

Present-Tense Tradition:

The Conflict over Commodification in Sauraha, Nepal

By William Litton

To Sukram Chaudary, for his invaluable help.

And to Peter Moran, for putting up with my shenanigans (and partaking in some of his own).

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Preface:

In one broad stroke, this is a study of 'modern man's' loss of 'nature' and 'tradition,' and the bizarre things he does to reclaim and reinvent them. My study takes place in the town of Sauraha, situated just by the entrance into Nepal's Royal Chitwan National Park, where, in the past 30 years, the tourist industry has expanded significantly. The industry offers consumers a unique commodity: the chance to re-commune with and marvel at 'true nature and tradition,' both inside the park proper, which boasts rhinos and tigers and bears (oh my!), and, of particular interest to me, in the surrounding Tharu villages, where local 'tradition,' though constantly under the knife of Westernizing forces, still 'lives,' and, like the wildlife in the park, must be consciously 'preserved' against the mars of modernity. My task is to disassemble this commodified experience, to investigate how the commodification of 'tradition' takes place, and what conflicts arise.

In addressing the peculiarities of 'tradition' commodified, 'preserved' and performed in the present, I've composed this ethnographic paper in a rather non-traditional, narrative fashion. (Yet, insofar as non-traditional forms of ethnographic representation have become a new type of anthropological tradition—as have unnecessarily convoluted parenthetical sentences like this one—perhaps I'm not the great innovator I'd like to be.)

In my narrative form, the typical structure of the term paper is turned on its head: I do not set out to prove a thesis, but rather to find one—to let analysis arise from scene and reflection, to discover, in narrative time, along with the reader, some communicable insight. I do not attempt to construct a strictly chronological or linear narrative arch, but rather arrange the narration

thematically, grouping relevant moments together and traveling fluidly through scene and analysis.

There is, however, a guiding framework, a blueprint for inquiry. Mine is an ethnography of an encounter—an encounter between "modernity" and "tradition"; between local culture and a global regime of commodification; between mobile upper-class consumers (tourists), their bourgeois accommodators (hotel owners, businessmen, and restaurateurs), the proletariat employed (hotel staff, waiters, drivers, and guides), and finally, those consumed, the toured-class, local Tharu villagers said to be the authentic purveyors of a precious commodity much sought after by the tourist class: Tharu cultural 'tradition.'

Indeed, this notion of commodified culture sparked my original curiosity with the case. Within the Marxist framework of the commodity fetish, I sought to investigate what happens to "culture" (ostensibly a non-commodity) once it appears, under the tourists' gaze, to express its own market value, and thus becomes produced (at least in part) for an exchange-value, for an "other" to consume. Of particular interest was the apparent contradiction between the tourist industry's discursive production of the local Tharu villagers as "undeveloped" and the actual apparatus' effect on local "development"—i.e., although the tourist industry presents Tharu culture as "traditional" and "unchanged," the industry itself is deeply engaged in changing that culture.

What I discovered, far beyond my expectations, was a broad-reaching, multi-faceted social conflict, at the center of which lay the issue of commodification, cultural and otherwise—a conflict over what (or who) was

being commodified and at what cost, over how and by whom the commodification took place, and, most saliently, who was actually benefiting from that commodification. The tourist is rarely, if ever, privy to the local conflict; most often it simmers beneath cordial interactions, only revealing itself to an outside who cares to investigate.

Yet, however much I may resist the classification, I, the anthropologist, am a tourist in my own right—a foreign observer consuming as well as studying—and so am implicated within the encounter and the conflict, but often at the arm's length extended to tourists. To make transparent this dynamic, I situate myself inside the narrative, employing the first person liberally and occasionally reflecting on my own role as observer and creator; but, to avoid rampant narcissism, I delve into intense self-reflexivity only when prompted to do so directly by other characters involved in my study. The first-person narrative form is mainly meant to be a constant reminder to the reader that I am in the business of perceiving and mediating culture, not of laying bare objective, static, generalized cultural "truths."

Following in the wobbly footsteps of the late great doctor, Hunter S. Thompson, I engage in a Gonzo-esque literary tact—not the removed reporter striving to mute his bias, but the researcher with a role to play, unashamedly baring his bias as an inevitable burden in every moment; not the alien from Mars, straining over the shoulders of those he studies, not Tom Wolfe in a white suite, but Dr. Gonzo, partaking himself of the proverbial electric kool aid. My form may be described, then, as part memoir, part literary journalism, part research paper—but all ethnography. I develop characters, engage with

my setting, reconstruct dialogue, and self reflect all in the name of ethnographic insight.

And, most importantly, it is a cooperative effort. Though it is always a story told by me, it is never at its heart a story about me. I hope that the story's characters, their interests, and the complexity of the conflict they're situated in, are communicated, if not outright 'honestly', then as close to honestly as one may get in this maddeningly mediated process. I owe my informants every thanks for putting up with me, for sharing with me, and for allowing me a sip—however small—of their kool aid.

Methodology:

My research took place over three weeks in late April, early May of 2008. The vast majority was conducted through informal interviews and participant observation, with the occasional semi-formal interview. Formality seemed not just unnecessary, but potentially abrasive in a town that, at least on the surface, coasts on a sense of ease. All of my most fruitful interactions occurred almost at random, by just showing up and starting a chat.

Except for one guided excursion, I refused the aid of a translator, a) because many of my informants, residing in a tourist-saturated environment, spoke a solid amount of English, or at least had enough patience to help me limp along with my somewhat decent Nepali skills, and b) because the use of a translator typically stabs the rapport-building project straight in the kidney. For similar reasons, I never used the aid of a voice recorder, and rarely even jotted notes in front of my informants. I found most everyone more eager to open up in a conversation between friends, rather than in the presence of a

notepad that insists one is being studied. (There was always, however, informed consent.)

The brevity of my stay and relatively lax nature of my interviews present several constraints in the composition of my project. First, I would be an idiot to believe that in three weeks time I could ever thoroughly immerse myself in the complex set of conflicts present in the Chitwan area. My investigation is an amateur one, but hopefully my memoir-esque style helps me to navigate the pitfalls of 'outsider-ness' inherent in a brief visit anywhere, and perhaps even flip those same pitfalls into a small type of advantage, as I'm peculiarly suited to relate to many of the other tourists on brief visits and their perceptions of the cultural landscapes around them.

Second, though I have somewhat extensive field notes to draw from, I am reconstructing many scenes from memory, which of course brings with it all of the complex ethical issues of verisimilitude inherent in memoir writing. Particularly problematic is the reconstruction of dialogue, especially because many of the conversations I held with informants were conducted in patchwork quilts of broken English and Nepali. In translating and editing quoted material for coherence, I do my best to preserve what I believe to be the 'original' and 'true' meaning of the dialogue. Where I feel it's necessary, I will address the process of translation directly in my narration.

