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# Developed Toast, Modern Laundry: Nepali Household Appliance Discourses

Maureen McCord  
*SIT Study Abroad*

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# **Developed Toast, Modern Laundry: Nepali Household Appliance Discourses**

Maureen McCord  
Academic Director: Daniel Putnam

Wellesley College  
Anthropology | History

South Asia, Nepal, Kathmandu  
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Nepal: Development and Social Change,  
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**ABSTRACT:** This project investigates discourses of modernity, globalization, class identity, and social change in Kathmandu, Nepal, through the lens of ten Nepali women's purchase and usage of home appliances. Four weeks of ethnographic research sought to identify prevailing practices and attitudes toward household appliances in the city, situating them in broader discourses of globalization, modernity, class identity, and social change. The project is composed of participant observation in Nepali homes, including informal interviews, with project participants sourced from my own social network. My collaborators' practices and opinions on appliances engage discourses of the developmentalist and modernizing South Asian state, fluid and shifting markers of class identity in the postmodern, globalizing developing world, and the ways in which western and nonwestern public performativity surrounding appliances interacts in the globalized, time-space compressed 21<sup>st</sup> Century to create a conflicting and contrasting public and private culture of consumption and commodities.

Key words: Nepal, modernity, globalization, public culture, household appliances, anthropology of commodities and consumption

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	4
<i>Literature Review</i> .....	7
<b>Methodology</b> .....	13
<b>Findings</b> .....	18
<i>Health, Wellness, and Affective Ties to Commodities</i> .....	19
<i>Constructions of Class and Socioeconomic Identity</i> .....	24
<i>Private Consumption, Public Culture, and the Role of Performativity</i> .....	29
<b>Discussion</b> .....	34
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	39
<b>Glossary of Terms</b> .....	41
<b>Appendices</b> .....	43
<i>Appendix A: Research Materials</i> .....	43
<i>Appendix B: Tables and Figures</i> .....	44
<b>References</b> .....	45
<b>List of Collaborators</b> .....	48

## Introduction

It's a pretty good-sized apartment, a flat that covers the third floor of a three-story low-rise apartment building in the middle class Kathmandu neighborhood of Handigaun. The building is made of concrete, a peachy-orangey-red color, with balconies lining the front and large windows of the kind so common in Nepal—a big pane of glass in the middle which doesn't open, with a transom above and two smaller panes on the sides that open and are protected by a utilitarian grille.

Coming up the stairs and into the apartment, it's basically a railroad-style, with a narrow hallway stretching from the balcony past the three main rooms and to the bathroom. The kitchen and stairwell flank the hallway on the other side. The front room has been partitioned off from the hallway with a flimsy-seeming plywood wall and door, covered in a child's scratchy handwriting. It's English homework, looks like, copied straight onto the wall like so many naughty kids do: "list the Nepali months...give any three meat-providing animals." Next to it hangs an enormous, laminated poster of Krishna and his consort, Radha. There's all-weather indoor-outdoor carpeting on the floor, or in some places tacked-down plastic sheeting made to look like wood parquet, and oriental rugs. Every single room has a bed in it, sometimes two, and it's not clear which room is used for what; one room has a small bed, sideboard and empty bookshelf, several couches and armchairs, and a creepy collection of somewhat-worse-for-wear stuffed animals. Another has an enormous bed, two *almirahs* (one wood, one classic avocado-green Godrej steel), a

loveseat, a TV, and a collection of silver serving ware.<sup>1</sup> The last has two beds, one large, one small, two *almirahs*, a desktop computer, and a vanity table.

The kitchen is even stranger—recognizable in some ways, utterly foreign in others. There’s a sink with two taps, one somewhat crudely chiseled out of the wall. A table pushed up against the wall and surrounded by four chairs, a smallish mauve fridge, a tabletop gas stove, and loads of open shelving and storage holding all matter of strange dry foods round out the space. Not to mention the dish rack, an imposing stainless steel contraption mounted to the wall with “FAMOUS NEPAL” stamped into the lip of the middle shelf and containing only a large collection of stainless steel vessels, utensils, and partitioned dishes that look like a *very* durable version of the Styrofoam trays I ate hot lunch off of in primary school. Where I expect a pantry to be, there’s a room with a small household shrine and collection of Hindu religious objects. It’s late January, and this is my Nepali family’s decidedly middle-class apartment: my new home for the next three and half months.

My family’s apartment is in many ways representative of the varied middle- and upper-middle class homes crowding the streets of Handigaun, Bishalnagar, and other neighborhoods in the heart of this city. It reflects both typical Nepali values and priorities and a recognizable Western modernism, with a floor plan similar to any number of postwar apartments in cities across the America. As I was welcomed into any number of homes—those of my friends, my extended Nepali family, and their friends—I noticed dozens of near-universal similarities (the household prayer room or shrine, often in the kitchen, as in the Indian homes I’d visited; the steel

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<sup>1</sup> See the glossary of terms for a discussion of *almirah*.

Godrej-brand *almirahs*) and something unique: loads of homes had a significant collection of household appliances, many of which, I was proudly informed, were new. It made me curious; these rapidly multiplying collections of household appliances had to be changing people's lives and everyday experiences. What are prevailing practices and attitudes towards household appliances in Kathmandu? Where are home appliances situated in the discourses of modernity, urbanization, and class identity prevalent in the city today? In what ways does the aspirational purchase and usage of household appliances interact with Nepalis' self-perception when it comes to class identity, development, and modernity?<sup>2</sup>

To engage with these questions, I conducted ethnographic research, collaborating intensely with ten women who made their homes in a narrow plot of Kathmandu: the neighborhoods of Handigaun, Bishalnagar, Chandol, Kalopul, Baluwatar, and Gairidhara. These small communities are closely intertwined, relatively old neighborhoods right in the heart of the city; taken together, the area is only between one and two square kilometers. They blend together, these neighborhoods; almost everyone I interviewed said at one point or another (often when trying to give me directions to their homes) that they, too, lived in Handigaun, the most recognizable of the neighborhoods, before amending their statement to say they actually lived in Gairidhara or Kalopul. Like so many middle class neighborhoods in South Asia, Handigaun and Kalopul are warrens of unpaved or minimally paved streets and *gallis*, tiny shops, tinier temples, low rise apartment

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<sup>2</sup> See the glossary of terms for a discussion of what constitutes a "household appliance" in this study.

blocks crowded together, street vendors, pedestrians, cows, stray dogs, children, young men on motorbikes.<sup>3</sup> As Handigaun blends into Bishalnagar, there are fewer blocky apartment buildings, more single family homes and homes converted into flats. The roads are wider, more often paved, with sidewalks. Gairidhara, Chandol, and Baluwatar are also more high-class (the prime minister's home is in Baluwatar, along with a number of INGO offices), noticeably less claustrophobic, and cleaner.

As I visited the homes of the women who graciously agreed to work with me on the project, the subtle shifts and delicate differences these neighborhoods evinced were reflected by my collaborators' ideas and practices surrounding home appliances. Our conversations encompassed discussions of class, social change, and navigating the complex intersections of Nepali and non-Nepali culture while remaining grounded in the everyday experiences of Nepali women, making this project an authentic, yet academically rich, portrait of their lives.

### *Literature Review*

Before starting this project, I knew research interest on the South Asian city had grown rapidly in the last 20 years, as urban studies has emerged as a fully-fledged discipline and cities in South Asia have become more visible following the influence of South Asian scholars such as the Subaltern Studies Group in mainstream academia. Much research on South Asian urbanity examines the role of modernity and rapid social change in the construction of urban South Asians' identities, with a focus on the shaping of an emergent middle class. This project situates this broad academic interest in the context of Kathmandu's middle class homes and

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<sup>3</sup> See the glossary of terms for a discussion of *galli*.

apartments—and their multiplying collections of home appliances. This project is informed by theoretical literature on modernity, urbanism, class identity, and globalization in the Global South; ethnographic literature from outside Nepal which treats these topics; and Nepal-specific work.

