# Fluid City, Solid State: Urban Environmental Territory in a State of Emergency, Kathmandu

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## Abstract

*This paper addresses the relationship between contemporary territorial processes of statemaking and the fluidity associated with globalizing cities. Focused on the remaking of urban environmental space during a period of political emergency in Kathmandu, the paper examines how state power was sustained and articulated through the production of urban environmental forms, and shows how particular modes of violence and governance were enabled in urban environmental territory. Through an analysis of beautification initiatives undertaken in concert with preparations for a major regional trade conference, I argue that urban environmental productions are critical for understanding the semiotics, multiple scales, and materialities of statemaking in twenty-first century cities. [Keywords: environment, state, emergency, Kathmandu, Nepal].*

## Introduction: statemaking in urban environments

Just over a month after a state of emergency was declared in Nepal,[1] Kathmandu hosted the eleventh meeting of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), an alliance of national governments that promotes free trade and regional cooperation.[2] In the weeks leading up to the SAARC Conference, citizens of emergency-bound Kathmandu witnessed a massive beautification campaign involving extensive housing demolitions and rapid construction of new urban parks. Urban environmental changes were officially framed as integral to an appropriate welcome for regional leaders, but they also functioned as highly symbolic assertions of national territorial control in a capital city at the center of an increasingly contingent state. The close coincidence of the emergency and SAARC regional meetings facilitated an

apparent conflation of the two, blurring boundaries between motives and audiences, and enabling particular logics of territorial and governmental control. The changes in the urban landscape implemented during this period provide a useful case for exploring the primacy of environmental territory in the semiotics of statemaking.

Despite longstanding theoretical discussions of "nature-cultures" (Haraway 1991; 1997; Latour 1993; Demerritt 1994; Swyngedouw 1996), urban and environmental subfields in anthropology have largely maintained a conceptual boundary between studies of cities and studies of the environment. While anthropological engagement with the urban context foregrounds issues like the politics of place (Hansen 2001; Baviskar 2003), concerns over segregation and citizenship (Holston and Appadurai 1999; Low 2003), urban governmentality (Scott 1998; Chatterjee 2004), and cultures of consumption and class formation (O'Dougherty 2002; Mazzarella 2003; Liechty 2003), it rarely relates these issues to ideas and practices of nature and the environment. Similarly, while scholarship in environmental anthropology has engaged issues like development and statemaking (Baviskar 1995; Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Mosse and Sivan 2003), modern ecology and territoriality (Vandergeest and Peluso 1995; Saberwal 1999; Brosius and Russell 2003), the formation of environmental subjects (Agrawal 2005), and the historical production of ideas and imaginaries of nature (Grove 1989; Peet and Watts 1996), it has rarely sought its subject – the environment – in cities. Instead, environmental anthropology tends to locate "the environment" almost exclusively in the rural, the countryside, or the agrarian context.

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Since the place of nature is rarely self-evident or automatic in cities, anthropological analyses can make crucial contributions to understanding at least two facets of urban environments. First, we can explore why the production of the environment[3] is important in specific cities at specific moments; second, we can ask why environmental productions are important in any city. In this paper, I address the former question by considering how environmental territory in Nepal's capital city was claimed and shaped in a time of political emergency. Toward addressing the second, I examine how power was sustained and articulated through the production of urban environmental forms, showing how particular modes of violence and governance were enabled in urban environmental territory.

Although environmental productions in the form of beautification will likely strike readers as a somewhat unsurprising undertaking for a state seeking to cultivate or reinscribe its legitimacy (Tarlo 2002; Greenough 2003), the Kathmandu case is instructive insofar as it underlines a particular moment, and way, in which environmental territory was delineated. The coincidence of the SAARC Conference and the emergency gave the performance of urban environmental control unusual symbolic power for audiences at multiple scales. As I

will demonstrate, new environmental territories gave spatial articulation to the limits of the state's previous experiment with democratization for a Nepali audience, while for regional SAARC dignitaries they performed state resilience in a time of uncertain sovereignty. Of note in this multi-scaled resonance is the way that urban environmental territory was used to articulate the boundaries of nation-state governance, while forging connectivity between the nation-state and the region.

The work of producing urban environments is therefore also the work of making states, a point of analytical importance for understanding the relationship between states and globalizing cities (Marcuse and van Kempen 2002). Not only is the environment an enduring platform for the reproduction of state power, but its expression in urban centers may aid our understanding of the practices through which contemporary states establish limits and mark boundaries in cities that simultaneously function as territories of nation-states, and as nodes in established or emergent transnational networks.

## Kathmandu in a transforming state

Kathmandu has long been critical territory for the Nepali state, so its centrality in matters of statecraft is not new. What is relatively new, however, are urban-centered processes associated with changing migration trends and economic globalization. Before the mid-twentieth century, strict migration policies facilitated tight state control over movement into and out of the Kathmandu Valley, thereby reproducing a fairly stable and homogeneous urban demographic (Liechty 2003:53; A. Tiwari 1992). The more recent picture is one of sustained growth and heterogeneity: between 1951 and 1991, the city's population quadrupled (Liechty 2003:53), and throughout the 1990s Kathmandu ranked among the fastest growing cities in South Asia (UNFPA 1995). Rapid growth catalyzed the development of sprawl, suburbanization (Liechty 2003:53–6), and a dramatic expansion of informal settlements.[4] At the same time, economic growth and transnational mobility marked Kathmandu as an increasingly important node in global labor and tourism networks.

