

## **‘Failed Development’ and Rural Revolution in Nepal: Rethinking Subaltern Consciousness and Women’s Empowerment**

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*Humanity is a modernist figure; and this humanity has a generic face, a universal shape. Humanity’s face has been the face of a man. (Donna Haraway 1992)*

*If the question of female subaltern consciousness is a red herring, the question of subaltern consciousness as such must be judged a red herring as well (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 1888)*

*“I am worried about my own country. In our country, nothing has happened besides killings and murders. Our country is our home. If the country is destroyed, our village is disturbed and if the village is disturbed, our home is disturbed, and if our home is disturbed, then we are destroyed too.” Padam Kumari, Gorkha.*

On February 13, 1996, a homemade bomb exploded at the agricultural development bank in rural Gorkha district. The blast damaged the building and its furniture; more importantly, the attack destroyed all records of the bank’s agricultural loans. Within hours, near simultaneous attacks took place at police posts in Rolpa and Rukum districts, further west. Together, these assaults announced the commencement of an armed Maoist revolt against the government of Nepal and what their instigators defined as 200 plus years of feudal exploitation of Nepal’s peasantry, the beginning of the *jana yuddha*—or “People’s War.”<sup>1</sup>

The onset of the insurrection took most Nepalis by surprise.<sup>2</sup> Initially dismissed by the political center as an aberrant phenomenon confined mainly to a few areas in the faraway Midwest, the movement grew by leaps and bounds; less than six years later it had penetrated almost all of Nepal’s 75 districts. As the scale of the conflict has grown, so have its casualties. By 2005, more than 10,000 people had been killed in connection with the uprising and state efforts to suppress it. Kidnapping and disappearances are common and both the Maoists and the State have been accused of human rights abuses. Schools, health posts and other development sites and activities have been disrupted or forced to close all over the country, and infrastructure such as airstrips, bridges, and telephone lines have been destroyed. As a result of all this, as many as 200,000 people have fled their rural homes, which are now sites of violent struggle, seeking work abroad or migrating to Nepali

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<sup>1</sup> Some English translations of Nepali phrases are conventional and reflect the language that the CPN (Maoist) use in their English propaganda literature. All other translations from the Nepali are mine.

<sup>2</sup>Despite the fact that the government had been presented with a 40 Point List of demands two weeks earlier, which it had neither acknowledged nor responded to. For more information on the political history of the CPN (Maoist) or the start of the People’s War, see Karki and Seddon (2003a) and other contributions to the same volume.

cities as internal refugees (IDPs).<sup>3</sup> Today, it is brutally clear that the insurrection and its attendant violence, insecurity and infrastructural destruction have threatened—and in many cases, destroyed—millions of rural and urban people’s abilities to live, sustain themselves, and pursue their social lives and livelihoods.

The speed and intensity with which the insurgency gained support in the countryside has inspired an abundant and growing literature on rural life and the roots of the rebellion.<sup>4</sup> Almost immediately, four factors were identified as motivating popular support: (1) popular disillusionment with the failure of the Nepal state to deliver the expected democratization of local social relations and political authority after the victory of a popular democratic movement and the establishment of multi-party democracy in 1990; (2) continuing poverty and a widening gap between rural and urban quality of life despite four decades of intensive development; (3) widespread frustration with corruption at all levels of government; and (4) a backlash against the brutality of police, and later army, counter-insurgency campaigns.

The first three of these have been glossed as related elements of a broad, singularly encompassing cause: that of “failed” or “incomplete” development. Pointing to the fact that the districts at the heart of the insurrection, Rolpa and Rukum, were among the poorest in Nepal and had benefited little from the millions of aid dollars that had been spent, many analysts have explained the revolt as the result of rising expectations combined with continued or even increasing deprivation.<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that millions of dollars had been devoted to rural development, uneven distribution of aid benefits and political voice between urban centers and rural hinterlands, between rural districts, and between classes of rural and urban people themselves was recognized as a development failure and threat to the state. The most common prescription for this malady—advanced at academic conferences, NGO seminars, political summits, and in a host of books, articles and working papers on the topic—was more and better development aid.

As we will see, all of these factors are important. Yet, they are all gender blind—a remarkable oversight given women’s extraordinary visibility in the revolt. One of the most commented on features of the rebellion is the unusual degree of women’s participation, and the

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<sup>3</sup>See Kernot (2003). This is a conservative estimate. A study carried out a year later by the Community Study and Welfare Centre (CSWC), an NGO advocating the issue of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Nepal, estimates that somewhere between 350,000 to 400,000 Nepalese have been displaced from their villages.

<sup>4</sup> Recent anthropological and historical works alone include Hutt (2004); Karki (2003b); Onesto (2005); Thapa (2003); Thapa (2003); Gellner (2003). Not to mention a virtual industry of reports commissioned by security concerns, aid organizations and NGOs

<sup>5</sup> De Sales notes that in the two districts of Rolpa and Rukum combined there isn’t a single hospital or any industry (2003:342). Ironically, a \$US 50 million, 15-year project in the Rapti Zone had concluded just a month and a half before the formal onset of the insurrection. On decreasing agricultural yield and increasing deprivation between 1960 and 1990, see MacFarlane (2001); also Seddon (2001).

rebels’ own emphasis on women’s liberation has been widely discussed.<sup>6</sup> One third of all foot soldiers in Maoist strongholds are said to be women. Women occupy positions of leadership throughout the Maoist hierarchy, participate actively in village defense groups, and work as couriers and guides. It is reported that some of “the most violent actions against local ‘tyrants’ are associated with all women-guerilla groups” (Gautam, Banskota, and Manchanda 2001). Indeed, journalist-scholar and human rights activist Rita Manchanda has suggested that Gorkhali women’s active support for the Maoists reflects not the absence or failure of development activities there, but, to the contrary, their surprising success. In an essay entitled “Empowerment With a Twist” (1999), she proposes that, at least in Gorkha district, the insurrection has benefited from two decades of development work. In particular, she and her colleagues Shoba Gautam and Amrita Banskota propose, women’s presence among the rebels has been boosted by the adult women’s literacy programs run by an American INGO:

In Gorkha district, it is literate women and men who are joining the struggle. Ironically, it is the success of the adult literacy campaign which has paved the way for women to become active in the public life of the community, for girls to go to schools and for girls politicized in school to be drawn into the armed struggle. (Gautam, Banskota, and Manchanda 2001)

By this theory, far from discouraging violence, development activities have actually helped catalyze it: “Literacy campaigns...designed to promote the empowerment of women inadvertently encouraged many conscientised young women to choose subsequent empowerment through armed struggle” (Gautam, Banskota, and Manchanda 2001).<sup>7</sup>

The contrast between this hypothesis and most others raises questions about the relationship between development and rural insurrection in Nepal, especially given the industry’s concern to promote “participation” and “empowerment.” Does popular support for the Maoist rebellion reflect the incompleteness or failure of the development enterprise, or is it an inadvertent result? What is “empowerment” and how is it related to democracy—and/or fomenting resistance to the developmental state? Are women different types of social actors than men? What are the relations between—and/or results of—transformations in political, developmental or gendered consciousness? As we will see, addressing these questions requires ethnographic engagement with development as both ideological practice and practical enterprise. It also demands a critical rethinking of conventional understandings of subaltern subjectivity and its relation to oppositional political consciousness.

This study is focused on the same Gorkhali women Manchanda referred to above, women who participated in an INGO-run rural women’s literacy and empowerment program in the mid-

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<sup>6</sup> See for instance Parvati (1999); Pettigrew (2004); Shakya (2003); Gautam (1999); Gautam (2001); Manchanda (1999); Onesto (2005); Maycock (2003).

<sup>7</sup> Sharma (2000:35-36) made a similar argument about USAID programs in the Rapti Zone (Gellner 2002:21). Karki and Seddon mention this possibility as well (Karki and Seddon 2003b:19).

eighties—and who are for the most part actively sympathetic to the uprising now, even as they criticize the violence and lament the lives lost. It is important to note at the outset that the women on whose experiences my reflections are based are not official members of the Maoist cadre. They have not left their homes to join the people’s army in the forests; nor are they members of local militias or party organizers. Yet, they support the rebels by feeding them, housing them, and, most importantly, not informing the government about their presence or activities. Without their support, these women told me, the insurgents would be lost. And as I have learned through my observations of daily life in this “conflict zone,” the notion that there are two distinct and opposed sides is mostly an illusion anyway (Leve 2004).

My approach reflects the difficulties of doing direct ethnography with the Maoists themselves. It is also, however, a result of circumstance. I first learned of Manchanda’s article when it was forwarded to me by the director of the INGO she credited for helping to catalyze Gorkhali women’s revolutionary consciousness. A note attached concluded with the question: “Interested?”

Given my relationship to the program and its participants, it was hardly surprising the director thought I might be interested. At the point that Manchanda made her trip to Gorkha and published her article, I’d been involved with the women from the program she was talking about for the last nine years and had published two studies on the effects of the program for the organization, one specifically focused on the question of women’s empowerment. My first research trip to Gorkha was in 1991 and lasted about a month, at which time I did ethnographic interviews and organized a quantitative survey of women who had taken part in the course in order to understand the effects of the program five years after it was completed. On the basis of this report, the INGO, which I will henceforth refer to as DFA (Development for All),<sup>8</sup> asked me to return in 1995-96 for a 10-year retrospective evaluation. Women’s empowerment was a particular concern in the development world at that time—as well as a personal interest of my own—so I centered my next round of research on this. What all this meant when the director contacted me was that I had ten years of longitudinal data on the effects of the program on its participants as individuals and the community as a whole.

