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# From Lahure Legacies to Moving Peoples: A Study of Opportunity and Mobility in the Annapurna Hills

Peter Jacobson  
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**From *Lahure* Legacies to Moving Peoples: A Study of Opportunity and  
Mobility in the Annapurna Hills**

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South Asia, Nepal, Ghandruk, Ghorepani and Hile

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## **Abstract**

This study examines the interplay between the politics of mobility and changing notions of opportunity in the face of growing trends of tourism in the southern Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA) of Nepal. Research was conducted in three villages that have been the sites of rapid change in recent years, both due to the widespread adoption of local trekking economies, and to demographic change engendered by growing trends of outmigration. By adopting a political ecological framework, which challenges common apolitical explanations of exclusion, inaccessibility and unequal distribution of costs and benefits with particular regard to environmental challenges, this paper jointly applies what I will refer to as a “mobility lens” to understand issues of power and inequality through the forms and configurations of (im)mobilities faced by people of varying socioeconomic backgrounds. In particular, this paper will examine the legacies of wealth and political structures present in these communities, which have acted as barriers to both the mobilities and opportunities accessible to lower class and marginalized peoples, and more broadly, to the sustainable development of resources and communities in Nepal’s ruralities. Questions of how migration, in particular, has become an adaptation implement for disadvantaged actors to facilitate new forms of socioeconomic mobility will be addressed.

**Keywords** Migration • Mobility • Opportunity • Trekking • Tourism

Lahure • Political Ecology • Local power dynamics • Ghandruk • Inequalities

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## 1. Introduction

Outmigration for labor has become a rapidly increasing trend and matter of national interest for the past three decades in Nepal. However, the country's longstanding and somewhat erratic history of labor migration began long before then, roughly two centuries ago. It was then that Nepali men first began seeking opportunities in armed conflict, first in Lahore, and then later, serving the British Army in India. In the past three decades, though, the scale and diversification of outmigration from rural Nepali communities has taken an unprecedented turn, with nearly 15% of Nepal's population working abroad at any given time today, and more than 1,500 people, on average, leaving Nepal each day to work in overseas destinations (Maharjan, et al., 2016). Such has had immense implications, both on local and national scales. The Nepali economy, which, for many years profited principally from agricultural production, has recently shifted to an economy of remittances. In the last decade, remittances have come to count for more than a third of Nepal's gross domestic product in 2016, making Nepal the largest recipient of remittances as a share of GDP in the world (Speck, 2017).

A particularly fascinating feature of these migration trends, however, is that they are developmentally and geographically bound. As in the case of almost all South Asian countries, Nepali foreign migrant workers most chiefly originate from mountainous and hill regions, particularly the Western Hills Region (which has the highest proportion of migrants in Nepal, at 21.9%) (Joshi, 2018). Communities and villages situated in the Western Hills of Nepal, particularly, have long histories of human occupation, movement and environmental degradation, economies that have long relied on subsistence agricultural and other land-use livelihood strategies, and development realities that have for decades fallen behind the Nepali

state's historical development efforts. However, recent dramatic changes brought by conservation initiatives and growing "trekking" industries in the Himalayas, have generated new forms of opportunity and prosperity at local levels, substantially shaping processes of socioeconomic and political reproduction in villages, and further changing the forms of mobilities and livelihood strategies accessible to certain groups. This paper attempts to examine the complexities bound and created by issues of power within the broader trends of eco-tourism and labor outmigration in 3 developing villages located at the southern end of the Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA) of Western Nepal. While a lot of preexisting literature has examined both localized and global aspects of migration processes, my research adopts a political ecological framework and a "mobility lens" to explore questions such as 1) What sorts of dynamics, histories and power relations are particular to the communities of study, and how do they inform degrees of access to opportunity and experiences of mobility?; 2) How are decisions around physical migration mediated by underlying economic, social, spatial, and political factors at the level of the family and community?; and 3) How has pursuing mobile lifeways—particularly in the form of international labor migration—facilitated new forms of socioeconomic mobility for those of traditionally lower social strata within the community?