As the historical and contemporary center of state bureaucracy and administration, and the locus of the creation and dissemination of *Nepālīpan*,[5] or "Nepaliness," Kathmandu has long been the territorial heart of Nepali statemaking (Gaige 1975; Liechty 1997; Pfaff-Czarnecka 1997). In contemporary terms, Kathmandu is a site of coordination among global development institutions, state bureaucratic and cultural projects, and rapid inflows of people, commodities, and capital. It is also the center of particular modern consumption practices through which, at the national scale, Kathmandu's citizens disproportionately

*Kathmandu has long been the territorial heart of Nepali statemaking*

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enjoy the material appropriations that have come to signify Nepal's urban middle class (Liechty 2003).[6] Although in 2001 only 15 percent of the country's total population resided there (S. Tiwari 2001:1), the concentration of state, development, and commercial powers located in Kathmandu weighted its importance in the construction and perpetuation of the nation-state in ways that this statistic cannot convey.

The official declaration of an emergency in Nepal confirmed that political volatility that had been building throughout the 1990s had reached a breaking point. Several conditions and incidents converged to produce this volatility, including a decade of contentious and only partially effective democratization, a royal massacre, and a deepening civil war. The decade following the 1990 *jana andolan*, or People's Movement, brought the reinstatement of democracy to Nepal, but the decade that followed witnessed contentious and largely ineffective governance (Lawoti 2007). In June of 2001, Crown Prince Dipendra reportedly opened fire on his family in the royal palace at Narayanhiti. Fatally wounded were King Birendra, Queen Aiswarya, their son, Prince Nirajan, and daughter, Princess Shruti, and other members of the royal family.[7] Prince Dipendra was then said to have committed suicide. News of the massacre fueled anxieties already associated with an intensifying conflict between government forces and Maoist revolutionaries. Since 1996, the Nepal government had been embroiled in violent confrontations with the army of the Communist Party Nepal-Maoist. In November 2001, Maoist fighters directly attacked the Royal Nepal Army for the first time (prior violence had been between the police and the Maoists), and in response, the government mobilized its army. Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba officially declared Maoist fighters "terrorists," and a subsequent Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Ordinance authorized state agents to make arrests without due process, and exercise strict controls over media and information.

In this context, the swift and dramatic creation of parks in the capital city added a spatial dimension to the legal and military strategies for consolidating emergency order. But before proceeding to this dimension, it is important to specify what constitutes the state in this analytic. Difficult to study and neither conceptually nor practically uniform, the state is dynamic, multi-layered, and perhaps best understood as in continuous negotiation and reproduction (Aretxaga 2003; Siu 1989; Joseph and Nugent 1994; Sivaramakrishnan 1999:8; Michael 1999; Faure and Siu 1995:17). One approach to understanding the dynamic state is to focus on moments of statemaking. My use of this term follows Sivaramakrishnan (1999), who defines statemaking through analytical attention to the forms and legitimations of government and governmentality, the making of civil society, and the study of "the ideological and organizational power of the central government to penetrate society, exact compliance, and invoke commitment" (Sivaramakrishnan 1999:5; see also Siu 1989; Scott 1990; Joseph and Nugent 1994; Migdal et al. 1994).

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Since the 1950s, the Nepali state – as both a bureaucratic appa-
ratus and an assemblage of cultural ideas (Hansen and Stepputat 2001)
– has been a crucial facilitator and mediator of development. Through
development discourses and practices, the modern Nepali state has
created ordered, "legible" spaces for governance (Scott 1998), but these
discourses and practices have also entailed constant negotiation and
struggle over the particular regimes of cultural representation that stand
for the state (Siu 1990; Kendall 1998; Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Faure
and Siu 1995). Such negotiations include state-regulated or state-
symbolic environments, including the layout, form, and function of the
capital city. To reference the state in the present consideration of
emergency environmental change is to mark beautification projects,
their associated agents, and their attendant semiotics at multiple scales
as projects of rule, however partial and temporary. Here, rule refers to
the reproduction of particular power relations and structures of inequal-
ity – structures that are not simply imposed, but rather are socially
produced through everyday relationships and compromises (Gupta
1995: 393–4; Baviskar 2007).

Although beyond the scope of the present discussion, it is impor-
tant to note that the Nepali state developed in particular, and regionally
unique, interaction with British colonial rule in the region, and, later,
with international development interests. In Nepal, ideas and processes
of development (*bikās*) have long been noted for their social, political,
and economic power. Never formally colonized, it is Nepal's modern
engagement with international development institutions that domi-
nates diagnoses of the country's economic marginality and sociopoliti-
cal problems. Since the first international development interventions
were enacted in Nepal in the 1950s, *bikās* has been widely regarded as a
political and material force with profound implications for the Nepali
state. Journalist and public intellectual Kanak Mani Dixit concludes
from his statistical portrait of Nepal's contemporary political and eco-
nomic history (1997) that by largely co-evolving with the international
development industry, the autonomy and functionality of the modern
Nepali state became severely distorted and heavily aid-dependent.
Indeed, well over half of the state's operating budget has come from
foreign aid for decades, and very little national policy goes forward
without some form of international support and its attendant influence.

