In Nepali films, the bar dancer as an item girl usually arrives in the narrative of the film mostly as an interruption and is a source of respite or entertainment. She breaks the narrative of the films by bringing in a song and dance routine or an 'item number' like in Hindi films. As sociologist Rita Brara (2017, 67) details, an "item number is a cine-segment comprising an item-girl/boy, a racy song, a vivacious dance and a surround of erotic and immanent exuberance." The song and dance routine become an important way to express and display sexual desire in the narrative where the music is erotic and so are the dance moves. Also, as film scholar Akshaya Kumar (2017, 338) explains, "even though it is packaged as an entertainment appendage to a film, it threatened to become the most privileged and identifiable sign of a film." He notes that the catchy lyrics, the melody of the song, and the dance choreography with glamorized actors are targeted to attract audiences to the film. In many cases, however, they overpower the filmic narrative, and the film is identified with the item number and the item girl/boy.

It is then relevant to discuss the figure of the bar dancer through her profession as a dancer, item songs as facilitating a certain kind of dance now popularly seen as Bollywood dance. The manner in which her body is on display through her dance in the public domain are articulations of female sexuality and desire. Lindner (2011, 2) argues that the female dancer on-screen is positioned as a "spectacularly feminine object" and her "body is subjectively perceived, while at the same time it is vigorously observed, scrutinized, and compared to a (virtually unattainable) ideal." She writes that through costume, make-up, lights, and choreography in the film the female dancer is positioned to appease an audience that absorbs the sequence as an orchestrated spectacle. Her body is showcased as an ideal parameter of female physicality to enhance its performative nature.

Shresthova's (2011) research on the prominence of Bollywood dance, which she describes as dance choreography inspired by Hindi film song and dance sequences, in Nepal shows that

[54] Some Hindi films based on the lives of bar dancers in Mumbai, India's economic capital are *Chadni Bar* (2001) and *Chameli* (2003).

dancing, as a profession for females in Kathmandu is unaccepted as a viable career due to its association with promiscuity. Her study demonstrates entanglements of identity, tradition, and modernity in the dancing styles learned and performed as Nepali in Kathmandu's many dance schools as dances from Hindi films dictate the moves. The dance steps in Nepali film songs are similar to those in Hindi films as they are used as a template to teach and perform dances.

Hindi films have a legacy of prominent female dancers who have garnered huge popularity as stars since the 1950s. Their association with certain dancing styles and song sequences has facilitated distinctive narratives about the place of desiring women in Hindi films who are seen as a danger to the moral fabric of society (Mazumdar 2002; Virdi 2003). Nihjawan (2009) analyzes Bollywood dances and dancers to understand how they transgress particular ideas of femininity allowed in Indian popular culture. She uses examples of Hindi film stars like Helen, Rekha, Madhuri, and Aishwarya each associated with a certain decade and song sequence to explain how they negate certain feminine roles allocated to them through their dancing bodies. In her reading of the role of Helen in *Teesri Manzil* (1966), she describes the actor as the quintessential vamp, a nightclub dancer,

> ruined by her hearty appetite for sexual pleasure, drink and dance – all 'vices' that apparently go together. Therefore, while she is admired as a gorgeous dancer, Helen is always denied the role of the leading lady, her independence of body and spirit and her 'lack of modesty' in dress and movements keep a 'legitimate' interiority out of her reach in all her films (Nijhawan 2009, 104).

Helen's dance as the vamp, as Nijhawan indicates, highlights contestations surrounding the position of dancers in nightclubs and bar dancers in films where she appears temporarily and disappears after the song sequence is over. Her dancing body threatens prescribed notions of modesty. She is a spectacle and celebrated by the audience but cannot be accommodated into the narrative of the film as she has the potential to dismantle societal norms with her vices. If it was Helen's dance that caught the attention of audiences in the 70s there was Rekha who embodied the courtesan in *Umrao Jaan* (1981) in Hindi films. The item girl or the bar dancer embodies elements of both the nightclub dancer and attributes of the courtesan. Her attire is mostly a *colī* (blouse) and a flowing skirt of varying length and she is baring her legs and midriff. Her "clothes signify lower class status and a gypsy life, traditionally coming with allusions of a free sexuality, unbounded by middle-class norms of behavior" (ibid., 106).

Bar dancers in Nepali films wear the same attire as item girls in Hindi films and the music and choreography are heavily inspired by Bollywood dance. Besides the space of the bar dance, she is present in the bazaar or *melā*[55]as a village belle in similar attire. Nepali films prominently feature songs in the *melā* with similar dance moves as inside the space of the bar dance.[56] This dancing figure can also be traced to water nymphs or apsaras who are depicted in Indian epic and puranic literature as voluptuous, scantily dressed supernatural beings known to entice saints into lives of domesticity (Lutgendorf 2005). She is seen as the cause of suffering, the disruptor of penance. If in Puranic traditions apsaras inhabit forests and waterfalls to allure men, she exhibits her sexuality among a group of men in a dance bar or dance floor in Hindi and Nepali films.

Figure 13: Actor Menaka Shrestha dances to the song *Nācana Maiyā/ Dance girl dance* in *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke* (2014). Film Screenshot.

Dwyer and Patel (2002, 68) describe the dance floor in nightclubs in the films of the 1970s as "a space in which all of society's norms are transgressed women wear sexy clothes, drink, and dance for men's entertainment". They are gendered spaces of pleasure where male fantasies are projected on the woman's dance, but it is also where women can break the confines of societal norms by socializing with men. As the dance floor in nightclubs, the dance bar setting in Nepali films is usually a stage or a platform with bright lights, overlooking a male audience on sofa or chairs. Often, she gets down from the platform to mingle with her clients, ending by drinking and dancing

[55]A *melā* or a village fair serves as an opportunity for youngsters to meet and interact. It is usually set up on a field with paper or plastic flyers, ferry wheels and food.
[56] Some popular examples from YouTube with more than 50 million views are *Kuṭumā Kuṭu* from *Duī Rupaiyā̃/Two Rupees* (2017) featuring actor Swastima Khadka, *Pūrva Paścima Rela* featuring actor Priyanka Karki, in *Chakkā Pañjā/Six and Five* (2015).

with them. She is a professional in public life but always an outsider, a disruptor of the moral codes of femininity, and has no place in the film’s narrative besides that of an entertainer.

Figure 14: Actor Swastima Khadka as a village belle dancing to Kuṭumā Kuṭu in Duī Rupaiyā̃/ Two Rupees (2017). Film Screenshot.

## 3.4 Conclusion

The bar dancer, *dādā* and *gāũle* in Nepali films provide visibility to certain city spaces and reflect on changing perceptions of everyday life in Kathmandu based on urban and global transformations. These figures are key to understanding shifts in social positions, caste and class authority in Nepal’s development politics. They are represented in films as caught between two social worlds of a cosmopolitan metropolitan order and an underdeveloped state of village life, intertwined with Kathmandu’s road to modernization. These displaced individuals as migrants complicate the figure of the cosmopolitan as they insert themselves and their experiences of estranged mobility into the space of cinematic representation and necessitate a rethinking of urban livelihoods. As a social category that represents a certain gender, ethnicity, and class these urban types are a comment on the connections between urbanization, migration, and dislocation in Kathmandu.

The adulation of Kathmandu as a migrant destination and observations on its changing agricultural landscape in Nepali poetry and literature find their articulation in Nepali films as well. The city serves as a physical transit to other global cities through its international airport. The concept of liminality as discussed by Gennep (1909), Turner (1995), and Eisenberg (2016) facilitate the understanding of Kathmandu’s transit state in films. Kathmandu is a location that is both

transitional and marginal and struggles to function as a metropolitian even if it is designated as such. The city, which is characterized by continual construction and re-construction, is an important node in a global network of human labor supply. Its transit state is experienced and articulated differently by national, regional, and international film productions whether as a dream city for migrants inside Nepal or a favored tourist destination offering a version of the Orient or a criminal hub.

If Hindi films feature Kathmandu as a criminal transit, international productions feature it is as a mystical transit, and films from 'new Nepali cinema' use the changing landscape of the city, its airport, and high-rise buildings to highlight it as a physical transit to other cities but also a metaphorical transit to upward economic mobility. The failed nature of Kathmandu's metropolitan status due to the suspended status of its infrastructures is captured in Nepali films through its changing cityscape of high-rise buildings, pollution, and urban poverty. It is imagined as a destination site and experienced as a liminal cityscape of broken dreams, poverty, and criminality in Nepali films.

# Chapter 4: Living in Kathmandu

> What is referred to as "the city" exists only in our heads or in the discourses of those who work in the various arts and media: television, the press, theater, radio, films, novels, DVDs. (King 2007, 2)

Sociologist Anthony D King explains the limitations of experiencing any city as one single entity; bounded and self-contained when it is against our own temporal and spatial interactions with city spaces. He suggests that cities can only be experienced in fragments since our social life is confined to certain communities, neighborhoods, localities, and routes of transportation and access to city sites, which creates our urban identities. The search for one city is futile since cities are imagined and represented as much as lived and experienced both individually and collectively. Fragments of lived experiences in the city contribute to narratives about urban life portrayed in the media, yet these narratives represent only a fraction of the multitude of experiences that may be erased or forgotten from our memories. Nevertheless, within our memories, specific visual markers of the city are scattered as fragments, serving as valuable guides for navigating and identifying urban spaces.

This chapter employs the concept of assemblage, understood as a collage or composition, to analyze the experience of living in Kathmandu as observed in Nepali films. The theoretical foundation of assemblage can be traced back to the works of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1988). They utilize the term 'agencement' to discuss their notion of assemblage, which refers to an arrangement or layout applicable to various social entities that exist as unified wholes and are generated through the connections of their heterogeneous parts, leading to the emergence of new identities (Kamalipour and Peimani 2015; Nail 2017). Their understanding posits assemblage thinking as a way to build relations, analyze heterogeneity and differences. Urban scholar Ignacio Farías (2011) adds to this discussion by stating that assemblage thinking facilitates explorative engagement involving agency and arrangement with subjects rather than theorizing around fixed concepts. In the study of cities, it can be a key to understand continuity and change in urban environments over multiple scales (Kamalipour and Peimani 2015). Geographer Colin McFarlane (2011a, 649) writes, "assemblage provides a useful basis for thinking of the city as a dwelling process and … for conceiving the spatiality of the city as processual, relational, mobile, and unequal." These approaches are useful in my investigation of architectural

identifiers used to represent arriving and living in Kathmandu in opening sequences of films discussed in this chapter. Films mediate imaginaries of the city, reconfiguring "city spaces into narrative geographies where urban fragments are collaged into spatial episodes" (Penz and Lu 2011, 14). The choice of monuments, their alignment and composition into a sequence brings together a range of historical and social moments that contribute to the urban landscape of the city. As McFarlane (2011, 667) explains,

> There is no necessary spatial template for assemblage; assemblage calls into view a range of spatial forms, from those generated by historical processes of accumulation and socio spatial polarisation or the distanciated mobilities of travelling policies to random juxtapositions and disruptive events and predictable daily and nightly rhythms of activity, atmosphere, and sociability. This is assemblage as a conceptualisation of urban objects, such as policy, social movements, or everyday urban culture.…Urban assemblages are structured, hierarchised, and narrativised through profound unequal relations of power, resource, and knowledge.

I draw upon McFarlane's definitions of assemblage to inform my understanding and analysis of the signifiers of Kathmandu in film. This approach does not adhere to a rigid template but rather encompasses spatial forms that arise from political processes, ranging from social events to daily activities. It allows for commentary on the economic disparities and urban inequalities present in the city. I suggest that films create and recreate urban assemblages in narrative form by observing and commenting on modes of urban living from my analysis of Nepali films. They comprehend the material, cultural, political, environmental, and social aspects of urban dwellings.

I present my analysis in this chapter in two sections. The first part locates specific landmarks in Kathmandu portrayed as signifiers of the city in film through a collage of monuments from different periods as opening sequences. I explain the choice of these monuments by discussing their historical, cultural, and social importance. I demonstrate how they exhibit contestations surrounding access to public spaces in Kathmandu. I further shed light on the heritage politics involved in the designation of UNESCO world heritage sites in the Valley and their on-screen presence. I then move on to discuss the image of rural space or 'the village' through views of hills and mountains or *himāla* in Nepali films as opposed to monuments for the city of Kathmandu. The natural landscape of mountains and hills stand in contrast to the view of monuments, but both are identifiers of the Nepali nation built on identity politics. In the second section of the chapter, I locate *bhāḍāko koṭhā* or rented rooms in Nepali films as a way of imagining urban living and

identities shaped by the physical transformations of the cityscape of Kathmandu. I discuss the representation of *bhāḍāko koṭhā* in reference to a certain class, gender, taste and how the narratives of Nepali film are built around this form of dwelling. I study these rooms as migrant 'lived spaces' (Lefebvre 1991) and negotiation for the 'right to the city' (Harvey 2008).

## 4.1 Identifying the city

The history of the Kathmandu Valley is more than two thousand years old and was ruled by the Gopalas, Mahispalas, Kiratas and the Lichhavis giving way to the Mallas who ruled from the 12$^{th}$ to the latter half of the 17$^{th}$ century (Slusser 1982). The arts and architecture of the Valley owe much to the Mallas who built the palace squares, temples, monastic buildings, and other religious and residential structures in the three cities of Kathmandu, Patan, and Bhaktapur (R. B. Thapa, Murayama, and Ale 2008a). After the invasion of the Kathmandu Valley by king Prithvi Narayan Shah of Gorkha and its rule by the Shahs the architecture and palace squares continued to be used by them for administrative and residential purposes and later by Rana rulers (R. B. Thapa and Murayama 2010). Beginning from 1846 AD after a coup by Janga Bahadur Kunwar the Ranas ruled Nepal for the next 104 years and contributed to the architecture of the Valley by building 41 palaces inspired by British neo-classical styles (Nelson 2019). The Malla palace squares, along with temples and Rana palaces are now landmarks of modern Kathmandu, embedded with autocratic histories, democratic aspirations, and bear the effects of ongoing urbanization. Nepali films and international productions beginning from the 1960s, when filmmaking began in Nepal, use them to identify the city as Nepal's national capital and highlight its architectural, cultural, and religious importance.

Cinema scholar Charlotte Brunsdon (2007, 22) discusses the featuring of iconic landmarks of capital cities in films as a comment on a nation's political history and explains, "...landmark iconography, like that of all capital cities, is an historically formed, multimedia iconography which is always about location but never just about location. While all cities have their landmarks, those of capital cities also carry complex and sometimes contested national and international meanings." She understands the presentation of certain landmarks from capital cities in films as more than a use of location that embodies complex meanings based on different political contexts. In her exploration of cinematic London, she traces the frequent use of landmarks (locations and monuments) that are widely used by films to represent it. She refers to these recognizable images

as 'landmark London', examples being Trafalgar Square, Piccadilly Street, Tower Bridge, and Palace of Westminster. She shows how they contribute to the urban imaginary of London as a national capital by building on its imperial past and global significance. London, a 'global city' was once the center of colonial power. Kathmandu contrarily is a 'far out' city experiencing the effects of a post-coloniality that is different from its South Asian neighbors (Liechty 2015, Des Chene 2007). However, it is a national capital like London bearing the legacy of a rich architectural heritage embedded with contested histories. The Ranas, a family oligarchy who ruled Nepal from their palaces in Kathmandu were a strong ally of the British rulers in South Asia (Sever 1993). Janga Bahadur Rana, the first Rana prime minister visited Britain and France in 1850-51, returning to Nepal fascinated by western modernity and British military power and rule of law (Paudyal 2010; Whelpton 2016). The autocratic Rana elites were consumers of European products and emulated the lifestyles and tastes of British rulers, simultaneously building neoclassical monumental architecture in Kathmandu and curtailing civil rights and liberties (Liechty 2010). Their regime fell in 1951 as the nationalist movement against British rule in India gained momentum and influenced citizens back in Nepal who fought to overthrow it (C. P. Singh 2004).

Films to set their narratives in Nepal's national capital, Kathmandu, use monuments from the Rana period and six United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (hereafter UNESCO) world heritage sites (Svayambhū, Bauddha, Paśupatinātha temple, Kathmandu Durbar Square, Bhaktapur Durbar Square, Patan Durbar Square) extensively.[57] These are familiar images of iconic locations mass-produced through media. Film scholar, Özlem Köksal (2014, 85) notes that films must engage with mass circulated images of the city, "[those that] must be recognizable enough to not alienate, yet different enough to attract." The UNESCO world heritage sites in the Kathmandu Valley are attractive to tourists, identifiable to locals, and appealing to filmmakers who film them to identify the city in their work. Köksal studies the ways in which films approach and contribute to the imagination of cities like Istanbul in Turkey and Lisbon in Portugal based on tourist interest in both cities as European cultural centers. She discusses how the featuring of certain sites in films invariably contributes to its commodification. Along similar lines, Brunsdon

[57] There are seven UNESCO world heritage sites in the Kathmandu Valley. In films, six of the seven UNESCO world heritage sites are mainly chosen to identify the Kathmandu Valley excluding the Changu Narayan temple situated in the northeast of Kathmandu with a stone pillar that has the oldest inscription of the Valley (Riccardi 1989). Its geographical distance from the city of Kathmandu appears to be the main reason behind its non-use in films although the site has deep historical value.

(2007, 21) argues that films deliberately have to engage with clichéd images of familiar locations due to their iconographic presence but "in using these recognizable images, a film both refer to the urban imaginary of a specific city and also stages it, contributing to the many images, characters, and tales that constitute that urban imaginary." She explains that films by using familiar images of iconic locations to stage their stories in certain cities show an awareness of its history, its urban imaginaries and at the same time contribute to it by assimilating different images, stories, and characters. In my reading of monuments used in films to locate the city of Kathmandu the concept of landmark iconography as used by Brunsdon and that of heritage provides a suitable contextualization.

Anthropologist Lynn Meskell (2015, 2) describes the overarching term heritage as "supplement of history" while Kersel and Luke (2015, 71) elaborate it as "...something someone or a collective considers to be worthy of being valued, preserved, cataloged, exhibited, restored, admired. Heritage is both personal and intensely political." These definitions of heritage as a testimony of history that is deemed of collective local and national value in the form of monuments and sites are useful for my analysis of heritage sites in Kathmandu as depicted in films. The monuments from the Rana period to those designated as world heritage sites have been valued and preserved as national iconic landmarks and continue to be exhibited in films as signifying the city of Kathmandu.

### 4.1.1 UNESCO brand

The six UNESCO world heritage sites used in films to identity Kathmandu are a major source of tourist income and their management has been guided through the years by master plans formulated by the government of Nepal and efforts of international agencies (R. Pradhan 1996; Coningham et al. 2018). The world heritage list is updated by UNESCO and is based on nominations by its 193 member nations with the organizational aim to promote world peace and security in the world and symbolizes the making of a 'quality brand' that allows certain sites to gain global reputation along with economic and social prestige (Ferrucci 2012). Heritage scholar Bailey Ashton Adie (2017) reviews the world heritage list as a franchise system in which UNESCO acts as the franchiser and its member states as franchisees. She discusses how world heritage sites are contract bound, adhere to a payment system, and must have 'outstanding universal value' to confirm to the UNESCO brand and maintain certain quality standards or face membership

termination. She writes that although different to a traditional business franchise model the designation of a world heritage site affects tourist visitation and creates a powerful economic dynamic between UNESCO and its members. Anthropologist Laura Kunreuther (2016, 45) affirms that, "The history of UNESCO projects in Nepal sheds light on the way Nepali heritage or history has been influenced in part by broader global agendas." She is referring to foreign interests in most of the heritage projects in Nepal as international agencies like UNESCO and governments of affluent states practice heritage diplomacy.

UNESCO has been an important part of Nepal's heritage conservation projects. It was first involved in the restoration of the Royal Palace in Hanuman Dhoka in 1972 and in 1979 it designated seven sites in the Kathmandu Valley as world heritage sites (Bhattarai- Upadhyay 2013). UNESCO states that the seven sites are chosen for their architectural uniqueness and "all the attributes that express the outstanding universal value of the Kathmandu Valley are represented through the seven monument zones established with the boundary modification accepted by the World Heritage Committee in 2006."[58] The conservation efforts of UNESCO along with local stakeholders and the Department of Archaeology (DOA) in Nepal have often clashed on management issues and in 2003, UNESCO enlisted Kathmandu's world heritage sites in the 'endangered list' which was later delisted (Chapagain 2008). The 2015 earthquake in Nepal damaged thousands of monuments in the Valley including these heritage sites which are now being rebuilt through efforts from various donor agencies and the government (S. Malla 2015). However, the Nepal government's heritage management efforts in the Valley continue to be criticized for catering to the interests of international organizations and donors rather than local efforts (Bhattarai- Upadhyay 2009; Brosius and Michaels 2020).

## 4.2 Heritage Kathmandu in films

I use 'heritage Kathmandu' to discuss landmarks in the Kathmandu Valley, including UNESCO world heritage sites and other monuments identified as signifiers of the city in films. Usually a 'this is Kathmandu' opening sequence which introduces the setting of the film through different locations of Kathmandu is collaged with images of one of the three Durbar Squares, the Svayambhū or Bauddha *stūpa*, the Paśupatinātha temple along with monuments like Dharaharā or

[58] See the UNESCO webpage on the Kathmandu Valley for mention of all the criteria of outstanding universal value at https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/121/ (accessed 31.01.2021).

Ghaṇṭāghara in central Kathmandu. First, I will discuss the six UNESCO heritage sites and move into two 'this is Kathmandu' sequences from films *Āmā* (1964) and *Dhanapati* (2017) that interplay with the visual representation of monuments that are not attested by UNESCO but have huge historical and cultural significance.

Among the six UNESCO world heritage sites, the three Durbar Squares of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Patan are an important choice for filmmakers in introducing Kathmandu. They represent the rich medieval architecture (11th to 16th century) of the Malla period and contribute to the influx of tourists to the Valley (R. B. Thapa, Murayama, and Ale 2008a, 47). The palace squares include palaces, temples, and shrines that were used as residential quarters for the royal families in past centuries and other administrative, social, and religious activities. Now they serve as spaces for social gatherings and religious activities for locals and an attraction for tourists. The Svayambhū and Bauddha *stūpas* including the Paśupatinātha temple are three other religious sites that introduce Kathmandu in films.

*The Night Train to Kathmandu* (1987) uses the Svayambhū *stūpa* to introduce Kathmandu. The *stūpa*[59] is situated on a hillock on the western outskirts of the Valley and holds deep religious significance for Newar Buddhists and Hindus alike who come to offer their obeisance to the deity, "Svayambhūnātha, the Self-Existent Lord " (Slusser 1982, 275). The monument site offers a panoramic view of Kathmandu and houses temples dating back to the Licchavi period (450- 700 CE) (ibid.). A major tourist attraction, the myths surrounding the establishment of the monument are linked to the first settlements of the Kathmandu Valley. Anthropologist Bruce Owens studies the changing status of the monument in the 2000s and informs,

> [the] name of this particular stūpa is derived from local accounts of its origin, which state that it marks the place at which a miraculous bejeweled lotus with a self-existent (svayambhū) flame at its center came to rest after the Bodhisattva Manjūśrī had cut a gorge into the Kathmandu Valley rim, draining the primordial lake within and making the Valley habitable for humans. (Owens 2002, 278)

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[59] As Meyer (1961, 25) describes, "The *stūpa*, most familiar of all Indian Buddhist symbols, derives its form and primary meaning from the primitive funerary cairn or tumulus erected over the mortal remains of distinguished persons". They "were positioned at topographically prominent spots that already enjoyed a reputation for being 'power places'" and consists of the central axis (yasti), a quadratic structure called harmika, the pinnacle with a jewel called *cudamani*, with a base called *mandala* (Franz-Karl Ehrhard 1991, 1). There are thousands of *stūpas* in the Kathmandu Valley.

The *stūpa* is linked to myths of the origin of the Kathmandu Valley the most famous of which is chronicled in the Svayambhū Purana and about Bodhisattva Manjūśrī who is said to have used his sword to cut a passage in between the hills of a pristine lake and by draining out the water turned it into a fertile Valley for habitation (Slusser 1982; Michael 1994). The *stūpa*, like Owen explains, is said to have emerged to mark this episode. The myths, stories, sacred rituals attached to the stūpas and its location, which offers a panoramic view of the Kathmandu Valley, make it an appropriate choice for filmmakers to use to locate their films. English films like *Night Train to Kathmandu* and *Doctor Strange* (2017) use the monument to set their stories in Kathmandu by interplaying with the monument's recognizable image as a sacred site for the residents of the Valley and an attractive touristic location for foreign visitors. The view of Svayambhū seen through a mist of fog in *Night Train to Kathmandu* (1987) and Dr. Strange using the prayer wheels of the stūpa in *Doctor Strange* (2017) highlights the 'mystic' aspects of the films' storylines. In both films, the protagonists are in search of a sacred land whose gateway is in Kathmandu. Dr. Strange in *Doctor Strange* is searching for Kamar-Taj and Joharv is searching for, 'a city that never was'. The view of Svayambhū alludes to the spiritual longing and meaning that the protagonists are seeking. They are foreign travelers who have made a journey to Kathmandu attracted by myths and stories about its existence and mystical aura.

Figure 15: A view of Svayambhū introduces Kathmandu in *The Night Train to Kathmandu* (1988). Film Screenshot.

Another spiritual and religious site used to introduce Kathmandu in films is the Paśupatinātha temple. The temple is regarded as the national temple of Nepal and Paśupatinātha the protector deity is worshipped by people from different sectarian beliefs (Michaels 2011). Besides housing the temple complex, the site is used as a *shmashāna ghata*[60], where Hindus are cremated at the end of their lives. Besides being one among other images used to introduce Kathmandu in films, *Paśupati Prasāda* (2016) is entirely set in its premise.[61] It borrows its name from the temple and features a protagonist who is named after it. His arrival in Kathmandu is also his arrival on the premises of the Paśupatinātha temple. Paśupati begins his new life in Kathmandu from the temple and ends it there as his dead body is cremated in the site.

Figure 16: View of the Paśupatinātha temple in *Paśupati Prasāda* (2016). Film Screenshot.

Now moving to other historical sites that do not bear the mark of UNESCO, I will discuss them through two sequences from *Āmā/Mother* (1964) and *Dhanapati* (2017). Although filmed decades apart both films visually map similar locations in Kathmandu that bear the legacies of Nepal's political past and the city's path to modernity. The first Nepali film produced in Nepal; *Āmā/Mother* (1964) begins with the protagonist Man Bahadur (Shiva Shankar) journeying to Kathmandu. He boards a train and arrives in the Indian border town of Raxaul, and then takes a bus to Kathmandu as the song, "Look at our motherland Nepal"[62] plays in the background. The

[60] Located in riverbeds (ghats) *shmashāna* or a Hindu crematory site is used to perform the last rites of the dead, which includes burning the dead body on a pyre.
[61] The focus on one place like the Paśupatinātha temple premises in *Paśupati Prasāda* (2016) can be seen in Nepali films like Baneshwar in *Gājā Bāja /Weed and Music* (2018) to Kalopool in web series *Once upon a time in Kalopool* (2016).
[62] *Hera Hera Yahī ho Hāmro Janmabhūmi Nepāla* (In Nepali)

Panchayat system (1960-1990) initiated by king Mahendra, produced the film, and it brings the Nepali *lāhure* home to the heart of the nation, which is the center of Kathmandu. *Lāhure* is a term used to refer to Nepali men who joined the Sikh army battalion stationed in Lahore in the 1830s (Onta 1998). The Sikh empire then covered a huge part of Pakistan and northern India and later, men serving in the Gurkha regiments of the British and Indian army were also called *lāhures* by those back home (ibid.). Now Nepali young men who migrate around the world for labor jobs from Arab nations to Japan are called *lāhures* (D. Kharel 2016). In the film, Man Bahadur is a *lāhure* in the Indian Army who returns home after serving for two years.