## **2. Literature Review**

### **i. Anthropology of Mobility: Considerations for Modern Migration**

Human mobility has long been an area of central research in the field of anthropology and its sister social sciences, perhaps for the very reason that peopled movement has been a natural feature of our existence, transcending both incredible intervals of space and time. Whether they study ancient or modern subjects, all anthropologists interested in confronting the conceptual and

methodological issues surrounding mobility face the immense challenge of recognizing and accounting for multiple temporal and spatial scales (and thereby starkly different contexts), in addition to defining mobility, the forms in which it occurs, and what it means for different peoples and cultures. In both ancient and historical periods, human beings have been neither simply mobile nor sedentary, but dynamic, often moving in ways distinct from their contemporaries, as they continually modify and create new practices and patterns of movement. The recent proliferation and acceleration of transnational human migration across the globe, in what Castles and Miller (2009) have referred to as the “age of migration,” has effected large and novel epistemological challenges for the new field of “anthropology of migration” (Köhn, 2016), which continually finds forms of human mobility implementing new spatial and temporal formations. Anthropologists have wrestled with the question of how to adequately come to terms with these new transnational movements and relations, which are becoming ever more salient features of our interconnected, mobile world. International migration has grown substantially in terms of absolute numbers over the past 50 years, from about 79 million in 1960, 173 million in 2000, to 244 million in 2015, a 200% increase (World Migration Report 2018). Of those migrants, two out of every three originate in less-developed countries, and globalization is increasingly posited as an explanation of such movements, exacerbating their frequency, scale, causes, and consequences. Increasingly, larger segments of the population have been mobilized both directly as wage labor and indirectly through rural-urban migration (Sanderson 2009). From war or poverty, or changing ecological conditions, or pursuit of opportunities, mobile subjects are the inevitable outcome of a globalized economy. Sanderson (2009) further reminds us that contemporary migrations are thus to a large degree, either willingly or unwillingly, produced and patterned by the demands of a globalized capitalism that



is both ambiguous and contradictory in its nature. Since their research participants have become mobile, anthropologists are faced with novel challenges of “traveling cultures” and “global ethnoscapes” (Appadurai 1996).

As mentioned, human (im)mobility presents itself in diverse ways, across diverse spatial and temporal scales. Urry (2007) has delineated distinct categories of human mobilities, arguing that social interactions posit various aspects of the movement and/or fixity of people, concepts, information, materials, and forms, therefore effectively creating and shaping culture and society. These categories, adapted from Urry’s (2007) work, follow as such:

- **Capable Mobility:** The possession or adoption of the (in)capacity or (loss of) property of movement. Capable mobility often relies on people, objects and technologies that facilitate and expedite movement, for example: people, vehicles, phones and other connective, digital technologies, physical properties such as homes, schools and hospitals, physical spaces and barriers (such as walls and fences, bounded territories), physical prostheses, etc.
- **Social Mobility:** The upward and downward social movement of people, thereby involving some of the social concerns of sociology, such as preexisting (albeit changing) systems of hierarchy, inequality, power, and capital (in all its forms), and social and cultural constructions. For example, the creation of “new” rich class, the growth of middle class, the social discrimination and restriction of certain groups of people, the impoverishment of families, the opportunity of education, xenophobia and legal restrictions to movement, and access to social services, etc.
- **Migration Mobility:** Takes the form of horizontal, semi-permanent geographical movement of people, often involving the physical movement of human resource to another region, country or continent due to any number of reasons (economic, climatic, political, issues of conflict, violence, seasonal transhumance). For example, environmental migrants, labor outmigration, political migration (political refugees), diasporas, movements as a result of food and physical security, etc.