One last note: due to the touchy nature of some of the information divulged, and in the interest of my informants' privacy, I have changed some names and altered small descriptive details.

I. Conflict Cooking in the Tharu Kitchen

Planted crookedly at the turn-in to the Sauraha bus park, a small signpost reads, "Tharu Kitchen," and points with a slim red arrow down the drive into the gravel lot. The outside world and its laws of proximity conspire against any tourist ever taking even the briefest notice of this cut of rusting tin, squatting as it is far below the eye-line of those arriving by commercial bus, with their tall sliding windows opening into the impossibly flat expanse of flooded rice fields and endless rows of droop-eared maize—a deep green countryside quietly alive, pocked occasionally with the thick thrush of wild bamboo, or a line of grazing water buffalo lumbering in stride with their herder: perhaps a slim shirtless elder whose creased wooden features speak romantically of a man whose life has been defined by the blessed hardship of one who works intimately with his hands and the land beneath him. Clucking absently at his livestock, he stands stark and squinting inside his egg of shade beneath the umbrella he holds, hiding from the gaze of a murderous midday sun. Absurdly, to those bus riders beholding him, his skeletal leather features carry both the untold wisdom and mystery of a man inhabiting 'nature,' as well as the markers of a people 'impoverished' against 'modern progress.'

When I arrived in Sauraha, the authority of the scenery and its faraway people, and their power to impress immediately—even upon a student conditioned to disassemble these notions—the nearly-fantastic narratives of 'untouched perfection' and 'unjust poverty,' begged for my interest far more than any quiet advertisement for a small restaurant and shelter settled at the edge of an otherwise barren bus lot. Neither, after emerging from my five-

hour ride, did I think to stop and poke my head inside the Tharu Kitchen, even though I was dying for a drink and the open storefront sat a mere ten strides away from where my bus hissed into park.

Like all tourists, I was quickly snatched up by my host hotel, ferried atop a motorcycle away from the open fields and into a thin paved commercial strip—a riverside lane lined with over sixty different resorts; a dozen restaurants and bars each advertising buy-one-get-one-free cocktails and free popcorn during 'Happy Hour'; and an uncountable string of identical shops, peddling the same carved wooden rhinoceroses, the same brands of bottled water and beer, the ubiquitous Snickers bar and mango juice, blasting the same miserable American pop flotsam from buzzing speakers: the same audible garbage I would vehemently and sanctimoniously decry stateside as noise pollution, and which I had not so secretly hoped to escape in a 'remote' Nepali jungle.

My god, I thought, the 'imperialist corporate machine' has made it to the very end of every gravel road, with its delicious tube of Pringles potato chips, each one manufactured and stacked exactly as the last—the disease of Western assimilation, an epidemic in a world where the sun never sets on a Coke. Dizzily, in a matter of ten minutes, I had fallen from the fairytale discourse of 'unscathed natural beauty,' to one of 'modern decline' where the 'developed' world had begun to press its grubby fingerprint. The roar of corporate modernization left that tiny sign for the Tharu Kitchen kicked in the dust of motorbikes and storming World-War-II-era Russian jeeps, re-modified to cushion the tourist class.

But that sign, even though passed over by nearly everyone, holds hidden import. In fact, the sign, and the restaurant it advertises, seem to mean so much precisely because they're so neglected.

The words themselves are appropriately poetic: "Tharu Kitchen" may very well suit as an alternate name for Sauraha and the surrounding Chitwan area, a) because it is considered to be 'originally,' and thus rightfully, the land of the Tharu people—a malaria-resistant indigenous community believed to have populated the thick jungles of the Terai, rampantly infested with the mosquito death, for many hundreds of years before the malaria eradication programs commenced in the 1950s and opened the area to outside immigration—and b) because, especially during the late Spring season in which I conducted my study, the entire area is a veritable kitchen, a tropical oven cooking its visitors in 100-degree heat, basting them in humidity best measured in the Newtons of force it exerts against bodies foolish enough to move through its palpable afternoon thickness, or in the liters of sweat in wrings from every conceivable pore.

More importantly, though, the kitchen itself and the interactions around it subtly exemplify the greater conflict over the tourist industry in Sauraha. Indeed, the bus park may be deemed the local seed of this conflict—the physical location where a capitalist class' monopoly on upper class consumptive practices begins, born in a small drama: what I call, 'The Bus Park Hustle.'

When I later returned to the kitchen for a proper visit, I met its Tharu owner, Tika Chaudary, a man with the plump rounded face and gentle treble-clef giggle of a baby, but the sturdy body of a giant. As a growing yet still

meager number of local Tharus have, he worked as an employee—assistant chef—in a prominent hotel on the main strip. He gave that job up seven months ago to open the Tharu Kitchen, his own 'traditional' Tharu-style restaurant—thus becoming one of only a very small handful of Tharu individuals to enter (and just barely, in Tika's case) the capitalist class.

The restaurant is constructed in 'traditional' Tharu fashion, with a ribbed bamboo frame, walls lined with slim thatch and coated over entirely in a mixture of mud and cow dung. The roof is a thick weave of elephant grass, gathered from the nearby national park. This architectural style is perhaps the most salient reification, symbol and signifier of 'true Tharu tradition.' To the arriving tourist, though, this dung facade that communicates so loudly a sense of the 'pre-modern other' speaks mostly of something that should be captured in a photograph, not of a place where it might be safe to dine, so far off the beaten path of their hotel itinerary as it is, and what with Giardia lurking in every dish.

Tika would have liked to set up shop on the main strip, but the riverside property is extremely expensive now. His family owns the maize field directly bordering the bus park, so he was able to build there at no cost. He wants to attract more tourist business, as therein lays the 'real money', but the closest he ever gets is when a stray traveler comes to grab a Kit Kat or a Pepsi for the long bus ride back to Kathmandu, or perhaps a roll of TP for the inevitable visit to a roadside squat toilet that is never properly stocked for a foreigner's gentle needs.

Tika deals instead with the drivers and hucksters whose job it is to transport tourists from bus park to hotel lobby, and, if possible, convince the

occasional low-budget wanderer—who hasn't purchased the standard pre-prepared-three-day-two-night-full-package itinerary—to patronize the hotel they represent. Most of these gentlemen are not Tharu caste, but Brahmins, Chettris, or upper-caste Newars—those groups historically situated in the upper-most echelons of the Nepali caste hierarchy. I will collectively refer to these upper-caste groups from here out—in a move that is unfortunately somewhat reductive, but nonetheless useful—as the 'hill castes,' as they are almost all, going one or two generations back, emigrants into Chitwan from the hill regions of Nepal.