The capital city has long been the site where the flow of develop-
ment funds is mediated, and as a result Kathmandu is widely regarded as
having disproportionately benefited from the state's development
dependency. Liechty elaborates:

> Between 1951 and 1997 Nepal received an estimated 3.7
> billion USD in grants and loans from foreign countries and
> international banks. By the early 1990s Nepal was servicing a
> debt of just under 1 billion USD. Even though usually intended

for rural development, all of this aid money is routed through Kathmandu. By the time the money filters through the maze of centralized bureaucratic bodies and their affiliated nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), often very little remains for projects at the 'grassroots.' According to one recent reckoning, around 70 percent of Nepal's total annual budget goes simply to running the national government, headquartered in Kathmandu. (2003:48)

Rather than erasing the existence or importance of the Nepali state, then, this state-development relationship simply foregrounds the Nepali state's role as facilitator and mediator of development power and processes (Dixit 2002; Seddon 1987; Gellner et al. 1997; Hoftun et al. 1999; Hutt 2004), and the ways these are mutually produced. As Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal have noted,

> the ideational and material aspects of development come together in the construction and the legitimation of the modern state. By serving as the arena for the pursuit of growth, democracy, and a single nation, development has linked the progressive state with the economic, political, and cultural programs implied in this three-part goal. (2003:38)

I now turn to a discussion of three urban environmental projects associated with the emergency and SAARC Conference, with attention to one in relative depth. I then examine the recent historical conditions that gave urban environmental productions their particular symbolic power to reinforce the image of a "solid state" in Kathmandu.

## 'Making SAARC' and articulating a solid state

*The anxious capital city was about to host a SAARC Summit that was itself framed by extreme regional and global tension*

In late 2001 and early 2002, the complex combination of People's War-related violence, the upheaval of the monarchy, and the declaration of emergency seemed to consolidate a growing sense of uncertainty, contingency, and explicit fear in public discourse in Kathmandu. The legitimacy of King Gyanendra was held in active question in the wake of the royal massacre, and the government was increasingly perceived to be vulnerable to defeat by the Maoists. These conditions held unknown consequences for the urbanites with whom I worked as part of a research project on urban environmental improvement.[8]

The anxious capital city was about to host a SAARC Summit that was itself framed by extreme regional and global tension. India-Pakistan relations appeared to be at a dangerous breaking point in the immediate aftermath of an attack on the Indian Parliament on December 13, in which twelve people were killed and twenty-two were injured. The

Indian government immediately blamed Pakistani militants. Internationally, still-fresh pronouncements of a "War on Terrorism" by the United States gave new global currency to the category 'terrorist,' influencing political dynamics throughout South Asia.

From December 2001 through January 2002 in Kathmandu, I found it nearly impossible to differentiate between SAARC preparations and the general tightened security that characterized urban life under the emergency. Early one morning, I arrived in the core of the city, at the bustling intersection at Thapathali, to find each of the colorful billboards that crowd this area draped in enormous white sheets. Normally advertising products like Wai Wai Instant Noodles, Royal Stag Whiskey, and Shikhar Cigarettes, these boards stood stark and blank, rising ominously above the winter fog. I puzzled over an interpretation of this whitewashing at first, wondering if it could be some sort of new control on advertising related to the emergency. I soon realized that it was more likely a feature of SAARC preparations. Indeed, over the next few days, Kathmanduites watched from the streets below as painters adorned these fresh canvases with SAARC-related welcome slogans, painted in uniform, all-capital English lettering. Pronouncements like, "LONG LIFE TO THE SAARC PARTNERSHIP!" shouted from boards not only in Thapathali, but all over the city.[9] Eventually, one could scarcely travel a main thoroughfare without encountering such neatly refashioned ads. The air of festivity and welcome, created by the SAARC signs, blended almost eerily with their ubiquity. The slogans reminded urbanites not only of the upcoming SAARC Conference, but also that the billboards on which they were painted were ultimately the domain of the state that would host the conference.

In the weeks leading up to the meetings, to travel the streets of Kathmandu was also to constantly encounter environmental improvement projects. The phrase "SAARC *banaune*," or "making SAARC," became a common explanation among my friends and research collaborators for the massive, rapid urban transformation. "Park *banaune*" soon joined the phrase, and the idea that "SAARC *banaune bhaneko* park *banaune*" – that preparing for SAARC meant constructing parks – functioned at once as a statement of fact and, often, as an expression of astonishment at the pace and entirety of Kathmandu's environmental transformation. This phrase conveyed how the coincidence of beautifications and SAARC gave logic to authoritarian environmental interventions, activating a particular kind of consent, and enabling a form of governance quite at odds with the city's and nation-state's recent history of democratization.

Dramatic changes took place all over the city, often with a rapidity that seemed akin to spontaneity. Over little more than a week, existing traffic islands in Patan and Kathmandu were freshly planted. Where cement road dividers did not previously exist, they appeared almost instantly, constructed quickly by huge groups of day laborers. Long lines

of workers painted sidewalk edges in black and white stripes, while tall welcome gates, decorated with flowers and graced at the base with small brass *karuwas*,[10] were erected at key points on major roadways.