Thus, Urry (2007) rightly asserts that mobility is an ontological condition that is expressed in processes, commodities, cultures and technologies all on the move. The realization of such requires a new approach to the study of mobilities—the so-called “new mobilities paradigm” or “mobilities turn”—as the combined movements of these things in all their complex relational dynamics (Urry 2007). Such categories of mobility almost always occur in confluence with and

bisect one another. For example, and for the purposes of this research, migration (“migration” mobility) inevitably involves other forms of mobility. Among them include various physical and technological boundaries to movement that (in)capacitate mobility. However, migration is also limited and influenced by the more social and political aspects of mobility, like access and power, which are inherent in different cultural and geographical spaces, such as rural mountain villages in the Nepal Himalaya, or even the urban social scapes of Kathmandu. More recently, questions around these social dimensions have contributed to new understandings of “gendered mobility” (Bealey and Lassoie, 2017), a field of study that investigates the ways in which mobilities and gender intersect and “how mobilities enables/disables/modifies gendered practices” (Uteng and Cresswell, cited by Bealey and Lassoie, 2017). There are many physical and social contexts which influence gendered mobility, including but not limited to, urban or rural setting, past and present development initiatives, cultural context and cultural norms, socioeconomic class status, race and ethnic identity, and level of education. “Access” as we understand it is primarily both a gendered and class-based phenomenon in developing countries, pertaining to all subsets of access, such as access to information, rights, land ownership, money, education, skills, political participation, as well as voice and expression. Within the particular context of Nepal, a great deal has been written on the deeply-imbedded Hindu caste system, with particular focus on the ways it has actualized and continues to engender restriction on all facets of mobility for women and other marginalized groups in Nepali culture, in particular regard to economic advancement and political and social inclusion (Kondos 2004).

The wide scope of the “Mobilities Turn” not only encompasses mobility across a wide range of forms, practices, scales, locations and technologies, but perhaps more importantly, it interrogates the *politics* of mobility and immobility. In this sense, it examines the material

contexts within which mobilities are embedded, representational and non-representational dynamics, as well as the interplay between the physical and social structures of mobility with the aesthetics and psychological dimensions of lived human experience. This leads to the next point, which is that mobilities, and in particular the varieties discussed in this research—namely, those involved in migration from rural sites in Western Nepal—necessarily involve both the physical and imaginary realities of migrants, which are highly interactive with one another. In this regard, we can see how mobility in the physical world is intimately connected and shaped by mobility in the imaginary world, wherein the degree of mobility found in either space in part supplies the agency, or lack of, for a migrant in his or her pathways of movement. Craig (2011) asserts that the human imagination is a space within which there is mobility to imagine the ideal or the problematic—in other words, to shape ideas of personhood, as well as the aspirations and understandings of opportunity of the migrant. In the physical world, an individual consequently conceives of particular locations as “specific places on the map and idealized spaces in which people imagine and enact certain possibilities for living, and experiences of suffering” (Craig, 2011).

To simplify this miscellany of ideas, migration involves a number of different classifications of mobility; using such a framework, this paper attempts to begin to understand the complex relationship between spatial and physical mobilities as they interact with—and are influenced by—changing cultural and socioeconomic realities and existing political relations in lowland Himalayan communities. In particular, how mobilities have been altered by the rise of tourism, legacies of wealth and class, and a new era of opportunity on foreign turf, will be discussed.