Plus, I’d made friends—the women I’d stayed with and worked with while doing the research, the women I’d met doing interviews and focus groups, the teachers, keepers of tea-stalls and shopkeepers that I’d interviewed or bantered with on the path, and the parents, husbands, brothers, sisters, mother-in-laws and children of all of these folks. When I returned in early 2001 during a ceasefire, Gorkha was officially classified as a “severely affected area,” and I wondered how—and whether—I’d be received. The fact that people remembered me and the relationships I had built meant that I was welcomed and protected, however, and I found familiar faces willing to participate in a new round of research. Since then, I’ve been back to Nepal and Gorkha twice and

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<sup>8</sup> This, as most personal and institutional names in this paper, is a pseudonym I have created to protect the privacy of the people involved.

each time I’ve stayed with participants and their families and met others, in the villages, in the district center and in Kathmandu.

This paper attempts to bring what I have learned from them to bear on the “failed development” thesis—and Manchanda’s “successful development” one. It seeks to understand participants’ understandings of development and its relation to social and gender-justice, the forms of consciousness that participants took from their experience of literacy study, and their redeployment of these against the state in the context of changes in the material realities and human expectations of men, women and families in the region. At end, we will see that while there is no single reason for the support Gorkhali women feel for the insurrection—understandings of it and affinities for it reflect multiple circumstances and subjectivities—all their own stories, reflection and explanations presume a very different sort of self: a self that is not, could not be, and does not wish to be purely autonomous in the way many theories of rural empowerment presume, but rather defines itself by its commitments and relationships. This is a self which, as Bakhtin might have put it, only exists at the point where it meets others. This insight has implications for the ways in which policy analysts, modernization theorists, Marxists, neoliberals and feminists alike conceptualize analytical terms such as “consciousness,” “progress” and “rebellion,” which in turn, has implications for conventional assumptions and conceptualizations of peace, freedom and liberation as complementary outcomes of successful development.

## **Women’s Empowerment in Gorkha District**

The ancestral home of the reigning Shah dynasty, Gorkha is probably the district with the greatest name recognition beyond Kathmandu. Indeed, it was from a palace that one literally passes on the way to the villages I will be describing that Prithvinarayan Shah, 10<sup>th</sup> generation grandfather to the current king, Gyanendra, set out with his armies to conquer—nationalists say “unite”—the lands that collectively comprise the sovereign space of modern Nepal.<sup>9</sup> As a result of this privileged history, the district has assumed a pride of place in the nationalist consciousness.<sup>10</sup> Indeed it was one of the first regions targeted for intensive development and Gorkha Bazaar remains one of the few

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<sup>9</sup> The “unification”—as this process is usually called—took place between over the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and brought together more than one hundred independent polities by war, marriage or alliance/annexation. That Nepali British soldiers are called “Gurkhas” to this day reflects the fact that it was the King of Gorkha who gave the British permission to recruit within from within his domain which was known at that time not as “Nepal” but as “the entire territories of the King from Gorkha.” “Gurkha” is a mispronunciation of this place name. See Burghart (1984)

<sup>10</sup>In 1991, before the start of the war, Gorkha had a total population of 252,5245 people. Although Gurungs are numerically dominant in the district, the area I’m calling Chorigaon had a relatively diverse ethnic/caste composition of Gurung, Magar, Newar, Brahmin-Chhetri, Baramu, and occupational groups. There is no one economically dominant caste in the area.

district centers in the mid-hills accessible by road. Nevertheless, the district has a strong leftist past, was one of the early Maoist strongholds, and remains a hotbed of insurrectionary support.<sup>11</sup>

The two Village Development Committees (VDCs) that I will collectively refer to as Chorigaon comprise about eighteen villages, spread out over about 3610 sq. kilometers and ranging up to 4050 feet in altitude. The fastest way to reach there from Kathmandu is to take a bus or other vehicle to the district center (approximately 190 km., a 6-8 hour ride), and then walk another 7-9 hours on an unpaved path down a river valley and back up the mountain and along the ridge on the other side. A twisting road to a nearby village where the Maoists ransacked a small DFA office in 1996<sup>12</sup> and which now hosts a military barracks, was constructed sometime between 1996 and 2001. It remains unpaved, however, and is only motorable in the dry season. A small part of the VDC became electrified in the mid-nineties; a telephone line that was also installed then has since been destroyed in the war. What this means is little electricity, no reliable roads, and, since many of the water taps the DFA installed in the eighties are no longer functioning, many women walk an hour or more to get drinking water an average of nine times per day.<sup>13</sup> Strikingly, however, Chorigaon is comparatively well-off as little of the rural mid-hills are electrified or have road access, despite the fact that Nepal was, before the war, began 90% rural.

The area in and around Chorigaon is ethnically diverse, although predominantly Hindu. Most families are subsistence farmers: In 1983, when the literacy program began, 98% of households owned land, although less than 55% were able to feed themselves from their land for more than 6 months in an average year.<sup>14</sup> Neither of these patterns has significantly changed, although cash needs have increased. Before the conflict began to force people off the land, most households supplemented their agricultural production with salaries and pensions earned through service in the British, Indian or Nepali armies, through private employment in the district center, India or Kathmandu, and/or by working others' fields, portering or other kinds of day labor.

The history of women's development programming in the region dates to 1983 when DFA organized an evening literacy course for adults. Although the class was technically open to both men

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<sup>11</sup> It is also the home area of Baburam Bhattarai, the chief theorist of the rebellion, and a number of other senior leaders. On more than one occasion when they wished to invoke their fearlessness or strength, women I worked with referred to themselves, jokingly or otherwise, as “daughters of Gorkha, sisters of Baburam Bhattarai.”

<sup>12</sup> A local Maoist told Li Onesto, a visiting journalist, that: “We went at night and seized equipment and money. This organization gives money for education and does social work, but they direct people away from the real revolutionary solution and promote Christianity.” I feel that I must state for the record here that DFA is not a Christian organization and, despite extensive interaction with both the local and national level staff, I have never seen any evidence of religious evangelism by DFA or its employees. (“Hope of the Hopeless in Gorkha,” <http://rwor.org/a/v21/1040-049/1042/nepal22.htm>)

<sup>13</sup> Baseline Survey (1983:8)

<sup>14</sup> Baseline Survey (1983:28)

and women, the organizers found that women—few of whom had had attended school as children—enrolled in the class at a much higher rate than men. Nonformal adult education was a relatively new concept in Nepal at that point; the first NFE courses in that area were introduced just the previous year in a neighboring VDC. Yet the program rapidly proved to be a popular success. In 1983-84, 1052 people enrolled in 25 NFE courses in two VDCs.<sup>15</sup> 87% of these participants were female. By the end of the program in 1986-7, more than 1600 people had attended one or more of the literacy classes, and almost half of the participants had completed the three year curriculum. Given that the total population of adult women (between 15 and 60) in Chorigaon in 1983 was about 1634, this means that roughly two-thirds of the women in the two VDCs comprising Chorigaon participated in the NFE course.

A notable feature of these courses was their emancipatory intent. Most women’s literacy courses offered in Nepal today are either six month or nine month programs that are valued primarily as a lead-in to income generation classes, microcredit programs, or savings and loan groups. This reflects the current dominance of neoliberal ideology in development planning, whereby the market is seen as the institution best suited to delivering overall social good and women’s empowerment is largely understood as a matter of facilitating women’s participation in cash-yielding forms of production and consumer life (Feldman 1997; Fernando 1997; Leve 2001; Rankin 2001; Rankin 2004). In contrast, Development For All’s NFE program in Chorigaon was a three year program with a participatory goal. According to the agency’s first formal program evaluation—which was written by two people who went on to occupy the top two positions in the agency for many years—its main intent in teaching literacy and numeracy skills was to “assist program participants in identifying the problems faced by their families and communities” and to help them “achieve greater self-confidence so they can shape their own environment through development activities” (Sob and Leslie 1988:3).

In prioritizing “the idea of self-help and people’s participation in community development projects”<sup>16</sup> the DFA program reflected fundamental ideals associated with the community-based integrated rural development (CBIRD) paradigm, which was in vogue at that time. These were also reflected in its curriculum, *Naya Goreto (New Path)*, an innovative pedagogical package based on the ideas of the radical Brazilian educator Paolo Freire as developed for Nepal by researchers at Tribhuvan University’s CERID (the Center for Educational Research, Innovation and Development) and the Boston-based INGO World Education.<sup>17</sup> Inspired by the Freirean ideal of “education as the

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<sup>15</sup> Sob and Leslie 1988:9

<sup>16</sup> Sob and Leslie 1988:3

<sup>17</sup> It was released by Nepal’s Ministry of Education in 1984, and immediately adopted by DFA.

practice of freedom,”<sup>18</sup> *Naya Goreto* aimed to combine community development, literacy learning and critical empowerment in a way that would change the consciousness of the oppressed. Freire believed that traditional educational methods dehumanize the downtrodden by reinforcing their sense of alienation and inadequacy (brought on by subjection to the hegemony of the dominant classes). He designed his pedagogy to help the people he alternately referred to as “peasants” and as “the oppressed” remake themselves as, literally, “new men” through a process of “conscientization”—a transformation whereby learners come to recognize their own identity and knowledge and thus, “enter the historical process as responsible Subjects,” build a qualitatively “new society,” and become “authentic” and “complete” human beings (1970:18,140, 65, 29). *Naya Goreto* followed this lead in that, “in addition to providing information,” the program was designed to inspire a critical dialogue which would “help participants develop problem-solving skills, self-confidence and a realization of their potential both as individuals and as members of a community.”<sup>19</sup>