Nearly every hotel owner, restaurateur, and businessman in Sauraha—that is, everyone in the capitalist class, and those people making by far the most money off of the tourist industry—are hill caste. Not surprisingly, most of the less labor-intensive jobs, including the relatively cushy position of bus park ferryman, are reserved for friends and relations of the bourgeois big men, and thus fall into the hands of hill castes as well. Tharus, though a select few have achieved the more prestigious rank of guide, are usually left with construction, maintenance, kitchen and cleaning positions, if they ever become employed at all. Most still rely on agriculture as their main source of livelihood.

Inside Tika's small open-air dining area—the only real source of shade in the massive open field besides an awning across the lot—the motley crew of jeep drivers seek asylum from the vicious midday heat. They gather around a central table, playing cards to pass the time as they wait (often for hours on end) for the tourist coach busses to arrive. Occasionally the losers of the card game order a round of sodas or cigarettes. Tika stands by a flat two-eye gas

stove-top, propped atop a mud plastered island, cooking up dhal baat—a rice and lentils dish—or the occasional order of duck or fish for anyone who's hungry.

These men lounge and eat here every day. It is their place of work, but also a home for them, a veritable social club. They live together and know one another well, as "brothers and fathers." Their chummy banter struck me, on my first visit, not as a language foreign to my own (though it was conducted in one), but as the romanticized universal language of men at work, the kind I'd expect to find in an old Brando flick, like *On the Waterfront*. They spoke of women and the trade: cheeky sexual quips, and complaints over the miserable competition in their field that week—the assholes low-balling and lying to fleece a few tourists and steal the honest man's business.

"You know the prices on petrol these days," a man in his thirty's said to me.

I nodded, having been made very aware in earlier months of the petrol problems in Nepal—the massive lines at fill-up spots, the strikes that closed down all traffic, a lot of active discontent, especially down in the Terai.

"Thirty rupees is the right price for a ride into town," he said, "but some guys are out there offering five rupees. Five rupees? I can't do that. That doesn't work out. Most of us don't like to fight over the tourists when they arrive, we're friends here. But some guys get angry, sometimes it gets ugly. The job is tough."

Once it was apparent that I had a decent enough grasp on the Nepali language—and that I, upon my own insisting, was no ordinary tourist, but (as a somewhat foolish matter of pride) a student—a brief string of questions

from Tika and the drivers followed, questions which were prototypical of many of my interactions with newly made friends in Sauraha.

"Where are you from?"

"America."

"How long have you been in Nepal?"

"A few months."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-one."

"Are you married?"

"No."

"When are you getting married?"

"Later, maybe. I'm still young."

"Do you like Nepali women?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Are you going to marry a Nepali woman?"

"I don't know. I'm still young."

"Kathmandu women, they're very easy." This last line (not typically included in my other introductory dialogues) was said in English, and was met with uproarious laughter. The men then proceeded to vault into a diatribe of sexual jokes in Nepali, which my language teachers hadn't equipped me with the vocab to follow. Though I was fairly certain the jokes, accompanied with hip thrusts and loud hoots, were fueled at my expense, I was happy to be in any way incorporated into the shooting of the workaday shit.

The rail-on-the-American session was cut short, though, when, in the distance, the churn of gravel became faintly audible, heralding the day's first

arrival. The men dropped their card game and, often in large bounds, took to the field. The 'Bus Park Hustle' had begun.

I call it a hustle not because anyone's necessarily getting duped during the dealings, but because the fresh batches of tourists—rattled and cramped and exhausted from their five or six hour journey—are hustled away to their hotels with such surprising speed and noise, especially when compared to the crawling pace of the rest of these drivers' days.

As the bus settles into park, the men crowd around its swivel doors, nudging for the best position. A baffled young couple exists first, met by a choral group of dusty dressed-down men, chaotically calling out "Excuse me! Yes! Hello!" and holding up pamphlets for the hotels they represent. The names of the establishments are all comedically similar, as if, to title their hotels, all the owners got together and threw a few buzz words in a grab bag and then took turns snatching three of them out, thus dubbing their joints "Jungle Tourist Camp," "Jungle Traveler's Lodge," "Rhino Lodge and Resort," "Rhino Residency Resort," etc.

The two travelers, wearing weary vacant expressions, shrug past the band of hucksters as if they were merely offering popcorn at a ballgame. In a moment the couple meets up with a rep calling out the correct three buzz words—the name of the hotel whose package tour they'd pre-booked in Kathmandu. Their bags are tossed from the bus roof and transferred to the back of a jeep; they pile on afterwards and the drop is thus successfully completed in under a minute, with little if any drama.

The couple is whisked away to their hotel grounds, from where they will rarely leave except on the numerous sight-seeing missions detailed in

their itinerary—guided canoe trip down the Rapti river, morning nature walk in the national park, afternoon safari on elephant back, etc. They'll probably eat all their meals, spend almost all their spare time (and thus almost all their spare cash) on the hotel's grounds, maybe wandering occasionally to pluck up souvenirs from the nearby shops. Everything is arranged and provided for them so that virtually all the money they spend goes straight into the hands of the owner of the hotel and tourist agency that originally booked them many miles away in the capital city, with a little spillover allowed for local shop owners.

After the first couple, a sluggish drip of other tourists followed suit out of the bus, largely ignoring the group of now somewhat discouraged drivers, who were slowly starting to disperse. The first arrival of the day appeared as if it would be uneventful—that is, until the news hit that some poor Swedish rube lingering at the end of the line hadn't made any prior arrangements and was in the market for a cheap place to shack.

The mad grab began. The drivers mobbed the mope, shouting names and rates and a few English catch phrases. One particularly fervent salesman jumped atop a jeep beside the Swede and began smacking the back seat, beckoning, "Excuse me, sir! Right here! Excuse me!" The Swede was employing the same phrase in an attempt to brush the men aside for a breath of air. "Excuse me," he said, softly at first, attempting to nudge past. But after one hectic minute in the cluster fuck, he said again in a holler, "Excuse me!" And soon everyone was yelling in a language foreign to their own, attempting to put a cordial face on something altogether annoying, "Excuse me, Excuse me, Excuse me!"

The bustle settled quickly once the Swede was finally persuaded to board the beckoner's jeep. Having emerged victorious in the (mostly) friendly competition, the driver laughed and shouted at his bested comrades, "don't worry, there are more coming." And indeed, another bus loomed on the horizon.