## **ii. Historical Mobility and Recent Trends of Movement in the Middle Hills of Nepal**

Mobility within the context of physical migration and occupation of the mountainous regions of Nepal is an age-old phenomenon, beginning hundreds of years ago with the seasonal migrations of agro-pastoralist hill and mountain peoples, whose transhumance is just one example of the importance of mobility as an early adaptive livelihood strategy. In many areas of the Himalayas, winter conditions provided the impetus for people to migrate to warmer climates in the southern lowlands, jointly allowing for ecological restoration of limited seasonal grazing and agricultural areas, and for further opportunities to engage in supplementary trade. Historically, the hills in Nepal have been heavily occupied, considered an ideal destination for peoples from above and below. From the south, this movement was motivated by a desire to escape the heat and malarial diseases of the Terai. From the north, this migration was prompted by a similar desire to egress the harsh climatic conditions of the highlands and find more cultivable land in the usually highly fertile soils of the middle hills. In the early 1900s, while the population in the hills was small in absolute numbers, it continued to grow rapidly within the confines of limited availability of potentially cultivable land. In what has been termed the “great turnabout” by Hrabovszky and Miyan (1987), initial immigration from the lowland areas to the mountains has been replaced by accelerating migration from the hills to the plains. Though this phenomenon is certainly not particular to the hill regions of Nepal, or the Himalayas—as similar processes have been observed in other mountain regions across the globe—it has been significant within the wider scope of Nepal’s developmental and economic history, particularly with regard to more recent forces of mobility. This increase in southern migration is a phenomenon that has accelerated since the late 1950s, when DDT campaigns were carried out to eradicate malarial

mosquitoes in the Terai, making these southern, agricultural lands more habitable (Gill, 2003). Over the three decades between 1971 and 2001, nearly all the migrants to the Terai originated from hill communities, and this movement began to occur at an increasing rate. At the time of the 1971 population census, there were nearly 399,925 migrants who had migrated internally. The following censuses conducted in 1981, 1991 and 2001 showed 686,178; 915,578 and 1,085,862, respectively (Nepal Population Report, 2016). This significant migration from mountain and hill regions to the Terai is often explained as a complex interaction of various push and pull factors. Major “pull” factors that have been explored are southern resettlement programs, the availability of fertile lands in the plains, better communication, transportation and access to social services, and employment opportunities in southern semi-urban and urban areas, and in India. Furthermore, these migration trends have been developmentally bound. Communities and villages situated in the hills of Nepal, particularly, are more than often very remote, depend predominantly on subsistence agricultural and other land-based livelihood strategies that are declining in productivity and practice, and are nascent in regard to inclusion in historical state-led development efforts, due to their physical and economic isolation from the national mainstream. Growing rates of poverty, agricultural declines, ecological challenges, food insecurity, and general access have become significant “push” factors in decisions for Nepalis and Nepali families to migrate. The national population and housing census for 2011 cited that between 2001 and 2011, depopulation occurred in 27 mountain districts of Nepal, a trend that is having considerable socioeconomic and ecological effects in the hill communities being departed from (Nepal Population Census, 2011). It is estimated that by 2012, one third of agricultural land in the middle mountains of Nepal had already been abandoned, an increasingly common

phenomenon that has coincided with much higher rates of population growth in semi-urban environments and urban centers in the foothills and southern valley floors (KC, et al., 2017).

Nepal has a longstanding history of foreign outmigration, too, which began more than two centuries ago, at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was then that Nepali men first began seeking opportunities in armed conflict, first in Lahore under a treaty between Nepal and the Sikh Empire, and then in service of the British Army in India under the Rana oligarchy. Later, recruitment into the Gurkha Divisions of the Indian and British armies would become an enduring tradition for Gurung, Magar and other Tibeto-Burman speaking ethnic groups in Nepal's western and eastern middle-hills, constituting the first large-scale, sustained culture of migration from the hills (Gurung 2004). Still today, the term *lahures* is used to describe individuals and communities that have engaged in foreign military service, and has also become a term of social prestige and empowerment. Up until the early 1980s, labor migration from Nepal was more or less restricted to its southern neighbor, India, and chiefly revolved around foreign military and civil service, and to a greater degree, cheap unskilled labor. In recent years, however, the proportion of migrants leaving for India has reduced and labor migration as a whole has expanded quite dramatically. The proportion of Nepalis—namely, young men—leaving the country in search of foreign labor over the past three decades has become a matter of national interest and concern in Nepal, with particular regard to migration's growing economic and political implications. From the late 1980s and into the early 90s—following the birth of the democratic movement in Nepal, the growing economic emergence of South East Asian and Gulf countries, an increasingly liberalized flow and trade of information in Nepal (as well as an increased concentration of other globalization impacts), and a decade of political unrest ensuing the Maoist Revolution—an unprecedented growth and diversification of outmigration and