While a variety of measures like these characterized official SAARC preparations in Kathmandu, three most visibly intersected with my broader research project on urban environmental improvement. First, there were swift building demolitions and new park construction at Tinkune, an area of land in the vicinity of the national airport. This park would be the first to greet visiting SAARC dignitaries on their journey between the airport and the city center; on completion, it featured lush plantings and a large central pond. Second, the four and five-story buildings at a crossroads called Maitighar were demolished and, over the course of a few days, replaced by a small park marked by an enormous *mandala*, a small *stupa*, and two stone water spouts.[11] Finally, just below the Bagmati Bridge, two informal settlements officially regarded as illegal squatter areas were forcibly evicted, the homes leveled and their residents dispersed. There was a marked lack of explicit public protest in all three cases.[12]

In the nearly simultaneous imposition of the emergency and preparations for the SAARC conference, I sought to understand seemingly contradictory messages of festivity, openness, and "a hearty welcome" on one hand, and those of local control and silenced dissent on the other.

The physical transformation took place against a backdrop of militarized streets, lined with young army personnel wielding rifles or machine guns and often clad in riot gear. Traveling around the Parliamentary offices at Singha Durbar entailed passing through gauntlets of soldiers with guns poised, fingers resting on triggers. It was clear that the welcome signified by SAARC preparations was intended for specific regional guests only; those who would inhabit the city long after dignitaries had left were well-advised to notice the soldiers in equal measure. And yet the combination of rapid park-making and heavy military coverage gave a strangely reassuring impression that everything, from environment to society, was under the eye of a state that would protect, safeguard, and even "green" its urban capital territory.

## Tinkune

Control over the development of Tinkune, a stretch of land not far from the city's airport, had been in dispute at least since 1974, when the area was first officially designated for urban parkland. A park was never built, however, and in the mid-1990s, the Supreme Court of Nepal ruled that the government had not adequately completed land acquisition procedures. The approximately fifty-five residents who had settled at Tinkune in the interim were convinced

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that their long dispute over the territory was settled, and they assumed legal landowning status. The area was developed by these residents, but Tinkune remained a semi-formal settlement in the eyes of municipal officials.

The emergency suspended the ownership rights that the courts had affirmed, and this, combined with an official desire to divert media attention away from the Maoist insurgency in the weeks leading up to SAARC,[13] precipitated the swift mobilization of park construction at Tinkune in December 2001. Residents and businesses were given fifteen days' notice to vacate properties, and offered compensation that was well below market value. There was little open resistance to the actions, however. A newspaper article explained the lack of protest by reasoning that, "in 'normal' times the Tinkune episode would have attracted much political opposition. But the pressure of pre-SAARC beautification and the emergency means these are not normal times" (Khanal 2002). Over the course of a week, the site was transformed from an officially unplanned residential and industrial area to a lushly planted park with a large, dramatic pond at its center. When dignitaries from all over South Asia arrived for the SAARC Conference, the new park "beautified" their journey between the airport and city center.

## Maitighar

In contrast to Tinkune's history of dispute and alternative use plans, the prior planning history of Maitighar, a much smaller piece of land, was unclear. Many press accounts claimed that there was no prior official plan for a park there, but the Mayor made claims to the contrary in a *Spotlight* piece called "Kathmandu's Soul Lost in a Concrete Jungle:"

> People think that KMC acted extremely quickly in order to build the garden in Maitighar. But they should not forget that KMC had the plan ready and was waiting only for the green signal from the government. Otherwise, how could we have developed such large *mandala* paintings overnight? (Spotlight 2002)

Like Tinkune, Maitighar's location was highly visible for SAARC dignitaries being ferried between the airport and city center; it was also considered an urban space that developed informally. As in the Tinkune case, once Maitighar demolitions and park construction were announced, the ten households there were given fifteen days' notice to vacate, and offered compensation at rates below market value.

Following the Maitighar demolitions, a *Kathmandu Post* article reported that the government was "working on a war footing" to

construct a 64 ft × 64 ft *mandala* in the southwest corner of the plot, a *stupa* in the north, and a set of three *dhunge dharas* (water spouts) in the southeast. Among these features, the *mandala* seemed to command the most attention, if not curiosity. Constructed of a huge iron frame set in the ground, it was filled with brightly colored rocks, and noted to be, "just like making the traditional *mandala* in religious occasions" (Manandhar 2001:1). The almost overnight erasure of this unplanned urban space, and its rapid replacement with iconic symbols of the Nepali national project, quickly transformed Maitighar into a spatial rendering of Nepali nationhood – this at a time when the most important of Nepal's religio-national symbols – the kingship – was under severe strain. Much more so than the larger park at Tinkune, the new park at the Maitighar crossroads seemed an unveiled reminder of historical connections between Kathmandu's moral geography and the legitimacy of the Nepali state.[14]

## Thapathali

The SAARC preparation project that intersected most directly with my field research also took place in December of 2001. One morning early that month, after a routine crossing of the Bagmati Bridge between Kathmandu and Patan, I was overcome by a sense that something had changed. Within a few moments I realized that the entire settlement of landless migrants (*sukumbasi*[15]) at the base of the bridge was gone.

*All evidence of the settlement had been completely removed*

All evidence of the settlement had been completely removed, erased so fully that a first time passerby would know it only as a solid dirt road bordered on one side by the trickling flow of the Bagmati River. I slowly reasoned through what had happened. I was aware that settlement residents had been served a notice to vacate a month earlier, but I also knew that like all past notices, it was received as routine harassment rather than an actual statement of intent to evict. The emergency and general sense of political flux had disturbed much that was routine, however, and the assumption that this notice would go unenforced, proved dangerously wrong. Rather than continue on home, I headed for the office of a housing advocacy organization with which I worked closely, to gather what information I could about the eviction.