Globalization, modernity, urbanity, and consumption are delicately enmeshed in uniquely specific, and at the same time translocal and transnational, contexts across the world, and particularly in the Global South. Direct linkages between Lefebvrian, politically and culturally meaningful spaces and literal physical spaces are increasingly contingent, especially given the role technology has played in compressing space-time and enabling translocal, transnational economics of “flexible accumulation” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, Harvey 1989). Today’s urban residents across the globe in particular have “globalization and time-space compression [making] it more feasible than ever to break the link” between one’s empirically real space (the locale) and one’s milieu, “the environment that is practically relevant to an individual” (Smart and Smart 1992, 271). Gupta and Ferguson (1992) and Appadurai (1990) have argued persuasively in their own ways for the transmutation of the seemingly natural relationship between literal space and socially made space in the contemporary globalized world, making this idea *de rigueur* in anthropology through their heavily cited articles “Beyond ‘Culture:’ Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference,” and “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy.”

These arguments should by no means be construed as dismissing or putting an end to localized, spatialized cultures (what we would typically consider “Nepali

culture,” “French culture,” or “Peruvian culture”), despite the provocative title of Gupta and Ferguson’s work. They rather hope to capture a “global cultural economy [which] has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order” and

the fluid, irregular shapes...[which] are not objectively given relations which look the same from every angle of vision, but rather...are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as sub-national groupings and movements (whether religious, political, or economic), and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighborhoods, and families (Appadurai 1990, 7).

In South Asia particularly, the perspectives from which Appadurai’s fluid, irregular –scapes are viewed draw on subaltern and postcolonial theoretical positioning, centering on how products, cultural, technological, financial, mediated, or ideological—products which may be integral to western philosophy—are “provincialized” (Chakrabarty 2007), and recontextualized in the specific, historicized, culturally complex South Asian context. As an example, Appadurai and Breckenridge’s extraordinarily influential concept of “public culture” is a way of thinking about “modernity [that] is now everywhere...But it is not only everywhere, it is also in a series of somewheres” in its uniquely South Asian form (1995, 2). It circumscribes a

zone of debate...[which] cannot be understood apart from the general processes of globalization...the contestatory character of public culture has much to do with the tensions and contradictions between national sites and transnational cultural processes. These tensions generate arenas where other registers of culture encounter, interrogate, and contest one another in new and unexpected ways (5).

Contemporary theorization of South Asian modernity, urbanity, consumption and globalization has increasingly relied on the concept of public culture to make

meaning from translocal and transnational processes by which modernity operates across the world—such as the spread of home appliances.

South Asian theorists have also shown the ways in which specifically South Asian histories and cosmologies have wrought a singular experience of modernity, urbanism, class, and “progress” in the sub continental city (Chatterjee 2004, Kaviraj 1997). Inter-class conflict in the urban arena is one of the key ideas emerging from all these texts, be it Kaviraj’s “plebianization” of midcentury subcontinental urban spaces—where, for the first time, the urban poor contested spatial and material markers of class identity—or Chatterjee’s “political society,” where the very growth of the urban city gave birth to a new form of political engagement for the lower classes, much to the newly constructed middle class’ chagrin. While these dynamics are India-centric and are not directly applicable to Nepal, with its much younger middle class and less prevalent history of class conflict, they nevertheless may influence the Nepali context and provide a baseline for analysis of class dynamics here.

These critical theories have been explored and expressed through numerous Indian urban ethnographies dating back to the 1990s. Like my own project, these works span a wide range of topics, often using a phenomenon of urban life to explore a facet of public culture, modernity, and globalization in a specific context. From cassette tapes (Manuel 1993), trick photography (Pinney 1998), discourses of urban renewal and property rights (Anjaria 2009, Ghertner 2012, Weinstein 2009), discourses of gender and urbanity (Phadke, Khan, and Ranade 2011), the rise of the apartment building (Rao 2013), to taxis in the global city (Bedi 2016a, 2016b), and

film and television (Larkin 2008, Rajagopal 2001), ethnographers and historians have demonstrated the strength of scholarship utilizing tangible phenomena to explore the fluidity and perspectival contingency of globalized modernity.

Additionally, within this body of scholarship, material consumption is often positioned as a key way for South Asians to tether the intangible aspects of class to reality, with western-style toilets (Rao 2013), lavishly decorated “middle-class” homes in Bollywood films (Dwyer and Patel 2002), and materially, aesthetically constituted discourses of “the world-class city” (Anjaria 2009, Ghertner 2012, Weinstein 2009) coming to dominate the conversation around urban class construction in South Asia.

In many ways, this focus draws on the foundations of anthropological research on commodities. The study of commodities in anthropology was virtually nonexistent prior to the 1970s; while “mass commodities and mass consumption predate the emergence of modern anthropology, [anthropology] was developed in clear but usually implicit alterity, originally drawing its students mostly to societies defined by the absence of such goods” (Miller 1995, 142). Reflecting the racist and colonialist history of the discipline, commodities and mass consumption were seen as part and parcel of western modernity and higher sociocultural advancement, and therefore could not be considered part of the study of “primitive” or otherwise radically othered cultural contexts; the earliest precursors of modern anthropological study of consumption can be found in seminal works on gifts and exchanges, most notably the work of Malinowski (1922) and Mauss (1967). However, starting with influential French structuralists like Pierre Bourdieu (1984), the study of

consumption and commodities began to infiltrate the rapidly changing field in the 1980s. Appadurai again made important contributions to the field in the study of commodities with his introduction to, and conceptual introduction of, *The Social Life of Things* in 1986. Since this time, additional work on commodities in the Global South has sought to explore the moral aspects of commodities and consumption, emphasizing commodities' potential to "destroy" "traditional" culture and the "resistance" to commodities and other forms of cultural domination (Comaroff 1990, Abu-Lughod 1990, 1995). Commodities and consumption, therefore, plays a key and complex role both for understanding class in different cultural contexts and for understanding the many perspectives on the translocal, transnational cultural economies globalization has wrought.

An additional important aspect of this research is the role of urban infrastructure in the everyday lives of Kathmandu residents, as lack of solid water and electrical infrastructure makes a significant impact on practices and discourses surrounding appliances, which of course rely on power (and occasionally, water) access to operate with any regularity. Numerous historical and ethnographic works in South Asia have grappled with the complexities and frequent failures of infrastructure in the colonial and postcolonial context (Anand 2011, 2012; Bear 2007; Bjorkman 2013, Khan 2006). As Brian Larkin (2013) explains, "the provision of infrastructures is so intimately caught up with the sense of shaping modern society and realizing the future;" infrastructures are one of the ways people have historically measured their modernity, teleological development (both economically and in terms of civilization). Infrastructures "provoke...deep affectual commitments, particularly,

but not only, in developing societies” (Larkin 2013). Indeed, over the course of my experience in Kathmandu, the role of power and water supply in people’s relationships to their appliances became one of the key ways collaborators articulated their ideas about social and cultural change in the globalized era in Nepal.

In the Nepali context, Mark Liechty (2003) has contributed some of the key articulations of Kathmandu residents’ class identities, linking middle class-ness to the performance of an *ijjat* economy, where material consumption and regimes of moral value combine to produce a middle space. Stacy Pigg’s work has gone a long way to characterize Nepali development discourses, noting especially the way development constructs the rural in Nepal, often positioning it against a developed, imaginary urban other (1992, 1996). As of the 2011 census, nearly 30% of urban residents in Nepal today having migrated from a rural area (Suwal 2014). In the Kathmandu Metropolitan wards, where this study takes place, fully 48% of residents are internal migrants (Suwal 2014). As more and more Nepalis move from the rural space to the urban, these rural and urban positionalities, as described by scholars such as Liechty and Pigg, are increasingly coming into contact with each other, creating a mercurial and contestatory urban class dynamic.