The DFA program also emulated Freire in rejecting what he identified as the “banking” method of learning, where authoritative teachers ‘deposit’ chunks of knowledge into passive student recipients. Instead, he—and they—advocated a participatory “keyword” approach. In this strategy, students learned phonetic letters in the context of specific words—such as “work” (*kaam*), “water” (*paani*) and “liquor” (*raksi*)—which “would cause [students] participants to examine their own practices and consider changing them.” As each keyword was introduced, class participants were encouraged to discuss the way in which these terms or practices were issues in their own lives by analyzing illustrations of people engaged in related activities and discussing comic strip stories about rural women’s everyday lives and dilemmas. The aim of the discussions was to promote collective reflection and critical analysis of themes such as poverty, economic class, environmental degradation, gender bias and inequality, bribery, and corruption.<sup>20</sup>

As noted, the program ran for 3 years consecutively. It met two hours per night five nights a week for 6-8 months during the dry season. It took place in the evening so that women could finish their work before they came. Classes were held under trees, in public buildings or in lean-to huts constructed for that purpose. Each facilitator, as NFE instructors were called, was given a packet of supplemental materials, a blackboard and a kerosene lamp as teaching equipment. Participants received textbooks, a notebook and one pencil each, in return for providing 25 paisa a month for

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<sup>18</sup>As opposed to “education as the practice of domination.” (Freire 1997:62)

<sup>19</sup> World Education (1989:1)

<sup>20</sup> World Education (1989). In addition to consciousness-raising activities, the curriculum also included concrete instruction in DFA’s community development priorities such as family planning, livestock raising, planting fodder trees in landslide areas, how to prepare oral rehydration solution, and how to construct pit latrines and smoke-outlet stoves.

kerosene and a 5 rupee registration fee.<sup>21</sup> The first person to arrive any evening was expected to sweep out the space and/or cover it with fresh straw.

Despite a 30% drop out rate as a result of illness, marriage or death, the program was highly successful at reaching women as a whole. Five years after the completion of the course, 70% were still able to read and write their names.<sup>22</sup> At the end of the program, participants formed savings and loan groups, opened shops and took up formal positions as Community Health Volunteers. A few joined local development committees and 41% reported that they felt more confident speaking in public and/or asserting themselves. About a dozen girls joined the public school system in class 4. Now 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> class-passed or studying at the university level, they formed the first cohort of educated girls in Chorigaon. Their mothers and sisters who studied at Adult Literacy Centers (ALC) also proved more disposed to send their other daughters to school. As a result of this experience, along with government media messages promoting education and changing aspirations and brute survival needs,<sup>23</sup> most children of both sexes attend school in Chorigaon today—or at least they did so until the intensification of the conflict.

According to its creators, the *Naya Goreto* program was intended “to serve as a catalyst for development by exposing participants to new ideas and information and by giving them a vision of what was possible.”<sup>24</sup> Did it indeed catalyze a vision of revolutionary transformation as well? There is reason to believe that, at least in some cases, it did. When I asked one woman about why people in her area supported the insurrection, her answer was succinct: “the Maoists work for social justice (*sāmājīk nyāya*).” When I asked her if she remembered when she first began to use that term and/or the ideals it expresses, she thought for a moment and then replied: “in the adult literacy course.”

This exchange would appear to suggest that the NFE experience did indeed plant seeds that would later help to radicalize its participants. Yet, as the next few sections of the paper will show, Manchanda’s thesis rests on specific assumptions about development, empowerment, and revolutionary consciousness that are not quite as straightforward as they may at first seem.

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<sup>21</sup> The second year, the monthly fee was raised to 50 paisa and 5 rupees were collected for the books raising the total cost for a year of class to 13 rps. The third year the monthly fee went up to 1 rp. and the book fee to 10 rps, bringing the total cost to 21 rupees. (Sob and Leslie 1988:12-13)

<sup>22</sup> (Leve 1993)

<sup>23</sup> For instance, the increased need for someone in the family to have a non-agricultural job; plus literate sons are believed to want literate wives.

<sup>24</sup> World Education (1989:2)

**Underdevelopment as a Cause of Violence or Development as a Violent Process?  
“Development,” “Freedom,” “Security,” “Consciousness” and “Empowerment” at USAID and  
in Freirean Discourse**

Before weighing in on what actually happened in Gorkha, I think we have to examine some questions raised by the failed development thesis as a whole. Scholarly understandings of the relationships between violence and development have tended to fall into one of two broad perspectives. The first—and dominant—line of analysis in mainstream development agencies and policy circles recognizes poverty and poverty-related despair as the greatest threat to peace and stability. It therefore sees development as a process that works to alleviate that poverty, decreasing the chance of violent uprisings. According to this theory, “failed” or “incomplete” development is the cause of the conflict in Nepal (and many other parts of the world), and more, better and farther-reaching interventions hold the promise of relief.

Against this, other scholars have advanced the claim that development itself is a form of structural violence—a neo-imperial enterprise through which industrialized Northern countries continue to dominate and exploit the so-called Third World (Cowen 1995; Des Chene 1996; Esteva 1992; Rahnema and Bawtree 1997; Sachs 1992). Anthropological studies along these lines have denounced development as an governmental instrument that serves the interests of transnational corporations against postcolonial peoples and states (Gupta 1998), charged that development discourse creates new, disempowering forms of subjectivity like “underdeveloped,” “illiterate” and “L.D.C.” (Escobar 1995; Escobar 1996; Pigg 1992; Pigg 1997; Shrestha 1995), and deemed it an “anti-politics machine” which disguises the deeply political nature of its work beneath a seemingly objective technical-managerial discourse (Ferguson 1994). This is, of course, an analysis that the Maoists share.<sup>25</sup>

Proponents of each position agree that the solution is to promote freedom: but each tends to be working with a very different idea of what freedom is.

For an example of how the first position plays out in practice, we need only turn our eyes to Washington DC. In its FY2004 Congressional budget justification, USAID cited the unequal distribution of development’s benefits between urban and urban areas as a key reason for rural

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<sup>25</sup> These are not the only two possibilities, of course. There’s also a third approach (Grillo and Stirrat 1997, Leve 2001, Li 1991, Pigg 1993) that looks at development largely through its ironies and contradictions: noting, for example, that even neoliberal programs which explicitly aimed to depoliticize populations, or to legitimate oppressive regimes, almost never succeed in doing so, or that even those sincerely intended to alleviate misery or to empower often end up inspiring or prolonging violent conflict. For instance, the massive growth of microcredit programs that provide women with gender-based access to capital resources has been documented as having actually increased violence against women in Bangladesh (Feldman 1997; Karim 2001; Rahman 1999). This paper might be said to be an example of this third approach.

support for the Maoists and attributed this to a dysfunctional political system that perverts development delivery:

Poor governance and corruption, its forbidding terrain and lack of infrastructure all contribute to its development gains being unevenly distributed....The Maoist insurgency...has found fertile ground largely in response to Nepal’s poverty, exclusion, and poor governance.<sup>26</sup>

In response, the agency proposed programs that would increase national wealth by promoting and rationalizing the hydropower and forest/agricultural products sectors and expanding “good governance” to deepen democracy. The integrating theme of these goals, as they put it, was “better governance for equitable growth.”<sup>27</sup>

A White House paper released at the end of September 2002 establishes the link between growth, freedom and security:

The great struggles of the twentieth century between liberty and totalitarianism ended with a decisive victory for the forces of freedom—and a single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy and free enterprise. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, only nations that share a commitment to protecting basic human rights and guaranteeing political and economic freedom everywhere will be able to unleash the potential of their people and assure their future prosperity.... [The United States seeks] to create a balance of power that favors human freedom: conditions in which all nations and societies can choose for themselves the rewards and challenges of political and economic liberty... ..The United States will use this moment of opportunity to extend the benefits of freedom across the globe. We will actively work to bring the hope of democracy, development, free markets and free trade to every corner of this world.<sup>28</sup>

In this policy, the joint goals of freedom, justice, security and democracy are collapsed into “a single sustainable model for national success.” Democracy is a critical part of the development effort because it empowers citizens to choose, participate in and benefit from free market policies, thereby supposedly increasing standards of living and, putatively, states’ security.<sup>29</sup> Not surprisingly, the emerging ethnographic literature on state violence and the coercive underside of many cultures of democracy does not figure into these calculations (Hansen 1999; Hansen 2001; Sluka 2000; Tambiah 1996; Warren 1993).

Manchanda, of course, is taking the opposite approach. She assumes that it is unregulated capitalism itself that is fueling the revolt, and the various forms of violence and exploitation that led up to it. The form of practice that tends to emerge from this sort of analysis is, generally speaking, some variation on the kind of conscientization approach described earlier. The underlying

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<sup>26</sup> [http://www.usaid.gov/policy/budget/cbj2004/asia\\_near\\_east/Nepal.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/policy/budget/cbj2004/asia_near_east/Nepal.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> [http://www.dec.org/pdf\\_docs/PDABS865.pdf](http://www.dec.org/pdf_docs/PDABS865.pdf)

<sup>28</sup> Prelude to “The National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” released by the President’s office, September 2002

<sup>29</sup> “By supporting efforts to resolve the Maoist insurgency and addressing the underlying causes of poverty, inequality, and poor governance in Nepal, the U.S. is making an important contribution to fighting terrorism, promoting regional stability, and lessening the likelihood of a humanitarian crisis.” ([http://www.usaid.gov/policy/budget/cbj2004/asia\\_near\\_east/Nepal.pdf](http://www.usaid.gov/policy/budget/cbj2004/asia_near_east/Nepal.pdf))

assumption here is that freedom is not merely a matter of the multiplication of choice but “the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion” (Freire 1997/1970). Likewise, justice is not the natural byproduct of an open market but the result of self-conscious action to set things right. In this, at least, Freirean educators and Maoist rebels share the same, essentially Marxian, assumptions about human nature.

In theory, the two positions couldn’t be more different. In practice, they have had a remarkable tendency to slip into one another. Consider the following history.