migrant destinations began to occur (Childs, et al., 2014). After the advent of the democratic movement in Nepal in 1990, it became easier to obtain travel documents and passports. Labor recruiting agencies, which quickly burst forth with greater foreign demand, have played a crucial role in commercializing and formalizing transnational migration by establishing networks, promoting opportunities and arranging work permits in Nepal (Kern and Müller-Böker, 2015). Today, the scale of outward mobility from Nepali communities is staggering, with more than 1,500 people, on average, leaving Nepal each day to work in overseas destinations, the most prominent of which are presently the Gulf countries and Malaysia (Maharjan, et al., 2016). Similarly, 2011 census data shows that one in every four Nepali households (25.42%; 1.38 million households) has an absent family member living and working abroad, a figure that is sure to have risen in the past few years (Nepal Population Report, 2016). This unprecedented change in the scale and nature of mobilities has had massive implications for Nepali economy which, for many years profited principally from agricultural production, but has recently shifted on a whole to an economy of remittances. In the last decade alone, remittances have come to count for more than a third of Nepal's gross domestic product (Speck, 2017).

### **iii. Impacts of Outmigration in Nepali Hill Communities**

A vast and ever growing body of literature has contributed to many of the ideas surrounding migration as a livelihood strategy and means of generating opportunity in rural Nepali villages (Hoermann, et al., 2010; Joshi, 2018), while many others, in conjunction, have established just how multifaceted and complex outmigration is as a process, challenge and opportunity for individual actors, families and communities. For instance, a number of studies have looked at the implications of remittances, as a potentiality for improving the livelihoods of migrants and their

families faced with stagnant local economic situations and a dearth of economic opportunities aside from agricultural and household work (Thieme, Wyss, 2005; Hoermann, et al., 2010). Other authors have looked closely at the fragility of traditional land-use practices and subsistence farming systems (and broader changes to ideas around the pursuit of wealth) in hill and mountain communities, particularly in the face of recent demographic, ecological, and cultural changes. Speck (2017), Joshi (2018), and Adhikhari (2011), for example, discuss the ways in which outmigration has directly altered agricultural production, land ownership and labor relations within rural communities afflicted by migration. Others have looked at the impact of population decline and abandonment of traditional practices on the local environment. Some studies have alternatively shown how the outmigration of young males (and the consequential dearth of male presence and labor) from rural communities has created both opportunities and challenges for “left-behind” women, thereby precipitating a process of empowerment, “feminization” of mountain agricultural systems, and in addition, feminization of the poverty that has traditionally accompanied those systems (Joshi, 2018; Shrestha, 2017). Studies, more recently, have begun to lend more qualitative attention to the implications of outmigration on demographic “greying,” internal household structure, and the generation and aggravation of social and economic hardships for older people in rural mountainous regions (Speck, 2017; Childs, et al., 2014). Aside from the academic community, the media, in particular, has played a large role in informing public perspectives and ideas around migration, particularly as a source of immense suffering for migrants—who oftentimes face a myriad of challenges, all which begin at home in the community. Greater challenges of the migration process include initial dealings with brokerage and recruitment agencies, and then further afield—problems such as restricted access to basic needs by employers, like identity documentation, social entitlements, housing, and



financial services. In many destination countries, migrant workers face social and political exclusion, physical and psychological stress, and sometimes, worse. A recent article published by the Kathmandu Post compared statistics over the past ten years: Rs 4.48 trillion—equivalent to USD 38.67 billion—in remittances received by Nepal; 6,708 Nepalis who returned home in coffins (Kathmandu Post, 2018).