## **Methodology**

All of my research was conducted in Kathmandu, and all the women I collaborated with lived within the neighborhoods of Handigaun, Bishalnagar, Kalopul, Chandol, Baluwatar, and Gairidhara. Combined, these neighborhoods cover significantly less than two square kilometers, and are closely interconnected. They are typically characterized by Kathmandu residents as middle class and upper

middle class, and a focal point for all is the Bhatbhateni supermarket, central to the homes of everyone interviewed and on the main street that cuts through the center of the area studied. I very intentionally use the words “collaborated” and “collaborator,” because this project is highly qualitative in nature and my largely unstructured research methodology makes my data as much about what these women chose to share with me after learning about my project as it is about what I decided I wanted to know.

I conducted mostly unstructured but somewhat guided interviews (refer to Appendix A for the guide used) with 10 different women in Kathmandu, and conducted participant observation in their homes. All research took place in Nepali; having obtained an “advanced-low” ACTFL score immediately before starting fieldwork I was confident in my language skills and found that conducting research in Nepali contributed significantly to the project, as it allowed me to communicate with genuinely middle class Nepalis who generally don’t speak English well enough for me to feel comfortable conducting this sort of project with Nepali collaborators in English. However, Nepali is my fourth non-native language (after German, Hindi, and Urdu) and I’d only been studying it for two and a half months prior to starting the research period; lack of genuine fluency was one of the reasons I did require a guide for my interviews—I felt much more confident in my ability to touch on all the topics I considered important if I had a few questions translated into Nepali for each topic readily at hand.

Ethics were central to my project, as it mostly consisted of entering private citizens’ homes, often for extended periods of time, and liberally citing these

individuals' words and practices in the service of my argument. As such, I foregrounded verbal assent, not mere consent, and obtained clear verbal agreement from all collaborators before using their experiences as data. I made judicious use of recordings in my data collection, so I also made sure to obtain verbal assent to record prior to beginning participant observation with any collaborator. To combat power differentials inherent in the researcher/researched and foreign/local dynamics, I utilized common South Asian fictive kinship terms such as “*didi*” (older sister) and “aunty,” as well as respectful verb conjugations in conversations with collaborators, to put them in positions of authority over me. I also offered to provide English language copies and/or summaries of my final research project, but as none of my collaborators were fluent in English this offer was roundly rejected. Collaborators were informed that, regardless of personal preference (many were perfectly fine with my using their real name), I would be assigning all of them pseudonyms in my final product; women were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym, but this option was also uniformly rejected. As everyone interviewed had a South Asian name of Hindu origin, I randomly assigned all ten collaborators common South Asian Hindu names which would not be out of place in any Indian or Nepali context.

While the majority of collaborators (eight) were upper-caste Nepali Hindus, a significant number came from outside the dominant “middle hills” districts of Nepal (where Kathmandu is located) and two self-identified as indigenous, belonging to the uniquely syncretic Buddhist Newar community, which originally inhabited the city of Kathmandu and controlled the Kathmandu Valley political unit prior to the ascendancy of the still-dominant *pahariya* (“hill-dwelling”) *Brahmin-Chhetri*, or

upper-caste Hindus (deriving caste origin from the two highest *varna*, known in India as *Brahmin* and *Kshatriya*) (see Table 1 in Appendix B for a visual breakdown of collaborators' ethnic and regional backgrounds). Given the somewhat more heterogeneous than expected caste, regional, and ethnic backgrounds of collaborators I struggled with the assignation of pseudonyms, which felt rather violent, but my commitment to the protection of collaborator privacy compelled me. Another heterogeneous data set was employment; one worked from home, five worked outside the home, and four did not work (see Table 2 in Appendix B). Other identity markers among my collaborators were largely homogenous; all but one was married (though one was widowed), all but that same unmarried one had children, varying in age from adult (in their twenties, moved out of the house and sometimes married themselves) to quite young (Mallika's youngest child is a five-year-old son).

My original plan was to blindly source collaborators from stores which sold appliances, like Bhatbhateni supermarket and their competitor, CG Electronics. However, given limitations including length of project (a mere four weeks) and personal discomfort approaching strangers, especially for a project which requires somewhat intimate research in the collaborators' homes, I instead opted to utilize the built-in network of family, family friends, and friends of friends accessible to me through my Nepali homestay family. While I sacrificed the randomization identifying participants through cold approaches at the store would have provided, I ultimately believe my approach benefitted the project. Being able to focus intensely on a small geographic area cut down on potential uncontrollable variables and utilizing a network of people already connected through social and kinship ties

assured the general comparability of class and life experience which lent itself best to my research goals. All this helped shape a project that produced conclusions I am able to substantiate despite a relatively small participant sample and short time frame for ethnographic work. Randomization is not key to a qualitative and interpretive study such as mine, as long as I can successfully characterize and acknowledge the influence of my collaborator acquisition method. Lastly, this approach allowed me to cast my relationship with collaborators as that of a family friend, fictive family member, or friend of friend, which allowed me greater access and helped produce equity between myself and my collaborators as described above.

A typical collaborator visit consisted of the “interview” described above and a much looser period of participant observation. I recorded the “interview,” which usually lasted for about a half hour, to make sure I had recorded material to base discursive analysis on, as my original research design privileged discourse analysis. I also asked each woman to give me a formal tour of her home following this recorded conversation. The rest of the participant observation varied greatly from woman to woman; I really hit it off with some of them, and if they weren’t too busy I’d stay in their house, hanging out or playing with their kids, for several hours after the interview had taken place. Others had commitments, but said I was welcome back anytime, so occasionally I’d drop in for a cup of tea to collect a little more data. Some I only met with once. I did my best to ensure I drank a cup of tea and/or had a snack or meal at every house, since this was typically a great opportunity to observe and participate in the everyday practices surrounding home appliances, and made the whole situation feel more comfortable and informal for everyone involved. Nepali

cultural practices highly privilege guests (a common proverb literally translates to “guest is god”), so visiting someone’s home for the first time could feel quite stiff and intimidating, but after taking a cup of tea and making a few language mistakes, typically we were all much more at ease.

I took detailed notes on these visits and transcribed and translated the recorded material myself. Analysis of the data attempts to identify primary sociocultural discourses surrounding appliances and uncovers contemporary discourses of modernity, globalization, class, consumption, and change as mediated through appliance practices.

In addition to these ten primary collaborative relationships, observational research was conducted in visits to the New Road shopping area, Bhatbhateni, and the flagship appliance showrooms on Durbar Marg, which my collaborators informed me were some of the most common purchase points in the city. My original intention was to take interviews with retailers at these locations, but these never materialized, so instead I took the position of a potential consumer, observing the discourses of sales and the ways these discourses do and do not match up with the discourses I found at home. This inquiry into sales was supplemented with analysis of women’s magazines, commercials, and print ads in Kathmandu’s malls, stores, magazines, and newspapers to get a feel for contemporary advertising discourses.

## **Findings**

As the archaeologists among us know, you can learn a lot about people from their stuff. As a cultural anthropologist in training, I would argue you can learn even

more about people when you talk to them about their stuff. Over the past four weeks, I talked to ten Nepali women, a lot, about their stuff, and particularly their “household appliances” (translated in Nepali as *gharko mashīnharu*, or “home’s machines”), from fridges and washing machines to irons and electric kettles. My goal was to collect these women’s thoughts, beliefs, opinions, practices, and ideas relating to household appliances, because I believed learning these would help me understand some of the many facets of social change, modernity, globalization, and urbanity as they currently play out across the small, delicately positioned country landlocked between India and China. The three major topics which I culled from my hours of participant observation and conversation with these women are discourses of health, wellness, and related affective ties to commodities; the role of appliances in changing Nepali constructions of class and socioeconomic identity; and the interaction between private, home-based consumption and public culture and performativity.

### *Health, Wellness, and Affective Ties to Commodities*

Probably the most prevalent opinions collaborators voiced about their appliances had to do with the ways appliances changed their relationships to health and wellness. Related to this were deeply affective ties to their appliances and commodities in general.