The bus leaves him in the Sundhara area, below Dharaharā or Bhīmasena Tower in central Kathmandu. After arriving in Sundhara, he walks around and reaches Śahīda Gate or the Martyr's Gate. The gate houses the statues of four martyrs Dharma Bhakta Mathema, Gangalal Shrestha, Shukraraj Shastri, and Dashrath Chand who lost their lives fighting for democracy against the Rana regime (1846-1951). There is also a bust of king Tribhuvan who was a key figure in the democratic movement of the 1960s in Nepal but after the monarchy was abolished in 2008 there has been controversy surrounding the removal or continued presence of the statue in the gate (The Himalayan Times 2018a). Śahīda Gate stands opposite Dharaharā. Both are landmarks of Kathmandu and are used consistently by Nepali filmmakers in opening sequences to set their stories in Kathmandu. Man Bahadur takes a moment to observe Śahīda Gate implying a homage to his ancestors who sacrificed their lives for the nation before moving on. The Panchayat government which produced *Āmā/Mother* was using the film like other forms of media such as radio to showcase its idea of national unity (Ajit 2007). Historian Pratyoush Onta (1996) in his study of Nepali primary school textbooks of the 1960s and 70s shows how the government propagated a national history and culture based on the inclusion of certain historic narratives of high caste Hindus and exclusion of other communities and languages. He refers to it as "the writing of a *vīra* (brave) history of the Nepali nation" (Onta 1996, 214) and ways of imagining the nation through textbooks and other media by the Panchayat regime. Man Bahadur's moment of reflection signals to a call for devoted loyalty to the nation from all its 'sons' and is a reference to the regime's "*Back to the Village National Campaign*"[63]. The campaign was based on a program under which students and civil servants from cities were sent to rural villages to aide in teaching and

[63] *Gāũ Pharka Rāṣṭrīya Abhiyāna* (In Nepali)

development works (Whelpton 2005). Films like *Āmā/Mother* (1964) and *Manako Bā̃dha/ Dam of the heart* (1973) produced by the regime promotes it. In *Āmā* a *lāhure* has returned to serve his motherland and reflects on his legacy.

In the scene, the acknowledgment of Śahīda Gate that stands for Nepal's democratic movement appears contradictory as the Panchayat regime was a direct and undemocratic rule by the monarchy. However, the regime promoted an "idea of the harmonious integration of different social groups (by) seek(ing) its enemy outside Nepalese society- the past Rana rulers were well suited as villains" (Ingemar 1994, 185) and the Ranas were the ones who sentenced the four martyrs felicitated in the monument to death.

Figure 17: Man Bahadur (Shiva Shankar) takes a moment to observe Śahīda Gate or the Martyrs Gate after arriving in Kathmandu. Film Screenshot *Āmā* (1964).

Besides Śahīda Gate, Dharaharā or Bhīmasena Tower where the bus initially drops Man Bahadur is an iconic landmark in the Sundhara area in Kathmandu used repeatedly by Nepali films to set their stories in the city. Although it was destroyed in the massive 2015 earthquake in Nepal leaving more than one hundred people dead "it has come to represent for many Nepalis an iconic representation not only of the disaster but also of a national determination to recover and rebuild" (Hutt 2019, 549). Hutt investigates how the image of the tower became popular in the media as a symbol for the damage of heritage sites after the 2015 earthquake including government, and private rebuilding efforts. He questions the sudden popularity and use of the secular building among the public and in the media as an emblem of resilience after the earthquake when it was previously side-lined by historians as lacking in original design and was functioning as a ticketed

touristic attraction. It was originally built as one among two towers between 1825-32 during the rule of Queen Lalit Tripurasundari by then prime minister Bhīmasena Thapa "modeled on monuments in India, such as the minarets that stand at the four corners of the Taj Mahal complex at Agra or the Qutub Minar in Delhi" (ibid., 553). Despite the presence of other thousands of monuments displaying the rich Newar architectural heritage of the Kathmandu Valley, it has attained an important place in public memory reiterated by the media in news reports to artists and in souvenirs which used the slogan "We shall rise again" in the backdrop of the tower (ibid). After its collapse in 2015, its various replicas were built around the country, and one even in the intersection in front of the rubble of the tower (The Himalayan Times 2018b). Both the original tower and the replica features in Nepali films, which are used to set the film's location in Kathmandu. In *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke* (2013) Dharaharā is one among other monuments in Kathmandu that signals Talak's arrival in Kathmandu. While in *Dhanapati* (2017), Kathmandu is shown through the replica of the tower, which has been built in the intersection in front of Dharaharā after its collapse. The necessity to represent the monument as a signifier of the city even in its replica form signals its importance in Nepal's national imaginary and public memory. Most importantly, the view of the tower encapsulates the experience of a migrant's arrival into the city. It is located in Sundhara, which was a transportation hub with ticket offices of bus companies and sometimes even the final bus stop station for travelers from outside of Kathmandu as shown in *Āmā* (1964).

Figure 18: Dharaharā in *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke* (2013). Film Screenshot.

Figure 19: Dharaharā replica in *Dhanapati* (2017). Film Screenshot.

And as Hutt (2019, 571) explains,

> Thus, for many Nepalis arriving in their capital after journeys that may have lasted for more than twenty-four hours, the Dharaharā, along with nearby monuments such as the Ghaṇṭāghara (the clocktower of Trichandra College) and the seventeenth-century manmade pool of Rani Pokhari, were the first things to be seen, and they became more familiar as emblems of the capital than the pagoda-scape of palaces and shrines that lies just a few minutes walk away.

He differentiates between the palace square of Kathmandu filled with pagoda-style architecture and monuments like Dharaharā, Ghaṇṭāghara, and Rani Pokhari, which migrants encounter first on their arrival in Kathmandu because of its proximity to bus ticket counters in Sundhara. This allows them to identify these monuments with the city although they are not UNESCO attested heritage sites and are used repeatedly in Nepali films as signifiers of Kathmandu. They announce the city to travelers and migrants from outside of Kathmandu who are yet to step into its palace squares. Like Dharaharā, Ghaṇṭāghara is a much-referenced monument in Nepali films. The tower was "modeled after London's Big Ben by the Ranas and was reconstructed in its present form after the earthquake in 1934" (S. Shrestha 2016). A film song from *Gorkhālī* (1999) alludes to both Dharaharā and Ghaṇṭāghara as actors Shree Krishna Shrestha and Jharana Thapa are dancing in their backdrop. The lyrics of the song is as follows

> The nine-storied Dharaharā of Kathmandu
> If only I could get love's support
> The clock tower in the middle of Kathmandu
> Irresponsible boys cannot be trusted [64]

[64] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r4P1-UsbKRs (accessed 03.12.2020). *Kāṭhmāṇḍuko nau tale Dharaharā*

Figure 20: Babu (Shree Krishna Shrestha) and Asmi (JharanaThapa) dance and sing in the backdrop of Dharaharā or Bhīmasena Tower and Ghaṇṭāghara or Bell Tower. Film Screenshots *Gorkhālī* (1999).

Both the monuments are celebrated as important sites in Kathmandu by the song and the city becomes a potential site for romance and drama. The area surrounding Dharaharā, Ghaṇṭāghara and moving to Ranipokhari and Tũḍīkhela form the central core of Kathmandu and are monuments from the Rana rule (1846-1951). Beginning with *Āmā/Mother* in the 1960s and through the decade of the 1990s in films like *Gorkhālī* and in the 2000s, Nepali films continue to visually map this area in opening sequences to situate their stories in Kathmandu.

The opening title sequence[65] of *Dhanapati* (2017) is one such example. It begins with an empty road to Singha Durbar[66] or Lion's palace, which was built during the rule of Rana Prime Minister Chandra Shumsher in 1903 AD on fifty hectares of land and said to be the among the largest palaces in Asia with one thousand rooms and seven courtyards decorated in European furniture (Weiler 2009). The palace from where the autocratic Ranas ruled Nepal now houses government ministries and offices of state-owned Radio Nepal and Nepal Television. After the shot of a deserted road leading to Singha Durbar, soon children arrive to skateboard in it. Then the sequence moves to the Nepal Army lane in Maitighar and the Durbar High School Road moving to Ratnapark, Tũḍīkhela, Dharaharā, back to Singha Durbar, Tripureshwar, Maitighar and as the

*Pāye hunthyo māyākosahārā*
*Kāṭhmāṇḍuko bicaimā Ghaṇṭāghara*
*Allāreko hudaina kunai bhara* (In Nepali)

[65]See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLv9Vi4H2H0 (accessed 20.02.2019).

[66] There is also a TV series titled Singha Durbar (first aired in 2016), which features the life of Nepal's first fictional female prime minister Asha Singh (Gauri Malla). Bhattarai (2018) reviews the serial as "recreat(ing) the corridors of power, while employing social themes often ignored by Nepal's politicians today." The use of the name of the Rana palace for a television series acknowledges the historical and political importance of the landmark. It interplays with the monument's familiarity as the symbol of the central political power hold of Nepal and the requirement for more women and minority representation in Nepal's political scape.

opening credits end it directs to the Tribhuvan University Road and rests at the gateway to Kirtipur, southwest of Kathmandu. This is where Dhanapati lives in a small, rented room with his family. Each location is empty, deserted by the city's inhabitants who otherwise use the route every day to commute to home, work, or buy both essentials and luxury items. This deserted look of the city interplays with a sanitized imaginary of the city. As one of the busiest strips of the core city of Kathmandu, it is rarely deserted. This would be possible only on the day of a *banda*[67] without the presence of any public or private vehicle interspersed with a few people on the streets who are forced to walk due to lack of a commute. But by introducing the location of the city as being devoid of vehicles and people on the street it is highlighting the conflict of 'publicness' already inherent in these sites of Kathmandu. These are public spaces that are used by pedestrians and riders on the street in thousands. By presenting it without any activity, it prioritizes its structure more than its use. Most spaces that are not privately owned in Kathmandu or public spaces are referred to as "*sārvajanīkasthala*– a place that is accessible to all" (U. Sengupta 2018, 24) and ideally, belongs to all citizens but they rarely function as public spaces as they are encroached by the state and private businesses.

All the sites shown in the opening sequence of *Dhanapati* (2017) surround Tũḍīkhela, Kathmandu's largest patch of green space used as a park, military ground parade, or a festival and music concert venue. Tũḍīkhela has been used by Kathmandu's public for more than 150 years but has shrunk considerably in size since the end of the Rana regime in 1951 (H. Rai 2002). The government has divided and fenced many of its parts and the Nepal Army uses a large area of the grounds for commercial and military purposes. 'Occupy Tũḍīkhela'[68], a citizens led independent campaign, launched in 2019, organized protests and programs like poetry readings, sit-ins, human chains around the site to create awareness about its history and pressurize the government to take action against further encroachment and barricading (The Himalayan Times 2019; Ojha 2019). Urban scholar Urmi Sengupta studies Tũḍīkhela's historical transformation and discusses how it is an important part of Kathmandu's urbanism by providing an insight into the politics of public spaces in Kathmandu. She argues that the control and use of Tũḍīkhela by state authorities

[67] A *banda* or strike in Nepal and other parts of South Asia means the shutdown of every economic activity as a sign of protest against the ruling party. *Bandas* in Nepal are very common and called on by any agitating party for all kinds of causes from political to sometimes personal ones.
[68] See https://www.facebook.com/OccupyTundikhel/(accessed 03.08.2021)

symbolizes a multi-layered and deeply conflictual meaning of public spaces in Kathmandu. It becomes an example of "urban rupturing: a process of (un) making of public space, through physical and symbolic fragmentation and spatial estrangement" (U. Sengupta 2018, 5). This means a redefinition of public space by state and municipal authorities by restricting access to citizens based on economic interests by creating divisions and diversions. Citizens are denied the right to use public space and state efforts of restrictions are framed through concerns for habitat and public property protection, which leads to continuous spatial estrangement.

The road on the eastern side of Tũḍīkhela, New Road, or Juddha Sadak is also visualized in the *Dhanapati* (2017) opening sequence. Originally, it was built after an earthquake in 1934 during the reign of Rana Prime Minister Juddha Shumsher with a new "metalled road with mercury vapor lamps" as his "interest in a planned township in Kathmandu" (Amatya 2004, 107). Cultural anthropologist Andrew Nelson (2019, 2) agrees and writes, "New Road symbolized the Rana injection of modernity into the urban core articulated through neoclassical architecture and modernist planning." New Road joined the palace square in central Kathmandu to the peripheries and the Ranas were adding their own modernist sensibilities to the cityscape. Through the decades, it has become one of the main commercial hubs of the city and as Liechty (2005, 9) explains, "New Road was Kathmandu's first modern consumer district, home to the public cinema and shopping center as well as some of its first restaurants, high-end retail establishments specializing in tailoring and imported clothing, consumer electronics, home appliances, photo developing, audio cassettes." It has continued to function as a consumer market, which means heavy traffic and crowding in the area, with the addition of a bus stop and a bustling street market. It stands as a testimony to the growth of consumer culture in Kathmandu and continues to serve residents of the city with shops selling household-to luxury items. Its emptiness in the sequence imagines New Road devoid of commercial activity in an area consumed by monetary transactions. The filming of the silent non-use of public spaces like Tũḍīkhela, and the roads around Singha Durbar, Ratnapark, Dasharath stadium, and New Road questions the use of these spaces. It displays the state's power over public space through the erasure of all public activity or the non-use of the space by the public as a protest. It is a fictionalized imaginary, which captures the duality of the spaces of the city. It sees the city as open and its public spaces accessible, something against the reality of a barricaded Tũḍīkhela and the traffic jam congested streets in Singha Durbar, Maitighar, and Ratnapark roads. However, it is also an empty city, lacking life without public activity. The filming

of these sites in films like *Dhanapati* (2017) reflects on the centrality of Kathmandu in Nepal's political administration and the entanglements of social movements and public access to urban spaces in Kathmandu.

Figure 21: Children skateboard on the road to Singha Dubar. Film Screenshot *Dhanapati* (2017).

Figure 22: Tũḍīkhela in the opening credits of *Dhanapati* (2017). Film Screenshot.

Figure 23: New Road in the opening credits of *Dhanapati* (2017). Film Screenshot.

## 4.3 Mountains as village other

If heritage sites are used in films to introduce Kathmandu it is the view of mountains that signifies a place or a village outside of Kathmandu. One such example is the opening sequence of *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke* (2013) which begins with mountains, rolling clouds above green hills to position Ṭalaka's life in his village. The use of mountains in Nepali films to signify village life, serenity, natural beauty, and romance is similar to Hindi films as researched by Indologist Philip Lutgendorf (2005). He discusses the trope of Himalayas[69] or mountains as a recurrent erotic trope used by popular Hindi films and illustrates how mountainsides function as venues for a love song and the "Himalayan love affair" which usually take place "between (invariably) a young man from a lowland metropolis and a young woman from a mountain village" (Lutgendorf 2005, 31). The trope can be traced in Nepali films where the 'tourist' or the young man from Kathmandu falls in love with the girl from the mountainside with devastating results for the girl or stigma from society.

[69] The Himalayas are a mountain range spanning across South and Southeast Asia covering the terrains of Nepal, China, Bhutan, India and Pakistan.

Figure 24: Bam Kaji (Saugat Malla) and Maiya (Rishma Gurung) on a bike ride in Naurikot, Mustang in *Kabaḍḍī Kabaḍḍī* (2015). Film Screenshot.

In *Kabaḍḍī* (2014) and *Kabaḍḍī Kabaḍḍī* (2015) Bibek and Bam Kaji, both young men from Kathmandu fall for the feisty village girl Maiya. In both films, Maiya elopes with the men. While she returns to the village in *Kabaḍḍī* (2014) after Bibek forsakes her, she is willing to marry Bam Kaji in *Kabaḍḍī Kabaḍḍī* (2015). These similar "Himalayan affairs" as discussed by Lutgendorf (2005, 32) in Hindi films such as *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* (1985), *Hare Rāma Hare Kṛṣṇa* (1971), *Dil Se* (1998), and *Taal* (1999) interplay with polarities of equating women with "nature, purity, and tradition and…of man with the urban (again, both in its positive valuation as modern, educated, and progressive, and in its negative depiction as westernized, callous, and corrupted)." He demonstrates that Hindi films depict the chaste woman from the mountains and the modern or the morally corrupt man from the city into narrative plotlines in the backdrop of mountainsides for its natural splendour to heighten the aesthetic mood. Cinema scholar Rachel Dwyer notes that the preferred mountainside location for Hindi films has been the state of Kashmir picturized in films like *Kashmir Ki Kali* (1964), *Junglee* (1961), *Bobby* (1973). She observes,

> Kashmir…until the 1980s was the major shooting location for romance in Hindi movies, drawing on its associations as an earthly paradise. During the 1990s, political unrest in the region made it too risky for film crews to work there, so they switched to other tourist locations, notably Switzerland, whose lakes and hills were similar but which had added associations of wealth and glamour. (Dwyer 2014, 57)

Dwyer understands the change of locations to depict snow and romance in Hindi films from Kashmir to Switzerland as an adjustment to political changes in the Indian state. After the 1990s,

political unrest in Kashmir became the main subject of films like *Roja* (1992), *Mission Kashmir* (2000) and *Haider* (2014).

In Nepali films, Mustang district in northern Nepal has become a recurrent location used by filmmakers to depict the grandeur of mountains and ways of village life. *Kāgabenī* (2008) was the first Nepali film to popularize the location as it was filmed and named after a village in Upper Mustang (M. Aryal 2008). Some parts of the Hindi film *Khuḍā Gavā* (1992) starring Amitabh Bachhan, Sri Devi, Danny Denzongpa were also filmed in the district (PTI 2015).[70]. Located in the Gandaki province, Mustang, lies between the mountain ranges of Annapurna and Dhaulagiri and became a major tourist destination from the 1980s as a part of the Annapurna and Upper Mustang trekking routes (S. K. Nepal 2007; Posch et al. 2019) . Although trekking routes were mainly seen as a destination for western tourists in Nepal, in the past decade, domestic tourism has increased expediently with better road access, a rise in the urban middle class and after the end of the Maoist armed struggle (1996-2006) (Dérioz et al. 2020). This has meant that film crews have better access to mountainous locations for shooting song sequences and films. Critic Dipendra Lama analyzes the popularity of Mustang as a location for Nepali films,

> Whether it is a requirement in films or not. Right now, Daya Hang Rai has played three-four films in Mustang. *Kānchī* was just shot in Mustang. Now that film called *Bhaire* is also being shot in Mustang. I do not know what story they will bring, *Kabaḍḍī* is from Mustang so is *Kabaḍḍī Kabaḍḍī* right, *Kānchī* and *Bhaire* too. It is not about what location the story demands but go to a beautiful location and then people will like it, the thinking is like that. (Interview with Lama, 2018)

Lama is contextualizing the work of actor Daya Hang Rai who plays Kaji and is the protagonist in the *Kabaḍḍī* series where he is portrayed as an unemployed villager. Rai gained popularity through his roles in *Loot* (2013) and the *Kabaḍḍī* series is one of the highest-paid Nepali actors. Since the *Kabaḍḍī* series is based in Mustang, Lama identifies the repeated use of the location for many of Rai's films as formulaic. According to him, filmmakers use the location of Mustang for its scenic qualities rather than it being a part of the film's narrative and repeat Rai's role as a naïve villager. The fascination for the presentation of mountains or *himāla* in Nepali films is further analyzed by

[70] Some international films shot in the mountains of Nepal are *Seven years in Tibet* (1997), *Himalaya/Caravan* (1999), *Everest* (2015).

critic Ajit as an outcome of a public fascination for mountains that are enmeshed in questions about the Nepali nation. He comments,

> *Himāla* is in the imagination of all Nepalis. I am not putting everyone in the same basket but if you go out in Kathmandu and ask someone in the street what is their dream it will be to see mountains from their window the first thing in the morning. I do not think it is their fault, this illusive image has been revolving around us since birth. If I imagine one morning that Sagaramāthā disappears I think Nepal will not exist. We cannot imagine Nepal without the Himalayas so that thing reflects in cinema too. Look at cinema from the past, the camera pans from above from the mountains then goes to the hills and never reaches Tarai. Sometimes the cinema is set in Tarai but to dance you reach *pahad* wearing *daurā-suruvāla* and *paṭukā*. (Interview with Ajit, 2018)

Ajit considers mountains or *himāla* an important part of Nepali imagination and the political constructions of the Nepali nation. He sees its fascination cutting across geography and especially among an urban population who can imagine and access mountains. A *ādhunik gīt*[71] titled *Bihāna uṭhne bittikai /First thing after I wake up* (1998) written by Kali Prasad Risal and sung by Ram Krishna Dhakal expresses this sentiment.

> Let me be able to see mountains after I get up in the morning
> Let these hands always be able to write about Nepal [72]

The Nepal Himalayas[73] is pictured extensively in stamps, currency notes, coins included in the national emblem of Nepal[74]. Among mountains in Nepal, Sagaramāthā or Mount Everest, 4,448 meters tall, considered the "the roof of the world" (Bruce E. Jefferies 1982) is seen as a strong marker of Nepali national identity as Ajit notes. His second observation of the camera pan in most Nepali films beginning with mountains from above to introduce the setting of the film or capture mountains in the backdrop of an idyllic village describes the hierarchy of geography in the political context of Nepal where *himāla* and *pāhāḍa* are seen as representing the Nepali nation. For Ajit, Nepali cinema is reflective of a particular caste group and geographical area failing to be inclusive of other groups especially the Madhesis. The Madhesis or the people living in the Southern plains

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[71]*Ādhunik gīt* or modern song developed as a genre in Nepali music through the effort of Radio Nepal in the1960s (Henderson 2002). Most lyrics of the songs are an expression of Nepali national identity and "describe poignant images of the land, situating listeners in a distinctively Nepali landscape and linking feelings of love and nostalgia with hills, forests and rivers" (A. Stirr 2013, 370).

[72]See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwC8hHXmAnc (accessed 02.01.2021) *Bihāna uṭhne bittikai himāla dekhna pāiyos, Yīhātale sadhai sadhai nepāla lekhna pāiyos* (In Nepali)

[73]They "form a continuous broad strip of just under 800 km in the north of the country and boast eight of the fourteen summits over 8,000 m" (Dérioz et al. 2020, 1).

[74] See https://nepal.gov.np:8443/NationalPortal/home (accessed 03.01.2021)

of Nepal or Tarai are of 'Indian origin' who speak languages other than Nepali such as Maithili, Bhojpuri, Awadhi and their cultural practices are distinct from the hill (*Parvatīya*) Nepalis (Whelpton 1997). Their grievances against the state culminated into the Madhes movement in 2007 which can be summarized as a "(i) quest for identity, (ii) sharing of national resources and (iii) greater representation in the political structure" (Mishra 2006, 803). The Madhesis see themselves as a marginalized group like Dalits and indigenous nationalities (*ādivāsī janajāti*) who have been protesting against the dominance of high caste Hindus from the hills in Nepal's state-building process since the eighteenth century which has led to political, economic, and social inequalities (Hangen 2007). Ajit sees the celebration of the topography of mountains and hills or *pāhāḍa* through picturization in song and dance sequences in Nepali films in a similar line to the primacy of *pahadis* or hill Brahmin and Chhetris in Nepal's national politics. He traces how the camera when introducing Nepal or locating a village never reaches the plains. He notes that most song and dance sequences are featured in hills with men wearing *daurā-suruvāla*[75] and women in *caubandhī colī* (blouse), *paṭukā* (cloth belt) and *sari* or *fariya* (skirt). These dresses worn by high caste Hindu men and women were promoted to formulate a distinct Nepali identity by the Panchayat government along with Hinduism as a common religion and Nepali as the official language, which excluded the cultural practices and languages of other ethnic groups (Whelpton 2005).

In the first part of the chapter, I analyzed how mountains represent village life and both UNESCO world heritage sites and monuments from the Rana period (1885-1951) locate Kathmandu in Nepali films from the 1960s to those from 'new Nepali cinema'. As increased urbanization from the 1990s has changed the cityscape of the agricultural Valley now filled with high-rise buildings urban living in Kathmandu is represented in Nepali films through living in rented rooms or *bhāḍāko koṭhā* (hereafter *bk*). McFarlane (2011) argues that dwellings are instructive in the reading of the unequal relations created by power, capital, and policies in cities. He proposes that low-income housing in cities is "dwelt or inhabited as much as it is built" (ibid., 650) and emphasizes on the nature of urban built environments, which are defined by their structural materiality but also by dwellers or those who live in it and are affected by shared histories of displacement and urban

[75] Regarded as Nepal's national dress and promoted by the Panchayat regime (1960-1990) it is " a cotton tunic and narrow trousers, (usually) worn (with) a Western-style jacket and… *topī* (cloth cap)" by men (Whelpton 2005, 160).

policies. In the next section, I will discuss the physical dimensions and inhabitants of rented rooms to understand how it functions as a way of imagining urban living in Kathmandu, and at the same time, its representations are shaped by the urban conditions of the city.

## 4.4 *Bhāḍāko Koṭhā*

> Everyday buildings sprout, everyday floors are added. They must block the sun that is why many do not know from where the sun rises in Kathmandu. (Mukarung 2012, 255).[76]

As Nepal's most populated city, Kathmandu is home to one million residents and has a population density of 4,416 people per square km (Central Bureau of Statistics 2012). It has the fastest-growing population growth and "the highest percentage (58.65) of households living in a rented house" (ibid.). Since the 1990s internal migration has changed the geographical dynamics of the Valley as better economic opportunities attracted a large population affected by the Maoist armed rebellion (1996 to 2006) (R. B. Thapa and Murayama 2010). The growth of the city is attributed to migrants who have overpopulated it or brought a drastic change to its culture and heritage and the area outside of Ring Road, which was built in the 1970s to mark the boundary of Kathmandu and Lalitpur is exemplified as a case study for the Valley's haphazard urbanization (Bhattarai-Upadhyay 2009; Ishtiaque, Shrestha, and Chhetri 2017). Anthropologist Andrew Nelson (2017) refers to these new settlements as Kathmandu's peri-urbanism or urban periphery, which includes a mixture of residential houses, commercial spaces, and businesses to farmland such as witnessed in other areas of South Asia. I will begin by discussing the urban core of the Valley or the significance of Newar architecture to the history and making of the city. Then I will elaborate on the housing and rental situation to understand the place and significance of rental rooms as an essential part of urban living in the Kathmandu Valley and as witnessed in 'new Nepali cinema'.

Historian Mary Shepherd Slusser observing the geography of the Kathmandu Valley in the 1960s divided it into Old Kathmandu with its urban core and Greater Kathmandu consisting of a dense population of surrounding villages. She attributes the growth of Greater Kathmandu to the period after the early Shah period in which Kathmandu was declared the national capital of Nepal and

[76] *Thuprai bhavanharu umrinchan dinahũ. Dinahũ thapinchan talāharū. Tinaile chelchan holā ghāmalāīra ta kāṭhmāṇḍumā katābāṭa ghāma jhulkincha dheraile khyāla gardainan* (Original text in Nepali)

during the rule of the Ranas (1846-1951) when they built their mansions, palaces, or durbars beyond the walled palaces of Malla kings. In her observation, the compact Newar settlements with their brick and wooden houses and uncluttered fields that complimented the natural beauty of the Valley had miraculously survived from the Malla period to the twentieth century and were waiting to be a memory. A shared nostalgia for Old Kathmandu with traditional Newar architecture is expressed by urban scholars and architects which allowed the city to "retain...its purity and timeless character almost as a frozen city that didn't move, grow or change with time" (Bhattarai-Upadhyay and Sengupta 2016, 94). But coming to the 21st century Newar architectural forms and use of traditional materials have lost their popularity in the quest for modernity and adhering to waves of global change (Gutschow 2011; Bhattarai-Upadhyay and Sengupta 2016; M. N. Shrestha 1981). This is an ongoing criticism of Kathmandu's urbanism "manifested in the inconsistent appearance and design of cement houses" (Nelson 2017b, 58) or "individual piecemeal housing developments" (Bhattarai-Upadhyay and Sengupta 2016, 97). Both these terms emphasize the lack of uniformity in cemented houses, which is different from houses in Newar towns similar in design, scale, and color. Along with these haphazardly built cement houses, there are also housing colonies and apartments in high-rise complexes that aim for uniformity in design by creating gated communities for the upper middle class and higher-class residents. The growing presence of these buildings is facilitated by neoliberal reforms that have allowed private companies to take over the housing market and cater to an elite clientele that wants to profit from privatization and social benefits from the state (Bhattarai-Upadhyay and Sengupta 2016; Nelson 2017a).