At the office, I found workers gathered around a rattan table in the winter sun, trying to strategize. They confirmed that the settlement had been razed, officially due to SAARC-related "security preparations" (see Lumanti 2002). In response, advocates were documenting what had happened, and helping to coordinate relief for the displaced families. Unlike in the past, however, no public expression of dissent or formal protest was planned – primarily, I was told, because of the uncertainty of the political moment. The emergency was still very new, one housing

advocate explained to me, and the possibility of arrest under the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities Ordinance was perceived as very high. Later, a volunteer described the changed terms under which the organization could respond to emergency evictions:

> Preventative action and delaying tactics like mass demonstrations, press conferences, people blocking the bulldozers – . . . things (we have) done for past eviction threats – can't be done because the possibility of the squatters and staff getting arrested is too high, and the emergency makes people very afraid that if they go to jail, they won't get out until it's over. Second, (advocates) feel like they can't single out government representatives as targets for action because they're afraid of being called terrorists.[16]

Unlike in the cases of Tinkune and Maitighar, evictions of settlers below the Bagmati Bridge did not involve any form of compensation for the destruction of property. In all, twenty-two families from settlements on both riverbanks were displaced in two phases, on December 4, 2001 and January 4, 2002. A follow-up advocacy report noted that most of the evicted families were immediately forced to erect temporary shelters on private land near their former homes. Beautification measures had therefore simply displaced squatters to within a few kilometers of their previous settlement (Lumanti 2002).

SAARC Summit security measures such as this one resonated in complex ways with urban elite sentiments surrounding the extensive recent growth of informal settlements in Kathmandu, particularly along the Bagmati and Bishnumati Rivers. By swiftly eliminating some of the most visible among these settlements, the emergency state ascribed new order to a territory perceived to be chaotic. New parks foregrounded the "environmental" quality of the space, and backgrounded the wealth and development asymmetries to which highly visible informal settlements often attest. Increasingly reminders of the political disorder in the countryside as well, the settlements seemed a logical focus for a government seeking to display its capacity to control and curb migration patterns that were being framed in popular discourse as an "invasion" of the capital (Post 2003).

The evictions at Thapathali marked a critical shift in official postures toward *sukumbasi*, and by extension toward urban migration itself. This particular SAARC-related gesture not only swiftly eliminated an informal settlement, it also communicated an official intolerance for the particular kind of urban fluidity signified by growing rural-to-urban migration. While previous to the emergency, Kathmandu's *sukumbasi* were widely considered economic refugees, in the context of the People's War they were also framed as war refugees who may be Maoist sympathizers, and thus a security threat.

*Beautification measures had therefore simply displaced squatters to within a few kilometers of their previous settlement*

# Democracy, disorder, and salvaging the environment through emergency

So-called beautification activities at Tinkune, Maitighar, and Thapathali replaced disordered spaces with an urban environmental order that simultaneously displayed a modern, clean, green city to regional dignitaries and sent messages of a strong and active state to Kathmandu residents. But it is only in considering the city's contemporary history of rapid urban growth, attendant popular anxieties over urban environmental breakdown, and general disaffection with 1990s democratization that we may fully appreciate what made environmental gestures so locally powerful at this historical moment.

The 1990s witnessed the reinstatement of democracy in Nepal. The country's first free elections since 1959 were held in 1991. Major media expansion and explosive growth of the Nepali non-governmental sector characterized the first years of democratization. The 1990s were also a time of tremendous material change. An urban middle class was growing, luxury goods were newly available to more than just royalty and the elite, and an awareness of material prospects linked to a broader global economy created the fervor of a boom. For many urbanites, this was an era punctuated by high expectations and a sense of new and unlimited possibility. But economic expansion in the Kathmandu Valley had adverse impacts as well; among these were pollution and urban environmental decline. As the population of the capital city surged, anxieties over urban infrastructural stresses and environmental deterioration assumed an evermore prominent place in elite public discourse. The city that was increasingly "going global" was also in upheaval over the stark degradation of its environmental integrity.

Concerns about urban environmental decline figured in elite public discourse from the earliest days of democratization. In January of 1992, *Himal* (5:1) devoted a special issue to "The Weakening Spirit of the Kathmandu Valley," identifying parallel processes of cultural and environmental degradation associated with urban change. The ecological and cultural state of the Bagmati River was mourned in an article called, "The Bagmati Scorned," while rapid urban growth and the deteriorating "cultural fabric" of the Valley were profiled in other pieces. While democracy and economic liberalization were expected to hold promise, they were also associated with seemingly intractable cultural and environmental predicaments. This perceived breakdown of environmental and cultural conditions combined with widespread dissatisfaction with the experience of democracy. The decade of democratization saw the rapid turnover of over a dozen successive governments, limiting the actions that any single government could take, and reinforcing a constant sense of political flux. Among many of my collaborators and

*Concerns about urban environmental decline figured in elite public discourse from the earliest days of democratization*

informants, democracy in Nepal came to be associated with accelerated environmental degradation itself, so much so that the two were sometimes explicitly conflated (Rademacher 2007).