Almost everyone felt that appliances had improved their health, and that of their family, in some way. Not every woman had the same number of, collection of, or history of ownership of appliances. Vidhya, a 58-year-old housewife and shopkeeper living and working on the border of Bishalnagar and Handigaun, had

only had her fridge for eight months, for example. But she owned a significant number of appliances overall, from the fridge, gas geyser, vacuum, and EuroGard water filter to the electric kettle, rice cooker, and machine which promised to turn out a perfectly boiled egg, every time<sup>4</sup>. Another collaborator, my own Nepali sister-in-law Sarjana, only owned three appliances: a fridge, electric water boiler, and pump to bring water from the city main to the family's storage tank on the roof. But she'd owned them for years.

Sarjana was the first person I interviewed, in fact, and she was the first person to bring my attention to the prevalent discourses of health and wellness surrounding appliances in Kathmandu. Sarjana was 34, married, and the proud mother of an eight-year-old daughter, living with her husband, daughter, mother-in-law, and myself in the flat in Handigaun. She ran a professional sewing and fabric-cutting instruction business from the hut on the roof of our apartment building, with three treadle sewing machines and a giant pile of fabric scraps. When I asked about her habits surrounding her fridge, Sarjana emotionally described how it made her feel "safe." "[I know] that if I put the food in the fridge it's safe, because it's cold." She could feed her daughter the food from the fridge without worrying about her being sick, and said that since owning the fridge and an electric water boiler for the past three to four years, the family had been markedly less sick, her daughter had missed fewer days of school and was generally healthier.

Sushmita, a fifty-year-old housewife and retired shop owner from Jhapa, owned possibly more appliances than any other collaborator. She had an induction

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<sup>4</sup> See the glossary of terms for a discussion of "gas geyser" and "EuroGard."

cooktop, a water filter, a fridge, a blender, two rice cookers (one for daily use and another for big parties), a toaster, a water pump, a gas geyser, and considerably more. She had so many kitchen appliances, she explained to me while we toured her flat, that she had to keep her toaster in her bedroom. “We don’t use it every day, only when we want toast. And there aren’t enough outlets to keep it plugged in in the kitchen,” she said, laughing. Now living with her lawyer husband, one helping son, and (occasionally, when home from their university courses in nursing and computer engineering) a grown son and daughter, in a flat on the border of Handigaun and Bishalnagar, Sushmita didn’t mince words, telling me she had bought her various appliances “for my health, right? For my own improvement.”<sup>5</sup>

Vidhya’s ideas about machines and health were similar. For example, she felt very strongly about the health benefits stemming from her reverse osmosis water filter, or EuroGard. She thought it was the most important of her appliances, explaining that “the water is really clear now. Before I habitually used the [traditional ceramic] filter, and didn’t typically have a lot of water, but now with the EuroGard the water is really filtered. I use the EuroGard water a lot. I have good water available for drinking.” She liked it so much that she claimed to repeatedly encourage friends to buy their own, saying “now [when my friends] have a little more money, I say, ‘*la, la*, please get, get that because I’ve found it to be really easy. I say it to my friends now. For drinking good water, get it. That EuroGard water. In my opinion, don’t boil water. The filtered drinking water is really good. I feel that way.”

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<sup>5</sup> See the glossary of terms for a discussion of “helping relatives.”

However, other women saw appliances as a mixed bag, health wise. Usha was the first person to express this opinion to me, and I found it pretty surprising. She was also fifty-years-old, and had always been a housewife, though she devoted a fair amount of time to volunteer “social work,” or community service, with a group of local Sai Baba devotees<sup>6</sup>. She lived quite near me in Handigaun, in a small flat with her husband and her younger sister’s daughter, being fostered there as a circulated, “helping” family member. Usha said at the very beginning of our first meeting that she had “very few electric things,” as it’s “not good to use them.” She explained that her friends and family were all big fans of household appliances, but that she felt differently: “all have, and all use them. But those that use them are quite lazy and a little sick, fat, that sort of thing. For them eating only is difficult, no? It’s like that. Machines have some disadvantages.” This was echoed a bit by Deepika, though her health-related criticisms were slightly different. Deepika was a 38-year-old unmarried private office worker in the finance and governance sector who lived in her ancestral home, a traditionally built, low slung brick house surrounding a courtyard in Kalopul, with her brother, sister-in-law, and one or two younger sisters. By this point in my research process I had met a number of women with different opinions on appliances, health, and wellness, so I asked her straight out:

M: Do you think machines are good for people’s health or not?

D: Both. It’s both good and bad, right? Some things are good only, and some things are bad only.

M: why?

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<sup>6</sup> See the glossary of terms for a discussion of Sai Baba and his devotees.

D: Because for us, if it's hot, oh, it's fine [to eat or drink from the fridge], but for sick people that's not good, it's cold. For us the fridge is okay, but for the sick people it's absolutely not. The fridge is cold and if one has a cold, oh, don't take from the fridge! It's our—it's according to Nepali culture. You all [Americans, foreigners] need it, the fridge is really necessary and what food comes from the fridge it's okay to eat directly, but for us it's forbidden, it's absolutely against Nepalis' habits, for the sick to have a cold [anything] from the fridge—no! Absolutely, totally forbidden. So good things and bad things both. It's good for health and there are disadvantages too, both.

Nikita, an elderly woman in Bishalnagar who had immigrated to Nepal from Darjeeling, in India, with her husband, who was originally from Sikkim, and now lived in the middle flat of a three-flat building (renting the other two flats to her son and daughter and their families), shared a view closer to Usha's. While she like the novelty of things like ovens and electric cooktops (her daughter had all the latest gadgets, including a washer-dryer and even a dishwasher—the only one I ever saw in Nepal), she prided herself on staying healthy, fit, and active into old age. To achieve this, she told me she got up at five in the morning and worked for ten hours every day, even though her husband had passed away several years ago and she was alone in her own flat (though often called upon to watch her three grandchildren). She only took one hour of free time, at two in the afternoon, to rest. She cooked, cleaned, and busied herself otherwise all day long. She washed her own laundry and occasionally that of other family members, and happily. Smiling and laughing, she told me she had no need for those newfangled contraptions her daughter liked so well, if only because her health came first.

Regardless of their opinions on health and appliances, most collaborators had remarkably deeply felt, affective ties to their machines and commodities, which came out more often than not in discussing how these appliances saved them time

around the house. Surprisingly few Nepali women have domestic help; unlike its dominating neighbor to the south, Nepali service cultures and economies are less visible. Not every elevator has an attendant, not everyone with their own car has their own driver to go along with it, and few people send their laundry out to a *dhobi* or have their *chapati* made by a maid.<sup>7</sup> Pushpa, a forty-year-old housewife and coop employee in upscale Baluwatar, where she lived with her husband, a government employee, and her twelve-year-old daughter and elderly mother in law, demonstrated the affective attachment to her appliances by comparing the differences between her pre- and post-appliance lives:

It's different with and without the machines, really different! With the machines I save time. Without them I had to do all the work using my own man power. Like with washing clothes, I had to do it with my own hands, right? In that I typically lost a lot of time. And the same with when I didn't have the oven, I had to cook everything on my own, you know? There was absolutely no help in doing anything! Had to do everything man only. With the machines I can have everything ready by leaving it in the oven. After that it cooks by itself. Like with the rice cooker. I put the dry rice and the water in the rice cooker, and after turning it on it cooks by itself. So time is spent really differently with and without machines. Like, with machines I save time, and without them I have to *feel* all the time myself.

But it was Sushmita who once again brought her affective ties to her appliances to the fore, with a single pithy statement, best rendered in Nepali:

“*machineharu mero saathi* [machines are my friends],” she said, laughing. “*ekdam milnesaathi* [really, best friends]!”

*Constructions of Class and Socioeconomic Identity*

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<sup>7</sup> See the glossary of terms for a discussion of *dhobi*.