I will focus on residential buildings to discuss forms of urban living in the Valley. Urban scholars, Bhattarai-Upadhyaya and Sengupta (2016) divide 'Nepalese residential architectural styles' in the Kathmandu Valley into four categories according to Lichhavi period (300-879 AD), Malla rule (1200-1769 AD), Shah rule (1769-1846 AD), and Rana period (1846-1951 AD). They posit that the modern Nepali home which emerges after 1951 uses concrete and bricks as an "influence of globalization and westernization" (Bhattarai-Upadhyay and Sengupta 2016, 95). If in earlier periods, materials like mud and wood were in use concrete and bricks became widely used to build residential houses after that. Shah (2010) locates 1950s as the period of "introduction of reinforced concrete construction (RCC)" which was waterproof and the method facilitated vertical construction, which meant that smaller plots of land could build houses with additional floors and use it to rent out tenants. Architects Gutschow and Kreutzmann (2002) link the escalating demand

for construction materials like bricks in the Kathmandu Valley and its industrial production to shift from brick production by Newar traditional craftsman to semi-professional migrant workers in Indian kilns. They observe that the demand for bricks is used to meet the rapid growth of vertical and horizontal urban settlements and has adversely affected agricultural practices where the kilns are now running. For them, urban growth in Kathmandu is characterized by sprawl more than planning where any free agricultural land becomes a suitable construction site for residential quarters without basic facilities like road, water, or waste management. Shah (2010) and Nelson (2017) discuss this as "a site-then-services" development of the periphery. "Instead of establishing infrastructure (services) first, and then houses (site), the typical homeowners buy land, build a house, and then attempt to establish roads, and obtain electricity, water, and sewage lines" (Nelson 2017b, 58). As both scholars outline, this phenomenon is a result of poor governance and disregard for planning largely guided by a system of land brokers and eager customers who are mostly migrants and want to build a house as a way to lay claim or belong to the city.

### 4.4.1 *Ghara*

To build a house in Kathmandu is very much a part of middle-class mobility and attached to honor or '*iijjata*' (ibid., Liechty 2010). Nelson (2017) who presents a neighborhood in the periphery of Kathmandu, Kirtipur as a case study to reflect on understandings of 'building a house' or *ghara* in the capital city does so by emphasizing how they are more than examples of unplanned urbanization. Rather than being a uniform way to look at these ever-growing houses in the periphery built by migrants he analyzes the struggles in building a *ghara* to fulfill middle-class aspirations. That of owning a house which is enrobed in struggles to pay off loans leading to debt and alienation. The structure and type of house to be built are often beyond the means of the ones who build it but the pressure to do so reflects uniformity in a design similar to the use of materials like cement, bricks, and iron rods. Even though living in Kathmandu, as he observes, is still referred to as *basāi* or residence and *ghara* as a place of birth/origin/permanent residence outside of the Valley the pressure to own a residence in Kathmandu is paramount. This materializes in a house that might not be equipped with basic amenities like water and a proper sewage system. However, it serves as a way to gain and maintain prestige within the family and community. The houses are built to serve as separate compartments for families but in order to meet loan interests and the demand for rented space, each room in these houses is rented out as a separate place of

lodgings. Migrants who come to Kathmandu for higher education or work rent these places "…often with friends and relatives, saving money or advancing their careers in order to later marry, start a family, and buy a house—often in that order" (ibid., 61). Rented rooms and flats become transitional spaces for young migrants who begin their life in the city. It facilitates their initiation into city life, as they educate themselves, find work, save money to buy land and build a house and start a family. In its essence, *bk* serves as the microcosm of urban living in Kathmandu.

### 4.4.2 *Ḍerā*

Most houses in the neighborhood that Nelson studies like other houses in the Valley are designed to separate the homeowner's apartment from the tenants. He notes that there are external staircases that allow vertical movement in the house without disturbing the privacy of other occupants. While the apartments are mostly designed with a hallway and doors on each side for rented rooms. House owners might even stay in a few rooms and rent the others while living in the same floor apartment. In Nepali films, the conditions of living in these rented rooms or *bk* are presented as moments of struggle, adjustments, and financial lack in the city and my emphasis is here on their difference from other rental properties like apartments in high-rise complexes or in other types of residential buildings. It is a multi-purpose room used for cooking and sleeping with a shared bathroom for the entire floor. It is exclusive of individual plumbing and sometimes might be rented with other rooms and described as a *ḍerā* or flat.

Broadly, *ḍerā* describes a rented space or even *bhāḍāko koṭhā*. There are certain stigmas attached to a *bhāḍāvāla* or a tenant of being irresponsible with the house owner's property. A much-publicized online campaign for one of Nepal's new political party founded in 2013, *Vivekaśīla Nepālī* now known as *Vivekaśīla Sajha Party* drawing comparisons with India's *Āma Ādamī Party* (T. D. Gurung 2015) uses the political slogan, "Nepal is our home, not some rented temporary shack. There is a difference between the one who rents a house and the one who owns a house.…"[77] The slogan implies that ownership of a place dictates attitudes towards it that of negligence, responsibility, or irresponsibility. It distinguishes rented space from owned space and characterizes one as home with permanence and the other as temporary and transitory. The presentation of *bk* in Nepali films interplay with the notion of *bk* as a temporary home, a dwelling created by those who

[77]English translation referenced from subtitles of the video campaign. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rCNMW_UxPs (accessed 10.01.2021)

live in it. Although it might seem as part of the mise-en-scène[78] in films *bk* serves as an important inquiry into the use of space in Nepali films. It is a private space, an indoor site that represents a transitory moment in the city when migrants are starting out financially or education-wise. It is a migrant 'production of space' (Lefebvre 1991) where social and economic identities are negotiated as a result of dislocation.

Sociologist Henri Lefebvre's (1991) triad division of space (perceived space, conceived space, and lived spaces or spaces of representation) is useful to understand how *bk* is created by an urban political environment of failed governance that influences architecture and social ways of living in Kathmandu. His definition of representational space "as directly lived through…the space of 'inhabitants and 'users'" (Lefebvre 1991, 39) helps in situating *bk* or rented rooms as urban fluid spaces created and owned by migrants as an adjustment to rising land and house prices against "conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists…all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived" (ibid., 38). Here, space theorized by the failed physical development plans for the Kathmandu Valley since the 1960s to facilitate urbanization has resulted in the creation of peri-urban areas brokered for housing by private companies and land brokers to a middle-class population who then divide and rent out their property to lower class migrants to clear their debt and make a living (Dennis 2017a; Khanal, Gurung, and Chand 2017; Nelson 2017b). Against failed urban policies that dictate mobility and living in Kathmandu, *bk* emerges as negotiated space, conceived, and lived through struggles of migration. This space serves as an important background in Nepali films, an essential point in the narrative. While they are prevalent in films after 2010 or 'new Nepali cinema', they are not exclusive to them as they can be located in earlier films. In *Basudev* (1984), directed by Nir Shah, Basudev Kattel, a university professor lives with his family in an impoverished condition in Kathmandu. Financial obligations and professional pressures burden him. His flat or *ḍerā* or mostly his bedroom, which also functions as the living room, is contrasted from his rich friend Kumar's bungalow.

[78] French term used in theatre and film to refer to the elements that contribute to the composition of a scene which includes costume, makeup, lighting, props, acting and others.

Figure 25: Professor Basudev Kattel (Harihar Sharma) in his room in *Basudev* (1984). Film Screenshot

In her extensive study of American films from 1945 to 1975 film scholar, Pamela Robertson Wojcik (2010) notes a distinctive style that guides the narrative of films as "apartment plot". She locates certain stories in which the apartment functions as an important narrative device and distinguishes it as a separate genre. She discusses it as an urban phenomenon, an urban discourse, a philosophy of urbanism that characterizes urban living in mid-twentieth-century America based on negotiations of class, gender, and race. Her research is crucial to my reading of *bk* in Nepali films as it offers an insight into the understanding of living spaces, homes, and rooms not as fixed, family-oriented, private enclaves but defined by impermanence, community, and mobility. Wojcik distinguishes apartments from tenements and boarding house rooms and dormitories, which often come with a shared bathroom and are lower working-class domains. Mostly white, middle-class individuals inhabit apartments. *Bk* shares affinities with boarding house rooms and functions as a place for lower class migrants; bachelors, singles, newly married couples, students, unemployed, criminals all struggling financially to keep up with the demands of Kathmandu. Wojcik notes that films from varying genres like romance, comedy, noir, thriller to horror make use of the apartment plot and,

> comprises various and often overlapping subplots, including plots in which lovers encounter one another within a single apartment house or live in neighboring apartment buildings; plots in which voyeurism, eavesdropping and intrusion are key; plots that focus on single working women in their apartments; plots in which married or suburban men temporarily inhabit apartments in order to access "bachelor" status; and plots in which

> aspects of everyday life are played out and informed by the chance encounters and urban access afforded by apartment living. (Wojcik 2010, 3)

She understands the apartment plot as the central node in dozens of American films through the decades of the 50s to the 70s with other subplots that emerge out of it focusing on the lives of apartment inhabitants. In her observation, the lives of singles who live in these apartments, working women to bachelor men, are captured in the films as new lovers meeting each other for the first time, becoming neighbors to voyeurs or married couples stuck together. She credits the films to stories that emerge out of urban access provided by apartment living in New York, a privileged site that offers new ways of thinking about home and family life where single, queer living, and chance friendships are encouraged. Wojcik further explains,

> The unique characteristics of the apartment, as site and plot, bring to the fore a range of human relations-not just heterosexual pairings, but also lived relationships with roommates, servants, neighbors, merchants, doormen, and bartenders-that often cross class lines and touch on marginalized communities. The apartment plot can also serve as a focal point for a host of other city spaces-bars, taxis, offices, hotels-that highlight the way in which the apartment plot blurs distinctions between public and private, work and home, masculine and feminine, inside and outside. (Wojcik 2010, 5)

Built as a private space, the apartment for Wojcik becomes a site for interactions across social classes as it allows relationships between roommates, neighbors, servants, lift operators to manifest. This includes marginalized communities who are queer, black, blue-collar workers to daily wage workers who become part of the apartment plot. In the films, she notes that it is distinguished from other public spaces in the city like the bar, hotel, or inside taxis and offices where other activities take place but the apartment has the capacity to blur the lines between public and private domain. It questions the structures of work, home, and gender dynamics allowing mobility in the narrative where it is more than the setting. The film revolves around the apartment, the individuals who inhabit it, who want to conceal their residence in the apartment, who want to find the apartment, use it to carry out illegal activities and so on.

There is also a generic quality to the apartment plot as it is constantly reiterated in American TV shows, lifestyle magazines of the 50s, 60s, and 70s, largely based on the lives of bachelor men, single women, and newly married couples. Film scholar Lee Wallace (2012, 329) reviews the premise of Wojcik's work as "summarizing films whose plots boil down to this kind of absurdity – one bed, two occupants; adjacent neighbors who never meet..." Yet it is a deep reflection on the

fantasy and reality of domestic urbanity affected by city planning and architecture. The figure of the bachelor and bohemian single girl, who are prime inhabitants of apartments, project fantasies of sexual aspirations and social mobility.

### 4.4.3 *Koṭhā*

*Bhāḍāko koṭhā (bk)* in 'new Nepali cinema' provides a background to the films, highlighting the class, gender, and social backgrounds of its characters as migrants to Kathmandu. Paśupati in *Paśupati Prasāda* (2017) arrives in Kathmandu to earn money and pay his parent's debts, forces his way to his *meetba's* (godfather) *bk* who is ashamed of his living conditions. In *Sanghuro/Constricted* (2013) Krishna who lives with his mother in their *bk* in a slum settlement struggles to accommodate his new wife in their life with no privacy for physical intimacy. Resham and Hariya, preparing to migrate as a laborer to Qatar are constantly disturbed by their neighbors in their bk and scuffle to use a toilet reserved for everyone in their neighborhood in *Reśama Phililī/Silk fluttering in the wind* (2015). Dhanapati, who has been displaced to Kathmandu by rebel groups in his hometown in *Dhanapati* (2017) wants to afford an English boarding school for his daughter and take better care of his family. Phadindra, a book storekeeper in *Jātrā/Festival* (2016) dreams of buying a house in Kathmandu and moving out of his bk to impress his in-laws who make fun of his economic status. Kirateshwar and Budhan, undercover police agents realize that their house owner has accidentally rented both of them the same room and decide to share it by making adjustments in *Lukāmārī/Hide and Seek* (2016).

Figure 26: Kirateswar Rai (Bikram Singh Tharu) and Budhan Chaudhary (Saugat Malla) draw a curtain between each other in their *bhāḍāko koṭhā* in *Lukāmārī/Hide and Seek* (2016). Film Screenshot.

Figure 27: Phadindra (Bipin Karki) with his family in their *bhāḍāko koṭhā* in *Jātrā/Festival* (2016). Film Screenshot.

Figure 28: Dhanapati (Khagendra Lamichhane) and his wife (Surakshya Pant) in their *bhāḍāko koṭhā* in *Dhanapati* (2017). Film Screenshot.

Figure 29: Hariya (Kameshwor Chaurasiya) in his and Resham's *bhāḍāko koṭhā* in *Reśama Philili/ Silk fluttering in the wind* (2015). Film Screenshot.

Figure 30: Newly married Krishna (Sushank Mainali) shares his *bhāḍāko koṭhā* with his mother (Aruna Karki) in *Sā̃ghuro/Constricted* (2013). Film Screenshot.

Figure 31: Paśupati (Khagendra Lamichhane) in his *meetba*'s (godfather) *bhāḍāko koṭhā* in *Paśupati Prasāda* (2016). Film Screenshot.

In *Chasing Rainbows* (2013) three siblings who live in rented rooms are saving money to afford a television to socialize with their middle-class friends. Sahara Sharma, director, and writer of the film who worked as a journalist recollects her interviews with youth who come to study in Kathmandu. She shares how these interactions while writing a social feature inspired her film,

> He said that he lived in Dillibazar. I asked him where in Dillibazar and he said that he had not found a room yet and was living in a shutter[79]. He was going to college at five a.m. when the gates opened, washing up in the bathroom, and hiding his towel and soap inside his bag. I wondered how many students lived like this. It must be embarrassing among friends. I was writing a feature story about youth in Kathmandu who come to pursue higher studies after completing their S.L.C (School Living Certificate or 10th

[79]The front cover of a shop made with a metallic shutter which is closed at night and could be used as a makeshift room until morning.

> Grade). His story touched me. I had a few cousins who were living in rented rooms and faced various difficulties but not to this extent. So, the idea for the film germinated from there and I had to research more. I asked him what he liked and disliked about Kathmandu. He said that he was afraid of the traffic but loved eating *titaurā* [80]. (Interview with Sharma, 2016)

Sharma's observations point to the housing and water crisis in Kathmandu and especially among migrants who cannot afford to pay rent or gain access to running water for cleaning and drinking. Since the 1990s Kathmandu's urban environment is characterized by traffic congestion, growth of unplanned housing, chronic drinking water problems, and decreased air quality (R. B. Thapa, Murayama, and Ale 2008b). The Melamchi water drinking project planned to ease Kathmandu's water problems has been in pipeline for the past twenty years and the Valley suffers from chronic water shortage with only a few areas having access to 24-hour water supply (Rest 2019). Most households buy water, some use water from stone water sprouts or wait for a supply of piped water provided by *Kathmandu Upatyakā Khānepānī Limited* (KUKL) on designated days of the week (ibid.). Kathmandu also faces a rising housing deficit for low-income groups (Bajracharya et al. 2015). In her research on informal housing or slums in the riverbeds of Bagmati and Bishnumati, Rademacher (2009) demonstrates how housing is framed as an environmental problem in Kathmandu based on parameters of health, disaster vulnerability, and failed governance. She shows how government efforts and donor agencies aim to rid the urban core and riverbeds of squatter settlements and fill it with natural habitat. The 'slum dwellers'[81] are resettled in the urban periphery of Kathmandu where they can be regarded as acceptable urban citizen-subjects. Residents who occupy squatter settlements or live in a shutter (make shift *bk*) are part of the "unintended city" who "'illegitimately' occupy a large space in the public domain, geographically and psychologically" (Nandy 1998, 2). They have no claim or right to the city as they live on its fringes or accommodate themselves in rented rooms, struggling financially to meet basic needs.

More than half of the population in Kathmandu or 58.65 percent of households live in a rented house (Central Bureau of Statistics 2012). Architect Bijaya K. Shrestha (2010) notes that the cost of buying land and owning a private house in Kathmandu is beyond the means of an average Nepali

[80] A type of fruit candy sold in Kathmandu.

[81] The Nepali term used broadly for slum dwellers or land squatters is *sukumbāsī* which refers to anyone occupying public land illegally mostly beside Kathmandu's riverbeds. It often has a negative connation used to describe 'inauthentic' migrants claiming to be 'urban poor' when they might own property outside of Kathmandu (Rademacher 2009; Ninglekhu 2017).

where the per capita income is around three hundred dollars, and the housing price is ten times the annual income of the average household in Kathmandu. He sees the housing deficit in Kathmandu as an outcome of rapid urbanization, growing poverty, and a rise in land and construction prices, which has led to inequality in rights and access to city resources. Urban scholar David Harvey (2008) discusses urbanization as a class phenomenon that develops under capitalism and argues that the right to the city needs to be considered an important human right.

> The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from that of what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies, and aesthetic values we desire. The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights. (Harvey 2008, 23)

Harvey is aware of the deep inequality and exploitation instigated by urban built environments in a capitalist system impacting social relationships and mobility. Rather than being a top-down approach dictated by capitalist interests and restrictive plans and policies, he proposes that urbanization should be based on a collective effort of experiences, on the right to the city. He proposes that city resources should be accessible to all and part of collective liberty to adapt and change with it. In Kathmandu, the denial of the right to the city means that citizens change themselves to adapt to the city like Sharma's interviewee who uses his college restroom to use running water and turns a shutter into a make-shift room at night. The many characters in 'new Nepali cinema' who live in *bk* do the same. They aim to change their economic status so that they can access Kathmandu's resources whether it is running water, electricity, internet connections, privacy, or better food. Their living conditions, which foreshadow their social and economic positions express aspirations to start out, settle, belong, or lay claim to the city. They are what urban researchers (Bajracharya et al. 2015) describe as 'low-income migrant renters' living in overcrowding housing conditions lacking basic amenities of water, sanitation, light, and ventilation in Kathmandu seen as dwellers of *bk* in Nepali films.

## 4.5 Conclusion

My investigation of urban assemblages in film understood through opening sequences and dwellings of urban inhabitants in Kathmandu foregrounds multiple interpretations of the history

of Nepal's national capital. By choosing to depict specific monuments and locations understood as landmark iconography, it presents a 'poster city' and celebrates different ideas of the nation and Kathmandu's urban growth, and its engagement with modernity. As an imaginary of the city, these opening sequences in Nepali films appropriate different places and their relationship to each other by commenting on the spatiality and mobility of Kathmandu in transition and in relation to the place of Kathmandu in Nepal's national politics. They reflect on understandings of belonging and identity politics in the construction of the Nepali state since the eighteenth century.

Kathmandu is spatially mapped in Nepali films through heritage sites, neo-classical British architecture, parks, and statues commenting on the constitutive elements of politics of representation in modern Nepal while the view of mountains signifies a place or a village outside of the Valley. The visual collage of a 'this is Kathmandu' sequence juxtaposes the legacies of medieval architecture, autocratic regimes, engagement with British colonial rule, social movements, heritage politics, rights, and access to public spaces in urban Kathmandu. The repetition of similar sites and monuments to identify Kathmandu from the 1960s when filmmaking began in Nepal to 'new Nepali cinema' in the 2010s is built on its link to Nepali national identity that has been constructed through a monarchical, dynastic, and multi-party rule. The architectural landscape of Kathmandu and its urbanized residential facade is brought together as an urban dwelling, an inherited assemblage formed out of failed urban planning and governance in the depiction of *bk* in 'new Nepali cinema'. Since most films are featured on young male migrants living in rented rooms and their desire for economic mobility and initiation into the criminal world as in *Loot* (2012) which brought into discussion the arrival of a 'new Nepali cinema' the association is visible. But even with the recurrent use of these twin tropes of financially strapped individuals who live in *bk* and dream of economic mobility through illegal or other means evident in 'new Nepali cinema', it does not diminish the potential of *bk* as a study in the nature of urban living and urban citizenship in Kathmandu. It offers an insight into urban, private, domestic spaces in the city by producing urban geography based on migrant needs and aspirations. It is a negotiated space produced in the margins of urban planning and a lived reality for low-income migrant renters failed by the state and urban policies.

# Chapter 5: Women in 'new Nepali cinema'

This chapter seeks to understand how the experiences of Nepali women are reflected in their screen images. It firstly analyzes the professional lives of women in the Nepali film industry. Based on my visits to film sets and film production offices where I observed, interviewed, and interacted with women professionals I will chart out ways in which they situate themselves and their work in the Nepali film industry. Secondly, I move into a discussion of screen images of women in Nepali films, mostly from 'new Nepali cinema' where they perform certain designated roles such as that of the angry wife and bar dancer who are seldom able to access and express their desires. I discuss these figures through examples from films like *Loot* (2012), *Loot 2* (2016), *Kabaḍḍī* (2014), *Kabaḍḍī Kabaḍḍī* (2016), *Mr Jhole* (2017), *Chakkā Pañjā/Six and Five* (2016), *Paśupati Prasāda* (2016) and *Dhanapati* (2017) in a dialogue with the world of the male migrant. I question these screen images within the context of the public lives of women to understand the vast difference in perception and representation. I also discuss how female desire plays an important role in these screen portrayals through a character analysis of Numa, Geeta, and Sarasvati in *Numāphuṅga* (2003) and *Mukhuṇḍo* (2000).

I examine my interactions with women professionals in the film industry and the portrayal of women in Nepali films through the lens of 'gender performativity', a concept discussed by feminist scholar Judith Butler in her works *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Feminist Epistemology* (1988) and *Gender Trouble* (1990). In her exploration, she goes beyond viewing gender solely within the confines of biological sex, much like social theorist Simone de Beauvoir, who posits that "one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (Beauvoir and Parshley 1989, 267). Butler distinguishes performative acts as having the potential not only to manifest facets of gender identity but also to construct that very identity. Her analysis frames gender as an outcome of behaviors, a performative act repeatedly enacted to the extent that it is ingrained and intrinsic to the body and its sense of self. She elaborates,

> Gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time-an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures,

> movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. (Butler 1988, 519)

As Butler explains, rather than a distinct normative identity, gender plays out in everyday life through repetitive actions that turn into behaviors. Gender identity is not a stable category, natural, and unchangeable but a constructed performance of roles and behaviors. She suggests that it is performed consciously and unconsciously within different social contexts and biological factors are not its pure determinant. There are some core attributes attached to gender in heteronormative terms which are socially and culturally acceptable. I trace how gender is performed in real and reel life through my interlocutors who understood their work based on their societal settings. My interactions with them allowed me a window into the lives of women professionals in the Nepali film industry and screen images of Nepali women.

## 5.1 Gendered locations

I will begin by describing my visit to the film set of *Pherī Pherī/Again and Again* at the Godavari Botanical Gardens, southeast of Kathmandu. The 82 hectares Gardens, designed by British horticulturists G.A.C Herklots and Tony Schilling which are open to the public since 1962, require an entrance fee and is a popular picnic location for Kathmandu Valley residents and used extensively as a shooting location by Nepali films.[82] It offers wide gardens for filming outdoor scenes and song sequences. A small-scattered crowd who are visiting the Garden is watching the shooting which becomes my entry into discussing the roles assigned to women in the narrative world of Nepali films and their professional lives. In the sequence being filmed, Jenny (Reecha Sharma) is walking home when a gust of wind blows her umbrella away. It drags her umbrella on the sidewalk, and she runs after it. A long thread is tied to the umbrella and pulled meticulously by one of the assistant directors of the film. She runs after the umbrella repeatedly and stops after cinematographer Suresh Bajracharya and director Puran Thapa approve the shot. In between the shots, actor Sharma explains to me about her character in the film,

> This is a very masala commercial cinema (laughs) which I am not really a fan of, but you know, as an actor you must explore. It has everything. Now you will see me getting wet in the rain and being shy with a guy. So it is that kind of a cinema. I do not know. I

[82] The cost of using the Gardens for film shooting is Rs 10,000 (around 90 dollars) per day. For more information see http://nbg.gov.np/ (accessed 15.01.2021)

> feel like I have passed that phase to work in cinemas like this, but you cannot help it, you need to work. (Interview with Sharma, 2018)

She is emphasizing the recognizable elements of commercial Nepali films and the stereotypical roles for women in them. Nepali films are noted for being influenced by the form of Hindi films, promoting stereotypical characterizations, and being ahistorical in nature (Ajit 2009). They are also termed masala films as Sharma mentions, borrowing from the phrase used to refer to Hindi films where different genres are mixed to cater to a large audience. These films are called masala as in "'mixed and spicy', containing romance, action, dancing and so on" (Dwyer, 178). Sharma shares that she is performing another stereotypical role in a commercial Nepali film, but it is part of her job. The actor who started her career with *First Love* (2010) has worked for over 14 years in the Nepali film industry, acted in more than 14 films, and has been vocal about her choices, and opinion of Nepali films (Shah 2017). Her remark about a character in the box office hit *Chakkā Pañjā/Six and Five* (2017) during a panel discussion on women in Nepali films in Ekadeshma International Short Film Festival 2017 initiated a debate about the portrayal of women in Nepali cinema in the media (R. Singh 2019). Sharma had expressed her disapproval at the audience's reaction with claps to a scene in *Chakkā Pañjā/Six and Five* (2017) where a woman character agrees to marry a man who puts forward a condition to slap her every night. Her opinion left audiences and readers of media news divided as the film was directed by actor Deepashree Niraula and was the highest-grossing Nepali film. Sharma was termed hypocritical in the media as many of her films confirm or reiterate similar stereotypes (Shah 2017; A. Dixit 2019b)

Going back to Godavari Botanical Gardens, after the umbrella shoot, the crew of *Pherī Pherī/Again and Again* breaks for lunch before rejoining for a rain sequence. A water tanker is lined up and a number of specially made hoses with sprinklers are ready to create rain on the film set. In the sequence, Jenny (Reecha Sharma) is walking with her two friends (Alina Baskota and Roshi Khadka) when it starts raining. She gets excited and pulls her friends for a rain dance and a few children join them after some time. Her potential love interest (Arpan Thapa) and his friends observe the girls from a nearby shed unknown to them. Once the shot is approved, the crew packs up for the day.

Figure 32: Crewmembers shower actor Reecha Sharma with a water hose to create rain on set for the film *Pherī Pherī/Again and Again* at Godavari Botanical Garden, Kathmandu. Photo: Author

Anthropologist Mark Liechty (1994, 435) observes that "much of South Asian cinema adds a dimension of male voyeurism to the camera position." This suggests that in numerous sequences, an unseen male observer finds pleasure in secretly watching the woman, perceiving her as an object of desire. Her body is filmed through his gaze, while his presence remains concealed or undisclosed to her. Feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey (1999, 837) discusses this as scopophilia or pleasure in looking where cinema privileges a male gaze to project sexual fantasies onto the figure of the woman who is displayed for "strong visual and erotic impact". The woman's body is a site to display eroticism. Similarly, film scholar Rachel Dwyer (2000) observes that rain is used extensively in dance and song sequences to highlight sensuality, love, and female bodily beauty. She traces numerous associations of rain with love and longing in Hindu mythology and how songs evoke rain and feature in dances of Hindi films since the 1940s. She explains, "the lyrics are only one part of the eroticism of the rain songs, the most important being the fact that the woman's clothing gets a thorough soaking" (ibid., 154) as in the rain sequence of *Pherī Pherī/Again and Again* where Jenny (Reecha Sharma) and her friends were soaked in the rain as their potential love interests watched them.