In 1996, USAID-Nepal made Women’s Empowerment an agency goal. As their congressional presentation explained:

The promotion of democracy through women’s empowerment is a USAID objective in Nepal. For democracy to be effective at the local level, women must meet their basic needs and the needs of their families....To organize the family through women’s empowerment is to organize society, and to democratize the family is to democratize society. (Congressional Presentation 1998)<sup>30</sup>

The result was a huge woman-focused development offensive that enrolled over 100,000 women in six or nine month literacy courses in one year alone. Nearly 43,000 women “were provided legal awareness and advocacy skills,” and the number of microcredit borrowers tripled between 1995 and 1996, reaching a total of 13,450.<sup>31</sup> “Access to productive resources is critical to improving women’s choices,” the agency explained. And literacy programs are the beginning:

[Our] literacy program is showing results beyond the acquisition of basic literacy and numeracy skills: women take jobs which they could not get while illiterate, thereby bringing more income into the household to support their families; they feel more confident to participate in community advocacy and user groups; and they seek additional training opportunities, such as legal and business literacy. (Congressional Presentation 1998)

It seems hard to believe that this neoliberal vision began as a Freirean ideal. By the mid-nineties “women’s empowerment” had truly become “one of the most loosely-used words in the development lexicon (Batliwala). It had, however, emerged in the context of a very specific political and theoretical debate. Like the popular educators who originated *Naya Goreto*, the first women’s empowerment activists were inspired by Freire’s revolutionary pedagogy. They were frustrated, however, by his lack of attention to gender. If conscientization was a process by which people “leave behind the status of *objects* to assume the status of historical *Subjects*”—which sounds an awful lot like some of the more influential feminist theories of the time—Freire nonetheless never raised the question of *gendered* power (1997:141, emphasis in original). Although he examined subaltern subjectivity in terms of dependence, self-alienation and, dehumanization, Freire’s model peasant remained, theoretically, sexually unmarked.

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.aid.gov/pubs/cp98/ane/countries/np.htm>

<sup>31</sup> <http://www.usiad.gov/pubs/cp98/ane/countries/np.htm>

The term “women’s empowerment” was born in the seventies when feminist popular educators introduced theories of gendered power into the conscientization frame (Batliwala). The concept became the focus of an international movement that is widely considered to have been a success. Yet, I’m skeptical that Women’s Empowerment’s earliest advocates would recognize USAID’s literacy-law-and-loan agenda as a realization of their ideal. (Nor, of course, would most liberal feminists recognize Freire’s revolutionary Marxism as part of their goal.)

This shift, from the revolutionary empowerment *of* subaltern subjects to an instrumental empowerment *for* market citizenship signifies a dramatic shift in the development vision.<sup>32</sup> Verónica Schild has observed that “the discourse of neoliberal modernization emphasizes an active relation to the market, expressed on the part of citizens as the autonomous exercise of responsibilities, including economic self-reliance and political participation” (Schild 2000). The result, she says, is a form of governmental rationality whereby “citizens are...conceived—and produced—as empowered clients, who as individuals are viewed as capable of enhancing their lives through judicious, responsible choices as consumers of services and other goods.” Because “the cultural contents shaping these neoliberal political subjects are none other than the liberal norms of the marketplace,” she refers to these subjects as “market citizens” (2000:276). I believe this describes USAID’s program well. But from a Freirean perspective, the reduction of conscientization to consumer consciousness is a wholesale reversal of their liberatory aim. For these radicals, agency is not realized through choices about what to sell, what to buy and how to vote. Empowerment may “begin...by changing women’s consciousness,” but it should “manifest itself as a redistribution of power” (Batliwala). Far from a matter of freeing the market, in this model, justice follows from freeing the mind.

How does this kind of slippage become possible?

One reason is because, despite dramatic differences in understanding and outlook, neoliberal and conscientization models share a number of unrecognized assumptions. First, both perceive development as a unilinear progression towards a predefined goal whereby developmental subjects become self-conscious agents, whether they express that through economic activity and disciplined participation in civil institutions or by seeking to overturn existing hierarchies and remake society. Second, both conceive of empowerment as a subjective transformation that will lead to concrete forms of action that reflect each model’s analysis of “objective” reality. Third, in each of these models the developmental subject is imagined as in some way incomplete, whether what is perceived as missing is credit and opportunity or self-knowledge and historical agency. Fourthly, all of these ideas rest on the assumption that the human subject is essentially a political or economic—

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<sup>32</sup> Others have also commented on the transformation of the empowerment model from one based on the conscientization paradigm to one reflecting neoliberal norms. See for example Feldman (1997); Fernando (1997); Kabeer (1994); Leve (2001); Tamang (2002). Katherine Rankin has analyzed this shift through the lens of microcredit which she blasts as a governmental strategy that is “all the more pernicious in its approbation of feminist languages...to alternative (and fundamentally conservative) ends” (2001:30).

i.e., not constitutively social—being who is most fully actualized at the moment of greatest autonomy. And finally, this historical agent (or ‘developed’ modern citizen, depending on the discourse) is not usually conceived as someone who lives in a gendered body and thus is implicitly male—even in explicitly feminist analyses.

Some of these points have been criticized as common problems in post-enlightenment political thought (Butler 1992; Haraway 1992; Spivak 1988a; Spivak 1988b). What I wish to emphasize is that they unite thinkers who would otherwise be perceived as politically opposed—and who would certainly not acknowledge themselves as sharing foundational assumptions. The neoliberal and concientization both draw on a Hegelian legacy that looks to the uniform unfolding of an autonomous human consciousness in the direction of greater rationality, transcendence and self-present Subjectivity. Nor are they alone in these assumptions, which structure much of the literature on peasant consciousness and rural politicization.<sup>33</sup> In her critique of peasant consciousness in the work of the Ranajit Guha (1983) and the early Subaltern Studies collective, Gayatri Spivak suggests that, “if the question of female subaltern consciousness is a red herring, the question of subaltern consciousness as such must be judged a red herring as well” (1988a:29).

And indeed it should be.

What we will see in the next section are a series of complex relationships between changing expectations and domestic reproduction, self-confidence and critical consciousness, and self-knowledge and gendered agency in Nepali social life that complicate theories like Freire’s—and Guha’s—which presume a teleological structure of evolving political awareness culminating in an unfettered, ungendered, autonomous (almost autochthonous) Humanity. The experiences and opinions reported by NFE graduates demonstrate that the presumptions about subaltern subjectivity embedded in empowerment theories are critically out of synch with the women I met in Chorigaon.

### **Empowerment and Agency in Chorigaon**

So how did NFE participation affect consciousness and identity? In interviews five and ten years after the conclusion of the program, women reported effects identical to those of many other literacy course graduates in Nepal: greater confidence and increased self-esteem, less shyness interacting with people outside of the family, and an expanded experience of women’s ability to succeed in traditionally male public and intellectual domains. Overall, participants testified to a profound sense of individual and collective transformation. Statements such as “I became accustomed to speaking without feeling shy,” “I’m able to express what I think; I leaned to speak and I learned many other new ideas,” “although we had eyes we were blind before; our eyes were opened

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<sup>33</sup> This is too large an assertion to be demonstrable here, but see for instance Spivak (1988a; 1988b) on Guha and Subaltern Studies, or Laclau and Mouffe (1985) on Marx’s theoretical legacies.

by the ALC,” and “we came out into the light from the darkness in our own homes” may sound dramatic or poetic, but such responses were exceedingly common (Leve 1993). “Before, if daughters or daughters-in-law went to meetings and spoke, people used to say that the hens were crowing. But now we’re allowed to speak in meetings,” Gita told me.

Also, by 2002, almost everyone I spoke with noted that community opinion had shifted to endorse treating sons and daughters equally.

“After beginning education, we came to know that sons and daughters are the same,” Gyan Kumari told me. “Before this only our brothers studied but I know that women can study too.”

“Boys and girls are naturally equal; it’s society that differentiates between them. They are equally able to do the same work,” Ram Maya said.

As a result of these sentiments, participants attested, both sons and daughters go to school today; nor do parents discriminate in providing food or medical care.

“If daughters are educated as much as sons, then they can also look after their parents,” Kamala affirmed, adding that she came to know this after enrolling in the literacy class.

Given that the 24.5% female literacy rate in Gorkha is 3.2 points higher than the national average,<sup>34</sup> and that Gorkha is known even among the rebels as a district where women are especially actively involved, there is a commonsensical quality to the idea that DFA’s programs may have “conscientised young women to choose subsequent empowerment through armed struggle” (Gautam, Banskota, and Manchanda 2001). But the social and political subjectivities that women manifest are more complicated than the theories above would suggest. While powerful development discourses have indeed helped to extend modernist forms of thought throughout rural Nepal—Pigg (1992) and Ahern (2001), for instance, have both illustrated how practices and values associated with “*bikās*” have penetrated rural Nepali consciousness—the forms of subjectivity that development has produced are not the only identities that Nepali women perform.<sup>35</sup> To the contrary, the women I spoke with in Chorigaon conceive of themselves in quintessentially social, relational terms, through relations that are morally inflected, often entail labor obligations and are deeply constitutive of personal identity. In fact, the social rootedness of the women I know makes me wonder whether the utopian freedom of autonomous Subjectivity exists outside of the bourgeois modernist imagination at all!

Let me start with Nani Maya. Nanu, as her friends call her, is in her late twenties, the youngest of three brothers and four sisters from a middle income family in Chorigaon. She is married with two young children and she currently lives with her husband, a sign-painter, in a crowded

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<sup>34</sup> Nepal Human Development Report, 1998.