Of the dozen or so busses I watched arrive (including my own), the Swede caused by far the most commotion. The hustle is usually a rather tame and peaceful affair, especially compared to other auction environments. But the performance demonstrates several things: first, that the hotel industry is perhaps 'over-expanded' and demand for (and thus competition over) tourists is fairly high. Second, that a tour in Chitwan is often a somewhat 'disorganized' business, and this shapes how tourists perceive the area and its people. Finally, and most importantly, that the average tourist is kept on a tight leash (though this is often desired by, or at least seems normal to most tourists). The tourist's home is the Sauraha strip, not its surrounding villages, so the flow of money follows accordingly.

The grand commodity that is 'Chitwan'—the full-package 'authentic jungle experience'—remains firmly in the hands of the hill-caste capitalists, while the Tharu, whose Chitwan this used to be, who once 'authentically lived' this 'jungle experience,' remain marginalized in the tourist industry. The feelings of embitterment are mostly imperceptible on the surface, but to be sure, in many quiet corners of the Tharu community, the grapes of wrath are ripening.

Here Tika sees cadres of tourists arrive every day, only to be plucked up by his big brothers in the bourgeois class. Though he has managed a small

stake in the means of production, he is out competed in every way by the hill-caste capitalists, and is left to accommodate, not the upper-class consumers from afar, but the mostly hill-caste employees whose very business it is to steal the tourists away to their gated compounds as quickly as possible.

After the hustle subsided, Tika served up a few cigarettes to the drivers who, having struck out the first round, returned to their cards and smoke.

"I guess the tourists don't come to your restaurant very often" I said to Tika.

"Never," he laughed. "But I wish they would."

A driver to my left, settling into his cigarette, piped up: "I've always had the idea that we should bring the tourists out here for one meal. If they want to experience real Tharu culture, let them have a real Tharu meal. Tika's food is delicious." The idea, in fact, was not original—many people, Tharu and hotel owner alike, expressed their interest to me in incorporating a Tharu meal into the standard itinerary.

"Do you think the hotels will ever start bringing tourists here?" I asked Tika.

Once more he laughed—a soft, rounded chuckle. "Never," he said again.

II. Of Caste and Class

No more than two hundred yards from the Tharu Kitchen and bus park—the most obvious sign of outsider presence in the otherwise seemingly-unbroken countryside—there stands another marker of emigrant thrust, perhaps the most ubiquitous sign of foreign persuasion in the non-Western world: a Christian church. It rests alone, situated in the center of a rice field behind the very first patch of Tharu houses that line the gravel road leading past the bus park and away from the main Sauraha strip. The simple one-room brick structure is painted and peaked to resemble the quaint, stern facades of Puritan New England, reminding me of a Robert Lowell line: "On a thousand small town New England greens,/ the old white churches hold their air/ of sparse, sincere rebellion..."

Indeed this church holds its air in rebellion against its backdrop, proclaiming its definite 'otherness'—a slim white cross on the 'remote' tropical edge of an officially Hindu Nepal. Having seen a few other small Christian churches scattered across the Kathmandu valley, I wasn't entirely bowled over to see one in Sauraha, but it sparked my curiosity nonetheless.

As I approached along the slim dirt ridge lining the flooded rice patch, a group of tiny Tharu children scattered from around their houses and ran shouting and laughing into the church to announce my arrival. From inside the church walls, I heard the loud buzzing of an un-tuned guitar plugged into a stripped and blown single-line speaker. When I poked my head into the front door, the playing stopped, and I was faced with a completely empty concrete

room, except for one middle-aged man wearing a brilliant smile and sitting cross legged in the corner, cradling the instrument.

Here was John Chaudary, the Tharu pastor for a small multi-caste group of Sauraha Christians. He changed his name from Godindra roughly eight years ago when he first converted and began construction of the church with funds from a missionary group in Kathmandu. He now hosts mass every Saturday, with a following of around sixty people.

I pressed my hands together in greeting and offered him a "Namaste."

He laughed in delight and patted the ground next to him. "Come, sit," he said in Nepali. "We can sing together."

I popped a squat against the wall and John called in the Tharu children who were now peeping in anxiously at the door. They tumbled into the room and grabbed some assorted instruments from the corner, including a modal—a Nepali drum—a tambourine and small hand symbols. John began strumming his guitar, and the band vaulted into song—a hymnal composed in the Nepali language, most of which I couldn't understand. It was terrific nonetheless, and I clapped along with the group, occasionally attempting to hum along in harmony.

I was treated to several of these songs, and then John handed me the guitar, requesting some American music. After a failed attempt at tuning the sparkling blue knockoff Ibanez acoustic/electric (called, cleverly, an 'Ivanez,' probably by the same company that turned Gibson into 'Givson'), I tried my best to provide a church-worthy song: a shoddy rendition of Hendrix's "Voodoo Chile (slight return)." John loved it, or did a great job of pretending to.

John lives in the house closest to the church, one of the first houses past the bus park in the village area just north of the Sauraha strip—the same village to which nearly every hotel brings its guests for a 'cultural tour.' John's house is constructed in 'traditional' Tharu fashion (the same way Tika's kitchen is), which thus makes it an occasional stop and prime photo-op on the tour.

Most Tharus I talked to living along this tour route were quick to tell me, upon my first inquiry, that the relationship between tourists and the locals was "very good," or, at the very least, "ok." It wasn't until later that many of my informants began expressing some discontent over the Tharu role in the tourist game. This is probably because, a) at this point, after over a decade of village cultural tours being conducted every day, several times a day, the banality of this interaction for most local villagers has produced a surface-level semblance of conviviality, or at least indifference, and b) because when Tharus said that they liked tourists, they were talking to me, a tourist (albeit a rare one that actually stopped to speak with them), and so probably didn't want to say to my face that the interactions between 'people like them' and 'people like me' were anything worse than "ok."

My relationship with John, though, blossomed quicker than most. He was one of the friendliest and most frank of my informants. After our jam session, and after the usual chatter over my business in Sauraha, my marital status and estimation of Nepali women, I asked John perhaps my most repeated question: "In your opinion, what's the relationship like between tourists and Tharus?"

John chuckled. "What relationship?" he said, smiling. "There is no relationship between Tharu and tourist. The foreigners come, they look, and then they leave. It's not a big problem to have them here, but there's no real relationship." John said this, not maliciously, but matter-of-factly.

His words hold water. The village tour is a strange glass-case encounter. Tourists are herded (sometimes in the back of an oxcart, but often on foot) from their hotel grounds by their Nepali guides—most-often a hill-caste guide, though there are a growing number of Tharu guides—and marched in a brief loop around a 'traditional Tharu village.' The guides offer their guests a short spiel on Tharu history, which most often goes something like this: 'The Tharus are the indigenous ethnic group in Chitwan. Though stories vary, they probably migrated here several hundred years ago from Rajasthan, India. Because they drink so much raksi (Nepali home-brew liquor made from rice or millet) and eat such spicy food, they are resistant to mosquitoes, and could thus inhabit the malaria-infested jungles.'