Similar to Sharma, I met filmmaker Meena[83] at her workplace in Goodwill Film Productions.[84] She had recently given birth to a daughter and took multiple breaks during our conversation to breastfeed her. Soon her son arrived from school, and she struggled to take care of the kids even with a caretaker at her side. Her husband, with whom she ran the production company, was in a meeting in the other room. I had met most of my male interlocutors in leisurely settings like cafes and teashops. They were usually drinking tea and smoking and other male customers surrounded us. I met most of my female interlocutors in their workplaces as they spoke to me in between their work or as domestic responsibilities interrupted them. Their presence in respective spaces represents the larger concerns of women's access to public spaces in Nepal and the gendered boundaries of private-public worlds. Although the interviews were set in their workplaces due to time-bound issues it allowed me an understanding of gendered familial responsibilities, struggles of women as they handled traditional roles as caretakers and interpreted their lives and work based on society's restricted understanding of their experience and roles.

Phadke et al (2009) extensively discuss patterns of gendered spaces in the city. By taking the case of Mumbai where it is impossible to imagine the presence of women in tea stalls and roadsides simply 'loitering' they showcase how gender is inbuilt into access and right to the city. This is true of other South Asian cities like Kathmandu where spaces are largely gender-segregated and "hegemonic gender-space [is] something that is not just contested but also constantly being brought into being through the everyday actions of men and women in space" (Phadke, Ranade, and Khan 2009, 194). The manner in which men and women interact with their surroundings on a day-to-day basis inscribes urban spaces with gendered meaning. Being able to discuss work or gossip in a café, teashop is a question of access easily at the reach of men where their behavior is unquestioned through parameters of decency. On the other hand, women must function within boundaries of appropriateness careful not to dismantle the power structures of public space. Development scholar Sierra Tamang (2014) argues, "male ownership of public space in Nepal is generally not questioned." She discusses the time of the emergency during the Maoist armed conflict (1996-2006) and how it restricted the movement of citizens and men felt interrogated and helpless at not being able to access the streets and move around at night. The experience was and

[83] Name changed for protection of privacy.
[84] Name changed for protection of privacy.

is different for women in Nepal and she contends that the days of the emergency might have ended but for women "it has always been a state of emergency." She explains that it is impossible not to think about safety or being interrogated at home or harassed on the streets if women are walking on the streets in the evening. She further puts forward the case of a public gathering in Ratnapark, Kathmandu organized by the Nepali feminist group *Caukāṭha*. They had planned to discuss women's access to public space when they were threatened to discontinue the gathering and their seating area was vandalized by Hindu right-wing activists ironically proving how society scrutinizes and polices women in public spaces (Record 2014).

If at the workplace my interlocutors were challenged by their domestic duties, they discussed their work and contribution to the Nepali film industry based on the space assigned by societal norms of perceived appropriate gendered behavior during our interactions. Their responses did not challenge gendered binaries and only reinforced notions of, 'what women are' and 'how they should behave'. I will exemplify a few interactions with other women professionals. My repeated calls and texts to Sheetal[85], who acts, directs, and produces her own films remained largely unanswered. I tried one last time to schedule a meeting with her. She picked up her phone one evening, listened carefully, and asked me to speak to 'Sir' first. The phone was handed to 'Sir' who told me that he was trying to create a brand for the actor and wanted to proceed with caution. He agreed to set up a meeting with her in the coming week, but her phone remained switched off and I never heard from him or her. I later learnt through a newspaper interview that I had been speaking to her life coach who was helping her better her life skills. He had produced and acted in one of her films. The majority of her films depict her in the role of a savior, while also revolving around the approval and validation of other influential male characters. This pattern appeared to apply to her opinions and choices regarding real-life matters, as they were filtered through the guidance of her life coach.

Another failed attempt at a face-to-face meeting resulted in a phone interview as suggested by actor Rita[86] who had made her way into the film industry through theater. She was now the judge in a Nepali reality show, a franchise of an Indian show where she was shown to be tough on contestants, judging them on their physical abilities to perform certain tasks. She had told me that

[85] Name changed for protection of privacy.
[86] Name changed for protection of privacy.

her shooting schedule was starting outside of Kathmandu, and I should interview her on the phone. As I began asking my questions, she sounded irritated and told me that she was not an expert on the subject of films to know the answers and she knew better about "women's issues" (Interview with Rita, 2018). Her response was dismissive of her own experience as an artist in the industry who had been part of many critically acclaimed films. She believed her expertise extended solely to addressing what she identified as matters concerning women within the industry. In another interaction with Priti[87], a filmmaker who was preparing for the release of her first feature film, I asked her about her experience as a woman professional in the film industry. She answered that she was able to notice minute details, like the slight difference between two earrings, which her actor was wearing as she was a woman (Interview with Priti, 2018). She had worked in the Nepali television industry for more than a decade and directed over 300 music videos and recommended her favorite one as the popular remix video of the song *Māchī Mārana Hai Baihinī /Catch some fishes*, sister featuring model Pooja Gurung. In the video Gurung is featured as a fisher woman dancing with her friends. The camera largely focuses on her waist, hips, and torso.[88]

The women professionals I interacted with were thriving in their careers. Their understanding of their own work and contribution to the film industry, however, was influenced by the social constructions of patriarchy. They were producing and reproducing gender norms by inscribing it through their behavior, much in line with Butler's (1988) concept of performative acts influenced by social conditioning. Their perspectives and lived experiences reiterate the essentialized perception of women's societal role as domestic, submissive, and inherently feminine as consolidated by patriarchy. They articulated their work on the parameters of gender binaries prescribed by society within the boundaries of femininity available to them. This phenomenon extends to the screen images of women in Nepali films.

## 5.2 Historical overview of women's screen images

Since the early years of filmmaking in Nepal, women have been typecast with regressive overtones (Gautam 2009). Although films of the 1960s and 1970s like *Āmā/Mother*, *Māitīghara/Natal Home,* and *Manako Bā̃dha/Dam of the heart* were presented as representative of women's issues, critic Deepa Gautam (2009) finds them to be unremarkable and forgettable because of their poor

[87] Name changed for protection of privacy.

[88] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oY54xfQtHfQ (accessed 20.07.2020).

character portrayals. She sees their traces and continuation until the early 2000s where women are primarily characterized as doting homemakers. However, beginning with the release of *Loot* (2012), things seemed to be changing in the film industry. There was an emergence of a "post-conflict cinema" (Limbu 2014) which introduced a new wave of films and filmmakers in the industry or a 'new Nepali cinema' of films made by industry outsiders[89] made an entry into the industry. However, women are still erased from their narratives or placed in them as hindrances, distractions, and a source of problems. Rai Karki (2017) discusses the representation of women in the Nepali media sector and reveals that the "media's imagination of women is limited. While this has confined women's representation in media to stereotypical roles, it has also shrunk our social imagination of women and their capacities". She notes that women are portrayed in the media in certain caregiving roles in their domestic world. By continuously reiterating these roles media confines the imaginative possibilities of the lived realities and responsibilities undertaken by women in the public sphere. Through sequences from filmmaker Ram Babu Gurung's films *Mr Jhole* (2017) and *Kabaḍḍī Kabaḍḍī* series both examples of 'new Nepali cinema', I will explain these restricted roles designated to women in Nepali films.

Thirty-two minutes into *Mr Jhole* (2017), Nanumaiya (Deeya Pun) is crying below a tree when Purne (Daya Hang Rai), who is returning to his village sees her. "Did the sun chase you or your husband beat you?" he asks her. She slaps him and replies, "When did you see me get married?" He holds his cheek and answers, "How can someone like you get a boy, *alacchina*." She picks up a stone to throw at him. He runs away. A voice-over (Khagendra Lamichhane) explains that it is just a little *ṭhāka-ṭhuka* (small misunderstanding) between the two and that Nanumaiya likes Purne since her childhood days. Soon after, she overhears him gossiping about her in the village shop and chases him with a stick. The chase is similar to another sequence in Rambabu Gurung's film *Kabaḍḍī* (2014). Here, a frustrated Gauri (Pashupati Rai), seeing her husband and his friend gamble, picks up a stick to drive them away. These are acts of defiance against mistreatment, women taking matters into their own hands with violence. They could be in solidarity with their other South Asian sisters like those from the 'Gulabi gang' in Uttar Pradesh, India who "train

[89] Aryal (2018) writes that in Nepal, "there are no big-name studios that fund films. There are, how-ever, many production houses, such as Aama Sarasvati Movies, A One Time Cinema and Gopi Krishna Movies, that are financially strong and continue to produce relatively high-budget film series such as *Chhakka Panja* and *Nai Nabhannu La*." These films made by well-funded private production houses can be categorized as made my industry insiders.

themselves to use in self-defense a traditional Indian stick called a *lāṭhī*" (Lindsey Seelhoff et al. 2007, 4). Yet the same scenes in both films are stripped of their potentiality for change through action as they are plastered into the films as comical.

The women in Gurung's films are angry, even bitter, because of their social circumstances. Nanumaiya in *Mr Jhole* lives with her widowed father. The whole village taunts her for being born under the wrong star. Gauri and Maiya's mother in *Kabaḍḍī* and *Kabaḍḍī Kabaḍḍī* are unsatisfied with their husbands. Maiya feels burdened by Kaji's attention. However, in these films, their anger appears unreasonable, packaged into moments of comic relief, unworthy of any sympathy or hearing, appropriate only for dismissal through laughter from the audience. It is an emblem of a volatile emotion stripped of its power for change. The same lens of ridicule is applied to the portrayal of women in films like *Kabaḍḍī Kabaḍḍī* (2016) and *Chakkā Pañjā/ Six and Five* (2016) which have been remarkable commercial box office hits across Nepal (Prasain 2018; Himalayan News Service 2016b). Although mentioned consistently in the media for their tendency to perpetuate gender stereotypes (Gautam 2017; Karki 2017; Shrestha 2015; Pande 2016), these misrepresentations of women are still a highlight of popular Nepali films.

Figure 33: Nanumaiya (Deeya Pun) chases Purne (Dayahang Rai) in *Mr Jhole* (2017). Film Screenshot.

Figure 34: Gauri (Pashupati Rai) chases her husband (Buddhi Tamang) and his friends in *Kabaḍḍī* (2014). Film Screenshot.

Borrowing from the synopsis of *Mr Jhole*[90] women in Nepali films oscillate between being dark, menacing subjects like the day of the dark moon or glowing, glamorized, objects of desire and ritual relevance, like the night of the full moon. They are venerated for their glamorous bodies or derided on the same grounds for misleading men. Film scholar Jyotika Virdi discusses the filmic representations of women in Hindi cinema in a similar manner as being split "between the figures of the Madonna and the vamp" distinguished by the scholar as "idealized women figures: passive, victimized, sacrificial, submissive, glorified, static, one-dimensional, and resilient" (Virdi 2003, 60). She questions their fashioning in such a manner after Indian Independence when all efforts in development and national reconstruction were allegedly 'forward-looking'. While in Hollywood, it is the genre of women's films, beginning in the 1930s, which has provided grounds to study women's representations. Historian June Sochen (1978, 9) in her investigation of the place of women in American society through the study of the Joan Crawford starrer film Mildred Pierce (1945) writes critically about

> two subtypes of women's films: the weepie and the Independent Woman film. Each has had a long history with many distinguishable qualities. The weepies, also known as the melodrama and the soap opera, always had a heroine who suffered and suffered and suffered. The Independent Woman film had a heroine who was strong and exciting and often had a full-time career outside of the home.

[90] The film categorized by its makers as 'comedy, drama' is a love story between *Aũse* (born in the day of the dark moon and therefore considered unlucky) as in Nanumaiya and *Pūrṇe* (born in the day of the full moon). Nanumaiya is the daughter of a shrewd, rich ex-military man in the village and Purne is a security guard in a school in Kathmandu who is persuaded by his mother to marry Nanumaiya for money. They are first cousins.

She studies the genre of women's films and divides it into weepies and the Independent Woman film where one is based on melodrama of the woman's suffering and the other on a career woman. While elements of melodrama are replete in Nepali films, there have been films like *Meghā* (2014), *Umā* (2013), *Sūnagābhā*/*Dance of the Orchids* (2012) which can be categorized under the genre of 'Independent woman film'. But none of these three films were mainstream successes, and all received mixed reviews (Thapa 2014; Neupane 2013). Recent releases like *Sāilī/Middle girl child* (2019) and *Bulbul/Nightingale* (2019) present the independent women pressurized by her familial duties and financial circumstances (T. Aryal 2019; Burea 2019; A. Dixit 2019a).

### 5.2.1 Angry women

Speaking of the roles assigned to women in 'new Nepali cinema' a range of angry wives now populates its narrative world. In *Loot* and *Loot 2*, the 'angry wife' (Srijana Subba) is married to Haku Kale. In *Kabaḍḍī* and *Kabaḍḍī Kabaḍḍī* she is married to Chatyal, Kaji's friend. She is also Maiya's mother, who is estranged from her husband (Aruna Karki). In *Chakkā Pañjā*/*Six and Five* (Priyanka Karki, Aruna Karki, and others) she is married to Raja, his friend, and another villager, and in *Jhyānākuṭī/Wedding* (2017) she is Malati (Benisha Hamal). In *Loot*, Putali is angry with her husband because he is a petty criminal always getting into trouble with the police. Her arguments with her husband are used as a medium to create another one-liner for Haku's character. In a spat between the two, she tells him that she is tired of his ways and would rather elope. He replies, "If it comes to that I will skin you and your lover and wear it as a jacket and boot all my life." His threat is treated as playful, witty dialogue to make him appear responsible in the next scenes. It seems she is placed in the film solely to argue with him. Their arguments continue into *Loot 2* when he and his gang members dismiss her. Besides being praised for introducing a new form of cinema for Nepali audiences, the characters in *Loot*, and especially that of Haku Kale (Saugat Malla), gained much popularity for their use of language as being authentic to the place and setting a standard for Nepali actors and filmmaking (ECS Living 2012). Haku's angry wife and his grand efforts to appease her are portrayed as a character trait of loyalty.

Meanwhile, in the *Kabaḍḍī* series, Gauri struggles to find a place in her home in the village. She is angry with her husband Chatyal because he loiters around with his two friends, and they cannot have a child. She is constantly told by Chatyal to stay inside her house when his friends visit and

not share her opinion unless asked for. This is also why a rape subplot is woven into the second part of the film through her plight. When the couple decides to take the help of the village *jhā̃krī* (a witch doctor) to have a child he tricks them and gets her pregnant. The *jhā̃krī's* escape minimalizes the gravity of deceit and crime. It is used as a cruel joke by erasing any opportunity for empathy or criminal justice on behalf of the victim's part. She is still angry with her husband after getting pregnant, but he promises her to be the savior after knowing that the child does not belong to him. There is also Maiya's mother, estranged from her husband in the film. He left her and his child and moved to Kathmandu. She goes into fits of anger whenever his name is mentioned, and once he returns to take part in the village elections, her behavior remains unchanged as she addresses him with anger and disappointment.

In *Chakkā Pañjā/Six and Five*, the roles and the actions of the women are repeated. Here again, playing *Devī* (Aruna Karki), the wife of Buddhi who is Raja's friend, is cast as a villain who interrupts them and disapproves of their friendship. Each time she comes on screen a lion roars in the background. She is the voice of reason in the film. As her husband and his friends spend their days drinking and jobless, she asks him to do something with his life. However, the gravity of her anger is deflated through the way the film highlights her unnecessary demands, such as having an expensive saree like her neighbor. The misogyny embedded in her character sketch elongates throughout the film. Buddhi is given the nickname *joi ṭiṅgre* or henpecked by his friends, and Raja encourages him to beat his wife. One night when he comes home drunk and beats her, an upbeat score plays in the background. The next day, as *Devī* is leaving the village his friends are venerating him with marigold garlands. The thread of violence against women is woven as a playful act throughout the film by the makers who are established actors of the Nepali comedy scene (Dixit 2018). When Raja is pressured to get married by his mother, he decides to use a trick to get out of the obligation. He demands to beat his wife each time he is offered a marriage proposal. His outrageous demand is even met to teach him a lesson. At the end of the film, Buddhi lines up all the men in his village. He asks his wife to put them *tīkā*,[91]which ritualistically makes them her brothers. This assures him that she will not cheat on him, and he can now go abroad for foreign employment.

[87]A mixture of rice and vermillion powder put on the forehead to mark auspicious occasions by certain caste groups in Nepal.

Moving on to *Mr Jhole*, a range of female characters who are angry at their love interest, son, or the world are on display. Nanumaiya is always irritated with Purne. Parvati (Aruna Karki)'s mother is angry with him and constantly threatens to leave home if he does not agree to marry. However, it is between the two village belles Pamfa (Neeru Khadka) and Champa (Laxmi Bardewa), unmarried and opinionated, that the film constantly moves back and forth. As an exasperated Karne (Praween Khatiwada) tells them towards the end of the film, "You two have not found a husband; all you do is backbite about others. I feel like crying when I see you both." They are not one to take his insults lightly and talk back at him. They are the gossipmongers of the village, calling names, jeering, and even actively participate in a village council meeting to demean and determine the father of the child of the village teacher (Barsha Raut) who gets pregnant accidentally. Their anger, remorse, insults, and gossip bundle up to create two ambiguous characters that embody the expectation and placing of women in a deeply patriarchal milieu. As assertive and independent women who make their own living, they are also shown to be outcasts who behave as they do out of envy for the life of domesticity that they do not have. The film also archives a list of slurs used at women, such as "*alacchin poi ṭokne, āmā ṭokne, bāu ṭokne*" (someone without *lacchin* or luck or inauspicious, one who causes her husband's death, one who causes her father's death, one who causes her mother's death). Nanumaiya, born on a dark moon night, is predicted to be unlucky. She is often referred to as a bad omen. The stars predict that she will be the cause of her husband's death and is therefore unfit for marriage. Although used in the film to stay true to the world of the village and its dialect, the slurs are used without serious consequences by including the film in the genre of 'Nepali comedy'. Slurs, insults, and misogynistic acts appear permissible in the space of the village where superstition is still the norm.

### 5.2.2 Mute dancing subjects

Coming to films like *Paśupati Prasāda* (2016) and *Dhanapati* (2017) by actor and writer Khagendra Lamichhane, his works are often discussed as 'social commentaries' by featuring the lives of 'working-class heroes' (Himalayan News Service 2016a; Post Report 2017a; Aryal 2017). However, the women in his films are helpless, left in the background as voiceless or muted from the narrative. In *Paśupati Prasāda*, Paśupati's romantic interest (Barsha Shiwakoti) cannot speak, and she communicates with him through glances. Since all her hopes are on meeting Paśupati and he does not turn up, she remains silent, her desires unfulfilled. Paśupati's godmother, who is an

old lady abandoned by her son at Paśupatinātha temple's old age home, also waits for him and is disheartened. He is the key to their happiness, and they are left stranded without him. The film is set in the famous Paśupatinātha temple, a prominent pilgrimage site for Hindus across South Asia, but also a place of abandonment and loneliness as it houses a well-known old age home in its premises. The stigma attached to the old age home and the stereotype of the abandoned woman is played out through Paśupati's godmother who is mistreated by her son and waits for a son-like savior to take care of her. In *Dhanapati*, Lamichhane as Dhanapati brings his feudal ways from his village to the city and strictly controls the way in which his family functions even with the loss of his legacy. When his wife (Suraksha Pant) decides to make some money for her daughter's school fees he takes it as an insult in his patriarchal role as the breadwinner of the family and makes her burn her earnings.

Figure 35: Dhanapati (Khagendra Lamichhane) threatens his wife (Surakshya Panta) in *Dhanapati* (2017). Film Screenshot.

Besides depicting the domesticated lives of Nepali women, Nepali films also put their bodies on display through song and dance sequences, which replicate the 'item number'[6] in Hindi films. In *Loot* it is the song *Udhreko colī* (Torn blouse), in *Talak Jung vs Tulke* it is *Nācana Maiyā* (Dance girl dance), in *Loot 2* it is *Ṭhamela Bajāra*, in *Parva* (2017) it is *Kāle dāī* (Dark-skinned brother) and the list continues to grow with films being pinned on the sequences. Women, preferably in a dance bar setting, perform for male clients who join in the dance. The camera takes the view of the male gaze by building on women's "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 1999) through the focus on certain body parts. She is a glamorized spectacle for the male clients in the bar and for the audience of the film. The lyrics of the songs themselves like *Ṭhamela Bajāra* hints at the place of

women in a male-driven economy as objects of consumption and service providers. The body of the female bar dancer who is an independent woman making a living in the public domain is used to project sexual fantasies of men which legitimizes the social stigma of prostitution attached to their work.

### 5.2.3 Free loiterers

If women are angry wives and bar dancers in Nepali films, young men loitering in the village and city are now also a staple category portrayed by actors like Khagendra Lamichhane, Dayahang Rai, Saugat Malla and others in films like *Loot, Kabaḍḍī, Kabaḍḍī Kabaḍḍī, Chakkā Pañjā series, Ṭalaka Jaṅga* vs *Ṭulke* and *Mr Jhole*, to name a few. They are migrants from the village to the city or waiting to migrate as they spend their days loitering. Although the conventional meaning of loitering is attached to unproductivity, Phadke, Ranade, and Khan (2009, 192), discussing the context of loitering in urban India, see it as a pleasurable act filled with 'agency and desire' available easily to men and denied to women: "Loitering can have no purpose other than pleasure. Pleasures which are not linked to consumption has the power to challenge the unspoken notion that only those who can afford it are entitled to pleasure, thus ensuring that marginal citizens are kept in place." It demonstrates a stake in the dismantling of social urban order that allows the intermingling of various caste and class structures. Being able to loiter in a public space that is populated by migrants from all around the country as in the case of a city like Kathmandu and other cities in Nepal where neighborhoods are filled with tenants allows interactions between individuals from different caste, religion, class, and ethnic backgrounds. Such interactions between male migrants are now recognizable sequences in Nepali films.

In Hindi films, loiterers on-screen are attached to the figure of the *tapori* (Amir Khan in Rangeela and Ghulam). He is, as Phadke explains, mostly a young lower-class male spending time in the street corner, rarely employed who has no real claim to power except in his neighborhood street. His presence is a cause of anxiety for women, as he often makes unnecessary comments, jeers, and sings loudly. It is the same figure, which becomes the *ṭola sukula gunḍā* (a lurking figure in the street corner who lives in the same *ṭola* or neighborhood in Nepali films. He is present outside shops, and on street corners playing board games, drinking tea, or just passing his time talking to others in the neighborhood. Nepali women rarely have the opportunity to loiter in public spaces

and the possibility on screen is even scarce. They are featured in their domestic worlds inside their houses, irritated and caught in their household duties. After all, "loitering holds the possibilities of disrupting the everyday performances of normative respectable femininity in public space" (ibid., 192). When they attempt to move out of assigned spaces of domesticity it hinders the narrative, and they are left stranded (often angry and powerless). Their access to public spaces and participation in public life is problematic as it disrupts the established hierarchy of patriarchy and hints at the requirement of an inclusive, participatory social space which is discouraged.
Although Phadke's argument is built on her observation of public spaces in India, specifically Mumbai and women's access to it, it rings true in the case of other South Asia cities like Kathmandu and even the villages of Nepal as portrayed in Nepali films. Women's mobility is highly restricted and name-calling and jeering by men are common in public and in films. The patriarchal norms of attaching women to their private domestic worlds and evoking respectability to it while discouraging her presence in public space erase their access and use of it which is evident in their screen images too. As Liechty (1996, 60) explains, "In shifting socio-political contexts the challenge for dominant gender and class groups is to domesticate women within new modes of representation."

### 5.2.4 Angry and powerless

Considering that many women in the discussed films are defiant and angry, and rightfully so, there is a difference from earlier screen images of dutiful, submissive wives, daughters, and lovers. They desire, are opinionated and expressive. They also display a change in the ethnic representation of actors in Nepali films. The lack of ethnic and minority representation has been discussed by critics since the 1990s (Subba 2008; Gaenszle 2016). Actors from Brahmin-Chhetri caste groups dominated the industry but since the release of *Loot* in 2012 actors from different caste groups now enjoy popularity among audiences. The angry wives and lovers of Nepali films are also played by actors outside of dominant caste groups (like Pun, Rai, and Subba in Mr Jhole, Kabaḍḍī, and Loot). However, their representation is troublesome, as their image is built on the stereotype of the angry, opinionated, ethnic woman.

Film scholars such as Mazumdar (2007) have discussed the potentiality of anger in films extensively. She (2007, 1) studies the "performative power of anger" in the Bombay films of the

1970s and 1980s through the figure of the angry young man (Amitabh Bachchan). As a socially alienated figure, he was able to mobilize his anger to fight against injustice. His rise in the film industry also affected women's roles in films and women-centered films like *Seeta aur Geeta* with creative, comedic representations seeing a decline (Virdi 2003). However, there was a rise in the genre of "avenging woman" (Gopalan 1997; Rao 1998). Although these films conclusively "evoked traditional representations of the pure or good woman" (Gopalan 2012, 418), they acknowledged the presence of raging women as vigilantes and fighters against the oppressive judicial system and were filled with feminist possibilities. In Nepali films, traces of the angry vigilante woman fighter can be seen in the films of Rekha Thapa.

Visibly angry women, however, are a trope to infuse 'comedy', ambiguity, and reflect masculine anxieties about the changing roles of women in Nepali society. The participation of women in the public domain has increased over the years as more women join the film industry as actors and filmmakers. Yet the pay gap between male and female actors is huge and so is the recognition of their work (Sharma 2011; Post Report 2018). Even their anger appears futile on screen though it is reasonable inside the narrative and a powerful emotion that has often been the fuel to ignite movements against injustice and inequality. Author Rebecca Traister (2018, 24) writes that historically, women's anger has always been scrutinized and derided, "vilified or marginalized". It has been dismissed as "ugly, hysterical, marginal, laughable" (ibid., 32). She points to the ways in which women's anger has been invalidated as irrational, suppressed in public life, and discouraged when it is equipped with revolutionary potential. Critic Anubhav Ajit reflects on women's participation in Nepal's political movements including the Maoist rebellion and their screen portrayals. He says,

> Nepali women carried guns and came out of their homes in the name of a movement in Nepal. It shows their aspirations, how will society settle that, how has it settled that? It signals that women are not confined in the four walls of their homes, they need a space in the national narrative and maybe this is why issues of gender rights have come forward. So, when all of this is happening, momentum has gathered and a film like *Chakkā Pañjā*, which is utterly insensitive to those issues, comes up and becomes the highest-grossing Nepali film. I did not find any strong commentaries against it except news like 'Nepali cinema celebrates fifty days at the box office.' Should we patronize these films just because they are 'Nepali cinema'? (Interview with Ajit, 2018)

Considering Ajit's observation on the vast difference between the public lives and aspirations of Nepali women and their screen images in films such as the *Chakkā Pañjā* series and others from

‘new Nepali cinema’, their discussion, debate, and commentaries on the films and women’s presence and representation in them are overshadowed by their box office success. The popularity of the films also hints towards the desire for self-identity and promotion of ‘Nepaliness’ among media and Nepali audiences through an engagement with local content in a market dominated by Bollywood and Hollywood films without questioning the rhetoric of the popular. The films themselves are made mostly by male directors and record the stories of young men embedded with norms of patriarchy. They are celebrated for their entertainment value and commended for their Nepali aesthetic. The use of Nepali dialects and localities are their highlights including the mention of growing ethnic representation. For example, Raja’s character in *Chakkā Pañjā/ Six and Five* speaks Nepali with an accent from western Nepal and the story takes place in a village setting. The protagonists portrayed and written by Khagendra Lamichhane in his films speak a local dialect to make his characters authentic to the locale of the story (examples being *Talak in Talak Jung* vs *Tulke* and Dhanapati in *Dhanapati*). While the *Loot* series is based in Kathmandu, the *Kabaḍḍī* series is set in the picturesque landscape of Mustang district to evoke daily routines of village life. *Mr Jhole* is also set in the village where characters interact in different public settings offered by its geography.