<sup>35</sup> See Butler (1990; 1993) for a theory of gender as performative action and the link between practice and identity.

quarter of Kathmandu. Nani Maya was in her early teens when she joined the adult literacy course. She'd never been to school, although all of her brothers attended, and she dreamed of studying even as she spent her days fetching water, collecting firewood, cutting grass for the buffalo, and herding the goats—gendered labor that kept her household afloat. When the ALC opened, her parents considered it a waste of time and she was only allowed to go after her brothers intervened on her behalf, and then only after finishing all her regular work. She remembers that she'd often arrive late to the class, hungry and tired. But she enjoyed studying, and she won a public school scholarship at the end of the NFE. At the village school, she passed classes four, five and six in the first division—a major accomplishment for a village girl.

“Even then,” she recalled: “I could hardly find the time. I was 15 years old and had three hours of class every morning and then more in the afternoon. I used to have to finish half my work before the class, and the other half afterward. Somehow I convinced my parents of this schedule... There was no option but to work because...we had lots of animals and some land and my parents couldn't finish the work alone.” Despite this, she found that she could succeed.

When she reached 18, however, her life changed. “There was gossip of my marriage and this affected me a lot.” In fact, she learned, her parents had arranged to marry her to a wealthy widower who was much older than she. “I didn't want to marry at that time,” she explained. “I thought not to marry before [finishing class ten and] passing the S.L.C. (School Leaving Certificate)”:

But my parents were eager to unburden my weight from their shoulders...[they believe that] only if their daughters are married will the parents go to heaven after death. Otherwise there is no chance of paradise. I disagreed strongly. I didn't like that man. He was already married and widowed. I was a young girl (virgin) and I wanted the same. “Why should I marry a widower who isn't well educated and has no personality?” I asked myself.

And on the night before her parents planned to take her to the temple and marry her off, she eloped with a boy she knew from school. He was of the right caste and S.L.C. passed, although from a relatively poor family. Most importantly, he valued her and supported her dreams: “my husband loves me...He helped me very much in my study. He insists on the need for education. He said if I thought there could be any future with him, he was ready to accept me...I ran away from my parents' house for a better future.”

When I last met Nanu in the summer of 2002, we talked at length about the Maoist situation. She hadn't been back to the village in three years. The last time she'd been there, when her husband had returned to see his father on his deathbed, the armed police had mistaken him for a Maoist, which, understandably, terrified her.

I was at home cooking food. Then suddenly Kanchi came running in. “Why are you running inside?” I asked. Then I looked up: there was a man with a gun standing right at the door!

“Is this Dil Kumar's house?” he asked. Then they checked the house from top to bottom. They were from the armed police and they asked “Where's Dil Kumar?” They shouted so loud. Father-in-law had been sleeping. The Maoist movement had just begun.

I said, “Father-in-law is sick and is sleeping. He [her husband] came from Kathmandu to see his father who is seriously ill. He’s gone with our baby to play. I’ll call him.” But the police followed right behind me because they suspected that I might help him run away.

[My husband] was in Kaila Ba’s house. After reaching there, the police said, “Come on, let’s go. Who are you—whose son? How long have you been living in Kathmandu? Why did you come here?” [My husband] said, “I’ve been in Kathmandu for ten years and I came here to take my sick father [for treatment], but in vain.” The police were furious. When he said he was the only son they said, “You’re lying.” And when I said I lived in Kathmandu and not in the village, they said, “You’re lying too!” Then Besar Maila’s son intervened and they beat him. Severely. With their boots, like a football. Then after beating everyone there, they were about to take my husband. He was carrying the baby and he said to them, “Give the baby to her,” to me.

Then I said [to the police], “I told you earlier that our sick father’s sleeping and I showed you. You’re lying! Are we lying? Or are you lying? Whatever you want to do to him, do to me!” And I came in between them so they couldn’t beat my husband.

By then the old men had gathered. They told the police that [my husband] is not like that (i.e., a Maoist). “Who gave you such information? Don’t get angry. He’s not like that; we would have known if he were like that,” they all said. Then the police left, telling him to come to the police post at 8 tomorrow morning. But when went the next day, none of those armed police were there. They’d already left, beating the tailors on the way. The ASI said, “This is the first time that I’m hearing this [her husband’s] name.” We said, “They’ve already come to our home and you’re telling us this!”

If they had taken him at that time, they would’ve killed him. It had only been 15 days since the teacher Gunanidhi—such a nice person—had been killed. Gunanidhi Sir had never gone for any meeting nor done anything....Such a person was taken from his bed and killed near the river. His wife was asked to come the next day with his clothes. She went to the police post. Then when she asked, “where is my husband?” they said, “we don’t know.” When she got back to her home she came to know from some cowherd boys who saw him lying dead. He had been shot from behind. After that, she hasn’t received any support from anywhere. The Maoists didn’t kill him and the police deny it....

After all that, when I think of the village, I don’t want to go....If they’d taken him away at that time, they would have killed him.

Given such an experience, it’s hardly surprising that Nani Maya has lost faith in the promises of conventional democracy—“*prajatantra*,” or “rule of the subjects,” in Nepali—or that she leans toward the Maoists, who, with their promises of social equality, economic opportunity and honest government, have come, to her, to represent those goals. After democracy was declared in 1990, she told me, she’d expected “that there would be good facilities in the village, that there would be justice, that working people would get to work, and that there wouldn’t be suppression (*daman*) and exploitation (*upayog*) anymore.” Instead, she’s found, “the opposite has happened”:

Now the ones with power can do anything...and if anyone is doing good work others pull their legs to drag them down. They say that she’s doing good work and shouldn’t be allowed to do so...There was an idea that people would become free/independent (*swatantra*) following democracy but no such event has occurred.<sup>36</sup>

Yet, though her hopes are with the rebels, she would in any case settle for peace:

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<sup>36</sup> Nanu’s disillusionment with democracy was widely shared. “Democracy has done nothing but kill...people,” Ram Maya lamented. Similarly, Sobita felt, “it’s due to democracy that we have no peace....In my thinking the multiparty system has not fulfilled anyone’s desires or expectations....We thought there would be development, but now the works have either been stopped, destroyed, or burnt down. Democracy has invited violence and killings, it seems.”

If the King could run the government properly then these problems could be resolved. Or if the Maoists run the government...then those who eat by doing their duty (*kartavya*)—there would be no problem of food and clothing for those who do their duty—the government would take care of them. The rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. The poor are dying on every side. But if the conflict could be resolved it would not have to be like this.

This feeling, that democracy has made poor people’s lives more tenuous, rather than increasing their security was widely shared and widely condemned. The phrase that is translated as “people who eat by doing their duty” suggests submission to a combination of necessity, obligation and fate. Nanu’s implication is that the people who have suffered most under democracy are those who work to stay alive (as opposed to those who live “having fun,” as we will see below). If such people do as they must—as they are obliged by the conditions of life—she feels they should at least be able to feed themselves and their families for their efforts (“no problem of food and clothing”). Her words suggest that a democracy that harms hardworking people while “the ones with power can do anything” is not the kind of development that she expected.

Another woman, Gita, echoes aspects of this. “After multiparty democracy was established, I thought, let there be development (*bikāś*) in the country. Let everyone get equal opportunity. But instead, development works have stopped. Instead of building, they have destroyed...buildings, hospitals, bridges, drinking water, electricity and roads. So rather than development, destruction has increased!”

At another point in the conversation, she linked these expectations to women and values developed in the ALC:

After studying, women started to learn many things, that we too have rights and that women have been dominated by men...[When democracy came,] I had hoped for equality. But what sort of development do we have now? The development is in killings only!

When asked what could be done to bring about peace, close to half the women interviewed wished that the government would agree to the Maoists’ 40 Point Demands which include inheritance rights for women, abolishing exploitation based on caste and ethnicity, special protections for orphans, disabled persons and the elderly, and the provision of employment opportunities for all, in addition to forgiving rural agricultural debt, redistributing land ‘to the tiller’ and other more familiar Marxist demands (Karki and Seddon 2003b) Women in and from Chorigaon repeatedly insisted that their greatest wish was peace. But although they identified economic crisis as a source of popular discontent, for them, this indicated a moral problem as much or more than a problem of technical governance. Not a single person suggested that the government could bring peace by crushing the Maoists militarily. Instead, about 40% of interviewees said, in more or less these very words: “the government (*sarkār*) must fulfill the demands (*āvasyak* or *māṅg*) of the people (*janatā*).”

Jamuna Devi was particularly adamant on this theme. “People’s distress and their difficulties need to be understood. . . . Poor people should be on top and the ruling rich people should be lower. Only when there is justice for the distressed will the people have trust (*bishvās*) [in the state]. The government must fulfill the Maoists’ demands.”

On women-specific issues, however, her thoughts were more contradictory. She gave dowry (*daijo*) at her elder daughter’s marriage, she said, so that her daughter would be appreciated and not “have to tolerate harsh words in her home.” But “I felt very bad while giving it,” she confessed. She wondered about the devaluation of women the practice implies and shared her feelings of injustice and loss: “I gave him my daughter and I also gave property. Then I have no daughter to work and no property either and I’m left vulnerable [as if naked] with both my daughter and my property gone!”

Despite this particular gender critique, however, Jamuna was firm in her approval of the menstrual taboos that bar women from touching men, or preparing food or water during their periods and from entering the house during that time. “I obey this rule very strictly because this is our women’s custom. I will never abandon this tradition,” she said. When I observed that rebels are said to give up these observances and suggested that these practices may put women at risk—for instance, a local woman had almost died after a tiger smelled blood and attacked her in the night while she was asleep outside of her home—Jamuna responded by listing all the things that had changed:

Today’s women can do all kinds of work. In the past, we used to eat and wear whatever we were given, but nowadays girls want to eat good food and wear good clothes. . . . A difference has come from knowing how to read and write. Husbands, mothers-in-law, guardians are also human beings. We came to know that we didn’t need to treat them like gods [a reference to bowing to them] only after the literacy class. . . . [Similarly, we now know] daughters may be able to study high and stand free/independent (*swatantra*) on their own feet. . . . But this is our women’s custom and I won’t give it up.