As the tour continues, guides may point out certain 'lived traditions' to their guests, especially the way the walls of the houses are still constructed in traditional style with bamboo and mud, and are often decorated with colorful thumb and hand prints. Some guides may even find an elder Tharu woman sitting outside and lift up her hand to show his guests the 'traditional' dark navy tattoo sleeve running up her forearm. The specific 'meaning' of the thumb prints and tattoos is not always explained, but it is implied that within these symbols lies 'authentically lived Tharu tradition.'

Some tourists may shy-up around the villagers they encounter. Others may go so far as to say 'Namaste' to them. Many simply walk up and, with

machine-gun gusto and the subtlety of a surgeon wielding a steak knife, snap pictures of the Tharus and their 'traditional' homes. If permission is ever sought to take these pics, it's usually from the guide who holds the authority on how this often awkward affair is supposed to take place. Rarely will a guide act as translator to facilitate a conversation between the guests and their toured subjects; and foreign tourists, safely standing behind the language barrier, virtually never communicate directly with the Tharu. The tour is often lauded as a 'learning experience,' but what exactly is 'learned' is a question I'll return to later.

Tharu villagers themselves, though subjected to this onslaught of outsiders nearly every day, are never directly compensated in any way. Some tourists may purchase the occasional woven handicraft from an industrious Tharu woman, but the big money is still in the pockets of the hotels and tourist agencies that arranged this village walk. This lack of compensation is a matter of quiet but serious concern among many Tharu people. It is, in fact, their most common complaint: not that the tourists invade their privacy or objectify them (though this was occasionally remarked upon), but that the Tharus—the producers and rightful owners of 'Tharu tradition,' the commodity being consumed on the village tour—receive nothing from the consumers who shovel that commodity onto the memory cards of their digital cameras. The vocal concern is not so much that Tharu 'tradition' is commodified *for* a foreign consumer, but *by* a foreign producer: the hotel owner. And the owner is indeed foreign—he is most often a hill-caste capitalist, and thus a 'modern businessman,' getting rich off showcasing a 'traditional' (and thus backwards) peoples' way of life.

I asked John my second most common question: "What changes have the tourists brought with them? What kind of development has happened in the Tharu village?"

John replied with another smile. "What development?" he quipped again. "No development has happened for the Tharu. There have been changes since the tourists came, yes, but no development for the Tharu." Putting aside for the moment the question of just what 'development' really means (it is often, in the literature of the neoliberals, reduced crudely to mere economic expansion, but means many different things to the Tharu people) the more important question for the Tharus is often, 'whose development?'

"The people from the hills," John said. "The Bahuns (Brahmin caste), they are very clever. They have education. They own all the hotels here and are very rich. For them, there is development. But we Tharu are all still very poor. We are very far behind them." John's sentiments were widely shared among the Tharus I spoke with, the key connectors always being: Bahun = 'clever,' 'educated,' 'ahead'; Tharu = 'poor,' 'uneducated,' 'behind.' The notions of what it means to be educated and wealthy, or uneducated and poor, are tied up in the very scripts of what it means to be 'modern'; and in the drama of modernity, the Tharu are cast, both by the tourist industry that commodifies their 'traditional' lives, and often in the minds of the Tharus themselves, as 'less modern' than both the tourists who visit their village and the hill castes who escort them.

"Before the Bahuns came down here," John said, "this land was all Tharu. But the Bahuns are smart, they're tricky, and we Tharus don't think very much. After the malaria eradication, Bahuns came and offered us meat

and raksi for a little bit of our land, and, foolishly, we agreed to the trade. The Bahuns got our land, and now they're getting rich off of it." John says all of this laughingly, as if he's simply recounting a comedy of errors. This joking ease in talking of their usurped land was characteristic of most Tharus I spoke with. Though many of them consider it a "big problem" that hill-caste Nepalis have moved into Tharu land and made money off of their home and way of life, there are no vocal demonstrations for land reclamation.

Though many Tharus, like John, had their own stories of how the 'tricky' Brahmins moved in and snatched up land, some of the most colorful accounts of Tharus getting "suckered" came from my good friend Sukram Chaudary (one of the rare Tharu tour guides, who we'll meet again later). Sukram related these anecdotes to me mostly in English. I reconstruct them here, but generally they are his words:

"The Tharus are dominated by other tribes, like the Brahmins. We are still so far behind. It's like a race, and we might be running faster now, slowly catching up, but still we are stuck behind the Brahmins.

"Long ago, before the malaria eradication project, the Brahmins from the hills used to come through the jungles during the short winter season, when the mosquitoes weren't a problem, and travel into India to trade for salts and oil. On the trade route, the Brahmins would meet Tharu people, befriend them, and stay in their houses. Sometimes the Brahmins would even become 'meet brothers' with the Tharu people, and perform a ceremony to make them very close friends, like kinship.

"The Brahmins were very clever, persuasive people, and so they knew how to use the Tharu. The Tharu were honest and friendly and less educated,

so they were easy to use. After the malaria eradication project, when a lot of rich farmland opened up, the Brahmins came down and began to get small pieces of land. They would go to the Tharus acting very friendly and say, 'Oh, my friend, my meet brother, I am so poor and you have so much good land, can't you please give me a small piece of it?' And of course the Tharus did.

"See, they were very clever, the Brahmins, and knew how to use the Tharus. And once they had their small piece of land, they started pulling tricks to get more land. They suckered the Tharus. Sometimes the Brahmins would plant vine-like plants, like pumpkins, and they would make it so that the vines pointed out over the boundaries of their field and grew into the Tharu fields. Once the pumpkins started growing in the Tharu's field, the Brahmin would go to him and say, 'My plants are growing on this land. That makes it my land. That is the law.' The Brahmins were tricky like that, and the Tharu thought that the Brahmins, being more educated, knew everything about the law and politics, and so they felt afraid to confront them.

"Another thing the Brahmins would do is to take their cattle to graze on a Tharu's field. This was to provoke the Tharu, and of course the Tharu would have to go out and shoo the Brahmin's cattle away, and then to teach the Brahmin a lesson the Tharu would beat him. But that's just what the Brahmin wanted. After the beating, the Brahmin would pretend to be on the verge of death and lay in his bed for days, faking an illness. He would say to the Tharu, 'I am very sick because you beat me, and so you have to compensate me or I can sue you. That is the law.' And the Tharu, knowing nothing about the law, and having no money, would have to give the Brahmin more land.