The places of women in these narratives are occasionally critiqued for their misrepresentations but dismissed and repeated as they are allowed to voice their displeasures through the emotion of anger in the narratives and appear to be celebrated through song and dance sequences or ‘item numbers’. However, these sequences I would argue, only perpetuate the commodification of certain types of bodies, body parts, and spaces. As the Hindi film industry reconsiders the value of the ‘item song’, Nepali films are still keen on endorsing the form to market their films. Kulkarni (2018) discusses the futility of the form in Hindi films and explains, “the song in which a dancer performs before a group of leering men serves zero purposes in a film’s plot and severely objectifies women.” Since the sequence is used to promote the film with catchy music and performance for a male audience, its popularity is cited as its purpose in the film. The site of the dance bar in which the sequence takes place in Nepali films, however, is a contested site of carnal economies. The sequences present a glamorized version of female bodies to legitimize the urban fantasies of young men.

### 5.2.5 Migrant mobilities

While the films are not realistic portrayals, they take inspiration and imagine the placing of women

in a widely urbanizing landscape where traditional values of family, community, and living are changing under a migrant economy. Nepal's economy relies heavily on its migrant population and remittance contributes to more than one-quarter of its GDP (Ministry of Labour and Employment et al. 2018). The prime destinations for migrants are Malaysia, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE including other first-world nations and the ratio of male migrants is significantly higher than female migrants who often leave their families, wives, and children behind (ibid.). As Liechty (1996, 65) argues: "Women's lives are among the key places where transitions from 'tradition' to 'modernity' are publicly scrutinized in domains such as consumerism, careers and labor, religion, citizenship, and sexuality. In negotiating new lifestyles, modernity for women is a much a threat as a promise." As men harbor migrant dreams so do women although they are not discussed or part of the narrative of Nepali films. They must also navigate new forms of familial relationships caught between following traditional routes and embracing newer lifestyles afforded by a remittance economy. Their choices and behavior are scrutinized through the rubric of tradition and honor, unlike men who can move seamlessly between the routes paved by modernity. Political changes, newer consumer patterns, and the rise of a middle-class culture have not meant the same access to political rights or freedom for women (Liechty 2002).

In the last few years, reports of violence against women have increased drastically as incidents of rape, molestation and harassment continue to escalate in the country (RSS 2019; Nepali Times 2018; Bhattarai 2018). The rape and murder of 13-year-old Nirmala Panta with no sight of the perpetrators, a corrupt investigation and lack of justice for the victim brought angry citizens to the streets in 2018 (Bhatta 2018; Gurung 2018). The demand for equal citizenship rights to women after the drafting of the new constitution in 2015 continues to be unheard of by the state (Gurung 2019; Laczo 2003). Although political parties must constitutionally ensure that they have 33 percent representation in their structures, the rules are bent to ensure secondary positions for women as "major parties have become male bastions" (Bhattarai 2019). As patriarchy continues to be endorsed by society and much of the discourse on women's issues is forwarded through a developmental lens, women's voices, concerns, and actions are rarely validated (The Record 2018).

## 5.3 Desiring women in *Mukhuṇḍo* (2000) and *Numāphuṅga* (2003)

Contrary to stereotypical misrepresentations of Nepali women there were two films released in the early 2000s, which project strong female characters struggling in the confines of patriarchy. The desiring women in *Mukhuṇḍo*[92](1999), directed by Tsering Rhitar Sherpa and *Numāphuṅga*[93](2003), directed by Nabin Subba subvert the narrative of the weak, stereotypical heroine attached to women in Nepali films and especially prevalent in the narrative world of 'new Nepali cinema' (Times 2000; Tamang 2002). Both films were well received in international film festivals and reviewed as critical successes in Nepal (ibid.). These films "show some ways in which reified and naturalized conceptions of gender might be understood as constituted and, hence, capable of being constituted differently" (Butler 1988, 520). Gender which Butler describes as a constructed identity proposes that it can also be appropriated differently. In *Mukhuṇḍo* and *Numāphuṅga* gender is negotiated through the question of female desire. I begin by presenting how articulations of female desire has a difficult relationship in film and it has seldom found an expression in the Nepali context. Then I discuss both films through their female protagonists.

Female desire is presented on-screen through various genres in film. Feminist film theorist Mary Ann Doane (1987, 9) in her analysis of the genre of woman's film in the 1940s discusses how these films were directed to a female spectator who was, "simultaneously projected and assumed as an image (the focal point of an address)" but her image was misunderstood and that, "the woman's relation to desire is difficult if not impossible. Paradoxically, her only access is to the desire to desire." Even as a genre directed to female spectatorship and to represent their experiences and desires the woman's film struggled with the question of female desire. Women in the film have no access to their object of desire, they are however allowed to desire. Women's sexuality and desires are also the cause of deep urban anxiety in Hindi films as shown by Mazumdar (2007). She traces contrasting versions of femininity presented through the figure of the 'westernized vamp' and the 'Indian woman' in the Hindi films of the 1970s. If one figure

[92] The film relates the story of Geeta, a *jhā̃krinī*, a witch doctor, a healer, a medium of the goddess Tripura in Kathmandu who is visited by a young distraught couple, Sarasvati and Dipak, who have lost their young child. Their lives become intertwined as Geeta and the young couple develop a friendship outside of her spiritual duties.
[93] Literally translates to 'beautiful flower' in the Limbu language. The film is seen as an example of Nepali ethnic or indigenous cinema (Gaenszle 2016; Khadgi 2020) and follows the life of *Numāphuṅga*, a young Limbu girl in eastern Nepal whose life is caught between following her cultural traditions and her own desires.

epitomized, excess and sexual desires the other the other was defined by her restrained desires. However, she notes that the vamp who was a prevalent figure in the films of the 1970s gradually disappeared through the 1990s giving way to a modern heroine placed in a globalized world of fashion consumption. Her sexuality and desires attained a new direction through fashion in song and dance sequences. The space for a desiring female subject in Hindi films then came to be negotiated through patterns of commodification and consumption. In a recent analysis film scholars Sengupta, Roy, and Purkayastha (2019) reveal how female desire is articulated and suppressed in Hindi films. They term the desiring women in Hindi films as "bad women" who need to be domesticated and chastised through societal norms that actively police them. As their research shows, "Female desires in Hindi films are engendered and regulated by patriarchal structures of power, but their articulations occur within the experiences of modernity, which can never be wholly contained within patriarchy" (S. Sengupta, Roy, and Purkayastha 2019, 9). They understand modernity in the Indian context in a state of constant flux, moving in between the past and present, and women in recent films portraying a self-understanding of the present moment based on their experiences, which works against the rigid foundations of patriarchy.

Women's desires have rarely become a subject of study in the Nepali context. One exception is anthropologist Laura M. Ahearn's (2003) study of love letters written by the young residents of Junigau in Western Nepal in the 1990s. In this anthropological study, she illustrates how love letter correspondences between the young articulated love as a desirable emotion rather than an embarrassing one and was possible due to increased female literacy rates in the village. She exemplifies how "desire is discursively constructed in particular social and linguistic contexts" (Ahearn 2003, 108) through excerpts from love letters between young Nepalis who were experiencing monumental economic and social changes in the decade of the 90s. Her research reveals how "desire itself came to be seen as desirable" (ibid., 107) as the literacy skills acquired by women led to drastic social transformations in the village meanwhile also reinforcing gender hierarchies. The act of writing a love letter had different repercussions for men and women. Since a love letter left material traces, it could be easily used as evidence to question the reputation of a woman and ruin her chances of marriage.

In Nepali films, desiring women are hard to trace because they are nominal to the narrative of the film. As sexualized bodies, they are present as bar dancers who enter the film as interludes and

disappear. At the same time as angry dissatisfied wives and lovers, they are seen as comical and confined to their domestic worlds. Contrary to this, the women in *Mukhuṇḍo* and *Numāphuṅga* articulate and confront their desires though with devastating results. As the end credits roll in *Numāphuṅga*, a verse from the background song reveals:

> A lot of times the desires of the heart has to be set away
> There are more sharp turnings than straight steps in my story
> Sun and rain kiss me, the wind caresses me
> They tell me to let down my mountain of sadness, the stars dazzling[94]

These lines capture the limits of female desire in the film. Numa is struggling to come to terms with her desires. She has set them aside and taken up her societal roles, but her youth and surroundings entice her to follow her heart. While the title of the film *Mukhuṇḍo* is, headlined by 'mask of desire'.

Each film has two principal female characters whose lives and experiences are intertwined through a matrix of societal roles and responsibilities. In *Mukhuṇḍo* Geeta and Sarasvati are deity and devotee, friends, and contenders. In *Numāphuṅga*, Numāphuṅga and Lojina are sisters, and it is through Lojina's eyes that the film unfolds in four parts titled as *Bhenā* (brother-in-law), *Rikuṭe*[95], *Mote Bhenā* (Fat brother-in-law) and *Bābu* (Father). All four parts are titled after men in their lives. The film begins with her marriage and Lojina has a new brother-in-law or *Bhenā*, the second section is Numa's meeting with a prospective love interest in the village *melā* or her meeting with Rikuṭe, the third section is her second marriage to *Moṭe Bhenā* and lastly the experience of her father.

Geeta and Numāphuṅga are both tied to their familial and societal roles. Geeta is a healer, a medium who can communicate between the sick and diseased, and Goddess Tripura.[96] She is

[94] *Dherai choṭī mankā rahara bāṭo visāunīmā*
*Pailā bhandā ghumtī dherai mero kahānīmā*
*Ghāmpānīle cumcha malāī hāvā sumsumyāũchaz*
*Pīrako pāhāḍa visāu bhandai, tara timtimāucha* (In Nepali)

[95] *Rikuṭe* is a well-known character from Leel Bahadur Kshetri's Nepali novel *Basāi*. He is presented as a *lahure* who cheats on the female protagonist. However, in the film he is Numa's love interest who appears to care for her and she is said to elope with him.

[96] The name Tripura is addressed to a manifestation of goddess Durga in the Kathmandu Valley. Historian Slusser (1982, 125) translates the term as "the name of a palace made of gold, iron, and silver whose demon occupants Siva destroyed; it signifies the city in which dwelt the Brahmanical triad, Brahma, Siva, and Visnu; and as Tripura-sundari, the Fair Goddess of Tripura".

revered as the Mother Goddess, a *mātā* (mother) who has no life outside of her spiritual duties. As a young widow who was possessed by the Goddess, she has taken up her spiritual duties and put her bodily desires aside. Numāphuṅga is the eldest daughter who must be married according to tradition. Her opinion does not matter and she is an essential part of the *sunaulī rupaulī* tradition in Limbu culture, which involves the acceptance of gold and money by the father on behalf of giving the daughter away to the son-in-law in marriage (Gaenszle 2016). Nevertheless, aware of their circumstances both women constantly voice their opinion and rebel. In one of the opening scenes, Geeta's attendant priest brings her tea after one of her healing sessions with her devotees. She questions, "Is it tea that only brings solace?" She speaks of the wretched, miserable people she helps and if she should only exist for them? Likewise, Numa refuses to marry again after the death of her first husband and runs away to her in-law's home. She tells her mother, "Is it not enough that you sold me once?" She even refuses her second husband, Girihang's advances and he tells her angrily, "Do you think I can be subjugated like your last husband?"

In both films, women find ways to physically navigate different 'rurban' spaces allowed to them by their patriarchal setting and societal duties. *Mukhuṇḍo* is set in the neighborhoods of Patan in Kathmandu and Geeta walks out of the confines of her deity house, dressed as herself and not decorated as a *mātā* and follows Dipak through Patan's cobbled streets and clustered neighborhoods to his apartment. She observes Dipak and Sarasvati's apartment before walking up and inviting herself into their world. Numa, on the other hand, plays with her little sister in her village home, weaves, walks to the *melā* with her friends, follows her two husbands around walking beside them and taking care of them, and finally elopes. Whether in the urban setting of Kathmandu or a Limbu village in Eastern Nepal both women are seen to be voicing and desiring. They do not hesitate to flirt with their love interest even when their societal positions demand restrain. Numa flirts with Rikuṭe after he keeps teasing her. She challenges him to come and ask her hand if he is as serious as he claims to be. Geeta meanwhile walks around with Dipak who is unaware of her interest in him. For him she is formidable, a medium of the goddess, his wife's friend and he respects her. She speaks to him about love and desire, making him uneasy, hesitant as she tells him that men are not courageous enough like women. Both serve as examples of strong voicing and desiring subjects in Nepali films.

Figure 36: Geeta (Mithila Sharma) peeks at Dipak (Ratan Subedi) from her window in *Mukhuṇḍo* (2000). Film Screenshot.

Figure 37: Numa (Anupama Subba) challenges Rikuṭe to ask her hand according to tradition at the village fair in *Numāphuṅga* (2003). Film Screenshot.

Tamang (2002) in her review of *Numāphuṅga* complements the film for providing a window into the "specificities of patriarchy that controls rural life" in eastern Nepal. She identifies the women in the film as strong and resistant. They have agency and will considering their social circumstance

guided by patriarchal forces, which curb their ambitions and independence. Here among Limbus, it appears to be more lenient to women's choices and desires. She explains,

> the easy remarriage of Numāphuṅga even as a widow; the social acceptability of her running away with another man while already married; her addressing of both husbands in the more egalitarian "timi" and not the more respectful 'tapai' or even 'hajur'; the open dancing at the fair between strangers of different sexes and the splashing of water between two men and women at Numāphuṅga's second wedding. There are clearly very particular notions of purity, sexuality and gendered norms in the Limbu world. (Tamang 2002)

One of the many ethnic groups of Nepal, Limbus, are also known as Kiratis and predominantly live in Eastern Nepal and now are a large part of the Nepali diaspora in the UK who strictly follow certain life cycle rituals as part of their tradition (Gaenszle 2016; B. G. Shrestha and Gellner 2018). As an insight into Limbu culture, the film depicts the place of women in their world and contextualizes the forms of patriarchy in different ethnic groups in Nepal. Numa exercises much freedom as a Limbu woman, but it is access guided by patriarchy. She still has no right to her desires and body. Her mobility is directed by her cultural tradition and familial responsibilities.

### 5.3.1 Mother, goddess, witch, slut

The films systematically evoke categories used to define women and delineate them into certain roles, whether it is as the figure of the mother, the goddess, or by the mention of slurs like witch and slut. Motherhood is a running theme in all the films. Geeta, Sarasvati, and Numa struggle with their identity as mothers. Geeta is revered as a mother goddess, Sarasvati doubts herself for being unable to give birth to a son, and Numa suffers a miscarriage. In *Numāphuṅga* the lives of three generations of mothers and daughters and their interactions serve as a window into their lived experiences. The interactions between Numa, her grandmother, her mother, and her mother-in-laws revolve around their societal duties and expectations.

As a revered mother figure, Geeta struggles with her identity. She is a *mātā* or supreme mother, healer of the sick and desolate, the medium of the goddess Tripura, yet her own maternal and material desires remain unrealized. Geeta's idolization and worship as *mātā* display the patriarchal definitions of womanhood as idealized mothers and venerated goddesses. She is worshipped as a source of power, yet she has no power over her own body. Gender scholar Anu Aneja (2016) in her study of the iconography of mother goddesses in the Hindu pantheon through many forms of goddess worship discloses its contested associations with the maternal. She writes, "On the one

hand, the mother goddess can embody power and promise empowerment, and on the other hand, she serves to disembody women by robbing them of a direct relationship with their own bodies" (Aneja 2016b). Mother goddesses, as Anuja describes are associated with a maternal instinct, she is worshipped in her all-powerful matriarchal form but at the same time as exemplified by Geeta, her body is disciplined. She is desexualized without desire or desirability. Her adornment, the red powder she paints on her forehead, the dark kajal in her eyes, the bell, and the chantings signal her transition from the desiring body to the venerated mother supreme. Her shrine, place of worship (puja), has a poster of goddess Kali and the head of goddess Tripura. The image of goddess Kali, her tongue out, carrying a dagger in the poster terrifies Dipak. It shows the dangers of feminine power and dominance. He recalls Geeta ordaining her devotees juxtaposed with that of Kali and is initially hesitant to see her in any other form. As one of the manifestations of the Hindu mother goddess Kali is unlike other Hindu Goddesses who are consorts and wives to male Gods like Laxmi and Sita. She is a threat to the patriarchal role assigned to women as benign mothers and even among deities as the all-loving mother goddesses. She is "the dangerous, violent and life-threatening" one (ibid., 8) "known more for her dark, terrifying aspects, associated with blood and death, and often visualized as a black, lion-seated goddess, a trident in her hand, her bloody tongue swaying in lust for violence" (ibid., 23). Unlike the pleasures of maternity, it is in the act of violence and destruction that she finds joy. As a reflection of this destructive form of the mother goddess Geeta finds herself caught between her identity as the medium to the mother supreme and desiring mortal after meeting Dipak and Sarasvati. She is envious of their 'physical love' as she tells Sarasvati in one of their conversations. She is warned by her attendant priest to restrain her 'baser feelings'. He tells her, "You are a vehicle; you are not in a position to choose." It is this lack of choice that she has over her body and life, which erupts in violence at the film's climatic end.

Figure 38: Geeta (Mithila Sharma) in her shrine with her devotees in *Mukhuṇḍo* (2000). Film Screenshot.

When Geeta is healing her patients as seen in the opening scenes of the film she goes into a trance, she calls the mother Goddess onto her body and relays her message. In her embodiment of the goddess, she appears ‘hysterical’. Her mutterings and entranced body are justified as she seems confident in conveying the Goddess’s message to her devotee but once she invites herself to Dipak and Sarasvati’s domestic world, she loses herself. She is unable to get into a trance, to embody the goddess, and she has to give up her sessions with her devotees repeatedly. Her reactions would duly be maniacal if not for her mother Goddess attribute. She is hysterical in her entranced form.

Psychoanalysts Freud and Breuer (1895) who first studied hysteria, as an illness predominantly seen in women found it to be a sexual disturbance rather than a neurological disorder. The study, which became the basis for psychoanalysis for Freud concluded that it “was merely the ‘‘dammed-up libido’’ seeking an outlet in symptoms ranging from facial tics to debilitating neurosis” (Buhle 2009, 29). However in the case of the medium who embodies the Goddess “the hysteric is someone whose nonsensical acts and utterances only mimic the insane world of which she struggles to make sense” (Aneja 2016a, 64). Geeta finds her way into a transgressive zone where her trauma formulates a dialogue with the unseen mother figure.

A similar goddess figure can be located in *Devī* (1960), directed by Satyajit Ray. The film depicts the life of a young bride Dayamoyee or Daya (Sharmila Tagore) who is worshipped as Devī or goddess, the human form of goddess Kali after her father-in-law has a dream about her being the deity's incarnation. The dilemma of the young bride who is venerated for being a goddess takes a serious turn when her devotees start increasing and her healing powers seem to be working. However, in the end, she questions her own self, unable to trust her healing powers or locate herself in her mortal form. Anuja (2016, 46) identifies the heroine in the film, Daya as "utterly disembodied by the idealized goddess image that has robbed her of all connections to her physical body and desires." Her actions are defined by patriarchy, which equates women with their procreating bodies. Daya's deification by society like that of Geeta is in place as long as they believe in the imaginative narratives created around them. This pattern of blind goddess worship based on the ideology of the maternal breaks down once the women recognize and rebel against the double lives forced on them. Even the figure of goddess Kali, an outsider in the pantheon of goddesses known as the terrifying form of feminine power, associated with them as her incarnates, subjugates both women to discrimination. As seen in the films she "purges real women of any hope they may have of free will and crushes the individual woman under the weight of divinity" (ibid.).

Figure 39: Dayamoyee (Sharmila Tagore) being worshipped as Mother Kali incarnate in *Devī* (1960). Film Screenshot.

In addition, their rebellion against the patriarchal control of their bodies through deification can only end in madness. Their decision to break free goes against societal norms. At the end of *Devī*,

Daya disappears into the horizon in a deranged form, while Geeta appears bloodied and aghast as Sarasvati's body lies lifeless in front of her. The women have confronted their desires with madness, which signals an impossibility of a future in a patriarchal social order. The goddess image is disrupted by questions of desire and mortality. Once both women break out from their maternal form sanctioned by attributes of healing and nurturing, they rebel against the confines of the figure of universal procreation. This act individualizes the goddess form and highlights women's desire to forge a relationship with their bodies, which is a danger to patriarchy. The line between a deity and mortal based on maternal instinct for both women veer to madness. Once the garb of the deity has come off, they turn into 'mad women' or witches or loose women in control of her sexuality, a slut. This dichotomy and the fine line between categories used to define women play out at the end of *Mukhuṇḍo*. Sarasvati wants to communicate with goddess Tripura and requests Geeta to arrange a session. She requests her as a *mātā* and not as a friend. She is feeling ill and believes that only the goddess can cure her. As the women face each other in the healing session both become aggressive. Sarasvati has doubted her womanhood, unable to give birth to a son, and Geeta's arrival into their lives has meant that she is overcome by jealousy. She encourages Geeta's visits but doubts her fondness for her husband. Geeta envies Sarasvati's domestic life as she is confined to her religious duties. In trying to cure Sarasvati and accusing that the witch is speaking through her body, Geeta is projecting her insecurities and so is Sarasvati by attacking her. Geeta calls her a witch. Sarasvati calls her a slut. The many forms of performed womanhood as a goddess witch or a slut are released through their physical assaults. Geeta survives but the goddess is now a convict, a murderer overcome by the confines of her shamanic duties who has released herself through madness. She exists out of the patriarchal reach of deification but as an outsider, a madwoman.

Referring to *Numāphuṅga*, Numa elopes at the end of the film leaving her family to pay the repercussion of her act of social breach. Men of her clan have always made decisions about her life. When she decides to move away from their confines her family must bear the burden of breach of marriage contract. The *sunaulī rupaulī* tradition of bride price which is aimed at protecting the bride if her husband deserts her or she faces abuse is misused as a means for financial gain and bargaining as shown in the film (Gaenszle 2016). After Numa has eloped, her father has to pay double compensation as Girihang, her second husband and his clan threaten not to leave without the money. Numa's family loses their house as they are shown to migrate away at the end of the

film. Her desires and independence have come at the cost of the loss of any future for her family. Shame and ostracization follow them but Numa has liberated herself through her desires.

## 5.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, my observations of women professionals in the Nepali film industry in this chapter have shown that they must navigate between assigned societal gender roles and economic freedoms provided by their profession. Their lives and work reflect on these conflicts as they reiterate their roles through patriarchal norms and gendered practices that delineate women to domesticity and feminine behavior. They perform gender through a template available to them, intricately interwoven into the social fabric of behavior which defines and is defined by roles as Butler (1988) claims. In my reading of women's screen images in popular Nepali films, their positioning in the filmic narrative is largely dependent on the male protagonist's aspirations. By discussing the figure of the angry wife and the bar dancer in the changing scape of Nepali films I trace their prevalence through a juxtaposition with politico-socio-economic changes in the Nepali state. The repeated presence of these figures in popular Nepali films and dismissal of its critique of the misrepresentation of women is sidelined by their commercial success. The film's promotion of a certain Nepaliness by using various Nepali dialects and locales in their storylines are attributed to their success. Inside the narrative, women are allowed to articulate their anger only to be dismissed as comical. The potential of her anger that arises out of her mistreatment is never explored or justified to allow some form of resolution. The estranged mobilities experienced by Nepali women in their public lives is also mirrored upon the freedom exercised by the loiterer who inhabits street corners and pathways to jeer at women and has a prominent place in Nepali films as an aspiring migrant. A celebratory tone attached to a popular song and dance sequences in Nepali films featuring a bar dancer and borrowed from the form of 'item numbers' of Hindi films only displays their bodies for the male gaze through the commodification of certain types of female bodies and spaces like the dance bar. There are, however, exceptions articulated through the figure of the desiring women in a few films that aim to subvert the patriarchal narrative of subservient daughters and mother goddesses who do not have the right to their bodies and sexualities. By legitimizing their desires, the films validate female desire but depict how it comes at the cost of the loss of family honor and breach of social conduct. Therefore, as angry, powerless, and muted subjects and glamorized spectacles, Nepali women are devalued into certain domestic roles that

cannot accommodate their hopes and aspirations. This kind of domesticated femininity continues to repeat in popular Nepali films as the lives and experiences of women remain typecast and misrepresented. Their desires result in the dismantling of patriarchal social order and must be silenced, derided, and denied.

# Chapter 6: Now Showing in Kathmandu

This chapter is structured around the cosmopolitan world of film screening venues in Kathmandu. The infrastructure of cinema halls, multiplexes, and city halls where Nepali and world cinema is exhibited in the city to a diverse class and gender of audiences as a commercial venture or as part of efforts for critical engagement with films showcase new patterns of consumption and public spheres in Kathmandu. I am applying the notion of cosmopolitanism to my study as "an aspirational outlook and mode of practice" (Werbner 2008, 2) to analyze the dynamics of film viewing, urban development, and social change in the Kathmandu Valley. Cosmopolitanism as a concept is characterized by an openness to experiences and addresses frictions and engagements between practices of the local, global, foreign, national, and international while aware of the pluralities of national histories and modernities (Breckenridge 2002; Kendall, Woodward, and Skrbis 2009). Anthropologist Ulf Hannerz (1990, 239) emphasizes the roles of various mobilities in cosmopolitanism and describes it as a

> stance toward diversity itself, toward the coexistence of cultures in the individual experience...an orientation, a willingness to engage with the Other. It is an intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity. [...] cosmopolitanism can be a matter of competence, and competence of both a generalized and a more specialized kind. There is the aspect of a state of readiness, a personal ability to make one's way into other cultures, through listening, looking, intuiting and reflecting.

His reflection on the attributes of cosmopolitanism based on the desire and enthusiasm to explore different value systems and beliefs by engaging with them complements my discussions on the early days of cinema-going in Kathmandu, the rise of multiplexes, the organization of film festivals, and the popularity of Nepali films on digital platforms. Hannerz suggests that cosmopolitanism acknowledges differences while at the same time emerges out of a readiness to understand by looking, listening, and reflecting which helps my analysis of the desire and effort to showcase global cinema and engage with it by audiences and organizers of film screenings in Kathmandu.

This chapter is guided by the overarching question: How has the emergence of a 'new Nepali cinema' affected film viewing practices in Kathmandu? I begin with a brief history of cinema halls in Kathmandu and then discuss how the rise of multiplexes signals a shift in film audiences with

the making of digital cinema and screening of 'new Nepali cinema'. It is followed by a discussion of different international film festivals held regularly in the Capital as an aspiration of organizers to become a part of the international film festival circuit by taking the case study of Kathmandu Mountain International Film Festival (KIMFF) in particular. This is followed by a discussion of screenings aimed at creating a forum for critical discussion on cinema. Through the analysis of theatrical releases in single screen halls, multiplexes, film festivals, and ending at the vast presence of Nepali films on YouTube or a digital turn in screening films, I delve into the many routes of film exhibition existent in Kathmandu. By drawing upon interviews of filmmakers, film exhibitors, film festival organizers, and digital distributors along with news reports this chapter charts out different venues of film screenings in Nepal's capital as a way to understand the audience of Nepali films and distinctions of films based on the choice of venues.