There is clearly something about this ritual for Jamuna that indexes an essential part of her feminine identity. I will return to this below. For now, suffice it to note that even women who value equality don’t necessarily wish to do away with practices that mark gender difference or sexual identity, especially differences that they don’t see as exploitative but that mark the genders as distinct.

Let me conclude this section by introducing Bina, one of DFA’s most dramatic success stories. Unschooled until she joined the adult literacy course as a young teenager, she is now married (to a policeman), with a son and a daughter, as well as a paying job of her own. She’s been working practically since she left school. Before taking her current position at a police academy in Kathmandu, she worked for the government’s community health program in her village, as an adult literacy instructor there, and, for two years, at the district hospital. In the village, she was active in development (president of her women’s group, member of the forest committee and a drinking water project group) and recognized as a local leader. “Although there were people who had passed the S.L.C. in that place, they used to see me as someone who can speak, and whenever there was any

work in that area they used to call me,” she explained. “They’d tell me that such and such a fight has taken place and then I had to go and resolve it.”

As the wife of a policeman and someone employed by a police academy herself, Bina regrets that she can’t return to the village nowadays:

When there was no conflict, I used to go to the village once a month. I love the village. I miss it very much. I have so much to do there.... I’m living here [in the city] only because I’m compelled to. Otherwise I’d prefer to be there.

But although she fears for her life and works for the police, she is sympathetic to the insurrection.

In our village there are nine people in the police and the army. The Maoists organized a mass meeting in the village and they read out these nine names. “These people shouldn’t serve in the police and army,” they said. “Ask them to leave. Instead, tell us how much salary they need; we will provide it.” I came to know that they said that. “Otherwise, we know where they are and we will kill them.”

What can we do? It’s difficult. We have to educate our children. If we’d been educated well we wouldn’t be facing so much trouble (*chintā*), would we? Who wouldn’t want to live having fun (*mojmajjā*)? No one wants to face such pain (*dukkha*), do they?....At night when we sleep in our room, if someone knocks on the door we feel they’ve come to kill us. That’s the kind of fear we live with....

What they [the Maoists] are doing is good. They’re doing it for us. It’s very good to say that rich and poor will be the same. We’re scared because they will kill us because of our jobs, and it shouldn’t be like that. We are doing these jobs because we have to. Otherwise, though, they’re not bad. Actually, if police/army recruits die and if Maoists die, it’s the same—all are sons and daughters of Nepal. But they aren’t fighting for personal interest (*afno sukha, phaida*). They’re fighting hoping for something for the future of the country. They’re fighting without any salary, but we’re fighting for our self-interest. In a way, we’re selfish (*svārthi*). Because if we don’t have a job we won’t be able to feed our kids, so we’ve become involved. But they don’t get a salary. They’re fighting knowing that they may die today or tomorrow. We’re fighting for our own self-interest and they’re fighting for the country.

In these comments, Bina introduces two key oppositions that structure her own and many other women’s moral thought: self-interest verses being for others, and pain and trouble (*dukkha, chintā*) verses ease and having fun (*mojmajjā, sukha*).

Kathryn March finds this second pattern among Tamang women in an area she calls Stupahill as well. One of the most characteristic aspects of Tamang self-representation, she writes, is that “life stories are told as hanging in the balance between *dukka* and *sukha*”:

Dukka is suffering: it is the physical hurt of illness, hunger, cold, or injury; it is the weight of knowing the fears, worries, wrongs, and obligations of life; and it is the sorrow, sadness, melancholy, or grief at being unable to forget hurt and hardship. Sukha is the opposite: it is the ease and comfort of health, food, warmth, clothing, and companionship; it is the feeling of uncomplicated pleasure; it is the purest as a happiness unaware even of its own good fortune. Every woman I interviewed located her life overall, and the events in her own narrative, in relation to dukka and sukha (2002:36).

Obviously anyone who’s expected to wake every day before the cock crows, clean out the cowshed, gather grass for the buffalo, and come home and make tea before anyone else is out of bed is likely

to agree that pleasure and ease are preferable to work.<sup>37</sup> But while empowerment theories track consciousness versus unconsciousness, agency versus alienation, “Subjectivity” versus “subalternity,” and choice versus constraint, the women above evaluate their lives in these other, perhaps more prosaic, terms. And the freedom (*swatantra*) to which they aspire is neither as limited as enhanced agency, nor as disembodied as pure Subjectivity. Based on my interviews, few of Chorigaon’s neoliterate women would want to be either born-again revolutionaries (Freire’s “new men”) or super market citizens (with a world of choice at their fingertips). Instead, they ask for fun, ease, security, equality of opportunity (including access to education and employment), respect for their desires, and adequate (or better, high quality) food and clothing as rewards for their hard work.<sup>38</sup> In fact, while the specific rules that Jamuna appreciates as the embodied ritual practices of womanhood (“our women’s custom”) are changing today, the idea that there are practices that make (social) people is not. And most of the people I know from Chorigaon would not want to be disengendered—i.e., socially disaggregated—individuals at all.<sup>39</sup>

### **Gendered Personhood, Generic Humanity and Women’s Suffering as Subjectivizing Force**

Talal Asad’s thoughts on the origins of secular personhood can help us unpack the implications of these observations. Beginning from the reflection that “modern projects do not hang together as an integrated totality,” but that “they do account for distinctive sensibilities, aesthetics [and] moralities,” Asad suggests that “what is distinctive about modernity *as a historical epoch* includes modernity as a political economic project” which “mediates people’s identities, helps shape their sensibilities and guarantees their experiences” (2003:14, emphasis in original).

What, precisely, might these identities, sensibilities and experiences be? Here, Asad looks to the problem of the subject. Noting the historical shifts in conceptual grammar and material life that have made it possible for secular forms of self and personhood to emerge, he observes that modernist thought presumes an “essential freedom” or “natural sovereignty” to the human subject, and that interests and desires arise from this autonomous internal space.

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<sup>37</sup> As Sita described the start of an average day in the village for a daughter-in-law.

<sup>38</sup> “Development” (*bikās*) might also be placed on this list. If so—again based on their testimonies—it would include water taps, electricity, bridges and roads, and peace.

<sup>39</sup> None of these goals are necessarily revolutionary. Indeed, there may be a clue here to whom in Gorkha joins the Maoists and in what ways. Bina frames the difference between the combatants on the two sides in terms of selfishness versus renunciation and praises the rebels as brave. But another way to look at it might be to acknowledge that joining the cadres in the jungle is indeed stepping into a new kind of social identity, which is not a universal goal. This would help to explain why so many adolescents in Gorkha have been drawn to the cause. It would also suggest that villagers who support them but are not Maoists themselves make a distinction between the rebels as those who fight for social justice and “pure” Maoist ideology.

Characteristically, Asad links these ideas to power—in this case, theories that posit power as external to the subject—and to a post-enlightenment “historical project whose aim is the increasing triumph of individual autonomy” (2003:71). He argues on this basis that the movement towards “freedom from all coercive control” is rather, as Schild (2000) suggested, just another form of subjectification: “The paradox inadequately appreciated here is that the self to be liberated from external control must be subjected to the control of a liberating self already and always free, aware and in control of its own desires” (2003:73). Empowerment then “becomes a metaphysical quality defining human agency, its objective as well as its precondition (2003:79).<sup>40</sup> Finally, he concludes that cultural theory—and here I would include development models as well—“tends to reduce [human subjectivity] to the...idea of a conscious agent-subject having both the capacity and the desire to move in a singular historical direction: that of increasing self-empowerment and decreasing pain” (2003:79).

These comments go some distance towards explaining the theoretical assumptions that we examined above. However, in reality, Asad argues, pain is not simply a biologically-rooted experience that humans naturally and necessarily wish to overcome. To the contrary, it is also shaped by and rooted in particular social contexts, some of which can make it profoundly meaningful:

what a subject experiences and how...*are themselves modes of living a relationship*. The ability to live such relationships over time transforms pain from a passive experience into an active one and thus defines one of the ways of living sanely in the world. It does not follow, of course, that one cannot or should not seek to reform the social relations one inhabits, still less that pain is intrinsically a valuable thing. [But] the progressive model of agency diverts attention away from our trying to understand how this is done in different traditions, because of the assumption that the agent always seeks to overcome pain conceived as object and state of passivity” (2003:84, emphasis in original).

In other words, “*as a social relationship*, pain is more than an experience. It is part of what creates the conditions of action and experience.” (2003:85, italics mine) And, I would add, identity.

Among women in Chorigaon, as throughout Nepal, certain types of pain and suffering are absolutely condemned—particularly that suffering caused by other people’s selfishness, thoughtlessness or greed<sup>41</sup> But in other situations, painful struggle is seen as a normal, even normative, aspect of a proper woman’s life; indeed, it is through certain types of suffering that the adult feminine subjectivity is produced.

For women, marriage—the active practice of forging or reproducing social relations— is a socially, morally and materially subjectifying event, a juncture where the force of power becomes

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<sup>40</sup> Moreover, he adds: “Agency means the self-ownership of the individual to whom extreme power always signifies a potential threat” (Asad 2003).