"Once though, I heard a story from my uncle in which a Tharu tricked the Brahmin. Like other times, the Brahmin had let his cattle graze on the Tharu's land, the Tharu had beaten the Brahmin, and the Brahmin was pretending to be deathly sick and demanding a piece of the Tharu's land. But the Tharu knew he was faking, and so he said, 'fine, I'll give the Brahmin twice the land he wants, but I want to beat him a second time!' and the Brahmin got scared, jumped out of his bed, and ran away."

Just how accurate these anecdotes are is beside the point. What's important is that there remains in the Tharu imagination a history of hill-castes moving in and taking Tharu land, and that the most widely held explanation for how this happened is that the Brahmins, being 'clever', were able to 'outsmart' the Tharus. But the word 'clever,' especially in the context of Sukram's stories, connotes something more than simple wit. The Brahmins' 'education,' and especially their authority over the 'law,' are both markers of 'modern man.' Indeed, one way to read the tales is that the Brahmins, migrating from the 'more developed' hill regions of Nepal, hoodwinked the 'less developed' Tharu villagers (the 'noble savages') with the ever-so-modern tool of 'civil law.'

When I asked John why he thought the Brahmins were able to exploit the Tharus, besides the usual explanation of Brahmins being 'clever' and 'tricky,' he said, interestingly, that Brahmins had more '*chetanaa*' than Tharus—a Nepali word that translates to something like 'feelings,' 'awareness,' or 'consciousness.' It's a word that, as I was informed later, is often used to distinguish people from animals; it's what makes a human a human and not a

mere instinctual beast—in other words, what Westerners usually call 'self-awareness' or 'self-consciousness.'

The fact that John would repeatedly employ a word that conjures such strong evolutionary connotations is, in my mind, rather telling. If '*chetanaa*' is essentially 'self-awareness,' and 'self-awareness' is a quintessential measurement of 'modern man,' then what John was describing, in essence, is a story in which the hill-castes were more 'evolutionarily developed' along the teleological race track of 'modernization', and even—to borrow the language of the insufferable Matthew Arnold, and other modern thinkers obsessed over what raises man over beast—more 'civilized.' '*Chetanaa*' acts as a marker of 'modernity' and 'development,' and, crucially, it can be measured, because hill castes had more of it.

And apparently still do. The history of a hierarchical relationship lingers in the present. Though many Tharus I talked to believe that they are now 'catching up' (for many reasons), most nonetheless said, as Sukram and John did, that Tharus are 'still behind in the race,' and the tides of 'development' have lifted only the hill-caste hotel owners.

But, the real nugget here, in the present tense, is that much of the current discontent expressed by the Tharus is against hotel owners, and not necessarily Brahmins or hill-castes as a whole. Though the history of caste conflict remains ever-present—as does a definite social hierarchy—the battle lines along which 'difference' is most often defined within that hierarchy have been revolutionized. What was once a rather clear-cut *caste* conflict—one migrant 'tribe' exploiting another indigenous 'tribe'—has taken a back seat to the now more salient category of *class*.

The Tharu are dissatisfied with the village walk precisely because they feel that, as the 'producers' of 'culture'—in part a commodity that expresses exchange-value—their 'labor-value' (insofar as 'labor' and 'culture' are both considered 'essential human activities') is being usurped by a capitalist class. In other words, though the Tharu are the ones 'living' and thus 'producing' culture, the so-called 'means of production'—or means of getting rich off that cultural commodity—are still firmly and exclusively in the hands of hotel owners. Simpler still: lower-class Tharus are being exploited by upper-class hotel owners.

However, due to the historical conditions that favored the hill-castes, the vast majority of capitalists in the Sauraha area are, as aforementioned, hill caste; thus the class conflict often appears as, and is often spoken of as, a conflict between indigenous and immigrant castes. The 'clever' Brahmin who usurped land from the Tharu is sometimes the same 'clever' Brahmin hotel-owner usurping the value of Tharu culture.

But most often not. As is the case all over Nepal, though most of the seats of power and wealth are occupied by hill-region Brahmin, Chettri and Newar castes, the vast majority of hill castes are neither 'powerful' nor 'wealthy.' It's a square and rectangle type deal, and clearing the confusion over which four-sided figure we're talking about here is vital to understanding the conflict over commodification in Chitwan. Though the class conflict may appear as predominantly between Tharu and hill-caste, it is in fact, more accurately, between petty-bourgeois / proletariat and bourgeois.

The exceptions to the prior rule prove the prominence of the latter: all along the village tour through a land of 'lived Tharu tradition,' many houses

and fields belong to hill caste farmers, and though the architecture sometimes varies, to the tourist perceiving a vast ocean of 'otherness,' it may take the enlightened tour guide to point out which property 'truly' portrays 'Tharu tradition,' and which property belongs to an immigrant group.

Within this village setting, especially among the younger generation, I found relations to be 'normal' between indigenous Tharu and second or third-generation Bahun. Many of the Tharu kids I hung out with counted Bahuns among their best friends. And, though most were quick to identify themselves when asked, many found it odd that I would care to distinguish between Tharu and Bahun among a group of friends, and even occasionally said, when asked if there was any caste tension, "For us, caste doesn't matter anymore." Though this is probably not precisely the case, it's important to note that very few of my informants cared to retrench themselves in caste identity, and that the Tharu villagers rarely if ever expressed discontent towards their hill-caste neighbors for 'using them,' but almost always did so towards hotel owners.

Beyond these generalizations, though, a couple anecdotes are particularly illustrative:

On my walk back from John's church—plodding in the evening light like a caricature of Tom Sawyer, with my pants rolled to my knees and a rucksack slung across my back—I was passed by a pony-drawn cart, draped over with an elaborately colored sunshade, its two slim wheels rattling frantically over the uneven gravel road. To preserve the 'traditional' feel of the Sauraha area—though ponies were never 'native' creatures—these carts are often used instead of cars as the taxi service between Sauraha and the nearby

urban center, Tadi Bazaar (though this does little to quell the overall flow of motor vehicles).

Ten feet in front of me, the pony whinnied to a halt, and its driver, a man in his late twenties, poked his head around the carriage's awning.

"Hello, brother," he called. "Come, sit, I'll take you into town."

Assuming the offer came with a service charge, I politely declined. "I'd like to walk it," I said.

"Come," he called again. "It's free for you, my friend. I'm going into town anyways."

Never one to turn down anything free, I hopped aboard. The driver, who we'll call Anil, gave the pony a sharp whip of the reins, and we began our bumpy journey into town. Our chat started in the standard way:

"Where are you from?" Anil asked.

"America," I said.

"Oh, America!" Anil said. "I would love to go to America. It's so much wealthier than Nepal. Can you help bring me there, friend? I've already got my passport."