## 6.1 Beginnings of film viewing in Kathmandu

In *Mr Jhole*[97](2017) Karna Bahadur Darji or Karne, a tailor's son, returns to his village after spending seven years in Kathmandu. His only credential is that he enjoys watching Hindi films and constantly references them in his interactions. According to anthropologist Mark Liechty (2010) who interviewed the audiences of Nepali and Hindi films in the 1980s and 90s in Kathmandu's cinema halls notes that it was divided among the middle class and urban poor. He also observed that Nepali films, which were not available in video cassettes, occasionally attracted the middle class who visited cinema halls to watch and compare them to Hindi films.

[97] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dq0HurUtR98 (accessed 30.06.2020)

Figure 40: Karna (Praween Khatiwada) passes by Gopi Krishna Movies in Chabahil, Kathmandu. Film Screenshot *Mr Jhole* (2017).

He writes, “the audience in cinema halls were mostly day laborers, domestics, construction-, garment-, or carpet-industry workers, office peons, and street vendors. Along with a large student population from rural Nepal, this is the group—mostly young, male, and financially strapped” (Liechty 2010, 162). Karna represents the prime audience of Kathmandu’s cinema halls, the young, working-class male migrants from the hills, Tarai, or India who come to Kathmandu looking for some form of employment. The fascination with cinema viewing among low-class male migrants is similar to other cinema audiences in South Asia who enjoy the social setting and mass audience in the cinema hall that actively engage with the film by applauding or dancing along to the film’s songs and sequences (Dickey 1993; Lotte 2013; L. Srinivas 2016).

Limited research exists about the viewers of Nepali films, their exhibition history, and official audience data is scarce, with only vague numbers available. Most studies concentrate on the initial years of Nepali film screenings during the late 1950s and the video boom in the 1980s and 90s. Due to the lack of official audience data, making estimates is challenging. However, Nikita Poudel, former director of Nepal Film Development Board (NFDB), and critic Dipendra Lama confirm that the audience for Nepali films comprises only about three to five percent of Nepal’s total population of 28 million (Interview with Poudel 2018, Interview with Lama 2017).

Film screening began in Nepal during the last years of the Rana regime in the 1950s. Researcher Ramesh Parajuli (2018) investigates the early years of film viewing in Nepal when the Rana regime used it as a source of entertainment in its private palaces. The public exhibition of films was,

however, banned. Nonetheless, Nepal's open border with India meant that upper-class citizens were able to watch Hindi films during their visits to India (K. M. Dixit 2013; R. Parajuli 2018). Their stories encouraged others to do the same and developed curiosity among the public about the medium of film. The Ranas in an effort to appease the public and take control of the content being screened finally decided to open a cinema hall in 1959 which was called Kathmandu Cinema Bhavan later called Jana Seva (R. Parajuli 2018; Liechty 2010). It began operation with the screening of Hindi religious films like *Ram Vivah* (D. Gautam 2009; R. Parajuli 2018; Liechty 2010). As the appetite for films grew among the public more cinema halls came into operation. By the mid-1970s there were five cinema halls in the Kathmandu Valley (Liechty 2010, 154). Besides Jana Seva they were "Ashok Hall in Patan, Biswajyoti, Jai Nepal and Ranjana in Kathmandu which were built in the art-deco style" (K. M. Dixit 2013). They mostly screened Hindi films and later Nepali films made their way into the cinema hall when the government allowed private companies to produce films. The audiences were diverse from upper-class families to lower-class daily wage workers and elders from the time often recount it as a "golden era for cinema-going in Kathmandu" (Liechty 2010, 155; R. Parajuli 2018).

The 1970s also ushered in a new era of video technology which arrived in the streets of Kathmandu as video parlors (Iyer 1989; Liechty 2010). These low-cost parlors as anthropologist Liechty (2010) describes were a profitable venture made by turning private rooms into parlors.

> During the first few months of the video boom, by packing fifty or more people in a room, at up to fifteen rupees per head, for up to seven or eight shows a day, Kathmandu's video entrepreneurs could earn thirty thousand rupees or more (several times the average annual income) in a single week. (Liechty 2010, 156)

The parlors offered a selection of films at a minimum price and divided cinema hall audiences as they found an alternative in their neighborhood from Clint Eastwood films to pornography (ibid.). The audience demographic changed further when VCRs entered middle-class homes and women began viewing films. As Liechty explains, piracy contributed to video viewing at home, as most new releases, Hindi films in particular were available in the market simultaneously or before their theatrical release. The exception was for Nepali films, which audiences could not find in a DVD format. The desire to visit a cinema hall for a Nepali film was also guided by an urge to trace its similarities and differences with Hindi films, which have always dominated the Nepali film market.

In the 2000s, the film industry suffered a major financial setback as the Maoist rebellion was underway which resulted in the closure of cinema halls around the country and a decrease in the number of film releases and box office numbers (Newar 2003; Limbu 2014). Film critic Newar (2003), reporting on the declining popularity of Nepali films and the dispute between cinema hall owners and film producers which saw a shutdown of all cinema halls in the early 2000s, writes, "Kathmandu has 40 of the nation's 1,100 cinemas. Fifteen that were dependent exclusively on Nepali films have closed down after the strike began. Bigger venues are feeling the pinch too but do not seem willing to reach a compromise." Although there are no official figures on the number of cinema halls in Nepal the numbers do not seem to be as large as estimated by Newar. Film exhibitor Nakim Uddin estimates the number of cinema halls around Nepal to be 250, which decreased to 150 during the years of insurgency in 2002-2003 (Interview with Uddin 2018). Both Newar and Uddin however confirm the rapid decline of cinema halls during the time of the Maoist insurgency. The shutdown noted by Newar was just one of many instances over the years when cinema hall owners expressed dissatisfaction with the low audience turnout for Nepali films due to their perceived inferior quality compared to Bollywood films (AFP 2012; Limbu 2014).

The year 2002 was also significant for Uddin, a businessperson based in Kathmandu, for his venture into film exhibition. Uddin along with his partners Bhaskar Dhungana and Rajesh Siddhi launched Quest Entertainment. They acquired the Jai Nepal cinema hall in Narayanhiti, Kathmandu, which was initially used to raise crocodile pets by the Ranas, and then renovated it. (J. Gurung 2002). As reported in Nepali Times

> the arrival in Kathmandu of its brandest new luxury cinema is to its entertainment-starved denizens what the invention of in-flight entertainment was perhaps to civil aviation. After a six-month Rs 20 million revamp, a completely re-equipped and refurbished Jai Nepal has opened its box office to customers this week with the Hollywood potboiler, Spiderman (ibid.).

At first, the cinema hall screened English films, and later switched to showing Hindi films. The theater was intended for the upper and upper-middle classes, who could afford the relatively higher ticket prices. According to the Quest Team, it was aimed at the crowds who "would never watch mainstream Nepali movies" (M. Aryal 2008). However, the demand to show Nepali films was equally strong, as Uddin remembers,

> It was very difficult in the earlier days to manage many things. We were called out for showing foreign films and not promoting local films. But our argument was that the kinds of Nepali films that were being made and in view of our ticket rates, it did not match our audiences. (Interview with Uddin, 2018)

He distinguishes between mainstream Nepali films, which draw a significant urban, lower-class viewership, and Hollywood and Bollywood films, which appeal to middle and upper-class audiences. He also explains how Jai Nepal was established to cater to that specific clientele. The cinema hall was also creating an audience; by attracting the middle class who had an appetite for English films and had stopped being a patron for Nepali films as in earlier decades when going to the movies was a family activity. The expensive tickets and the exclusive screening of English films also prevented the audience of Nepali and Hindi films from attending the cinema hall. However, realizing the constrain of a single screen and the huge pressure and demand from the industry to screen Nepali films, the team bought the Kumari Cinema hall in Kamalpokhari and increased its screen to three, and started showing Nepali and Hindi films (ibid., M. Aryal 2008).

In a significant move for the film industry, Uddin and his team ventured into digital cinema production in 2008 and aided in the digitization of 14 cinema halls around Nepal (Interview with Uddin, 2018). Quest Entertainment produced *Kāgabenī* (2008) directed by Bhusan Dahal and *Sāno Saṃsāra/Small world* (2008) directed by Alok Nembang. Uddin explains,

> We thought that these films would change the style of Nepali film producers. Nepali films should have their own identity. What can Nepali films do by copying Hindi films? We do not have that kind of budget of Bollywood and nor their subjects but if we pick our own stories in Nepali style in Nepali language to a Nepali audience in a simple but nice way with good cameras and production values to the subject and not formula then at least it will run in cinema halls of our standard (Interview with Uddin 2018).

Both films were directed by renowned Nepali music video directors. The company produced them as samples to be screened in their kind of cinema halls. They were from different genres, *Kāgabenī* was made as an example of 'art house' cinema and *Sāno Saṃsāra* was a 'romantic comedy' (Interview with Uddin 2018). Although box office failures both were reviewed favorably by the media who called "*Kāgabenī* a handsome movie: superbly crafted, seductively acted, meticulously directed …proves Nepali cinema has finally come of age" (K. Dixit 2008). While *Sāno Saṃsāra* was inspired by the romantic comedy *My Sassy Girl* (2001) outlining the desire of the makers to show their inspiration from around the world and not just Hindi films (Basnet 2008; B. Rai 2012).

The release and reception of both films and the subsequent digitation of cinema halls around Nepal; 14 in total to screen the films ushered a new era of leisure consumerism and use of portable technology in the industry. This had a ripple effect on the production and exhibition of films as other Nepali filmmakers also shifted to digital filmmaking.

The strategies of digitization, the screening of foreign films, and the aspiration to raise production standards across various film genres to align with those of foreign productions, undertaken by Uddin and his team, exemplify a cosmopolitan aspiration to integrate into global channels of film production, distribution, and exhibition. Sociologist Ulrich Beck (2006) suggests that a 'cosmopolitan imagination' transcends national borders and embraces a global outlook based on interconnectedness. The incorporation of worldwide technologies and popular genres in film screening practices in this case is aimed at cultivating an engaged Nepali audience for Hollywood blockbusters and facilitating a global cinematic experience.

## 6.2 Mall *ki* (or) Hall: Emerging spatial categories for film viewing

In 2010, the opening of cinema halls inside Civil Mall as the first digital multiplex in Nepal and a rebranding of Quest Entertainment to QFX marked the beginning of multiplex culture in Nepal (Mahato 2010). QFX Cinemas now has multiplexes in Labim Mall, Pulchowk, Chhaya Center, Thamel, and in Bhatbhateni Superstore, Bhaktapur in Kathmandu. It has also extended to other parts of Nepal i.e Pokhara, Nepalgunj, and Birtamod, and has altogether 23 screens all over Nepal (Republica 2019). Inside Kathmandu, there are a growing number of shopping centers or malls with cinema halls or multiplexes like Civil Mall and Civil Trade Center Mall in Sundhara, Rising Mall in Durbarmarg, KL Mall in Boudha, and City Center Mall in Kamal Pokhari. Sociologists Adrian Athique and Douglas Hill (2010, 3) in their pioneering work on the growth of multiplexes in India refer to them as architectural and social interventions in the city and define a multiplex as

> most typically a highly decorated landmark, and hence is itself a text of a certain kind. Within a city, each multiplex occupies a particular place to which large numbers of people travel by various routes and means during the course of their everyday lives. The multiplex impinges on the consciousness of even larger numbers of those who are, for now at least, just passing by.

They analyze how multiplexes mark city spaces and are framed in terms of the development of infrastructures and marketplaces. By attracting people for leisure consumption, they reconfigure

urban spaces by creating routes of travel. They are part of metropolitan urban life even if one does not watch films inside them but simply passes by. In Kathmandu multiplexes inside malls are part of the urban facade of growing cemented houses and high-rise buildings as a result of private investments in infrastructures since the 1980s.

Nepal started implementing structural programs guided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to accelerate economic liberalization and growth from 1985 which meant encouraging privatization and more incentives for the financial sector by reducing governmental role in economic activities (P. K. Shrestha 2017). Nepal's accession as a World Trade Organization (WTO) member in 2004 and execution of programs and policies supported by IMF and World Bank has, however, had a marginal impact on economic growth, employment generation and unemployment reduction (ibid., Sharma, Jayasuriya, and Oczkowski 2000). Anthropologist Andrew Nelson (2007) discusses how more than three decades of neoliberal policies in Nepal have changed the cityscape of Kathmandu and refers to settlements outside of Ring Road marking the boundaries of Lalitpur and Kathmandu as urban peripheries. He describes these commercial spaces, residences, agricultural land factories existing simultaneously as 'mixed spaces' of South Asian peri-urbanism as defined by (Dupont 2007). The multiplexes inside malls in the Kathmandu Valley are part of these mixed spaces located in central Kathmandu like Sundhara to the peripheries like Baudhanath road and Bhaktapur. They are surrounded by residential buildings, commercial complexes to farmland.

The increase or opening of theatres or multiplexes inside malls in Kathmandu has meant a mixture of film viewing with other consumeristic activities (B. Timalsina 2013). As urban studies scholar Ravi Vasudevan (2003) notes, the making of multiplexes is based on "a new drive to segment publics and create niche audiences for the markedly spatial experience of the multiplex, where the cinema is only one in a menu of leisure attractions." He terms multiplex viewing as one among the many activities offered as a form of leisure to clients who can afford a visit to the mall and chose what to purchase. The gradual shift from single screens to multiplex in Nepal is similar to India where scholars Athique and Hill (2010, 164) understand the opening of multiplexes as a "concerted shift away from mass audiences towards the targeting of niche audiences." They discuss how multiplexes systematically support audience division by catering to different classes of people and genres of films to be screened in one venue. Although differences in size and population exist

between Nepal and India, film production is very similar to India where multiplexes have changed the dynamics of film production, exhibition, and distribution (ibid). As the beginnings of QFX Cinemas show, the exhibition brand was created to cater to a certain class of audiences and its film productions attempted to appease to their film sensibilities. In recent years, the growth of multiplexes in the Kathmandu Valley and all over Nepal has meant an awareness among filmmakers about the economic potentiality of their films in different screening spaces. Actor and writer Khagendra Lamichhane whose hits include films like *Paśupati Prasāda* (2015) and *Dhanapati* (2017) sees the growth of multiplexes as an opportunity for Nepali films. He compares the experience of single-screen cinema halls to multiplexes and reflects on contribution to the business of Nepali films,

> Previously in halls, men would tease girls, pinch them, smoke, and because of these activities people had stopped going to watch a film with their sisters and wives on those single screens but when multiplexes arrived everything was ensured with regard to women's safety. There was no problem. People started going to watch films as a family and the market has grown. Multiplex culture has really supported films. Even though tickets are costlier, people from all classes come there. Nepali cinema runs houseful in multiplexes, and it is very good business-wise. (Interview with Lamichhane, 2018)

He is noting the change in gender and class of audiences according to screening spaces where he equates single screen halls to a lower-class rowdy audience due to cheaper ticket prices and the space of multiplexes defined by security and cleanliness. His observation about the difficulties faced by female audiences in single screens resounds with the work of sociologist Lakshmi Srinivas (2010) on the experience of female audiences in Bangalore, South India. They must navigate ways to find a suitable cinema hall in their locality including appropriate seating to watch films while avoiding queuing with men or being groped and pinched by them inside the cinema hall. She uses the term 'ladies audience' as mentioned in the South Indian film industry to describe middle-class women who are different from the mass of poor, low-class men in the audience. She notes that the approval of women in the audience who usually bring their families is very important for films as it elevates its standing as a decent, family entertainer.

If single screens with their affordable tickets attract both a lower-class audience and a middle class, multiplexes inside malls that charge more than single screens provide an insulated environment for women viewers. Furthermore, sociologist Sanjaya Srivastava's finding of women's access to malls in India's capital Delhi shows that they enjoy roaming around "without running the risk of

being subjected to the sanctions and harassments of an overtly masculine public culture" (Srivastava 2015, 226). He writes that malls provide freedom of movement to women who can stroll and shop without the fear of harassment from men in public spaces in Delhi. As middle-class consumption has grown in the past decades in India, "the mall is a favored site of new kin sociality" (ibid., 254). Women's access to consumeristic goods and safety is insulated in a tailored environment, which allows friendships and leisure activities to foster in familial ways. In Kathmandu however, malls are yet to become preferred choices for shopping or other leisure activities. Cinemas appear to be the main attraction of malls as other retail shops inside Kathmandu's numerous malls suffer from a lack of clientele since mom and pop shops are popular in residential neighborhoods, and high rent costs and a small consumer market are challenges for good business (Ojha 2020; Ng 2008; Poudel 2009).

Films like *Paśupati Prasāda* (2015) and *Ṭalaka Jaṅga vs Ṭulke* (2017) written and acted by Lamichhane which according to him benefits from multiplexes belongs to a 'post-conflict cinema' made by a "new crop of filmmakers who have been trying to chart a new course in terms of storytelling and technique" (Limbu 2014). These new films as the *Loot* series, *Kabaḍḍī Kabaḍḍī* series, *Chhaka Panja* series, and others, which are written by Lamichhane (discussed in chapter 2), are credited in bringing audiences back to the cinema hall to watch Nepali films. These films are based on the lives of rural-urban lower-class men loitering or trying to make a living in the village or in the city. The popularity and recurrence of such themes, which began, with the release of *Loot* (2012) continues and critics have emphasized how they are now losing novelty and appear market-driven (A. Dixit 2019; T. Aryal 2017).

Similar to the popularity of these Nepali films among an urban audience since 2010, anthropologist Rachel Dwyer (2002) discusses how a new genre of films attracted middle-class audiences to cinema halls in India in the decade of the 1990s. Film producers worked with a perceived audience in mind and certain genres like the "musical romance: a heightened form of glamour and consumption, where 'Indian values' were tested across the transnational Indian family" (Dwyer 2002, 177) achieved huge box office success. The Indian middle class with global aspirations and belief in Indian values flocked to cinema halls to view these films. Since the release of *Loot* (2012) which was able, to attract an "urban audience into cinema halls" (T. Aryal 2018) the subjects of Nepali films have repeatedly been lower class men struggling in the city and loitering in villages.

These films address the audience of Nepali films while also retaining a middle-class audience through their popularity in multiplexes and their ‘social message’.

The relationship between the subject of films, audiences, and screening spaces is co-relational as shown by research on Hindi films. Beginning from the 1940s, Athique and Hill (2010, 40) find that the masala film, “a super-genre comprising of a three hour spectacular providing something for everyone: comedy, romance, action, family drama, and numerous songs” dominated business and cinema halls. The genre was popularized by the film industry to maximize audiences and business. Single screens were associated with masala films and as multiplexes grew, they provided a diversification of content. According to Dwyer (2011, 198), multiplex films that emerged in the decades of the 2000s were “more realist…manifesting a rejection of melodrama, have a more focused narrative, share some features of Bollywood cinema, notably the presence of stars”. These films, which are made with a smaller budget for safe returns and use real locations in smaller Indian cities, are also referred to as *hatke* (different) films. In Nepal, although a distinction in the genre is yet to be researched, films benefit from multiple screens and certain repetitive themes by filmmakers target an urban multiplex audience. Filmmakers like Lamichhane understand how screening spaces have affected the popularity of films by bringing in a new stream of audiences who are open to newer themes. It has however initiated a divide between audiences of different cinema halls including the kinds of films with particular actors in them. Filmmaker Sangeeta Shrestha describes these distinctions

> Now there is a trend to separate by looking at artists like this is a multiplex artist and others are suited for a single theater. This distinction has come up, which is not bad in itself but only when a film runs house full in both single theaters and multiplexes it is successful. Otherwise, we have to be half satisfied, which is useless because the audiences of single theaters are equally important as multiplex audiences. This division of audiences in such a manner is a loss for us. So let us wait for a day in which we make a film and it runs house full in both places. This is the only way the industry will benefit. (Interview with Shrestha, 2018)

Shrestha’s observation of the division of actors in multiplex films and single screens is similar to the rise of *hatke* films which are almost exclusively screened in India’s multiplexes (Dwyer 2011). These films usually have “‘unknown’ actors, often from theatre, and may have character actors recognized from Bollywood films” (ibid., 198). The trend is perhaps similar to Nepali films where the films targeted to an urban audience in multiplexes have the presence of certain actors from a

theater background like Saugat Malla, Dayahang Rai, Bipin Karki, and Khagendra Lamichhane, among others (K. Bhattarai 2016). While the actors more famous among mass audiences in single-screen theatres are actors like Biraj Bhatt, Nikhil Upreti, Rekha Thapa, and once Rajesh Hamal who dominated Nepali films for decades as the industry's most bankable star (Boss Nepal, n.d.; T. Aryal 2020). Shrestha sees the distinction of multiplexes and single-screen theaters creating an economic and content divide in the Nepali film industry. However, she sees audiences as a singular category even if they visit different venues according to their purchasing capacity. She hopes that a film can break these distinctions by appeasing both multiplex and single screen theaters for maximum profitability.

On the contrary, filmmaker Manoj Pandit questions the splendor of multiplexes. He does not see the increase in multiplexes benefiting the business of films. He explains,

> Malls will not make a difference for my kind of films. They are more of a burden because they project a larger canvas, which we do not need. Our goal is to portray the minute details of life, for which an expensive venue is not important at all. We do not require the kind of multiplex avenue they offer; instead, we need to question and gather a mass with a new perspective. We need to develop narratives that benefit us, rather than relying on these large halls. (Interview with Pandit, 2018)

Pandit understands multiplexes inside malls as being unable to accommodate the subjects that he works with. He analyses its growth as being based on the popularity of certain kinds of films and if the industry wants to grow, an effort has to be made on developing a new perspective on cinema that looks beyond the business of films. There needs to be more audience participation rather than the glitz of large cinema halls. His two films *Dāsaḍhuṅgā* (2011) and *Badhaśālā* (2013) came under censorship from the government for tackling controversial political topics and he had to fight a ban for their release (S. Pandey 2012; T. Rana 2013). *Dāsaḍhuṅgā* (2011) was based on the death of CPN-UML (Communist Party of Nepal-United Marxist Leninist) leader Madan Bhandari and *Badhaśālā* (2013) was inspired by the torture and killings of Maoist cadres by the Bhairavnath Battalion of the Nepal Army during the 10-year Maoist armed struggle (1996-2006). His doubt on the value of multiplexes for the Nepali film industry stems from it being a largely inaccessible space for the masses who cannot afford high-ticket prices or the goods available in malls. After all "multiplex venues are expensive or upmarket cinemas where ticket prices are high and small screens are available without the risk of hiring a large single-screen theatre" (Dwyer 2002, 198). Here, film scholar Dwyer is describing the physical infrastructure of multiplexes which allows

multiple films to be screened at one time to small groups of audiences rather than to a large audience with high ticket prices. Although credited for diversifying content, blockbusters appear to do well in both multiplexes and single screens.

Critic Anubhav Ajit comments that multiplexes in Kathmandu are primarily "elite spaces where maybe sometimes youth from the lower classes may turn up but it largely caters to high-class urban youth who can afford its expensive tickets" (Interview with Ajit, 2018). The ticket prices of QFX cinemas in Civil Mall, Labim Mall, Chhaya Center, and Bhaktapur Bhatbhateni range from NPR 480 to NPR 330.[98] In comparison Biswajyoti cinema hall in Kamaladi, one of Kathmandu's oldest cinema halls, which primarily screens Nepali films, prices its tickets at NPR 120 for special and NPR 150 for balcony seating (Interview with Mehta, 2018). Rajiv Mehta, the manager of the hall, however, admits there are several constrictions that a single screen poses for his cinema hall and informs about Biswajyoti's plans to open a multiplex in the mall in its premises. "When two films release, we are confused about which film to release, if we have two-three halls we can release all the films" (Interview with Mehta, 2018). The increase in the number of Nepali film releases including the demand for Hollywood and Bollywood releases has meant that cinema halls often have to choose between which films to screen. A turn to multiplex has meant that more films can be screened which brings in more revenue from higher ticket prices. Besides transforming into multiplexes there are also cinema halls like Gopi Krishna Movies, which have multiple single screens to accommodate the release of different Nepali and Hindi films. Nikita Poudel, manager of Gopi Krishna Movies informs,

> We have seven halls in the same compound with different capacities. We have two large halls, one hall is for a Hindi film and the other is for a Nepali film. Beginning from the second week we have a holdover, if audiences go below 50 percent then we shift it to a smaller hall and a new film comes in. But if a film is able to pull in audiences even in the second week and the hall occupancy is consistent it stays on. The films move to a smaller hall according to its hold over. (Interview with Poudel, 2018)

The array of films screened at Gopi Krishna movies displays the range and genre of Nepali and Hindi films available in the market. Even if one Hindi film occupies the largest cinema hall there are six others, which are circulating Nepali films of different genres and budgets. The cinema hall

[98] 480 Nepalese Rupees (NPR) amounts to around five dollars. Around 31 percent of Nepal's population lives under three dollars a day (Prasain 2020). There is however discount on certain days of the week. See https://www.showtimenepal.com/p/ticket-prices-of-movie-theaters.html for ticket prices (accessed 08.06.2020)

has divided its screening capacity observing the growing production of Nepali films in different genres and budgets.

Figure 41: Gopi Krishna Movies Private Limited with seven cinema halls in one venue located at Chabahil, Kathmandu. Photo: Author

"Nepal figures in the list of the world's 15 most prolific film-producing nations" (P. Kharel 2019) with two to three releases a week. Although "80 percent of Nepal's film market is dominated by Bollywood" (Limbu 2014) Nepali films compete for releases every week. Among these releases which are said to amount to 100 in a year only 10 of them are able to recur their investments (P. Kharel 2019). This has not stopped the production of films as investment continues to pour into films. Critics, however, warn of the dismal situation of Nepali films often playing to a "virtually non-existent audience" (T. Aryal 2020), repeating storylines and being unable to get out of Bollywood's shadow (A. Dixit 2019c; S. Gautam 2014).

As most Nepali films struggle to recoup their investment and cinema halls mainly profit from Bollywood and Hollywood blockbusters, venues for screening alternate, independent films appear minimal. However, there are film festivals and free screenings in Kathmandu, which aim to fulfill this gap by creating a platform for first-time filmmakers and bringing world cinema to the city. In the next section, I will discuss film festivals and free screenings in Kathmandu as alternate screening avenues for international films.

## 6.3 International film festivals only in Kathmandu

> *Bidhya Sundar Shakya, Kathmandu Metropolitan City Mayor:* This is not like making a short film, it takes a lot of time, its budget is huge (laughter in the audience) and moreover in your film, the director plays the part according to the script, actors do as told by the director but it is not like that in the film we make.
>
> *A voice from the Audience:* make roads first (laughter and clapping from the audience)
>
> *Mayor:* I am saying, according to the script, the actors and director work and no one disturbs them. We make a road, and someone comes and digs it up. No one listens to us. There are many actors here. If you just look at Kathmandu Metropolitan area there are 40 lakh actors, and there are few representatives of the Metropolitan Office. We have not been able to coordinate among different government agencies. However, we have to be hopeful. I am hopeful too and you filmmakers should be hopeful too. (Field notes from KIMFF Closing Ceremony, 2017)[99]

These quotes from a speech by Bidhya Sundar Shakya, mayor of Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC) at the closing ceremony of Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival 2017 (hereafter KIMFF) juxtaposes the prospect of film making, film festivals, and its place in a city like Kathmandu. Shakya was elected the mayor of Kathmandu in 2017 from the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist) or the CPN-UML for five years. It had been 15 years since the city had a mayor as local elections had not been conducted since 2002 (Wagle 2017; Ojha 2018). In an address to the audience at the KIMFF closing ceremony where awards were distributed in different categories to festival participants, he drew a parallel between his work as the mayor of the city and young upcoming filmmakers who screen their films at KIMFF. He compared himself to a filmmaker trying to make a film and being interrupted by budgetary

[99] Mayor: *ahile ma yahā̃ bhai rahadā kheri tapā̃īle jimmā diye anusāra ma pani euṭā nirmātā eka janā nirmātā ma caini nirmātā yasa artha ma kāṭhmāṇḍu mahānagara banāune jimmā malāī dieko cha mahānagara vāsīharūle ra mailāī herne ra bujhne pharaka hunasakcha tara mero chaina yo film bana jasto tapā̃īko short film hoina ali dherai samaya pani lāgne ali kharca pani budget pani ṭhūlai cha (laughter in the audience) ta tesmā tapā̃īle banāko movie mā script anusāra nirdeśakale bhūmikā khelcha kalākārale nirdeśaka anusārale garcha tara hāmīle banāune filmmā testo hudaina.*
Audience: *bāṭo banāunu paryo pahilā*. (laughter and clapping from audience)
Mayor: *maile bhani rachu jastai tapā̃īko script nirdeśakale bhane anusāra kalākārale plan garcha arkole kahi disturb gardaina ādhi hami bato banauchau arko le khani dincha hamro ka suncha samasya tyaha ni ra cha hāmī bāṭo banāuchau arkole khanidincha hāmro ka suncha samasyā tyāhānira cha. hāmīkomā kālākāra thprai chan kāṭhmāṇḍu mahānagarapālikā mātra herne ho bhane jhaṇḍai 40 lakh) mātrai yahā̃kā kālākāramātrai chan. 40 lakh kāryakartā cha. jhan tesmā kāṭhmāṇḍu mahānagarapālikā janapratinidhi thorai chan karmacārī [...] bibhinna nikāyabīca hāmīle samanvaya garna sakekā chainaũ samanvaya huna sakeko chaina aba hāmī āśāvādī hunuparcha ra ma āphai pani āśāvādī chu tapā̃īle film banāune nirmātāharū pani āśāvādī hunuparcha.*

constraints and clashes with other government agencies. However, the audience comprising mostly of a young audience did not find his argument convincing and one member asked him about roads.