<sup>41</sup>For instance, the suffering of a women whose husband abandons her for another wife, the bride of an alcoholic who spends the family’s money on drink and not food, shopkeepers who cheat illiterates when making change, money lenders who charge exorbitant interest rates or mother-in-laws who work their daughter-in-laws to the bone while they or their own daughters relax and take it easy.

clearly visible in their lives. Bennett records that her Brahmin-Chhetri Hindu informants spoke of it as a women’s sacred duty (*dharma*)(1983:174-5).<sup>42</sup> And many ethnographers have observed that this forcible separation from the comfort of their natal homes in order to join a household of strangers in the least autonomous and most onerous domestic role is *the* defining experience of Nepali womanhood (Des Chene 1998; Desjarlais 2003; McHugh 2001). Not surprisingly under the circumstances, this movement is paradigmatically described as a transition from *sukha* to suffering, from freedom to domination, indulgence to deprivation, easier tasks to harder work. In practice, of course, it is not always this simple and many women spoke of miserable childhoods and/or happy married lives. But even in a Hindu-Buddhist religio-cultural setting, where a generalized experience of suffering is accepted as the last word on human life, it is taken for granted that women’s lives are especially filled with *dukkha* due to this dislocation, dependence, hard work and the pain of childbirth. Moreover, this is not limited by region or ethnic group: the idea that women suffer more than men is pervasive throughout Nepal.

An important consequence of this situation is that come to women actualize themselves in the process of living these constraints. Suffering being common to all, it is the specifics of each woman’s experience—her chance to study or lack thereof, the hunger she survived, the husband she was given, the children that she lost—that defines her social persona and makes her life unique.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, it’s through the particular ways that each woman manages the *dukkha* she is dealt that individuals exercise agency and claim social respectability. As Desjarlais notes in his analysis of a Kisang Omu’s, a Yolmo woman’s, life history, the choices that a women makes throughout her life will reflect on her, her siblings, her forebears and her descendents so there is tremendous pressure to act in culturally “skillful” ways that indicate moral knowledge as well as individual creativity.

“Our lives are like links in a chain,” Kisang told him (2003:136). After marriage, after women “grow up,” “we need to eat. So I needed to tend the potatoes. I needed to do the work. Without work, we cannot eat. What to do? Sorrow means that, it turns out” (2003:114). Appearing inside an extended discussion of her marriage and the pain of moving from her father’s home to a faraway place, these words reflect on the ways that social, moral and material realities come together in the construction of female subjectivity. Despite her unhappiness at discovering that her father had arranged her marriage, Kisang emphasized that she didn’t shame her family by refusing or running away. And in this way, she says, she became herself: “What to do then? My elders sent me [in marriage]. Such is the fate of the daughters...*In that way, I became like this*. Nevertheless, it became nice” (2003:131, emphasis mine).

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<sup>42</sup> I heard this many times in Chorigaon as well and the expression always spoke of its inevitability as well as recognizing that it meant suffering.

<sup>43</sup> See also March (2002).

We can see similar subjective patterns and moral expectations in the narratives of the women from Chorigaon given above. I have already stressed that Nani Maya eloped only after she judged that her parents and brothers had betrayed their socio-ethical responsibility to her by arranging to give her to a wealthy man for their own advantage, rather than respecting her wish to continue to study or pairing her with an appropriate partner of her own age. I would add that despite her unorthodox love marriage, she takes her duty as a daughter-in-law as a matter of pride, for which reason she stayed on in the village to help her aging mother-in-law with the heavy work of carrying water, collecting firewood and cutting grass long after her husband had left to find wage work in the city. When she tells her life story, she relates it as a narrative of suffering wherein she was wronged by her parents, her brothers, and the society’s expectations for—and exploitation of—girls and women. But in her telling, she has always responded properly and responsibly, the way a good daughter/daughter-in-law should.<sup>44</sup>

The sacrifices associated with marriage and adulthood prompted social and ethical negotiations for Bina too:

In the hills, a daughter has to get married after she grows up. She has to go to another home.... I was 15/16 when I got married.... I may have forced [my parents] to let me study, but then I was compelled.

In our home, the tradition is that you get married before menstruation....If you’re married before menstruation, it’s called *kanyadān* (the gift of a virgin) and they say that [giving *kanyadān* inspires divine reward]....[I passed class 7 living at my sisters’ home, helping with her children and going to school] and I had already begun the menstrual period. Then my younger brother, father and mother discussed it. I said, I will marry only after passing my S.L.C. But my elder brother said, “No, you get married. I’ll make them pledge to you to stay here for two years and complete your studies. But you get married now.”

She rejected this idea:

It’s an impossible thing to study after getting married. You have to work in the morning and at night after becoming a daughter-in-law. When will you study? But my elder brother forced me. “You have to marry,” he said.... “If you’re not marrying [according to our will], then we won’t send you to school. Do what you like!” they said.

The boy who had come to ask for me was doing his BA.... “The boy doesn’t drink and gamble, and you have to marry him,” was what my parents said. My elder brother said, “if you don’t marry with that boy then I’ll never tell you to get married. Go wherever you like and do whatever you want!” After he said that, I didn’t stay with him. I came to Kathmandu to stay with my younger brother.... [But even in Kathmandu], people kept coming to ask for me. My third sister had come to know about her marriage only three or four days after it had all been decided [and she didn’t know anything about the man until after the wedding]....At that time, I had said, “if you give me like that I’ll never marry,” which is why my parents consulted me. Actually, I’m the only one who’s studied to class seven/eight in my family—my younger brother only studied to class three/four.... My parents said, “She is educated and not like the other sisters and if she commits suicide, what will we do?” So fearing that I might commit suicide, they asked for my permission. But I said no.

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<sup>44</sup> See Ahern (Ahern 2001) for a sensitive ethnographic study of changing marriage practices and how development discourse has created moral tensions associate with emergent forms of subjectivities associated with individualistic accomplishments such as “success” and “love.”

Despite this, she acknowledges, she was ultimately unable to impose her will:

But after I came to Kathmandu, I got married anyway. He is my brother’s wife’s niece’s son. People continued coming to my brother and asking for his sister’s hand. Then my brother said, “Everyone is coming asking for you. You have to marry one.” Maybe my time had come. I couldn’t say no. I got married in Kathmandu and after I’d lived here for one year and I had my daughter in my womb I went back to the village. And life in the village was fun (*majjā*).

From *sukha* to *dukkha* to *majjā* (mixed now with *dukkha*), the events surrounding Bina’s marriage illustrate her initial resistance to marriage and the life changes it would bring as well as her eventual acceptance of what she now thinks of as the ultimately inevitable (“maybe my time had come”).

One way to look at this story is to focus on the relations and identities that come into play. At all points in the narrative, Bina expected to get married and she expected to marry someone her family proposed. From her reference to the religious rewards that accrue in the ritual of *kanyadān* to her brother’s threat to end their relationship if she refused to go as he proposed to give (“If you don’t marry with that boy then I’ll never tell you to get married. Go wherever you like and do whatever you want!”), it is clear that her family members saw her marriage as a collective concern, with her role as a family member assumed to take precedence over her identity as the bride. As an educated daughter, her parents made some accommodation to her exceptional status (and perhaps, force of will). But no one assumed that her life was hers to contract as she wished; her only respectable option for escaping social power was the last resort of suicide.<sup>45</sup>

In evaluating this version of events, however, we must also take care to read between the lines. For while Bina frames her story in terms of external power and personal resistance/accommodation—which is the expected, and respectable, way for women to narrate the events leading up to marriage in Nepal<sup>46</sup>—in fact, the family negotiated a compromise: Bina married within the bounds of normative convention and she returned to the village to live with her mother-in-law. But she effectively selected her husband herself. Moreover, when she chose her husband, she also chose her mother-in-law, the person whose support or disapproval would most immediately affect her happiness or suffering for the next years of her life. In her who would support her throughout her married life. When she says that she married her “brother’s wife’s niece’s son,” therefore, she

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<sup>45</sup> Much of this discussion echoes analyses that feminist theorists and anthropologists working with women in South Asia have been saying for decades, of course. See for example, Des Chene (1998); Roy (1992 (1972)); Kumar (1994); Skinner (1998); McHugh (2001); March (2002); Chodorow (1989); Enslin (1998). This also parallels a more general debate about the relative individuality versus inter-dependence of Hindu South Asian ideas of the person as a whole (Appadurai 1986; Daniel 1984; Dirks 1987; Dirks 1992; Dumont 1970; Marriott 1989; Marriott and Inden 1977; Mines 1994).

<sup>46</sup> It is expected that a bride will cry at her wedding and refuse to leave with the groom. Not to do so would be considered surprising and, for many, shameless. Yet, although parents say it hurts them to give their daughters away and know that hardship that is likely in store, the suffering that women experience in their new homes is an inevitable part of the next stage of their lives, i.e., growing up and being a woman. It is said to be something that every woman goes through.

indicates two things: one, that he was from an appropriate marriage pool and approved by her family, and two, that she knew, or had reliable ways of getting information about his mother. If she’d married into a different family, they might have demanded that she limit her public activities and confine herself to the fields and her home—in which case her life in the village would surely have been a whole lot less fun! Having accepted the situation of marriage, she did what she was expected to do as her family’s daughter in the eyes of society. But she also found a solution that would be bearable for her, allowing her to do what she liked to do and actualize herself in a way she enjoyed, and still be a respectable daughter and daughter-in-law.

When I was working at the Community Health Program, I went for a 15 day training. If I’d been a daughter-in-law in another household then people would have gossiped. I was the only daughter-in-law from the area going there. But [my mother-in-law] had no such feeling, even when others used to say things. In the village, it happens that there are people who were jealous that I was working. But if anyone said anything, she would say, “So what’s wrong? My son’s okay with it and I’m okay with it, so why are you concerned about it?”.... She was very helpful....Boys and girls would come to see me to talk about community affairs and she would come to the field to call me and stay there while I met them at the house. She never thought, “What is this—my daughter-in-law is sitting and talking with other boys!”.... If she hadn’t been like that, I wouldn’t have come here....After attending the adult literacy class...I’ve done it all.