Many women explained that their practices and opinions surrounding their appliances had a lot to do with their social class and socioeconomic identity. In general, they were less likely to bring this up themselves, but when asked about it directly it was clear that many women saw commodity purchase and usage—especially in the home—as a key marker of middle class and upper-middle class identity in Nepal. However, my collaborators absolutely did not agree about what kinds of practices identified middle class Nepalis.

One woman who was particularly gregarious when it came to class was Vidhya, the 58-year-old shopkeeper and housewife in Bishalnagar/Handigaun. She moved from the eastern Tarai (along the border with India) district of Jhapa, her native place, to Kathmandu about 30 years ago, and informed me quite matter-of-factly that neither her nor her husband had completed their secondary education; she considered herself “simple, medium people” especially because she was not highly educated (she was, literally, “not a read-and-written person” in Nepali). However, it was unmistakably clear to me as an outsider that Vidhya was decidedly upwardly mobile; she had four daughters, all with advanced professional degrees, several of whom had studied abroad. She owned an iPad, the first one I’d seen in a Nepali person’s house. But she insisted she was “simple, medium” and therefore had a complex relationship to appliances.

Vidhya felt very strongly that in order to be a middle class Nepali, one must live a “simple” life, use one’s own effort around the house. “We are simple, we do our own housework ourselves, we don’t have these washing machines, these electric-type things. We do [everything the] simple-simple-simple way, we do our own work

ourselves, we don't keep other people [household help] ...we are middle-class people only, [and our] life is okay right now—easy in the house,” she told me at the end of a long answer to my first question: “what is your full name?” She drove this point home in our conversation about her vacuum cleaner. I brought it up, as it was out in the living room while we were chatting the first time I visited her house, which was somewhat unusual; many Nepalis, I'd noticed, had a habit of covering up or tucking away household appliances whenever possible. Vidhya had been describing her morning routine to me, emphasizing how much of the work she did herself: “now I do most of the work on my own. I get up in the morning, cook our food, do the sweeping, wash the clothes, all by myself. I don't do it with the machines.” She gestured around the room and mimed sweeping with a traditional Nepali handle-less bundle broom.

I was surprised, and pointed to her vacuum cleaner. “Isn't it a little quicker with the vacuum?” I asked.

“No! It's absolutely not quicker with the vacuum!” She practically shouted. She went on to explain that machines could not make the lives of middle class people easier. “For people with a little education, it might be easy with machines. [But] we're not educated, so for us machines aren't easy, because we don't know how to use machines.” The vacuum stirred up loads more dust and it took ages for her to siphon it all away. When using her broom, on the other hand, Vidhya could use her decades of sweeping muscle memory to tidy the whole flat in five minutes. Middle class Nepalis, according to Vidhya's perspective, were simple men and women who weren't afraid to get their hands dirty, applying their own elbow grease in their

homes and businesses. They perhaps weren't supposed to aspire to great upward mobility, or at least not outwardly; for though she was "simple," "uneducated," and "[didn't] know what ha[d] to be done," Vidhya was also someone who owned a surprisingly large collection of appliances and had managed to send four daughters to obtain higher university degrees, and in Europe at that.

Usha, the 50-year-old housewife and volunteer "social worker" who lived in a nearby *galli* to mine in Handigaun, felt similarly. While much of her criticism of appliance purchase and usage centered on a discourse of health as discussed above, there was a certain class dynamic at play, as evidenced by her understanding of expending energy on housework as morally upstanding. When I asked her directly, she said "[we're] medium [class]. We earn a little for ourselves [through our own work], we do a little, but the high class people are the business people. We're middle class." Her husband was retired from an office job, her daughter was working, and her son was taking an MBA degree in India when I got to know her family. Like Vidhya, Usha placed a lot of emphasis on middle class people earning for themselves, living for themselves, and, by extension, doing their housework for themselves. By disdainfully decrying people who overused machines as "lazy" as well as fat, Usha reinforced a moral universe that for her demarcated middle class identity: the hardworking independent people who manage for themselves by doing for themselves.

Contrastingly, a number of women emphasized the increased use of appliances as a marker of middle class identity. Deepika, the 38-year-old unmarried office worker in Kalopul who lived with her family in their ancestral home, drew

attention to this by discussing the generalities of Kathmandu's classes, and particularly noting the lack of appliances among the poor. "Middle class people only are sometimes academic, really educated, and also do work, they have office jobs," she explained:

They can manage, if they go slowly with buying stuff, and if they have a small family. But *no* family, *no* work, *no* income...that's really hard, and living in the house...even with educated people's incomes, money, it can be really hard to have and use things, really difficult and expensive. Kathmandu is really expensive. Houses are small, and families are big. If only one [person] is working, then it's really tough. For that reason, we [all] have mobiles, cheap or expensive. For people, of all the things now this one is the most necessary.

"[Even] if you come into a tiny, [rented] room," Deepika said, painting a picture of Kathmandu's urban poor, "the TV is really important, and so is the mobile...if you don't have a refrigerator or iron it's okay [if you're poor]." Class status, as Deepika explained it, could be understood generally from looking at the amount and types of appliances people had. "In Kathmandu a lot of people's houses don't have a lot of machines, a lot of things," she emphasized. "For many it's just TV and *mobile*. Only. Out of everything that's what most people have at home. Middle class people, some, have a refrigerator, vacuum. A little big, rich people's houses [only] have a lot of electric things." Appliance ownership and usage was commensurate with socioeconomic status, more than values. There's a certain baseline—for Deepika, the ownership of a mobile phone and television—but hopping up a couple rungs on the social ladder entails a little more: a refrigerator, vacuum cleaner, or iron. Only the really rich have everything, from TV and cell phone through refrigerator and gas geyser to washing machine and microwave.

Deepika's big-picture view was complemented by Mallika's personal anecdotes. A forty-year-old housewife and finance coop employee, she lived with her husband, two children, and some extended family in a large detached house in Chandol. She had worked since she was 20 and spoke proudly of the familial support she had gotten as a full-time "housewife-plus," explaining that "for me to be happy in life, I need to do this [work]...my husband supports me, my kids, my babies are well, so with all that I do it for myself." Working her whole life, and with her husband running his own business, Mallika had been able to purchase a veritable menagerie of machines, from Deepika's basic vacuum and fridge to a washing machine, multiple televisions, and even an induction cooktop which the family didn't use (but had purchased in times of gas shortage after the Indian embargo of Nepal a few years ago). She aspired to buy a treadmill. Mallika explained that machines were both the product of and the key to her upwardly mobile lifestyle. "With the machines that we use we can do other work in different places," she said. "From that we can take financial support also, making it easier for me. A lot of work can be done. After doing all this work we earn money...so for that reason it's easy—usually financially supporting. SO with that also we tend to add to our life." However, she was still identifying with her middle class roots— "[the middle class] tend to work hard. Really high society people don't know difficulty," she said, after responding that "if I had to say, [we're] middle class." All that hard work paid off; she noted that one reason why she *was* middle class, if she "had to say," was because she "ha[d] the facilities...ha[d] the machines."

*Private Consumption, Public Culture, and the Role of Performativity*

The final prevalent topic in my research surrounded Nepali women's appliances and the role of private consumption, public culture, and performativity in everyday appliance practices. Unlike many cultural forms commonly thought of under the "public culture" label, such as television, sports, or film, appliance consumption practices almost uniformly take place in the home, with only purchase practices taking place in the public arena. However, as with any consumption practice in late capitalism, appliance consumption relies on mass media, advertising, and other public cultural forms to create a uniform appliance *habitus*, a seemingly ingrained and subconsciously acquired set of rules and commonly held practices governing interactions with appliances. These ideas came up when discussing virtually every part of appliances' presence in people's lives. They had genuinely penetrated the discourse and thinking on appliances in Nepal. Typically, respondents were divided in their opinions—either they were totally adoptive of the public performance of appliance practices and discourses, even in their private domains, or they were a little suspicious, emphasizing their commitment instead to what they saw as "Nepali" values and practices.