Kathmandu is often referred to as a city of failed infrastructures and as researched by anthropologist Dannah Dennis (2017, 99) “roads have come to serve as a powerful metaphor for the broken promises, frustrated hopes, and overwhelming sense of inertia that have characterized Nepali politics since the1990s”. Nepal was largely road less until the 1950s when the Prithvi Highway was built in 1956 with assistance from the Indian government followed by the Tribhuvan Highway in the 1960s with the help of the Chinese government (R. B. Thapa, Murayama, and Ale 2008a). Both highways connected Kathmandu to eastern and western Nepal. There have been numerous physical development plans implemented in the Kathmandu Valley since the 1960s which has changed its urban infrastructures. In 1969, the Physical Development Plan of the Kathmandu Valley was introduced to protect its agricultural land and then Kathmandu Valley Physical Development Plan, 1972 to co-ordinate its geographical structure followed by the Land-use Plan of Kathmandu Valley in 1976 which introduced building regulations and divided it into its inner core, adjacent areas and other new settlements and established the Kathmandu Valley Development Authority (Bajracharya et al. 2015). Inside the Kathmandu Valley the making of Ring Road, a 27 km connecting the three cities of Kathmandu, Bhaktapur, and Lalitpur in the 1970s facilitated urban expansion (Dennis 2017b; Khanal, Gurung, and Chand 2017). In 2011, the government headed by then Prime Minister Baburam Bhattarai began a controversial road expansion inside the Kathmandu Valley based on the recommendations of the Urban Development Implementation Act of 1977 (ibid.). This has meant the continuation of largely unfinished road work around the ring road area even ten years later which continues to increase air pollution and traffic congestion. Nonetheless irrespective of the environmental pollution there are now plans from the government to build an outer ring road and satellite cites outside of Kathmandu (Himalayan Times 2016; News Service 2017).

The question from the audience to the mayor signals the frustration of commuters in Kathmandu who must deal with dust, traffic jams, and accidents every day. Since being elected as the mayor, Shakya has been a controversial political figure for his decisions on the restoration of various heritage sites in Kathmandu. He came into the spotlight in 2018 for allowing the use of concrete to rebuild the historic Rani Pokhari in central Kathmandu after it had been damaged in the 2015

earthquake and advertised his plans to open a coffee shop and a water fountain in the pond which was canceled after protests from heritage activists (Ojha 2018). Shakya's persistence to 'modernize' the ancient pond by using concrete against suggestions by heritage experts brings together contestations of urban sprawl, attempts by the Metropolitan authorities to urbanize Kathmandu and the city's deep historical and cultural roots. The mayor's invitation to the festival as a guest and his address to the audience to inform about his current activities and discuss his political career displays how the festival acts as an important platform for public officials who want to engage with Kathmandu's public. It also shows the efforts of the organizers to situate the film festival as an important cultural event of the city and attract global attention.

Film festivals have developed as an important area of study to understand the dynamics of global film cultures. They "provide places in which multiple agents negotiate local, national, and supranational relations of culture, power, and identity" (Wong 2011, 1). Film festivals create contact zones for the display of diverse identities and experiences. By bringing in filmmakers and enthusiastic audiences in a time-based event, they allow for collective interactions and judgment on the status of films. Film scholar Dina Iordanova (2009) emphasizes the transformative potential of film festivals as "sites of cultural diplomacy," where films act as catalysts for mutual understanding of diversities. They contribute to the creation of a cosmopolitan association that transcends geographical and socio-political boundaries. By encouraging the appreciation of diverse narratives and perspectives, film festivals provide opportunities for audiences to engage with different histories and cultures.

Cities all over the world are associated with film festivals and newer ones continue to be set up to become part of the circuit. Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival (KIMFF) borrows the name of the city of Kathmandu and is one of the oldest running film festivals in Nepal that screens documentaries and fiction films. It is organized by the non-profit organization Himal Association and as its website informs, the festival "brings people together to discover extraordinary experiences through films from around the world".[100] Now running for more than 20 years the festival has a Nepal Panorama section, a non-competitive section, and an international competition

[100] See https://www.mountainfilmalliance.org/members/detail/kathmandu-international-mountain-film-festival/ (accessed 05.04.2020).

section and is a member of the International Alliance for Mountain Film, which represents film festivals from 19 countries around the world. (S. Bhattarai 2019).

Basanta Thapa, the director of the festival has helmed the festival since its inception in 1994. Thapa's views as the long-standing festival director are significant here because as media scholar Giacomo Di Foggia (2014) suggests festival founders and their personalities are crucial for the understanding of film festivals as they embody the motivation and initial means through which the festival was created. He compiles a list of festival directors from around the world and discusses how their personalities and interests drive film festivals. Their lifelong associations with the festival shape its programming and impact. In this light, Thapa's opinions are critical to understanding the module and impact of KIMFF. He recalls the beginnings of the festival, which started out as Film Himalaya in 1994, and the decision to start a yearly mountain film festival in Nepal based in Kathmandu.

> We had a group who were associated with the media as journalists and others who were interested in mountaineering, mountain literature, and cultures. We knew that mountain film festivals were happening in other countries and Nepal is known to the outside world as a mountain country, our identity is because of the Himalayas, mountains, Annapurna, and all those 8,000-meter-high mountains so this is our identity and if others are doing we should do it. We knew that many countries in Europe were doing it so we decided to do it. (Interview with Thapa, 2018)

Thapa's recollection of the beginnings of the festival underlines two important motivations for starting the festival. As mountain enthusiasts who were organizing the festival, they wanted to cement Nepal's identity with mountains and participate in the global circuit of mountain film festivals. Among the many personal and geopolitical reasons for which film festivals are initiated around the world, one is the motivation to belong to a global network of film festivals or to be 'international' which various scholars in film festival research have studied extensively. Screen studies scholar Felicia Chan (2011, 253) understands the difficulty in defining an 'international film festival' as "there are apparently between five hundred and one thousand film festivals in any given year, the typology is complex and there is no real consensus." However, she refers to them as a cosmopolitan space where viewers are given a "concentrated cultural tour of the world" (ibid.) heavily regulated by geo-political factors. The projection of film festivals as international events means, "they cater not only to local or national audiences, but specifically aim to attract international visitors and guests" (Valck, Kredell, and Loist 2016, 2).

KIMFF with international in its title attempts to stand out as the premier film festival in Nepal. It displays films from around the world at Rāṣṭrīya Sabhā Gṛha or City Hall or National Assembly Hall, Kathmandu in December of every year. The location of the festival is important for the festival as its organization in a public building, which is accessible to a larger audience rather than a movie theater and situates it as a public event. The government built Rāṣṭrīya Sabhā Gṛha is one of the few buildings accessible to the public and designed for large events and exhibition. Its rent-out facility has meant that private event organizers can easily rent out the hall and use it for institutional to political events. However, in recent years the change of management of the hall has meant that its rent-out facility to private organizers was canceled. This happened after the SAARC Summit in 2014 when the hall was renovated by the Department of Urban Development and Building Construction (DUDBC) and its management changed from the Kathmandu Metropolitan City which was managing it for 13 years (P. Report 2014). KIMFF was then shifted to Kumari Cinemas for some years but since government restrictions were eased out, it has gone back to its older venue. Ramyata Limbu, one of the festival organizers explains how the festival is aimed at being a city event and its central venue has helped the coming together of publics. "Our main goal is to engage the city. I think the city should be invested in KIMFF, it could be the metropolitan city, municipality or it could be local organizations here" (Interview with Limbu, 2018). A venue like the Rāṣṭrīya Sabhā Gṛha managed by the Kathmandu Metropolitan City for the festival has meant that a large stream of audiences from different educational and economic background visit it and the ticket prices can be kept at a bare minimum. The public can access the venue and the films being screened are accessible to multiple publics. Limbu also estimates the number of the audience at the festival spanning five days at twenty to twenty-five thousand. Although no data from the festival confirms the number of audiences, it could be within ten thousand. About the programming of the festival, it receives a considerable number of submissions and since the introduction of the Nepal Panorama section in 2007, it has made a name for itself among emerging Nepali filmmakers. This section exclusively presents Nepali fiction and non-fiction films of varying lengths. Thapa shares the need to present a separate category for Nepali films in the festival,

> When we started, it was very difficult to choose even one Nepali film for the festival. They could not meet the quality of presentation, production value, storytelling, content, sound technicalities and we were far behind. We were doing a film festival in Nepal and could not even show one nice Nepali film and we had decided on being a competitive

> festival where Nepali films could definitely not compete. So, we created a separate category for Nepali films, maybe they do not meet international criteria we have shortcomings, but it has stories from Nepal. (Interview with Thapa, 2018)

As an exclusive category for Nepali films, this section has been a platform for emerging filmmakers to display their work. The films that won the Nepal Panorama Award have been described as gritty and ground-breaking even if lacking in technicalities. A review of the young filmmakers showcasing their work in the Nepal Panorama section of KIMFF 2008 states, "These filmmakers' works feel young and bold, ambitious within their modest means, and unabashedly delve into boundary-pushing themes" (D'Silva 2008). Filmmakers like Min Bham and Deepak Rauniyar who are now well-known names in the international film festival circuit began their careers by presenting their work in KIMFF. Thapa confirms that the section is meant to encourage the youth who want to make films. "They should look at the category and think that I can do it too" (Interview with Thapa, 2018).

While KIMFF, primarily a documentary film festival, offers chances for young filmmakers to present their work, newer festivals focusing on both fictional and non-fictional films have also emerged. There is Ekadeshma International Short Film Festival[101], which had five editions from 2012 to 2016 focusing primarily on short films from Nepal and the world. Nepal Human Rights International Film Festival, which began in 2010 presents films on human rights issues. The recent Nepal International Film Festival (NIFF) which began in 2018 claims that it is "one of Nepal's premier annual film and cultural events" and "was founded to celebrate various forms of storytelling and narratives from all over the world".[102] Much like these events, there are numerous film festivals held irregularly in Kathmandu and Nepal. However, due to the lack of official data, it's challenging to track them, as only a few have managed to sustain their initiatives over time. A Golden Nepalese Film Festival, "an event of the terai, hills and mountains" organized by filmmaker Akash Adhikari, president of Film Producer's Association held in Bigunj, Nepal in 2019 had a special performance by Indian actor Govinda and screened Nepali feature films in Birgunj's Adarsanagar for three days in November.[103] It appears to be a one-time event as no further information is available about its future plans and programming. Many film festivals like the

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[101] See http://ekadeshma.org/ (accessed 10.5.2020).
[102] See http://niff.org.np/about-niff/ (accessed 10.5.2020 ).
[103] See https://www.facebook.com/goldenfilmfestivalbirgunj2076/ (accessed 12.05.2020).

Golden Nepalese Film Festival seem to be organized irregularly by film industry insiders, students, NGOs to educational organizations. One reason could very well be a lack of finances. Basanta Thapa, speaking for the KIMFF organizing committee admits the challenges of organizing the festival on a yearly basis "because of the financial inadequacy and the passive attitude of the state and private agencies" (Post, 2015). He outlines how he struggles to put up the festival every year as it lacks proper corporate sponsorship and support from the state.

Observing the programming and the goals of KIMFF, the festival can be described as a festival combining the elements of a 'business festival' and 'audience festival'. Based on his extensive work at the Vancouver International Film Festival, critic and film festival programmer Mark Peranson (2002) distinguishes two models of film festivals as 'business festival' and 'audience festival'. He writes that 'business festivals' have high budgets with major corporate sponsorship; they are film premier oriented with a large staff which includes film festivals like Cannes Film Festival in France, Berlin International Film Festival in Germany, Venice International Film Festival in Italy, Toronto International Film Festival in Canada and Busan International Film Festival in South Korea. Audience festivals on the other hand have low budgets, work with a small staff without a market presence, and lack corporate sponsorship. He explains that these categories are not fixed as film festivals often combine elements from both festivals, and some even move from one model to another. KIMFF functions under the audience festival model but aspires for more corporate and state sponsorship and by sharing elements of both models falls in the middle. Other film festivals based in Nepal with 'international' in their title fit into the same category. There is the Yala International Independent Film Festival (YIFF)[104] held in Lalitpur, Kathmandu, and the Pokhara International Mountain Film Festival (PIMFF)[105] being organized in Pokhara, west of Kathmandu. By incorporating 'international' in their names, these festivals aim to serve as platforms for international films and audiences in Nepal. However, effectively managing their programming to achieve success poses a challenge. Festival director Thapa reviews the use of international in the name of KIMFF and sees other organizers in Nepal replicating the model offered by the festival.

> We do not know if we are international or not. There are many other mountain film festivals in the world, but none has international in their names. It is not that just by

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[104] See http://yiiff.org/ (accessed 18.05.2020).
[105] See https://www.facebook.com/pokharaiff/ (accessed 18.05.2020).

> putting international we will be international. The short form KIMFF became catchy and stuck with us. Now there are many other events similar to ours. I hear there is a KIFF festival and even the art biennale Kathmandu International Arts Festival (KIAF) sounds like us. (Interview with Thapa, 2018)

He raises concerns about the programming of his own festival and whether it truly draws foreign filmmakers and displays global films as it promotes. He observes that many new film festivals adopt the 'international' label, and due to KIMFF's continuing presence, more organizers opt for similar titles for their events, even if they struggle to attract audiences or maintain their efforts.
Film scholar Fitzmaurice (2001, 24) summarizes the motive of international film festivals as being

> increasingly less about the films themselves, or even film culture as such than about the promotion of the cities in which the films are showcased. The paradox here is that the future development of these cities — many of them in what is still known as the Third World — is tied to their visible success in attracting attention to themselves as platforms for exactly that kind of cinema which is itself threatened by the same conditions of globalization in which the festival operates and to which it responds.

Fitzmaurice points that international film festivals promote a certain brand of films and garner attention to the city which is organizing the event rather than the films being screened. He also locates film festivals in the Global South which seek exposure as an international film festival and how they become part of a global phenomenon that rarely supports the growth of local cinemas. Even with these critiques, all film festivals provide a screening arena for films from different parts of the world and an opportunity for audiences who would not be able to see the films otherwise (Peranson 2008; Valck, Kredell, and Loist 2016). In Kathmandu filmmakers and critics acknowledge the value of local film festivals like KIMFF and FSA (Film South Asia) to foster the aspirations of young filmmakers but point to the shortcomings and need for a bigger film festival. Critic Yagnesh observes that among the three main film festivals held in Nepal, KIMFF mainly screens mountain-themed documentaries and FSA is a platform for South asian documentaries while Ekadeshma screens short films. "These do not inform us what Jia Zhanke is making or which new film... is working on. There is no discussion about it, but these are the things that drive cinema. We have not gone there we have yet to reach there ... Wherever meaningful films have been made it has not happened without good film festivals or movements whether it is Korea or China" (Interview with Yagnesh, 2018). Yagnesh as a film critic points out the inadequacies of current film festivals, which do not conduct discussion series about world cinema or are unable to attract auteurs and filmmakers from around the globe. He sees a lack in programming, which is unable to

screen the best of world cinema to local audiences made by new waves of filmmakers that often inspire new film movements. Filmmaker Min Bham seconds this and recounts the hardships he had to face in breaking into the international film festival circuit with his films and how film festivals are crucial for new filmmakers who begin by making short films that will not be screened at cinema halls unless if it is at a film festival (Interview with Bham, 2018). He suggests that the government should organize a film festival where filmmakers from all around the world can come together and interact with local talents (ibid.). Both Bham and Yagnesh reason that audiences exposed to different kinds of cinemas are also able to develop broader perspectives and sensibilities on cinema adding to 'cine literacy' which is described by film scholars as the ability to interpret and analyze films based on a knowledge of cinema histories and world cinema (Icart Isern and Donaghy 2012; Dickie 2017). They are both well-traveled filmmakers and critics who have made the rounds of most 'big festivals' like Locarno and Berlinale and Bham has benefitted from screening his films and attending sessions at the big three 'Cannes, Venice and Berlin' festivals (D. Lama 2015; Mayorga 2018). Their opinions and views come out of their exposure to the international film festival markets and setting a vision for the national industry, it also discloses the quest for a larger exposure and an obsession with publicity and financial growth for film festivals.

The viewpoint that film festivals have to be large in scale has been critiqued by film scholars who point that bigger film festivals and events are difficult to navigate and do not necessarily mean better (Valck, Kredell, and Loist 2016). Film festival scholar Julian Stringer (2001, 139) argues that "Just because a festival in a particular city is internationally established and growing more successful by the minute, it does not necessarily follow that this will lead to growth in the film industry of the respective nation that city belongs to." He maps how international film festivals are a world in themselves and their ambition to achieve the status of a global event often means they are in competition with one another, and inequalities are built into its structure. They serve as tourist attractions rather than benefit the local film industry.

These considerations have not stopped the organization of film festivals or free screenings in Kathmandu. Some curated free screenings by various organizations in different parts of Kathmandu also aim to contribute to the increase of 'cine literacy'. The venues for film screenings include academic institutions to restaurants and bars. One such screening is organized by Film

Critics Society of Nepal (FICSON) in Martin Chautari, an academic institution that runs as a non-governmental organization in Thapathali, Kathmandu. While the audience for the film screening at Martin Chautari attracts scholars, visitors at the Chautari library to students, some other screenings like those organized by Lalitpur Film Society and rooftop bars like Cinema under the Moon at Thamel are aimed at expats and foreigners visiting Kathmandu. The weekly film screenings organized at the South Asia Institute in Kathmandu according to organizers of the Lalitpur Film Society claim that "each film has an average of 25 attending, but sometimes it goes up to 55 people" (Heaton 2018). For organizers and participants of the monthly free film screening at Martin Chautari, the discussion sessions after the screening are the crowd puller. Researcher Prabhakar Gautam, who co-ordinates the screening session observes that Nepali films and those with speakers attract a larger audience. "Having a speaker is very important as there will be interaction and you can learn something new and because of that, there are more people who attend these sessions rather than just for a random screening" (Interview with Gautam, 2018). He explains the motive of the screening as a way to encourage dialogue between audiences about the films being screened and create a 'public sphere'.

Sociologist Jürgen Habermas (1962) identified the importance of gathering and dialogue to generate opinions on social issues of the state which he defined as the 'public sphere'. His study has been crucial for media scholars in understanding media messages and their audiences who gather in physical and virtual platforms to communicate, create and share opinions on various issues (Johnson 2001; Wessler 2018). Film screenings with their choice of films and free entry to venues encourage a gathering and discussion among film viewers who share their opinion on films and are part of a public sphere. Filmmakers to critics are occasionally invited by the FICSON team to present their films and the organizers moderate a discussion session. Gautam notes that the screening attendees are mostly graduate students or Martin Chautari regulars who attend other talk programs of the organization. The number of female participants is mostly negligible. The FICSON team decides on the films for screening, and these include Iranian films to Nepali film festival favorites or recent releases that might have been unable to garner box office success but received good reviews. He informs that previously these free screening series were organized

every week as Sunday Cinema[106] in Union House, Anamnagar near the Mandala Theater house and was shifted to Martin Chautari premises in 2018. This has meant that a different demography of audiences has access to the screenings with change of venue as the latter might have attracted theatregoers in the Anamnagar area.

The discussions of 'international' film festivals and free screenings in Kathmandu within this section showcases their roles as cosmopolitan spaces that create an engaged public, celebrates diversity, and encourages critical engagement with cinematic texts. These events serve as platforms that unite filmmakers and viewers from across the globe, facilitating a vibrant exchange of ideas, as seen in festivals like KIMFF, Ekadeshma, and Film Southasia. Film screenings, workshops, and panel discussions enable filmmakers, critics, and audiences to engage in meaningful conversations about the socio-political, historical, and cultural contexts of films. The celebration of diversity, initiation of dialogue and collaboration which are features of cosmopolitanism, flourishes within these spaces.

## 6.4 Trending at number one on YouTube

Meanwhile even outside of the physical infrastructure of cinema halls and free screening venues the internet has now become a thriving resource for Nepali films. According to Maltby and Craven (2019) digital platforms such as streaming platforms, online film festivals and virtual screenings offer a new kind of cosmopolitanism, enabling global audiences to participate in a shared conversation. Internet usage has grown expediently in Nepal "with 96 percent of Nepali households now owning mobile phones" (K. Dixit 2020). Media researches show that there is vast inequality in internet usage across Nepal with urban areas like the Kathmandu Valley making up for most of the internet traffic through social media sites like Twitter, YouTube, and Viber (S. B. Pandey 2018). This means urban hubs like Kathmandu make up for most of the internet users and the number of YouTube users in Nepal have increased substantially over the past years, as thousands of Nepali films, music videos and clips are available online. As an online video sharing platform, YouTube, which began service in 2005, now with its "collection of perhaps [more than] 200 million videos, making the Internet the world's largest vault for moving-image" (Snickars and

[106] See https://m.facebook.com/Sunday-Cinema-277567782449222/?ref=page_internal&mt_nav=0 (accessed 10.05.2020).

Vonderau 2009, 14). After the purchase of the company by Google in 2006, it has transformed from "a user-generated content (UGC) – oriented as a virtual village – into a professionally generated content (PGC) video site" (Kim 2012). This means it functions as a distribution channel in itself with films and video content being produced and released by amateur and professional users and companies directly into the platform.

In Nepal, there are numerous digital film companies such as Highlights Nepal, Budha Subba Digital, OSR Digital, Sairam Pictures, and HiTech Entertainment. They began as film and music (CD, VCD, DVD) distribution companies, which now operate their channels on YouTube and are digital distributors. Each channel has more than 1 million subscribers and uploads Nepali movies regularly creating a massive archive of Nepali films. A simple search of Nepali films on YouTube generates thousands of responses with films from the decade of the 80s to recent releases. Janak Tamang, director at Highlights Nepal that advertises itself as "Nepal's largest movie library"[107] recounts the beginning of the online digital platform and why it was after 2012 that the company decided to venture into digital distribution.

> Previously the company was not in the movie business. We started with mobile ring tone in 2009 and jumped into the movie business around 2011 or 2012. At that time, the movie business was such that it was very dependent on CD and VCD. The movie industry from 2008 to 2011, 2012 was not doing well. Audiences complained that there were no good movies being made and filmmakers said that there were few audiences. However, in 2012 things changed in the industry. Our new sirs who had studied film, and theatre artists started something new in the industry. So, we felt the change in movies, audiences got a new taste, and they increased too. (Interview with Tamang, 2018)

Tamang identifies 2012 as the year in which the Nepali film industry was able to gain back its audience. This was the year of the release of *Loot* (2012) which was credited by critics and journalists as the coming of a 'new Nepali cinema' which brought back audiences to cinema halls (Republica 2013; Limbu 2014; T. Aryal 2018). This encouraged his company, which was in the music business, profiting from customers who downloaded Caller Ring Back Tones (CRBT) of Nepali songs, to get into digital film distribution. He notes that a new group of filmmakers who had studied filmmaking along with theatre-trained actors began making films, which offered

[107] See https://www.youtube.com/user/highlightsnepal2009/about (accessed 10.04.2020).

something new to an eager audience. Film critic AbhiManyu Dixit terms this new wave of filmmakers as the '*Loot* generation'. He shares,

> *Loot* generation are new people coming to the cinema industry. They are the product of 20, 30 years of stagnant cinema where filmmakers and their assistants made one kind of cinema. They recycled the same story and presentation styles. Some might have made money, and some might have incurred losses. *Loot* generation arose out of people who wanted to make a difference. They came out of film schools. They are people with an understanding of cinema, uniqueness in storytelling. Film school graduates like Nischal Basnet and Min Bham started getting recognition after *Loot*. These individuals were trying to make a difference in cinema but after *Loot* they came to the spotlight. (Interview with Dixit, 2016)

Dixit locates a new generation of film school graduates who entered the Nepali film industry after 2012. Some had been working before the release of *Loot* but gained prominence through the good reviews and box office success of the film. He observes that the film marked a departure in working style for the film industry which did not have professionals trained in film schools. A new generation of film professionals became active, and their working styles and innovations became recognized. Janak Tamang's company wanted to join the wave and set a platform for films being made by this new wave of professionals. Its YouTube channel has films like *Loot 2* (2017) two of the *Chakkā Pañjā* series and *Paśupati Prasāda* (2015) and *Dhanapati* (2017) credited to be part of 'new Nepali cinema'. There are other popular films, which are dispersed in different digital channels like OSR Digital, HiTech Entertainment among others. The company's move into the digital realm stems from recognizing that the urban audience, which appreciates these new film trends, also has internet access, and will likely use a digital platform to access them. Its channel on YouTube started on May 27, 2013. Certain well-received Nepali film uploads, including songs, have garnered extensive views. For instance, the song *Kutuma Kutu*[108] from the film *Duī Rupaiyā̃ /Two Rupees* (2017) has 122 million views, and *Chakkā Pañjā 2* (2019) which has accumulated over 15 million views on YouTube as of April 2020 (P. Report 2017).

As Tamang describes the audience for these films and videos is both in Nepal and across the globe. Highlights Nepal also distributes Nepali films worldwide to Nepali diasporic audiences. Since the past decades, the out-migration of Nepali youth for work to Gulf nations and first world countries like the United States and Australia has increased considerably with nearly 50 percent of all

[108] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwIWfvW3SD8 (accessed 02.04.2020).

households in Nepal having at least one member abroad or a returnee (Central Bureau of Statistics 2012). Highlights Nepal identifies overseas territories as a potential market for Nepali films and its branch office is located in Australia which is a prime location for Nepali students seeking higher education. According to Nepal's Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology (MOEST), in the fiscal year 2018/19, "Australia was the first choice of the students with about half of the total of migrant students going to Australia (36,324)" (IOM 2019, 64). As Tamang informs Nepali films are released in various cinema halls in Australia and United States considering the large population of Nepali emigrants but it is challenging for the company to show films in other territories like Europe and UK without a local distributor. He explains that the regulations for screening films are different in each location as in Hong Kong, Korea, UK, Gulf nations and India where the films are submitted to their respective censorship boards before public screenings. These procedures often mean that ticket prices for the films are relatively high and they only screen films in licensed halls rather than community halls or other temporary screening venues. He details,

> Our Nepali movie is priced three times higher than the movie running in the hall. For example, if a Hollywood movie is showing in Australia its price is 10 Australian dollars but for a Nepali movie, it is 25-30 dollars which is three times more. Even then, audiences come and watch. This means audiences want to support us or else why would they watch by paying such high prices. (Interview with Tamang, 2018)

Tamang presumes that Nepali audiences participate in film screenings in overseas territories out of nostalgia for their homeland to support the market for Nepali films. The audience perceives it as a contribution to the film industry despite the expense. The curiosity to watch the films is generated by the YouTube channels of the distribution companies, which have trailers and songs from respective films, and viewers from around the world interact with the content through comments. The data of viewers for Highlights Nepal's YouTube channel as shared by Tamang in a particular weekday shows that the highest number of audiences are from Nepal as there is a lot of repeated viewing, followed by the United States, India, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Qatar, UK, Japan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia. He shares that the location is constantly changing and shifting as new uploads are made every day. The popularity of media content on YouTube can be seen through regular newspaper reporting which carries sections on the top ten trending videos in Nepal on YouTube (Report 2016; Tribune 2018; Times 2018; Report 2020). There are also VOD (video on demand) websites like hamromovie.com run by Highlights Nepal and Iflix which offers Nepali films at a designated price.