Thus began another type of conversation not uncommon between my Nepali friends and me—a conversation I often found difficult and depressing. The first vein of the conversation is a recital of all the ways in which America—a romanticized land of milk and honey—is superior to Nepal in most every conceivable way. In Anil's words, "Everyone has work in America, no? Everyone is very rich. The houses and buildings, they are so big. I have seen them in pictures. I have seen pictures of New York. It's not

like in Nepal. Our houses are so small and there is no work. I am very poor. It has been so hard for me."

Against my own tendency to indulge in the notions of 'American decline'—in Philip Roth's words, the death of "the American pastoral," and descent into "the indigenous American berserk"—a pristine picture of America still stands in the imagination of some, like Anil's, as a 'shining beacon on the hill.' This notion of America's superiority as a 'civilization' is not unlike the narrative of the 'clever' Bahun and the 'backwards' Tharu. In both the comparisons of America vs. Nepal and Bahun vs. Tharu, the prior party is placed 'ahead' on the teleological yellow brick road of 'modernization' and 'development.'

Although wildly romanticized, there is certainly some empirical truth to America being 'more affluent' than Nepal; but the notion of American *superiority* in being 'more developed' or 'more modern' is wrapped up in the dubious and destructive discourses of 'development' and 'modernity'—discourses that demand to be deconstructed. In other words, to borrow a phrase from Edward Said, the idea of American superiority is a discursive project that must be exposed as 'almost fiction.' 'Development's' 'modern' regime of signification, as it did with Brahmin and Tharu, reduces parties to winners and losers: America = 'big,' 'clean,' 'rich'; Nepal = 'small,' 'dirty,' 'poor.' America is 'developed' and Nepal is 'underdeveloped,' or, at best, '(still) developing.' America is 'modern,' Nepal is '(still) modernizing.'

However, trying to protest Anil's and others' conceptions of an American paradise was always incredibly difficult (especially in a foreign language of which I had a wobbly grasp at best). How was I, the possessor

and purveyor of such incredible American privilege—the same incredible privilege and wealth that allowed me to even be in Nepal and have this conversation, a privilege embedded in the same global structure of inequality that will probably prevent Anil from ever reaching America—supposed to portray to Anil that America isn't, in fact, 'better' than Nepal? I usually settled on something like, "There are also many problems in America. Not everyone has work. Some people are very poor. And I very much like living in Nepal. It is a very beautiful place."

The conundrum only worsened in the second vein of the conversation. After expressing his confusion as to why anyone would ever choose to come from America to Nepal (and spend a rather large sum of money to do so), he repeated his own interest in going to America, and attempted to enlist my help.

"I already have my passport," he said again. "You can bring me back to America with you, friend. I can find work there."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I can't do that. It doesn't work like that."

"How can I make it work?" Anil asked.

Lamely, I told him that he needed a worker's visa, that he'd have to apply for one at the US Embassy, that it was a very difficult process, and that even if he managed to get a visa, he'd still need an exorbitant sum of money for a plane ticket, and that finding work and place to live in America would probably be hard for him, especially because he didn't speak much English. By the vacant look on Anil's face, I could tell I was repeating a lot of bullshit he'd already heard and knew all too well.

Pastor John had also asked me about finding work in America, and I had told him the same crap about having to get a visa—and that no, I didn't have any sway over Embassy decisions or any other way to help him get that visa—not a half hour before meeting Anil and having the same conversation. John had even asked me how strict the US was in checking for a visa, what the punishments were, and if he could somehow hide or sneak in. He asked in the same laughing cadence in which he'd conducted the rest of our conversation, but despite his smiles, the whole exchange managed to depress the shit out of me. But what was to follow from Anil would plunge me into an even deeper funk.

"It's so hard for me," Anil said. "I spent the last three years of my life in Malaysia, cleaning toilets. I was away from my wife and my little daughter. It was so hard. Every night I would weep. It was a very sad time." Anil's story is pervasive in Nepal; in fact, the largest source of income in the Nepal is the remittance economy—mostly young men working menial jobs in the heat of the Gulf States, brought along by migrant labor corporations essentially as indentured servants on a several year stint.

"And now that I'm back," Anil said, "I think I might have to leave again. It's impossible to find work in this area. And even when you can, the work is very hard and pays very little. I can't make it by driving this cart. I am too poor, and my bosses pay me nothing."

"I'm sad to hear all this," I kept saying, like an idiot broken record, feeling strangely ashamed and helpless.

"My family is very large," Anil continued, "so we can't split up my parents' land. My older brothers, they'll get all the land, and I am left with a

tiny house and no land. I have to work. I tried working as a waiter before, but my job was given to the owner's cousin. So I had to go abroad, and maybe I'll have to go again. All the money from tourism goes straight to the big men, the bosses. There's nothing left for us."

"Are you a Tharu?" I asked.

"No," he said, pointing at a small post card pasted to the front board of the cart. On it were various portrayals of Hindu gods. "These are all my gods. I am a Bahun, a Brahmin."

Anil is only one of many Brahmins in the proletariat class, struggling to make a living in the Sauraha area. And, while Anil clearly found his Brahmin identity important to practice—he carried the post card with him always—he was far more vocal about the structures of economic inequality in Sauraha than about any tensions between castes. His main concern was the flow of most all tourist money 'straight to the big men,' and the severe lack of opportunity for everyone else to stake a piece of that business—a system of inequity that sent him to Malaysia to clean toilets, alienated from his family for a full three years of his daughter's childhood.

This demonstrates that the class conflict is not merely limited to a petty-bourgeois group of Tharu farmers who feel that the market value of their culture is exploited by bourgeois hotel owners, but is expressed much more broadly between a multi-caste group of proletariat workers and the multi-caste group of 'big men' who are running the show and keeping wages low.

Interestingly, among these 'big men,' there is a Tharu main player, Giridhari Chaudary, who, for a full eighteen years sat as president of the Hotel Association—the semi-formal legislative and regulatory body of hotel owners.

He owns his own resort on the Sauraha strip—in fact one of the first hotels ever started in Sauraha—and is, by all rights, a successful capitalist. When I spoke with him at his home, though he expressed concern for helping the Tharu community to 'develop,' he took the standard 'trickle-down' tact of the bourgeois class when I brought up the issue of hotel owners exploiting the Tharu cultural commodity:

"Yes, there's a conflict between us hotel owners and the Tharu villagers. The Tharu say we're selling their culture and getting money from it when they get nothing. But how many houses are there in the Tharu village? How could we give money to all of them? There's no way to compensate them directly, but they do see plenty of indirect benefits. That's what they need to understand.

"We have to convince them, look, we are the sellers, we sell the goods, but you all, you are the growers, you need to grow the goods to be sold. You can grow the chickens and lentils and other vegetables that we then buy to feed to the tourists. And you can come get jobs in our hotels. The whole Tharu community benefits from the hotel business, because we buy their cash crops and we employ them. These are the indirect benefits.