One area where Pushpa demonstrated her commitment to the publically performed appliance *habitus* was in her commitment to "branded" appliances, and her Samsung brand loyalty. She said:

The machine's brand is necessary for me, because if you buy something for cheap and a year later, it's finished, then you have to buy another one in a year. That's not true with branded things. They're a little long-lasting usually. So I have a Samsung washing machine, and now, after nine or ten years, it's never broken. It still works. If one has Samsung-branded things, then they're more likely to do good work...my refrigerator is also from Samsung. Now after ten or fifteen years we still have it. It's good. I don't need [appliances] to be cheap. I need

[them] to be branded...we in Nepal can't change [and buy a new one] year-by-year...it's not like America!

Mallika was also a devoted Samsung user. "I use Samsung," she said when talking about purchasing appliances. "Samsung is good. My *TV* is also Samsung...fridge, too. All these things. I usually buy them at the supermarket, on Durbar Marg, or at the Samsung showroom." She explained that she also felt Samsung products were typically reliable and long-lasting, and that for now she liked them. Explaining how she chose what to buy, she said:

[I choose from the] catalog, from looking through the catalog. I looked at all the machines I could [afford to] buy myself, I bought them one at a time. At different times...not in a lump, but at different times...I looked at the catalog, and if there was something I didn't understand I phoned up the showroom, and they gave me the information. It was easy for me; this sort of thing isn't difficult.

Advertising and personal experience combined to create the kind of brand loyalty and shopping practices prevalent in a widely accepted performance of late capitalist consumption in the cases of Pushpa and Mallika.

Branding was also important to Jaya, a 38-year-old insurance office worker in Gairidhara, who lived in a large, three story single family home with her children, husband, mother-in-law and one hired "domestic." She was not brand loyal in the way Pushpa and Mallika were, but she did take pride in the "good brands" she owned, like her National brand fridge. "See it over there?" Jaya asked me during our first few minutes of chatting. "It's National brand—Japanese. Our TV is too—what is it again? [asking her son]—yeah, Toshiba." Like many consumers around the world over the past 30 years of neoliberal, globalized time-space compression, for Jaya the nationality of her appliances—their Japanese-ness—spoke of her good taste

in high quality and cost effective appliances. For Gayatri, too, a fifty-year-old housewife who lived with her husband, a government employee, and their two adult children in Bishalnagar, both the brand's quality and its cost effectiveness were important. She and her husband talked over each other, back and forth, as they debated how to answer my question about what they were looking for when they shopped around for new appliances. "Both type and price [are important]," her husband said. "The quality of the thing is necessary only, and if the cost is very expensive..."

"No!" Gayatri argued. "The cheaply priced types of things are good. Both are important." Cost efficiency was something Jaya, Gayatri, and other women knew was important to the performance of commodity consumption, especially for the middle class, but as the debate between Gayatri and her husband demonstrates, they typically tried to balance that performance with their desire for the cultured, worldly qualities of brand loyalty, price be damned.

Sushmita's take was a little different. She didn't really care about the brand or long-lasting quality of her appliances, but she did buy wholeheartedly into the performance of a publically popular belief that machines, as time-savers and commodities which made life easier, were important and necessary. When asked if she had plans to buy more appliances she said, "I used to have a microwave oven, but now it's broken...after a bit, after one or two months, I'll buy a microwave oven. Because it's become a problem for me! To heat food...with the microwave oven broken it's been difficult for me. It's become a problem in the kitchen [laughs]." When told some of my collaborators thought appliances weren't good for health, she

responded with a joking, but also serious, commentary on publically acceptable practices surrounding machines. “In your interviews people said machine help isn’t good for people?” Sushmita asked. “Those...are really stingy people [laughs]. Because to buy machines you need money, and you have to pay the electric bill too, and for those people...those people do a lot of work. I don’t like to do a lot of work, I have machines and for me it’s good. The easy life [laughs]. I don’t like stingy people [laughs].”

But for as many women as were thinking in terms of the public culture and performative qualities of appliance consumption, as evidenced by discourses of brand loyalty and cost effectiveness, there were women who pushed back against these, seeing their practices as incorporating appliances and commodities into their “traditional” Nepali lives, arguing to me that little had changed since they had bought appliances—except maybe the time it took to do things. There was Vidhya, with her belief that things were “absolutely not quicker” with the vacuum (and, by implication, with appliances in general). There was Usha, who on top of believing that using appliances made one fat and lazy, also told me she would only buy more appliances if she were “absolutely unable to do things” in the traditional manner; “after I get a little older and I can’t do so much work, then at that time it will be *okay* [to have more appliances],” she said.

Deepika told me that other than the key, most important appliances (mobile phone and television), which changed people’s lives, the others in her home were only purchased as society deemed them necessary. “[we bought] all of them slowly. After they were necessary, slowly-slowly...according to the times, the society was

changing. After that, it became necessary. Oh, we need this, it's really necessary, to be alright socially.” Rather than buying into a performative public culture wholeheartedly, Deepika and her family cast the purchase of home appliances as recognizing that other parts of public culture had consumed the performativity of consumption and sought to follow suit to maintain the correct social standing in a changing, globalizing community.

## **Discussion**

This project was a fascinating one to put into words. On the one hand, my research never even felt all that different from my everyday life in Kathmandu; just popping in to people's homes to do some “deep hanging out,” for work purposes. But on the other hand, every word, every moment was packed with meaning for my research. Balancing this kind of study of everyday life with actual, everyday life is a complex task, especially when it comes to teasing that meaning out of the hours of conversations, meals, and time spent playing with kids and watching TV that constituted my research process.

I was really surprised to see health and wellness as such a prevalent topic among my collaborators, though perhaps I shouldn't have been. While this isn't something that comes up a lot when we think about (if we think about) our household appliances in the U.S., it's true that—as an example—one of the first things on our minds when our fridge breaks down, or we have a rare substantial power outage, is how frustrating it will be to throw away or attempt to ascertain the safety of all the frozen foods, raw meat, dairy, and so on in our own fridges. This is just a daily part of life in infrastructure-less Nepal, where middle class people have

only really started purchasing fridges as a matter of course in the last ten or fifteen years—so it makes sense that one of the first things to change in Nepalis' lives with the introduction of a water purifier or fridge is their average health.

This discourse can be partially ascribed to the “developmentalist” and modernizing South Asian state, as well. While the phrase “developmentalist state” is more often applied to the Five-Year Plans and nationalization of industry in Nehruvian India, the general requirements, such as prioritizing infrastructure development and industry development as a matter of government policy and promoting “modern” values through state avenues such as state television channels and education, can be found throughout South Asia and across the political spectrum. The Nepali women I worked with certainly recognized this tendency in their own state, especially recently, as state policy has put an end to the crippling, regular power outages lasting up to 16 hours which used to be a part of Kathmandu life (and referred to as loadshedding). Additionally, in the few months that I lived in Nepal, the state had finally begun one of the final phases of the 20-year long Melamchi project, which is meant to bring water from the Melamchi reservoir to a city with water infrastructure problems rivaling Mumbai's. The roads in Handigaun, Bishalnagar, Kalopul, Gairidhara, Baluwatar, and Chandol (as well as every other part of the city) were utterly destroyed by work crews laying piping nearly everyday. Many women commented on these projects in our time together, discussing their developmentalist, service-oriented relationship to the state quite naturally and making easy linkages between the Melamchi and loadshedding policies and potential changes in consumer practices. Everyone was frustrated by the lack of water in

Kathmandu, and everyone agreed that when (if!) the water actually came to Kathmandu (the project's end date is still two years away, ostensibly), it would make it more likely for them to buy or use washing machines and other machines that didn't use a lot of water.

The arrival of the state's development, in the form of the regular power supply, future regular water supply, and, by extension, increased appliance usage, was seen as something which would benefit Nepalis, and especially their health. This was particularly interesting as almost all advertising for gadgets and home appliances also emphasized their health benefits; one fridge I saw an advertisement for supposedly kept vegetables fresh for up to a week longer than the competitor! And one of the most common ads on TV during ISP was for a Kent vegetable washer (almost all Nepali TV packages are a few nationalized and private Nepali-language news channels plus a bunch of Hindi-language Indian cable channels, so this was a Hindi-language ad aimed at an Indian audience, to be fair). In the ad, a middle class-looking middle aged woman held some fresh vegetables in her hands and said "how do I know these don't have harmful chemicals in them?" before the commercial cut to the vegetable cleaner in action, with a voiceover detailing the health benefits of the washer's unique processes.