Filmmakers, on the other hand, express frustration over the prevailing trend where audiences have become accustomed to viewing films for free on YouTube. This pattern has led to a reluctance to attend cinema halls, as many prefer to await the availability of films on various YouTube channels before engaging with them. Actor Reecha Sharma who owns her own film production company, Richa Sharma Films Production Private Limited, considers the opportunities offered by digital platforms and the downsides.

> People write proudly in the comment section that we are waiting for the film on YouTube. However, the producer will only earn when you go and watch the movie at the theaters not just on YouTube. It is a fixed business on YouTube. You get a certain amount of money, and that movie is there forever. It is like giving the movie you made with so much passion to somebody forever. Your cinema is at least yours for a week in the theater. In a way, [YouTube] is a good platform for cinema makers but if you look at the bigger picture, it benefits is for online platform more. (Interview with Sharma, 2017)

Sharma credits online platforms for the visibility and popularity generated for Nepal films as audiences can comment and interact with the films directly on their YouTube channels. However, it also means that the number of films available freely on YouTube furthers expectations from audiences who do not want to go to cinema halls to watch the films. They will wait for a film to come up on YouTube rather than pay for it by visiting a cinema hall after its release. As a producer, she weighs on the downside of losing the rights to one's films to digital distributors since the film might get popular on YouTube, but all economic benefit goes to the distributor. However, some economic recuperation and permanent visibility on YouTube is beneficial for a film that has to compete with two other films for release and usually spends one week at the cinema hall. The film is also available for Nepali viewers around the world who would otherwise be unable to watch the film.

The routes that Nepali films take from physical screening spaces to the internet through YouTube change the 'economic biographies' of the films from a commodity to a 'free' item. Sociologist Igor Kopytoff (1986) suggests in his analysis of objects that their biographies and value as a commodity transform depending on socio-economic-cultural contexts. If a film is understood as a commodity with a certain economic value, the digital turn, in this case, the popularity of YouTube allows Nepali films to be viewed free if one has access to internet. Film scholars Srinivas et al (2018) while studying regional blockbusters from Tamil and Telugu cinema, which are popular in

single-screen theaters and gaining traction on YouTube, refer to this trend as "the migration of movies across geographical spaces as well as screens" (S. V. Srinivas et al. 2018, 233). They locate a growing trend of 'direct-to-YouTube-release of films' which is turning the digital platform into a virtual release territory.

Nepali films release directly on YouTube too. Passe Pictures[109] and KTMArtHouse[110] are examples of film production companies that have their own YouTube channels. Passe Pictures is based in London and includes short films by filmmaker Shirish Gurung. The production's first feature film *Latokosero* (2018) was screened to a limited audience and released via digital platform Amazon Prime (Moktan 2020). Sunil Pun reporting for The Nepali Times writes about *The Garage* a hangout space in Feltham, London, where Gurung and his artist friends rehearsed and developed scripts of films. He describes it as a vibrant gathering of young children of the Gurkha population settled in the UK in their early twenties who shared similar interests in music and films and were able to express themselves artistically in the garage space. The films made by Gurung and others in his group, "revolved around the theme of isolation, dislocation and a sense of displacement" and although many who used to gather in the space have dispersed Gurung continues to make "indie films with low budget, autonomous, small-scale, using actors selected from West London Nepali youth on local location" (Pun 2019). KTMArthouse, on the other hand, includes films directed by filmmaker Anuska Rauniyar. Its channel includes the film *KTMCocktale* (2017) and the web series *Once upon a time in Kaalopool* (2016). There are now many other YouTube channels run by different production companies based in Kathmandu and all-around Nepal that upload content directly into the digital platform, this includes a list of mini-series and comedy, political satire-based videos. Sunne Kathā, Gaũthalī Entertainment, Kathāharū, Kukky Dunk, Pinkerbell Productions are some examples of production companies that produce content exclusively for their YouTube channels and have substantial viewership. Numerous TV series broadcast on different television channels are also uploaded on YouTube simultaneously, and they garner significant popularity and viewership.

The direct release of films and videos on YouTube has allowed a new generation of filmmakers and content creators to discard traditional routes of distribution and find a digital audience. Its

[109] See https://www.youtube.com/user/PassePictures/videos (accessed 10.06.2020).
[110] See https://www.youtube.com/user/KTMArtHouse (accessed 10.06.2020).

significance can further be analyzed by the controversy of two short films released on YouTube. Nepali filmmaker Anil Neupane's *Bob* and Bollywood filmmaker Shirish Kunder's *Kirti* were both released on YouTube in July 2016. Neupane claimed that Kunder's film had directly lifted the plot from his film and as the controversy ensued Neupane sent a legal notice to Kunder and Bollywood actor Manoj Bajpayee who produced the film to demand economic compensation for defamation (Chaulagain 2016). YouTube removed both films from its platform as both parties held on to their copyright claims and Neupane's film also received a counterclaim of 'authenticity (Staff 2016; Chaulagain 2016; N. Lal 2017). Both Neupane, a young filmmaker from a relatively unknown film industry, and Kunder, a Bollywood filmmaker considered YouTube a powerful platform to garner views and reach a selected digital audience. The rise of digital platforms on the internet allowed both of them to share and contest their work as original or copy even if they were produced in different geographical and social settings.

## 6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, I propose film screening venues in Kathmandu which include single screen halls, multiplexes, film festivals, free screenings, and digital platforms as cosmopolitan gatherings where filmmakers, audiences, and critics from diverse backgrounds engage in creative dialogue. The integration of global technologies, popular genres, film festival formats, and digital distribution by cinema hall owners, producers, filmmakers, festival organizers and distributors show an engagement with the openness and dynamism of translocal experiences endorsed by cosmopolitanism. The chapter's examination of the relationship between Nepali film audiences, film genres, and the social space of cinema halls and screenings venues in Kathmandu reveals the rise of a middle-class population. This demographic shift is accompanied by a shared cosmopolitan desire among audiences, filmmakers, and film festival organizers, an aspiration to engage with world cinema and participate in international film festivals hosted within the city.

I begin by tracing the history of film viewing in Kathmandu, starting from the 1950s during the last years of the Rana period, progressing through the spread of single-screen theatres, its decline during the decade of the Maoist rebellion, and culminating in the emergence of multiplexes. Within these accounts, I locate shifts in audience dynamics and economic accessibility to these urban spaces as a way to understand its correlation with the rise of 'new Nepali cinema'. This

phenomenon is discussed by critics and the Nepali media as being able to attract urban audiences and provide direction to the Nepali film industry. Single screen theatres and multiplexes, as articulated by filmmakers, cater to distinct audience preferences. While some confirm the benefits of an expanding multiplex culture, citing its capacity to foster a diverse audience demographic and attract a larger female viewership, others raise concerns regarding its inclusivity and the thematic content of films. As single-screen theaters and multiplexes primarily showcase Nepali commercial films, it is film festivals held regularly within the city that allows Valley residents the opportunity to engage with global cinema. Among these, KIMFF stands as the longest running film festival in Nepal, based in Kathmandu, serving as a vital platform for aspiring Nepali filmmakers seeking to establish themselves in the film industry. It organizes events with opportunities for networking, exposure, and international collaboration. Yet, some envision the potential for a larger-scale festival capable of garnering global attention and bringing auteurs of world cinema to the city. Despite the growing proliferation of film festivals within the Kathmandu Valley, the volume of film production remains the same. The effort by KIMFF to achieve economic sustainability and the aspiration of others for a larger-scale film festival can be read in terms of gaining international visibility for one's national film industry. In relation to diverse audiences, there are attendees of film festivals and free screenings which bring people together for routine film viewings and subsequent discussions. Beyond the confines of these physical venues, the digital realm of YouTube has emerged as a significant platform, allowing internet users worldwide access to a diverse array of Nepali films. The digital distribution of Nepali films, spanning from the 1980s to recent releases, has ushered in a new online audience that favors awaiting the digital release of films over visiting cinema halls.

# Chapter 7: Conclusion

I pursued this research with a motive to understand the spatialities of Kathmandu's cinematic imaginaries. My main question structured around the relationship between the material and the imagined city of Kathmandu in film, and how its locations are identified and structured in filmic narratives. Bringing together my ethnographic insights on the Nepali film industry located in Nepal's capital, and reading of Nepali films I emphasize the transcultural, transnational, and translocal networks, connections, and entanglements involved in its historical and current developments. I argue that the city cinema nexus explored expediently in academic work on cinemas and cities from the Global North requires an alternate lens by discarding developmentalist paths of analysis. The discussion of 'far out' (Liechty, 2015), third world 'periphery' (Roy 2011) Kathmandu as a cinematic city based on local contexts of transitions, translations, and borrowings is an intervention in that direction. By chronicling the cinematic imaginaries of a South Asian cityscape, I am creating a framework based on a multi-sited ethnography against a dominant American and Eurocentric methodological approach in film and urban studies.

My work draws from and contributes to literature on cinematic cities, South Asian cinema cultures, and discussions of cities in cinema (Hay 1997; Clarke 1997; Shiel and Fitzmaurice 2001; Brunsdon 2007; Marcus and Neumann 2007; Mazumdar 2007; Mennel 2008; Zhang 2008; Braester and Tweedie 2010; Brunsdon 2012; Lotte 2013). It foregrounds the connection between cities and cinema and how it is crucial in the study of cinema cultures and the development of cities. Through a careful analysis of diverse Nepali films, this thesis highlights a range of narratives, economic, and socio-cultural contexts, that define cities in the Global South. From sprawling neighborhoods, streets, roads, monuments, temples, monasteries, palaces, parks, and residential buildings, Nepali films become a powerful reserve for asserting the complexities of diverse urban spaces. The spaces featured in Nepali films are an insight into understanding architecture as more than built structures that signify histories of power and identity formation.

I use the term 'Nepali films' to specifically refer to films in the Nepali language, acknowledging the diversity of languages and regions from which films are produced in Nepal. My primary focus is on Kathmandu and predominantly on films made after 2010, which have been labelled as 'new Nepali cinema' by critics, reporters, and filmmakers in journalistic writing. I also include the

official names of my interlocutors, who are public figures such as actors, filmmakers, critics, and journalists in Nepal, in the thesis. In some cases, I change names for privacy. As both primary and secondary sources, this thesis incorporates references to more than 90 films, encompassing Nepali, Hindi, European, and American films. The dearth of research writings on Nepali films also posed a challenge which I have attempted to overcome by translating news reporting, film analysis, and reviews written in Nepali to English. All my interviews were transcribed and translated from Nepali to English, and I have presented quotations in both languages whenever possible.

## 7.1 Transcultural connectivities

Theoretically, transculturality has provided this research the methodological reflexivity to research Nepali films, and the Nepali film industry with a multi-sited inquiry focusing on the processes of their production, social relevance, and global impact. In highlighting the various connectivities and modes of circulation that filmmaking practices in Kathmandu take, I advance a transcultural understanding of local practices based on encounters, exchange, and negotiation. The routes navigated by Nepali films in representing daily experiences of city life connect to the discourse of cinematic cities, adds multiple layers to its Euro-American focus, and draws insights from the transnational impact of other national cinemas. The connections and interactions facilitated by filmmaking in Kathmandu create new social and cultural expressions based on relationality and reflexivity. The study of Nepali films and the Nepali film industry is an examination of entanglements of historical connections, borrowings, otherings, projections, and understandings of the form of Hindi films and the structure of the Hindi film industry based in Mumbai. I place Nepali films in a global circulation of film cultures and in dialogue with representations and discussions of the cinematic city in film and urban studies. There are channels of exchanges and influences which have contributed to the continuing evolution of the structure, form, and content of Nepali films. Furthermore, the processes involved in screening films whether through the traditional route of cinema halls or digital platforms which are now available to Nepali films shows the transformative impact of digital media. Transculturality has also enabled the research to highlight the problematic nature of dichotomous distinctions, such as ‘copy’, ‘real’, and ‘authentic’, which are commonly employed by media outlets in Nepal to define and discuss the narratives of Nepali films. The traditions and knowledge of local appropriations of terms like

*maulikatā* as discussed in this research enriches their meanings which are understood as open rather than static without essentializing it.

The overrunning theme in the thesis is the presence of a 'new Nepali cinema' with a search for *maulikatā* or originality and *nepālīpana* or Nepaliness. Eacs chapter in the dissertation brings together the themes of urbanism, nationalism, urban subjectivities, gender relations, and cinema cultures which is discussed in greater detail in the next section.

## 7.2 A quest for a 'new cinema'

The search for *maulikatā* or originality and *nepālīpana* or Nepaliness is a recurring discourse in 'new Nepali cinema'. I question and dissect the term, identify its multiple associations, and what it entails in the study of Nepali films. The definitions of *maulikatā* in film form subsumes notions of 'originality', 'copy', and 'authenticity' and are not exclusive of these meanings. I contextualize *maulikatā* by drawing upon the works of scholars such as Fredric Jameson (1991), who proposes the term pastiche to describe the revision of old styles, Walter Benjamin (1969), who writes about mechanical reproduction and authenticity in art works and Jean Baudrillard (2001), who suggests simulacrum as a term that challenges ideas of original and copy, referring to a copy without an original. Moreover, I trace the recurrent use of the term *maulikatā* to discuss the identity, form, and elements of Nepali films by critics, policymakers, and filmmakers to investigate the filmscape of the Nepali film industry. I unpack its various contextual meanings as addressed by my interlocutors to understand the 'new' in 'new Nepali cinema' which relates to the political changes experienced by the nation-state of Nepal after the end of the monarchy in 2006. The analysis by C.K Lal (2012) on the historical trajectories of the formation of *nepalipan* and search for a 'new Nepal' enriches my study of 'new Nepali cinema'. What local contexts and explanations of *maulikatā* by critics, filmmakers, and actors in the Nepali film industry provide is a multiplicity of meanings, associations, and connections to world cinema and film industries around the world problematizing a limited understanding of national cinema based on geographical boundaries when transnational networks of production and funding are blurring these lines. The preposition by Nabin Subba (2019) on what is *maulikatā* in Nepali cinema further enables me to delve into its multiple meanings in detail.

I suggest that the history of filmmaking in Nepal is conjoined with transitions of the nation-state from a Hindu monarchy to a secular republic. The 'new Nepali cinema' narrative emerges in tandem with hopes for a *'Nayā̃ Nepāl'* or 'new Nepal' after the end of the ten-year-old Maoist armed struggle and monarchy. I also set correspondence between other cinemas in the world, be it in Hong Kong, Taiwan, or Bombay cinema. The appearance and need for a new cinema around the world signals changes in technology, experimentation, and effort to create an identity different from large film industries such as Hollywood. New waves of films and filmmakers struggle in achieving commercial success as their primary goal is to secure recognition in the international film festival circuit. They aspire to become part of global cinema, but they are driven by market forces as highlighted by scholars like James Tweedie (2013).

In Nepal, a 'new Nepali cinema' aimed to capture the hopes and aspirations of a generation experiencing monumental social and political transformations. Critics, reviews, and news reports outline that such films and filmmakers emerged after the release of *Loot* (2012) which captures the urban politics of the Kathmandu Valley, its migrant struggles, housing crisis, and rise in criminality. Films attached to the 'new Nepali cinema' narrative however include both box office successes and local and international film festival favorites. These films vary in themes and genres, some comment on the political, and social state of Nepal and others are marked by experimentation. The term itself is also used as a marketing tool by industry professionals to network and associate with young aspiring filmmakers and professionals seeking opportunities in the Nepali film industry. I propose that films from 'new Nepali cinema' which I study in my thesis can be described as 'urban popular' films that use a masculine lens to address issues of urban inequality, migration, and belonging in the city. By centering on migrant narratives, these films serve as a repository of urban subjectivities. They are box office successes and receive favorable reviews in the media, being termed *maulik* with *nepālīpana*. Their deliberate use of specific architectural sites to represent Kathmandu, inhabited by distinct 'urban types' who occupy specific city spaces including streets, rented rooms, dance bars, and rooftops sets them apart.

Kathmandu is characterized as a liminal site of shattered aspirations, a transit to other global cities, in the backdrop of social and economic transformations since the 1990s. It is an 'arrival and transit' city. I specifically discuss how Nepal, Hindi, and English language films depict Kathmandu as a physical, criminal, and mystical transit by drawing upon the concept of liminality, originally

proposed by Arnold van Gennep (1909) and later expanded upon by Victor Turner (1995). Applying their framework, I examine the liminal state of Kathmandu in films, characterized by its fractured infrastructures and its role as a transit to other global cities. The city's urban struggles serve as a metaphor for its in-between state, neither developed as a metropolitan nor entirely disconnected from global market forces. Kathmandu and its rural other are defined by an understanding of *bikās* or development which has emerged as a social category to define progress in Nepal's development politics. There is also a large migrant population that has come to inhabit the city which are located in films as financially strapped 'urban types' who embody changes in lifestyles and social fabric of the city. I discuss the villager (*gāũle*), the gangster (*dādā),* and bar dancer as examples. The villager is naïve to the ways of the city and needs to acquire certain tastes to belong to the city. Meanwhile, the figure of the gangster emerges in Nepali films after the end of the Maoist armed struggle in 2006. This period saw the reintegration of Maoist ex-combatants into the army, and urban crime witnessed a surge as politics and criminal activities became intertwined, with criminals receiving political support. While the bar dancer in Nepali films represents a rise in income, material excess, and the growth of food and drink service industries in the Kathmandu Valley. As they dance to entertain a male clientele, their profession is stigmatized as a front for prostitution. In 'new Nepali cinema', they assume the role of item girls, serving as interludes for entertainment, and they have no significant role in the narrative. They dance in a style that bears resemblance to Bollywood dance, and similarities can be drawn to the dancing nymphs in Hindu puranic texts who are scantily dressed and entice ascetics.

Films from 'new Nepali cinema' also identify and introduce Kathmandu in their narratives through a 'this is Kathmandu' sequence that functions as an urban assemblage of architectural identifiers which include monuments, buildings, temples, parks, and other dwellings that comment on the living conditions of its inhabitants. Based on various examples, I propose that urban assemblages are created in films as sequences by collaging historically important landmarks and monuments as signifiers of the city. I build on assemblage thinking (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Kamalipour and Peimani 2015; Farías 2011; McFarlane 2011) to locate and interrogate architectural identifiers of Kathmandu in films by elaborating on the entanglements of local and national histories of its heritage sites that include temples, palace squares, *stūpas*, and parks that capture the religious, cultural, and social facets of the city. An assemblage of a 'this is Kathmandu' sequence in films juxtaposes iconographic images of the city, UNESCO certified heritage sites which are familiar

and attractive and can be termed the ‘poster city’ with its pagoda architecture, Buddhist *stūpas*, Rana palaces, and parks that are barricaded for military parades. However, there is another ‘lived city’ that emerges from dwellings or rented rooms or spaces that exist together with the ‘poster city’. I bring the worlds of an official poster city and an unofficial, unintended, lived city through a discussion of Kathmandu’s iconographic monuments and migrant dwellings.

The choice of specific monuments for identification discloses the politics of heritage, and access to public spaces in Kathmandu. The six UNESCO world heritage sites in the Kathmandu Valley are used as signifiers for a ‘poster city’ that is recognizable to tourists and identifiable by locals. In films it is noticeable as ‘heritage Kathmandu’. There are however several other monuments and landmarks mainly from the Rana period such as Dharaharā, Ghaṇṭāghara, Singha Durbar, and Tũḍīkhela unattested by UNESCO that are used to signify the city because of their social and cultural significance in public memory. If heritage sites introduce Kathmandu, mountains represent locations, particularly villages outside of the Valley. Mountains have always held a captivating allure and occupy a significant space in the Nepali imagination. Mount Everest or Sagarmatha stands as a symbol of national identity. Over the past decade, Mustang, situated in northern Nepal, has gained prominence as a prime destination for filmmakers seeking to capture mountain views and village life. These films often narrate stories of love and romance, unfolding between a village girl and an urban boy from Kathmandu, set against the magnificent backdrop of Nepal's Himalayas. The preference for certain geographies while sidelining others, like the celebration of mountains and occasional glimpses of the plains, is reflective of the importance allocated to a specific region, ethnicity, and caste group. The struggle for recognition and rights by minority groups such as the Madhesis, Dalits, and women who occupy other marginal regions, reveals disparity in the distribution of state resources.

Among residential spaces in the city, the stories of Kathmandu’s urban migrants and their dwellings, pictured in rented rooms or *bhāḍāko koṭhā,* offers a view of urban living that shapes the narratives of Nepali films. As a vision of a home built on transitory moments in the city, it is ‘lived space’ (Lefebvre 1991) made through negotiations with neo-liberal urban plans and policies and a negotiation for the right to the city (Harvey 2008). Low-income renters who live in impoverished conditions in rented rooms serve as major subjects of ‘new Nepali cinema’. Pamela Robertson Wojcik’s (2010) research on the ‘apartment plot’ in films, as a unique style and genre that initiates

an urban discourse, facilitates my analysis of rented rooms in Nepali films as fluid lived spaces defined by mobility and impermanence. These rooms become home to various individuals, including students, singles, newly married couples, bachelors, criminals, and unemployed young men waiting to migrate to Gulf nations, all struggling financially in Kathmandu.

I also explore the place of women in 'new Nepali cinema' by investigating how their lives, aspirations, and desires are portrayed in their narratives. I interrogate how the public lives and experiences of Nepali women are represented in their on-screen portrayals. The repetitive roles of angry wives and bar dancers confined into performative acts (Butler 1988) of domesticity demonstrate women's struggle for rights and representation in Nepal's state structures. My interactions with female professionals in the Nepali film industry also highlights the gendered nature of public space in Nepal witnessed through notions of decency and honor. The valuation of their work and contribution to the film industry is screened through the social conditioning of patriarchy similar to the roles assigned to women in the narrative world of Nepali films.

Lastly, I analyze the mediascape of film exhibition in Kathmandu by tracing the journey of Nepali films from single-screen cinema halls and video parlors to multiplexes and digital platforms, with a focus on YouTube. In doing so, I examine the connection that evolves between film screening venues, audiences, and films as a result of technical and infrastructural changes in the Nepali film industry. From film festivals and free screenings to the advent of multiplexes, audiences in the city now have an array of films and screening venues to choose from. I identify, in particular, how the emergence of a new cinema necessitates the establishment of new screening venues. The rise of multiplexes in the Valley correlates with the ascent of a 'new Nepali cinema', as my interlocutors state. The division between single-screen theaters and multiplexes likewise signifies distinct themes in films, different filmmaking approaches, and acting styles. Apart from single screens and multiplexes that showcase big budget films, there is a well-structured and coordinated effort to showcase world cinema in Kathmandu by film festival organizers. Their goal is to contribute to the cultural landscape of the city, offer support to young Nepali filmmakers, and become part of a cosmopolitan world of global cinema.

I suggest that these multiple screening venues in Kathmandu comprising single screen theaters, multiplexes, film festivals to free screenings are cosmopolitan gatherings where filmmakers,

critics, and audiences from diverse backgrounds converge to network and engage in creative exchange. Despite financial constraints and lack of government support, film festival organizers find inspiration in encouraging young Nepali filmmakers who want to share stories of their diverse histories and experiences and gain visibility in the international film festival circuit. The desire to augment an international connection and recognition for Nepali films encourages organizers to promote themselves as 'international' to showcase a global awareness and understanding of film cultures. These spaces represent the ethos of cosmopolitanism which encourages the promotion of diverse narratives, interconnectedness, global outlook, and an awareness of transnational issues. The emphasis on reflexive thinking, agency of objects and ideas, connections across geographical boundaries emphasized by a cosmopolitan outlook and discussed by various scholars is evident in the analysis of these spaces (Hannerz 1990; Appadurai 1996; Werbner 2008).

## 7.3 Future research prospects

The thesis is not without limitations. The cinematic Kathmandu that I identify in my research is based on my experiences and interpretations of imaginaries of the city. It is one perspective among many others. The subjectivities I employ stem from distinctive analytical frameworks, and my positionality as a researcher in Nepali arts, who was born, raised, and educated in Nepal. In the process of selecting films for this study, my choices were based on their availability and accessibility in digital platforms. This might have excluded films that are not publicly available on YouTube, in DVD formats, or those that remain unreleased or shown exclusively to select audiences in film festivals. Likewise, my choice of interlocutors was based on reciprocity and accessibility of time after I approached professionals in the Nepali film industry. Though I attempted to include the opinions of a large selection of voices, my scheduled field work time and approachability dictated my interviews and on-site observations.

Over the years, the landscape of filmmaking in Nepal has changed drastically. A new generation of film professionals trained in film schools, cinephiles, or Nepalis who have access to media tools spread around the world, are pursuing their interests in creating digital content for the internet with substantial viewership and income generation. Nepali films and their networks of production based in Kathmandu are benefitting from these changes discarding traditional routes of film exhibition

via cinema halls or using both physical and digital platforms to retain their audiences inside Nepal and abroad.

As around 80 films continue to be made annually within the Nepali film industry centered in its national capital, Kathmandu, the cityscape transforms under new governments, urban plans, policies, massive urbanization, and environmental pollution. How will ongoing urban transformations in the Kathmandu Valley be imagined and projected in films is difficult to answer as the future often unfolds in ways contrary to plans and projections. However, the connections between Kathmandu and cinema endure, nurtured by its urban imaginings.

As this study concludes, I express my hope for further research to delve into the urban subjectivities of Kathmandu and Nepali films. Currently, this field remains under-researched and underrepresented in academia, and my work is one effort to fill that lacuna. There are several potential topics which the thesis could not explore but can be a research focus for other studies in the future such as the histories of Nepali cinema, the representations of linguistic, ethnic, religious, and regional diversity in Nepali films, the exploration of different genres by filmmakers and its popularity, the infrastructures of the Nepali film industry, production processes, distribution networks and technologies and diasporic audiences of Nepali films.

I acknowledge that the findings and conclusions of my research are based on a specific period in the Nepali film industry and involve the analysis of select Nepali films. Its applicability relies on various social, political, cultural, and economic contexts as new digital technologies, infrastructures, and creative labor are transforming film industries around the world.

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# List of interviews

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| Basanta Thapa, Director (KIMFF) | 02.02.2018 |
| Dipendra Lama, Filmmaker | 15.12 2017 |
| Janak Tamang, Director (Highlights Nepal) | 18.09.2018 |
| Khagendra Lamicchane, Actor,Writer | 06.02.2018 |
| Manoj Pandit, Filmmaker | 20.12.2017 |
| Meena (Name changed), Filmmaker | 14.02.2018 |
| Min Bham, Filmmaker | 06.01.2018 |
| Murray Kerr, Filmmaker | 20.09.2016 |
| Nakim Uddin, QFX Cinemas Owner | 08.03.2018 |
| Nikita Poudel, Former President (NFDB) | 23.03.2018 |
| Nischal Basnet, Filmmaker | 23.06.2018 |
| Prabhat Gautam, Journalist | 12.09.2018 |
| Ramyata Limbu, Organizer (KIMFF) | 01.02.2018 |
| Rajiv Mehta, Manager (Biswajyoti Cinema Hall) | 15.09.2018 |
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