As urban environmental deterioration continued, public discontent with the gross imbalance between studies, investments, and official promises on one hand, and the worsening condition of the urban environment on the other, permeated public discourse. Headlines such as "Billions Spent but the Rivers Still Polluted," which proclaimed the wastage of over three billion rupees in investments toward Bagmati and Bishnumati River improvement in the capital, described an almost total lack of accountability on the part of state and development organizations for monies lost to the cause of urban environmental management:

> Despite the expenses, Kathmandu Valley's rivers – Bagmati, Bishnumati, Dhobikhola, Hanumante and Tukucha – continue to serve as massive sewerage systems for the Valley's overall population of 1.5 million. Industrial waste is also dumped into them recklessly. . . . There is a total lack of accountability and coordination among more than a dozen authorities that are supposed to be concerned about the plight of the rivers. Experts also stress that the government should come up with laws and regulations clearly defining rivers and their standard widths. They also (criticized) the municipalities, industries, and environment ministry for failing to enforce existing laws. (Kathmandu Post 2000a)

Throughout the 1990s, a host of environmental protection laws were established, but they lacked enforcement mechanisms or clear delineations of bureaucratic responsibility. Several agencies and institutions were assigned to protect the urban environment,[17] but confusion about which Ministries should manage what tasks often resulted in cross-agency conflicts rather than actual enforcement or implementation. Thus the "total" lack of coordination lamented in the selection above.

A few days after the "Billions Spent" article was published, an editorial response appeared in the same paper under the title, "Protect Valley Rivers." It argued that ultimately only the "concrete measures" of a strong state could reverse urban river damage:

> There are over a dozen authorities supposed to be concerned with improving the cleanliness of rivers. But lack of coordination and accountability problems mar their performance. . . . In this backdrop, it can be concluded that serious action must be taken without delay to enforce relevant laws and regulations to improve the plight of the valley's rivers. Unless the government comes forward with concrete measures, rivers that constitute

> the foundation of the Valley's old civilization will not stand any chance of survival, forget about improving their condition. (Kathmandu Post 2000b)

The discontent that accompanied democratization in Nepal is therefore important for understanding the local power of environmental interventions undertaken in the initial months of the state of emergency. Urban environmental disorder, by then almost synonymous with ideas of dysfunctional democracy, enabled an atmosphere in which a completely anti-democratic gesture, the state of emergency, was initially welcomed even by those holding strong commitments to democracy and participatory environmental management.

Consider, for instance, the comments of the Nepali director of a major park-building initiative near Thapatali. Like many development professionals involved in Kathmandu's environmental politics, he expressed fervent commitments to consultative, democratic planning and governance as the only acceptable path to sustainable urban environmental change. At the same time, however, he grew increasingly frustrated with the pace of environmental deterioration, so much so that his preliminary response to the declaration of emergency was one of optimism and relief. The fact that emergency beautifications had an immediate connection to the image the city would project to regional and global onlookers associated with the SAARC Conference seemed to heighten his enthusiasm, reflected in the following comments:

> Kathmandu is the capital. We want to make the city clean for our guests. These parks were a special case because they showed what can happen when we focus our expertise and concentrate our resources. Everyone worked together and something got done. Finally, some action – it is a relief.

*Democratic or not, the emergency state facilitated a level of environmental management of which the previous decade of democracy seemed to be incapable*

This official, then, viewed a moment when the state consolidated resources and power as "everyone working together." He expressed further relief that the Thapathali squatter settlements were quickly and completely destroyed, as this removed what he saw as a major obstacle to moving forward with his park-making initiative. On several occasions, the park director told me that international donors would not get involved with his project until what he called the "*sukumbasi* problem" was resolved. He assured me that only in the context of an emergency could the state have removed informal settlements so "effectively." Democratic or not, the emergency state facilitated a level of environmental management of which the previous decade of democracy seemed to be incapable.

But expressions of relief and welcome for the changes were expressed even among housing activists. After the Thapatali actions – the first forced *sukumbasi* evictions along the riverbanks since 1996 – I

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heard more approval for the state's actions among these informants than criticisms. One prominent Nepali activist for urban housing and environmental rights expressed relief that, as she put it, at least "something" in the way of urban environmental improvement was finally "getting done," in sharp contrast to the ineffective democratic decade. She emphasized a broader picture in which all SAARC -related improvements were a welcome relief, suggesting that, despite their vulnerability, even the city's *sukumbasi* population had a generally positive reaction to the beautification campaign. After all, she said, *sukumbasi* were "just like us:" even they welcomed actions that would evidence a proactive, effective government and promote a cleaner city. She said:

> People [in *sukumbasi* settlements] are not against [the SAARC-related projects]. . . . They say they want these development programs. They say they want the city to look clean. The message the people are getting is that the government can do it if they want . . . even these big houses [at Maitighar] are demolished in a moment. [The government] can do it if they want to.[18]

While in theory she would never approve of forced evictions or the violent harassment of the urban poor, her reaction to emergency beautification was interesting in that it framed it as almost hopeful, a sign of life for a state empowered to "do it if they want to." She went to great length to explain that in a very broad sense, SAARC-related clean-up measures were in themselves desirable, even to communities that could potentially fall victim to evictions.[19]

To interpret such comments as an expression of a desire to do away with democracy altogether would be simplistic and inaccurate. In fact, many held on to an ideal of democracy quite different from their experience of democratization over the 1990s. For some, salvaging the state by backgrounding dissent during the initial state of emergency also meant preserving the possibility that a more desirable democracy might be forged at some future point. The unspoken tradeoff was that if the excesses of 1990s democratization continued, any hope for a more "authentic" democracy at some later point would likely be destroyed.