What would it mean to say that Bina was empowered by the literacy class? What would it mean to say that she was not? These stories illustrate how the experiences of certain forms of social suffering constitute people as specific kinds of human subjects. To refuse this or to respond to it in inappropriate ways (such as by refusing to do the work expected or leaving a non-abusive husband for another man) is to put oneself outside of normative gender roles and, depending on the case, to court social sanction. In other words, it’s not to act like a woman.<sup>47</sup> And this is objectionable not primarily because defiance is condemned *per se*, but because social reproduction hangs on women’s physical and emotional work. The *dukkha*—and *dharma* (duty)—of carrying water, cutting grass, cultivating crops and so on is inescapably tied to the *dukkha* and *dharma* of social relations. This does not mean that people won’t seek to minimize unpleasant obligations and maximize fun whenever possible—given, of course, that, as March’s informant, Jyomo, put it, “if the work doesn’t get done, no one eats” (2002:133). Nor does it mean that women generically lack agency to negotiate conditions of their lives and their work. In fact, there are numerous cultural mechanisms that give individuals what we might think of as wiggling room<sup>48</sup>—as Bina’s flight from one brother’s house to another’s shows (notably, this show of resistance would also have offered her brother a way of refusing an otherwise respectable offer without offending the family from which it came). Social and

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<sup>47</sup> The Maoists know this, which is why they preach against custom, culture, and tradition in absolute and totalizing terms.

<sup>48</sup> Das has illustrated the difference between formal kinship rules and what she calls “practical kinship” and shown how the flexibility of kinship in practice offers individuals and communities options—sometimes necessary for survival—that often do not “officially” exist (1995).

material labor are both necessary if families are to reproduce themselves and individuals are to eat and both are inescapably intertwined with the suffering that women are, in most cases, expected to bear. The alternative is considered selfish individualism.

### **Conclusion: Political Consciousness and the Development (*Bikāse*) Ideal**

On a superficial reading, the testimonies I’ve gathered here do little to undercut the “failed development” model; in fact, they might seem to provide strong support for it. When the women I interviewed talked about development (*bikās*) they certainly did not see it as a form of violence; rather, they associated violence with its absence. This was striking because they were almost certainly familiar with Maoist arguments that did indeed frame development as a form of violence. It was even more striking because almost all of them were skeptical—if not downright cynical—about democracy. When I asked women what they hoped to see happen in their communities in upcoming years, the number two answer—after “peace”—was development. No one I spoke to explicitly criticized development as an ideal. Although people mentioned broken infrastructure and rich people’s corruption as specific problems (and off the record, I learned a lot about local resentments about what were perceived as unequal distributions of the opportunities for income and upward mobility that specific projects brought), most everyone expressed the desire to see roads, bridges, electricity, schools and hospitals and more income-generating activities come to their area—and, at least in the language game that we played together—no one even challenged the modernization ideal.<sup>49</sup>

On some level, all of this is simply obvious. Just as one doesn’t need elaborate social theory to explain why women who work twelve hour days might wish to lead an easier life, it doesn’t take much imagination to understand why farmers in an inaccessible rural district might wish their children to have access to a modern hospital. Who wouldn’t? The failed development paradigm, however, is an attempt to understand why revolutionary movements receive popular support. Or, to put it more specifically in this context, to understand why rural women, even those who do not consider themselves Maoists and who make it clear they hate the violence and everything that has come with it, nonetheless blame politicians (‘democracy’) for the fact that the violence is happening, and not the Maoists themselves. It’s here—at the point where the failed development paradigm is no longer simply stating the obvious—that I would argue it is genuinely dangerous, because it brings

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<sup>49</sup> Two things here: One is the possibility that people were simply being polite to me as they associated me with DFA and the development enterprise, or they hoped, despite reservations they might have, that I could bring back DFA projects that would reinvigorate the local economy (although it’s hard to imagine they expected that the Maoists would allow this.). Also, one could argue that they did in fact actually challenge the ideal in a host of practical ways, such as insisting on taking their teenage daughters out of school to get married, etc. But if people were aware of these actions as acts of resistance they certainly didn’t speak of it to me and I’m dubious that they recognize resistance to development as an objective meaning or even implication of these practices as a whole.

with it a whole host of tacit assumptions about what people are like and what they ought to want from life that have very little to do with these women’s actual lives or what they find important in them. In fact, I would argue that almost everyone vying to influence or understand these women—foreign academics, NGO workers, government counterinsurgency advisors, or Maoist theoreticians—share the same flawed assumptions.

So why do people rebel? Perhaps some of the Maoist appeal is related to the dialectic of pleasure and suffering, and its intersection with the moral economy that I have described. In an argument that reflects a Gramscian turn to engagement with culture and popular consciousness, James Scott has proposed that peasants revolt when their sense of social justice is violated and that this is typically when their ability to reproduce themselves—what he proposes they perceive as an implicit “right to subsistence”—is threatened. This argument is exceptional for both its creativity and its pragmatism; unlike related efforts to rethink agrarian political consciousness, Scott neither rejects the “false consciousness” of local knowledge for the political-economic wisdom of the revolutionary vanguard<sup>50</sup> nor falls into the teleological logic of theories about the emergence or pre-emergence of political (read, class) consciousness at all.

The concept of false consciousness overlooks the very real possibility that the actor’s “problem” is not simply one of misperception. It overlooks the possibility that he may, in fact, have his own durable standards of equity and exploitation—standards that lead him to judgments about his situation which are quite different from those of an outside observer equipped with deductive theory. To put it bluntly, the actor may have his own moral economy. If this is the case, the failure of his views to accord with theory is not due to his inability to see things clearly, but to his values. Of course, one may choose to call these values a form of false consciousness as well. But, to the extent that they are rooted in the actor’s existential needs, to the extent that they are resistant to efforts at “reeducation,” to the extent that they continue to define the situation for him, it is they and not the theory which serves as reliable guides to his sentiments and behavior. (1976:160)

Substitute “she” for “he” here and you have a lot of my own argument. However, I don’t think the difference is insignificant. The fact that the question I inherited has to do with the revolutionary agency of women makes it easy to see problems of difference and hence the importance of developing a gender-sensitive lens. At the same time, though, I am not simply—or even particularly—offering a critique of gender-blindness in the failed development hypothesis. Rather, I’m trying to understand how theories of rural empowerment and political consciousness reproduce ideological projects—most particularly the one that sees modernity as a historical process—by representing the modernist ideal of autonomous self and the quest for absolute freedom (of the market citizen?) from all kinds of social constraints as the essence of human subjectivity itself. Gender specificity forces us to confront the more general problem of how we understand and theorize *people*.

In insisting that rebellions may be less matters of consciousness and more matters of morality, and that subsistence and politics meet in the realm of values, Scott’s thesis reaches directly to the heart of why the Gorkhali women I worked with give the Maoists their support. It does not

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<sup>50</sup> For a further development of this theme, see Scott (1998), *Seeing Like a State*.

necessarily answer the question of why some people become Maoists by joining the rebel fighters in the forests, however. And there is also the question of how moral economies intersect with developmental ideologies—including the ideology of conscientization—that the “failed” (and “successful”) development question raises.

This question is too large to take on here, but I’ll mention two related hypotheses. Saubhagya Shah has proposed that one effect of the recent development rhetoric of participation is that it has created the “paradoxical subject position of agents without an agency” (2002). Similarly, Judith Pettigrew suggests that “participation in the Maoists enables village youth to participate in a new type of modernity”:

Young villagers see themselves and are seen as marginal to the “good and proper life” (McHugh 2001) offered by town living and enjoyed by those with the money to re-locate. By taking up the Maoist option, they no longer have to look to the town and ‘foreign’ to be ‘at the heart of the action.’ Membership in the Maoists re-configures perceptions of a consumerist world that excludes them. (2003)

Pettigrew is speaking here of the young people who actually do decide to become guerillas, and hence, new kinds of subjects, accepting the total cutting off from older forms of social relation that this decision implies.<sup>51</sup> But even here, whatever decisions people make, or perhaps better put, whatever commitments they decide to undertake, these come from thinking of themselves as people who are constituted through relations with others and who value the reciprocity (read: opposite of selfishness, recall how much Bina valued the Maoists for being unselfish in comparison to herself) that this sociality/relatedness implies. In fact, if one is thinking specifically of the perspective of young village women, one might note that the experience of going off to a Maoist training camp might not actually be as radical a break from expectations as one might think: after all, they are fully expected, at that age, to undergo a major life change that will involve leaving their natal home for a place where they will live under others’ orders, endure hardships and suffering, to do it in the name of a selfless commitment to others, but at the same time, to become more complete people as a result. The main difference, perhaps, is that the Maoist option involves a higher degree of physical danger, but at the same time, also, greater opportunities for fun.

This paper, then, is not really meant to provide simple answers. Instead, what I’ve tried to do is to convey something of what I understand to have happened in and since the literacy course and to connect this and Gorkhali women’s notorious radicalization to a sense of what was important to them and what sort of people they thought and think themselves to be, and to take that seriously enough to consider what it might mean to reexamine our own theoretical assumptions in that light. As the war in Nepal rages—and as development continues to figure into security strategy for the U.S.—it seems

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<sup>51</sup> Hisala Yami, wife of Dr. Baburam Bhattarai and former head of the Women’s Front, has been quoted as doubting that women, once radicalized, can ever return to their pre-Maoist homes. “Sons will be welcomed back with open arms, but for the daughters, can there be a return? When they become guerillas, the women set themselves free from patriarchal bonds. How can they go back? That is why, the women are more committed” (Gautam, Banskota and Machanda 2003:109).

important, more than ever perhaps, to interrogate critical assumptions about the relations between development, justice, empowerment and security, and to bring rural people, policy makers and academicians into dialogue.

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