Together, the anti-commercial, statist, developmentalist politics and social discourses surrounding Melamchi and loadshedding, as well as the highly commercialized, neoliberal discourses of appliance advertising worked to produce a household discourse of appliances as a front line soldier in the fight for health and wellness, and therefore helped create viscerally felt affective ties to these

commodities on the part of the women who used them. Even people who felt negatively about the impact of appliances on health were influenced by these discourses, just in a different way—they pushed back against the dominant notion that appliances were in any way a result of or tool in the work of government development policies and related “advances” in health and wellness.

The fluid nature of collaborators’ responses to issues of class and socioeconomic status was quite curious. Everyone considered themselves middle class, and in fact universally insisted on this identity. However, no one could quite agree on what it meant to be middle class. Some thought it meant you were hardworking (like Mallika, Usha, or Vidhya), while others (Pushpa, Sushmita, Jaya) argued that it meant you were able to delegate some work and enjoy the “easy life.” In addition, there was significant socioeconomic disparity among my collaborators that was clearly evident to me as the researcher. They were all “middle class,” and they all lived in the neighborhoods that most everyone I talked to uniformly identified as “middle class” or occasionally “upper middle class” neighborhoods in central Kathmandu, but they all had different levels of socioeconomic comfort. Some could afford a detached, stand alone home, all the newest gadgets, and even rare domestic help as necessary. Others lived in small flats in shared apartment buildings, with few appliances, and struggled with money. This strange tapestry of socially illegible (or at least deeply perspective-dependent) class signifiers that made up the lives of the women I worked with pointed to the unstable nature of class identity and dynamics in the postmodern, late capitalist world of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Global South. As transnational and translocal media-, techno- and finanscapes work

changes in the lives of average Nepalis, the traditional, understandable trajectory of class history, with industrial labor, unions, bourgeoisie, and other expected players dissipates. Nepali class signifiers, such as usage and purchase practices surrounding household appliances, exist in a discursive universe bereft of the typical touchstones, making them infinitely more malleable and perspective dependent, reflecting Appadurai and Harvey's arguments from the late 1980s and early 1990s about globalization and economics, cultural and otherwise.

Continuing to draw on Appadurai and Harvey, along with other theorists of globalization, cultural production, and performance theory as discussed in anthropology by Victor Turner (1988), allows for insight into collaborators' thoughts on public culture, private consumption, and performativity. In a globalizing South Asia, and a globalizing Nepal, disparate culture elements are combining and clashing in constantly innovative ways. With the mass media and the role of postmodern time-space compression in bringing translocal and transnational concepts into communication and conflict, western dominant performative formations surrounding appliances and consumption, like emphasis on brand loyalty or cost efficiency, are entering the Nepali public discourse surrounding homes and household appliances. At the same time, more "traditional" or Nepali performative formations surrounding the home and housework persist. The conflict and communication between both reflects the findings of past studies such as Rao's (2013) analysis of apartment design and bathrooms in modern Bombay; in Kathmandu homes, appliances and the cultural performances surrounding them create a unique discursive and performative environment which, in this case, further reflects the postmodern and globalized

space-time compression prevalent in 21<sup>st</sup> Century South Asia, as well as the cultural and spatial conflicts engendered by it.

## **Conclusion**

Like any other everyday practice, there's a lot more to household appliance usage in Kathmandu than meets the eye. Given the roles of globalization, modernization, social change, and class in shaping and reshaping the city in the last few decades, household appliances have proven to be an excellent lens for engaging middle class Nepali collaborators on these broad topics, and have shed light on the current state of Nepali cultural economies and public/private modernities. While I cannot say that there is some obvious consensus of opinion among my collaborators, it's true that there were some threads of continuity running through their stories, creating a loosely linked web of sociocultural discourse and shared experience.

This monograph has tried to present a more narratively-focused account of my research into that experience while doing justice to the varied views of the women who worked so generously with me. The findings are by no means complete, and I am sure that more fully realized analysis and discussion will develop as I gain further distance from the research period. In addition, a topic such as this must acknowledge the fact that whatever stabs at interpretation I did make are likely to be obsolete sooner rather than later; by its very nature study of globalization, public culture, and modernity is changeable and has a short shelf life.

Consider this, then, an attempt at a good start, and by no means an ending. Much work still has to be done to further contemplate the role of consumption and commodities in the vibrant and mutating landscape of contemporary urban Nepal.

Like any other researcher, I love to play spot-the-next-research project, and there are so many good ones that could serve to further toy with these concepts: changing diets in Nepal as people move from twice-daily *daal-bhaat* to other meals more conducive to the internationally recognized 9:00-5:00 work schedule; the future of the Nepali lunar calendar in an increasing time-space compressed world, limitless options in television and media; even a project that circles back to appliances and commodities but approaches it from a more retail-oriented perspective. Given that the country is beginning to stabilize politically following the decade-long civil war and later massive earthquake, I would particularly argue that further analysis of structural factors and literal infrastructure is necessary.

## Glossary of Terms

*almirah*—common term for standalone wardrobes, which are the most common form of storage in South Asian homes, which typically do not have closets. Historically, the Godrej furniture company based in Mumbai has produced steel “Godrej *almirahs*” which became a near-ubiquitous form of *almirah* for middle class families on the subcontinent.

*dhobi*—professional washerman. In South Asia, if you have a *dhobi*, he comes to your house on a regular schedule, collects your dirty laundry and returns it—often the next day—cleaned, pressed, and, unless you specifically ask him not to, starched. What is remarkable is the *dhobi*’s sixth sense for your laundry, rarely (if ever) losing it and rarely (if ever) damaging or staining it, despite the massive scale of urban South Asian *dhobi* operations on the ubiquitous *dhobi ghats* where they ply their trade.

*EuroGuard*—the name given to water purifiers by most Nepalis. While other brands exist (in India, Kent is very common), in Nepal EuroGuard has become synonymous with wall-mounted, single-family reverse osmosis water purifiers.

*galli*—the small alleys off of main streets, often inaccessible by car or even motorcycle/scooter, where the entrances to many homes and apartment buildings are located in South Asia. Something of a neighborhood “base unit,” like a city block, where all the kids know each other, everyone has the same vegetable guy/tailor/recyclables collector, and your neighbors may or may not be skimming off your wifi.

*gas geyser*—the South Asian English term for a water heater that provides hot water for a shower and/or tap in one’s bathroom. As the name suggests, these are typically wall-mounted, hand-controlled heaters which use the generic liquid propane gas tanks that also power Nepali stoves (there is no city gas infrastructure in Kathmandu). They are preferred to immersion heaters as they are tankless and cost less; they only use gas to heat water when a hot water tap is opened in the home, instead of constantly keeping a tank full of water hot. Solar-powered instantaneous heaters also exist, but are not as popular or common. Pronounced like “gas geezer.”

*“helping” relatives*— “helping” sons, daughters, sisters, or brothers are young children or youths (typically between the ages of eight or so and twenty) who are members of a Nepali extended family. Typically hailing from rural, remote, or otherwise disadvantaged communities/branches of the family, these kids are circulated into the homes of other relatives in more prosperous situations, where they perform household chores in exchange for room, board, and, typically, education expenses (though sometimes they earn some other form of remuneration). While many outsiders see this practice as somewhat upsetting, it is not as if these children are Cinderellas, slaving away in their lavish relatives’ homes. They are very much a part of the family, though they do extra chores. While there’s no data on this

informal child circulatory practice, my own personal belief is that there may be more helping children among Kathmandu families than in the past, given the extensive damage caused to rural areas and infrastructures after the 2015 earthquake. Child circulatory practices such as the helping children are quite common in mountainous regions; see *The Circulation of Children: Kinship, Adoption, and Morality in Andean Peru* by Jessaca Leinaweaver for an entire ethnography on analogous practices in the Andes (Duke University Press, 2008).