Herein lies an important aspect of emergency-era compromises: while the dissent that might have been openly expressed during the 1990s did not disappear, it was measured, reserved, or muted so that the demonstrated effectiveness and functionality of the post-democratic state could be condoned, the Nepali state itself could be reinforced, and the more immediate perceived threats associated with the Maoist insurgency could be curtailed. Ultimate support for an effective, assertive state among many of my informants, particularly in an uncertain time of suspended civil rights, seemed to suggest that democratic environmental management replaced by authoritarian environmental management

was still considered environmental progress. Even if urban parks were constructed without public consultation or accountability, they were built, demonstrating that "the government can do it if they want to." Perhaps ironically, embracing the undemocratic practices of the emergency-era state could also be understood as an act of preservation and salvage consistent with, rather than dismissive of, ultimately democratic political ideals. A certain experience of democratization, then, seemed to give way to support for an authoritarian state of emergency that was seen, at some levels, as the only way to ensure that a more authentic democratic Nepal, as well as a more acceptable urban environment, might be possible in the future.

It is important to note that this consent was temporary and contingent. It evaporated quickly, as King Gyanendra consolidated, rather than loosened, his power over the years that followed 2001. On February 1, 2005, the king seized direct power, which lasted until protests of unprecedented scale and size around the country led him to reinstate Parliament in April of 2006. The monarchy was officially stripped of its power in a Parliamentary declaration in May of 2006, and optimism for peace and a new kind of democracy (*loktantra*) marked the months immediately following the April 2006 demonstrations. The period since has witnessed turbulent preparations for Constituent Assembly elections that continue at this writing (Hangen 2007).

## Urban environments and solid states

Thus SAARC Summit beautifications did much more than appropriately welcome, and perhaps impress, visiting regional dignitaries. They also provided local city residents with spectacles of tangible state action in the wake of a long and frustrating legacy of environmental inaction. Each environmental intervention seemed tied to showing that the emergency state was the converse of its democratic legacy, and rather than fuel dissent, it temporarily galvanized the support of the urban activists and professionals whose previous political actions and statements conveyed deep commitments to democratic practices.

The ordered parks that quickly replaced disorderly and ecologically degraded urban spaces gave physical testimony to the perceived failures of environmental management under democracy, and to the changes that could be expected under emergency rule. Immediate demonstrations of environmental control made sense locally as the converse of democracy-as-inaction, and the state, transformed under emergency terms, conveyed the capacity to do in a moment what twelve years of democracy in practice could not. The SAARC-emergency convergence gave the interventions their dual valence of regional welcome and local control; both temporarily diverted attention from the likely unsustainability of the state's authoritarian turn, and the reality that the

Kathmandu-centered state faced continued, unprecedented challenges to its authority. Articulations of environmental control sought to reinscribe the centrality of the capital in a time when multiple power centers violently contested Kathmandu as the center of Nepali sovereignty.

Voices of dissent or protest were notably missing from public responses to urban environmental change, due in part to uncertainty and fear of unknown consequences. But while the lack of expression does not demonstrate that dissent disappeared, I wish to highlight the consolidation of provisional consent among those otherwise committed to democratic and participatory urban environmental change. Such consent can only be understood by recognizing deep desires for urban environmental action, and, over the course of democratization, yearnings for a strong state to facilitate it. Given the dismal record of the previous decade, gestures of ecological control that could be construed as successes were welcomed by elites, managers, and even activists. They carried with them the capacity to temporarily supplant inconvenient details of undemocratic governance, violations of human rights, or overt authoritarian violence.

The Kathmandu case affords particular insight into the ways that urban environmental territory can function symbolically as both the place of the state, and as a site for articulating the "state of the state" to global and local audiences. Urban environmental productions helped to reinforce the image, and possibility, of a solid state with a singular center—the capital city—among an urban populace eager for evidence of state resilience in wartime. At the same time, they displayed a modern, clean, green city to a regional audience and trade alliance seeking assurances of Nepali sovereignty and economic vitality. Simultaneous, but differently meaningful, performances of state strength to local urbanites and temporary regional visitors made the urban environment a particularly powerful, multi-scaled terrain of statemaking in this critical period.

In a time of increasing attention to the social and environmental stresses that accompany rapid urban growth (Evans 2002; Dawson and Edwards 2004; UN 2003), and in a scholarly context where the contemporary form and relevance of state power is in active debate (Marcuse and van Kempen 2002; Appadurai 1996; Hannerz 1996; Ong 1998; Tsing 2000), it behooves us to recognize not only the ecological challenges unique to urban settings, but also the symbolic power of shaping, creating, and transforming urban environmental space itself. Environmental interventions in the wake of an emergency in Kathmandu underline statemaking processes critical for understanding even those cities that are more often marked by their integration into transnational flows of people, commodities, and capital.

It was through urban environmental productions that the important work of Nepali state transformation and consolidation was reinforced at multiple scales, and for multiple audiences.

*Articulations of environmental control sought to reinscribe the centrality of the capital*

## Notes

[1]A national state of emergency was declared on November 26, 2001, after a third round of peace negotiations with the Communist Party Nepal-Maoist failed to reach an agreement, and immediately following November 23 and 25 Maoist attacks in Surkhet, Dang, Syangja, and Salleri in which at least fourteen Royal Nepal Army (RNA) soldiers, fifty police officers, and several other government officials were killed.

[2]The 2002 South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit was the first to be held in three years, and the second in Kathmandu since the creation of SAARC in 1985. Rhetorically far more than an alliance to promote regional trade relations, SAARC was conceived as a potential catalyst for the creation of "cooperative cultural identities" through which the political conflicts and tensions pervasive in the South Asian region could be "moderated, if not completely eliminated" (Muni 2002).