"When there was the problem with the Maoists and the tourists stopped coming, the people started realizing that everything was hurting in the area, that they actually got benefits indirectly from the industry. Only in the absence of the tourists did they realize this, though. It's very hard to convince them about these things. If there were no hotels and no tourists, they would not have any development."

Beyond the obvious linguistic clues—listen to the inclusive "we" when referring to hotel owners, the 'other-ing' "they" when addressing farmers and workers—Giridhari's interests align strongly with those of the capitalist class: to maintain a monopoly on "selling" to tourists, while insisting it should be the 'indirectly' thanked role of others to merely "grow" goods for this business (including, apparently, 'culture'). The insistence on others receiving 'indirect' benefits from the hotel industry was the go-to line of every owner I spoke with.

And while it's not necessarily altogether untrue that some villagers see indirect economic benefit from tourist presence, this benefit is often meagre and does little to soothe the rash of the overall structure of inequality. Not only do hotels do everything in their power to monopolize tourist consumptive practices, but they do very little to make sure that any of this money is funneled, even indirectly, into the local villager's hands. Most hotels purchase all of their produce—vegetables, fruit, milk—from the faraway markets of the Tadi Bazaar, rather than purchasing organic goods directly from village groups.

More importantly, Giridhari's explanatory side-step of 'indirect benefits' never addresses directly the qualm of the Tharu people who feel the cultural good they're 'growing' is being usurped. When I asked Giridhari if, as a Tharu himself, he felt any personal responsibility towards the Tharu community, he replied, appealing to what struck me as classic good-old-American bootstraps bullshit, "No, not really. Everyone has their own free mind, their own free will. Everyone has to be a leader for themselves." Siding consistently with hotel interest, and snubbing (however politely) the interests

of Tharu villagers, the outlier I found in Giridhari—the very rare Tharu hotel owner—portrays in vibrant Technicolor the new rule of class over caste.

All of this is not to say that caste is no longer important at all, or that class has come to replace caste. My point is that, in and around Sauraha, *class is now the more salient category along which the lines of conflict are drawn*. Many still find caste identity important to express, but rarely does it produce contention the way the class hierarchy does.

Moreover, how the broader social conflict is conceived of and enacted defies the old rules of the caste hierarchy. In Nepal, caste, as a definite marker of social status, is determined through heredity and was once performed largely through ritual—which religious ceremonies one practiced, which foods one ate, whether one drank alcohol, what trade one practiced, etc. And, to attempt to ascend in this ostensibly static hierarchy, many engaged in what's referred to as sanskritization—or the adoption of another caste's ritual principles.

The highest caste groups in Nepal, according to the *Maluki Ain*—a legal code which institutionalized the caste hierarchy—were the so-called 'wearers of the sacred thread.' Once, when I asked an elderly man in the village if he was a Tharu, he laughed at me as if I was blind. "No," he said, pulling at a thin strand of material worn as a sash inside his shirt. "Do you see this? This, Tharus do not wear. This is what makes me a Bahun."

Now, however, the salient signifiers in the social hierarchy, especially among the younger generation, are no longer the old ritual practices, but rather—redefined in a globalizing era by the scripts of 'modernity'—one's performance of those things that make one appear 'modern': ranging broadly,

but including especially the clothes one wears, the house one lives in, one's occupation, and one's education, all of which were important and frequent topics of conversations among my informants.

Indeed the last item, education, was remarked upon as one of the most prominent gradients of status. Many of my informants not only considered the lack of education as the main reason for why Tharus were 'so far behind,' but also considered the recent trend in Tharu youth enrollment as the biggest reason that Tharus might be 'catching up,' however slowly. As a prominent mark of modernity, there is ostensibly 'mobility' along the new hierarchy, as public education is supposed to provide equal opportunity for all.

In terms of those most outward performances of appearance, most Tharu and hill-caste alike wear western clothes: kids wear blue jeans and t-shirts (often, to my chagrin, sporting the air-brushed primped and polished mugs of Avril Lavigne or Britney Spears) and are required to wear the standard navy slacks and dark blue button-up shirts to school; men often wear khakis and collared shirts, and many in the bourgeois class may raise the stakes with pleats and button-ups even for casual affairs. Other than the occasional topi—a 'traditional' Nepali hat—virtually no 'traditional' Nepali or Tharu attire is ever worn by the men. As my friend Ram Chaudary (another Tharu guide we'll return to later) once remarked to me, "if you want to be taken seriously in Nepal, you have to wear Western clothes." Women bear the burden of being the final vessels of 'Nepali culture.' Though few Tharu women, except the occasional elder, wear 'traditional Tharu dress,' many hill-caste women still occasionally wear the 'traditional' Nepali sari.

And many Tharu and other farmers in the village who have the money have abandoned 'traditional' housing and built concrete or brick abodes, often painted over in bright greens, purples or pinks, in a move that many condemn as 'peacocking their wealth' (and 'killing tradition')—a practice tied directly to class performance. For class is itself a very modern category, as it arrives most prominently along with industrial and advanced capitalism—that most modern of economic arrangements, which depends on the commodity fetish. And, with the modern capitalist regime's proclivity to transform everything into a commodity—even 'culture' and 'tradition'—the means to express or perform ones 'modernity' often require the aid of commodities, or become commodities themselves.

Class thus becomes particularly salient in the new 'modern' hierarchy. Though in the classic Marxist sense the qualifier is not nearly expansive enough to include all of those complex performances that make one 'modern,' one's own personal affluence and the opportunities this (re)creates often facilitate the performance of the 'modern'—nice clothes, a nice house, and a private education all cost money, and therefore reflect not just 'modernity' but, inside and related to this, 'wealth.' And many of the undercurrents of conflict present in Sauraha, regarding the Tharu village walk and otherwise, are quite often conflicts over a regime of commodification—conflicts in which the lines are clearly drawn between, in the classic Marxist sense, *classes*: between groups that share similar relations to the 'means of production' of the grand commodity that is the Chitwan 'natural' and 'cultural' experience.

Indeed, for the Tharu living along the route of the village walk, the quest to 'get ahead'—to become 'more modern' and 'more developed'—is

intimately wrapped up in the quest to reclaim their cultural commodity and snatch a slice of the tourist business. For though the Tharu are still the owners and producers of ‘Tharu tradition,’ they do not control the ‘means of producing’ the ‘cultural *experience*’—the tour itself—for which all the proverbial cabbage is rendered. Thus, for the Tharu, though ‘becoming more modern’ is never necessarily synonymous with upending their class condition, it does often stroll hand-in-hand with their project to revolutionize their relation to the means of production.

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