*household appliance*—I typically allowed my collaborators to decide for themselves what constituted a household appliance (though I provided examples like fridges, washing machines, electric water boilers, induction cooktops, or irons). Ultimately, I was not interested in practices concerning objects like televisions, radios, computers, or mobile phones, although these were almost always listed by my collaborators, as they dealt for me with a theoretical realm more concerned with global mass media—something I felt was beyond the scope of my project. I typically described “household appliance” to English language interlocutors as “products which are developed and marketed as time- and/or money-savers for the home; the sort of thing we identify with midcentury housewives in the US.”

*Sai Baba*—Sai Baba of Shirdi was a famous early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Hindu religious figure. Most women in Kathmandu who are adherents to Sai Baba devotional groups (and many, many middle class women are; in my experience, veneration of Sai Baba is one of the most common Hindu religious practices in middle class homes across India and Nepal) are also adherents of Sathya Sai Baba, a later 20<sup>th</sup> Century religious figure and philanthropist who was revered as the reincarnation of Sai Baba of Shirdi. Sathya Sai Baba founded the Sathya Sai Organization, which helps women like Usha organize and perform community service work, which Nepali women typically call their “social work,” in a reformist, Jane Adams type of way.

## Appendices

### *Appendix A: Research Materials*

The only truly important materials used to conduct my research was a short list of brainstormed questions, going all the way back to my very first afternoon of ISP, which served as a guide during my ethnographic interviews and participant observation. I translated some of these into Nepali, especially the more complex ones, in order to make as few linguistic mistakes as possible. Here is a reasonable facsimile of that guide, which was constantly evolving and changing.

#### Personal Information:

What is your full name? Your age? How long have you lived in Kathmandu? Why did you come here? Where did you live before? If you moved here for study, what subjects did you take in university, and to what level did you study (in Nepal, there are multiple post-secondary courses: a “plus-two” which is two years of post-secondary study, a bachelor’s degree, and typical graduate degrees, in addition to professional training courses and certificates). What do you do for work? How many people are in your family? What does your husband do? Your kids?

#### General Appliance Info:

Will you show me your home and where you keep your appliances? How many appliances do you have? When/where/how (i.e. with credit or cash, what did you consider when shopping around, how did you decide what to buy when, was it delivered, etc.) did you buy your appliances? Why did you buy them? Are you planning on buy more or other appliances in the future? Please describe this plan. How has the end of loadshedding or the promise of Melamchi water affected these plans?

#### Practice, Affect, Discourse, Community:

What is your favorite appliance and why? How is your life different having appliances vs. not having them? Do you have more free time? Do these save you time or money? How? What are your daily habit surrounding these? Do you have a morning routine? What is it? What do your friends/family think/say about your appliances? What do you think about theirs? Generally, do you or they own more? Which are common and which are rare? Why do you think that is? If you could have one new appliance, which would you want and why? What do you think of development schemes like the end of loadshedding and the Melamchi water scheme? Do these infrastructure development projects influence your or your friends’ general opinions or ideas about appliances?

#### Class and Socioeconomic Status:

Which class do you belong to? What do middle class people in Kathmandu have in common, i.e. what are some common jobs, where do they tend to live, what do they tend to buy and use? What is good about being middle class? What is bad?

*Appendix B: Tables and Figures*

Table 1: Ethnic/Caste and Regional Background of Project Collaborators

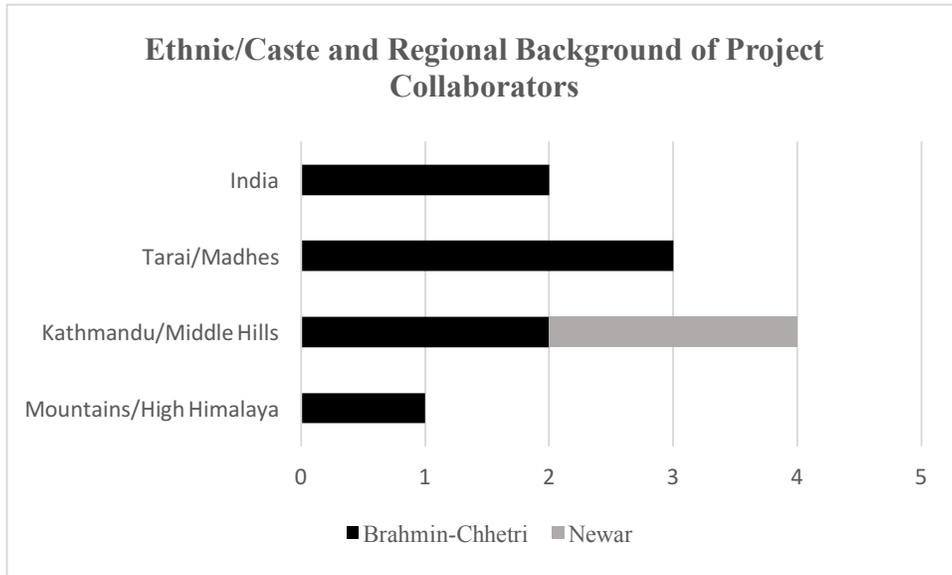
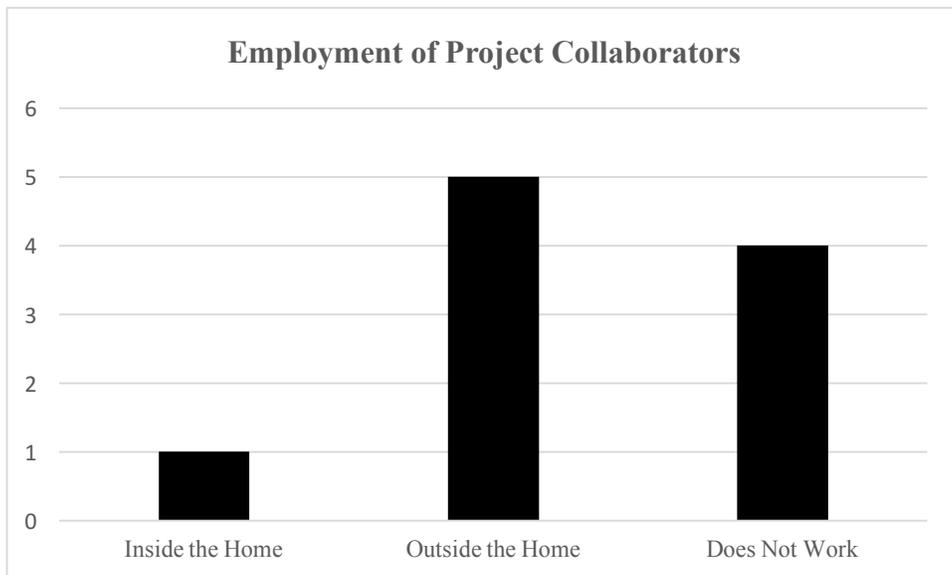


Table 2: Employment of Project Collaborators



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### List of Collaborators

<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Location</b>
Sarjana	4 April 2017	Handigaun, Kathmandu
Vidhya	5 April 2017	Handigaun/Bishalnagar, Kathmandu
Usha	7 April 2017	Handigaun, Kathmandu
Pushpa	11 April 2017	Baluwatar, Kathmandu
Sushmita	15 April 2017	Handigaun/Bishalnagar, Kathmandu
Mallika	15 April 2017	Chandol, Kathmandu
Deepika	18 April 2017	Kalopul, Kathmandu
Gayatri	18 April 2017	Bishalnagar, Kathmandu
Nikita	20 April 2017	Bishalnagar, Kathmandu
Jaya	21 April 2017	Gairidhara, Kathmandu

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Email Address: mmccord@wellesley.edu

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