[3]By "production of the environment," I refer to Smith (1984), who suggested that nature in its relationship with social processes should form the core of historical materialist analysis, as nature is a fundamental part of a "process of production."

[4]Bal Kumar K.C. (1998) reports that the proportion of people living in urban centers went from 4 percent in 1961 to 9.2 percent in 1991; further noted is that less than 50 percent of the urban population had drainage, solid waste facilities, or sewage and sanitation services. K.C. describes a trend of "gradual shifting of the rural poor to urban areas," particularly from the "immediate countryside" areas of Ramechhap, Trisuli, Dolakha, Sindupalchowk, and Dhading. In 1991, informal settlements in urban riverbank areas were estimated to be growing at 12 percent annually, a rate twice that of the city itself (HMG/ADB 1991). Between 1990 and 2000, the number of total urban squatter settlements almost tripled, with a majority located on public lands along rivers (Hada 2001:154).

[5]The deliberate cultivation of a Nepali national consciousness by the state began after the fall of the Rana regime and the reinstatement of King Tribhuvan in 1951. Although certain private groups had been working for decades to foster a Nepali national consciousness underground in Nepal and from exile in India (Onta 1997; Fisher et al. 1998), only in 1951 the state began an official project of nation-building characterized by state-run schools, the promotion of

a national dress and national language, an official media, and other features (Pfaff-Czarnika 1997).

⁶Following Holston (1999), this study suggests an important role for cities in the analysis of global flows and globalization. Brenner (1997:154) has argued that urbanization can be conceptualized as a fundamental dimension of globalization. Capitalist industrialization, he notes, has continually reconfigured the urban, and the dynamic that results secures capital's requirements for labor power and fixed-capital inputs.

⁷These were the king's sisters, Princesses Shanti Singh and Sharada Shah; Princess Sharada's husband, Kumar Khadga Bikram Shah; and Princess Jayanti Shah, a cousin of the late king.

⁸The research project, "Culturing Urban Ecology: Development, State-making, and River Restoration in Kathmandu" (2005) was conducted over multiple periods between 1997 and 2003. During twenty cumulative months of fieldwork in Kathmandu, I conducted participant-observation among actors in three broadly-defined discursive fields: a state-development field, a cultural heritage advocate field, and a housing activist and landless migrant field.

⁹Many slogans were written in a way easily subject to satire, prompting Kunda Dixit to poke endless fun (2002).

¹⁰A *karuwā* is a round metal pitcher with a neck to contain drinking water, usually made of brass.

¹¹Michael Hutt defines the *mandala* as "a ritual diagram with a principal deity at its center and the other divinities of this deity's retinue arranged around it. The mandala is the model for the design of Nepal's square pagoda temples and also, though less obviously, for the layout of the royal cities of the Valley during the Malla period" (1995:229). He defines the *stupa* as "the primary cult object of Buddhism in Nepal and elsewhere. Originally a mound entombing sacred relics, now greatly elaborated" (ibid:232).

¹²Emergency restrictions did not legally prohibit affected individuals from filing court complaints, yet no complaints in the Thapathali eviction case were filed.

¹³Several months after the SAARC Conference, the Nepali Times ran a profile of Kathmandu Mayor Keshab Staphit that cited the transformation of Tinkune as evidence that the mayor lived up to his reputation as a "shrewd operator." The article explained, "When he had to convince Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba to clean up Tinkune before SAARC, he told him that demolishing houses in the city would take media attention away from the Maoist insurgency ahead of the summit. Deuba immediately saw the logic, and gave the go-ahead."

¹⁴Sharma (2002) shows a long history of interconnection between Nepali statecraft and religious symbolism. Sharma argues that at particular historical moments, the state has sought to enhance or consolidate its power through formal associations with religious symbolism and practice, citing for example the post-1990 context, in which, via the continued constitutional existence of Nepal as a "Hindu Kingdom," Hinduism functioned primarily as a force for the cultural legitimacy of the state. He cites examples like the ban on cow slaughter, official celebration of Hindu holidays, the content of school curricula, and the ban on religious proselytizing (30) as evidence of state-sponsored

Hinduism. The *mandala* and other symbolic content of Maitighar may be interpreted as consistent with this.

[15]There is no easy translation from Nepali to English for *sukumbasi*, although it is most commonly translated to squatter. A related word, *sukumbasa*, is the state of having nothing. Used to refer both to people and their settlements, *sukumbasi* refers to those who are assumed to be landless, or very poor, and who occupy land for which they do not own a legal title. Although technically the term refers to "the person lacking shelter and food; one having neither" according to Pradhan's (2001) Ratna's Nepali English Dictionary, some of Kathmandu's *sukumbasi* population may not be said to be definitely and universally lacking these things.

[16]Email message from a housing advocacy volunteer, February 2002.

[17]The Ministry of Population and Environment was created in 1995, and an Environmental Protection Act followed in 1996. Since 1997, it has been unlawful to create pollution in a way that causes significant impacts to the environment or public health, and there are now national pollution standards and a schedule of fines for development projects that proceed without environmental impact statements (Adhikari 1998).

[18]Interview Transcript, 8 January 2002.

[19]During this period I was strongly dissuaded from interviewing *sukumbasi* settlers themselves, and I have therefore very limited data about their direct reactions to the Thapatali evictions.

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