Over the course of its academic and political history in Nepal, migration has largely been a much talked, poorly understood, and loosely handled issue. It is, and has been, greatly influenced by various social, economic, political and cultural factors. Its impacts are shaped by changing circumstances, and thus it itself is a fluid process. Migration has been seen to improve economic conditions and ensure family livelihood security in regard to remittances; on the other hand, though, it has “inadvertently created a vacuum in mountain societies,” thereby placing novel pressures on existing systems and the family units that are inherently involved (Joshi, 2018). Outmigration has established itself as a very real adaptive measure to the constraints of subsistence economy, and the changing conditions and associated risks and relations brought by tourism across the mountainous regions of the world; as such, it is hardly a phenomenon specific to the hills and mountain regions of Nepal. I see an opportunity to approach understandings of migration with a slightly different lens—one that sheds light on the complexities created by tourism and the role of local political dynamics and relations in determining access to opportunities and the various forms of mobilities taken by local peoples.

#### **iv. Development, Tourism and the Rise of Trekking Economies: History of Annapurna Conservation Area**

In beginning to understand the ever changing mobilities observed in Nepali ruralities today, one must begin with the critical realization that these mobilities are both cause and effect of a

number of complex, often coinciding, historical processes involved in Nepal's path to economic and political development. The concept of "development," or *bikaas*, though only a few decades old in Nepal, has assumed a central place in Nepali social and political discourse and identity, to a large extent framing the modern practical pursuits of individuals, local communities, and the Nepali state (Lim, 2008). Ideas and practices of development in Nepal have been inevitably molded by western narratives of modernization and development. Nepal's long and troubled political identity has been intimately tied to the global institutions of international development that have guided its more recent development course, as well as to conceptions of what type of *place* Nepal is—which, in the viewing modern developmental parlance, is still one of the poorest countries in the world (Lim, 2008). In spite of this, however, *bikaas* has also been shaped a great deal by local understandings that are uniquely Nepali, and which have effected, and continue to effect, lived decisions, imagined possibilities, and increasingly mobile lifeways at the scale of the individual and community today.

To give a brief history, modern development efforts in Nepal began in the early 1950s, following the revolution of 1951, which effectively overthrew the long-standing Rana dynasty, the tightly centralized isolationist autocracy that had ruled Nepal the foregoing century (Stevens, 1985). The quasi-constitutional rule restored by the Shah monarchy adopted a considerably more progressive stance, opening the country's doors to Western knowledge and aid surrounding the expansion and diversification of Nepal's economy and infrastructural base. In the short years following, Nepal embarked on the task of social and economic development, though change was exceedingly slow to begin. At the time of the early 1950s, the country's road network was confined entirely to the Kathmandu Valley, electricity was unknown outside the capital, and agriculture was practiced nearly universally, with age-old techniques (Stevens, 1985). Foreign

aid began to flow into the country, slowly at first, but then at a much quicker rate in the ensuing years. Amidst many initial challenges to development, tourism emerged as one of the few promising sectors of the Nepali economy; if nothing else, the very physical ecologies that have long acted as *the* greatest impediments to inclusive economic development across Nepal have also become among the world's greatest tourist spectacles, a fact that would encourage a more focused approach to tourist-related developments, and particularly, nature-based tourism, in the government's future planning. From a slow beginning in the late 1950s, the nature of tourism began to change dramatically in Nepal during the 1960s and into the 70s—growing in foreign visitors (from 6,000 in 1962 to nearly 160,000 in 1978), expanding infrastructure and facilities, diversifying the types of tourism offered, and extending tourist destinations beyond Kathmandu, into the hinterlands, Nepal's prized landscapes (Stevens, 1985). Given Nepal's dependency on foreign aid for its development, there was little choice but for its developmental policies to reflect the changing foci and priorities of its donor countries. Therefore, in 1971 the Nepalese government initiated a national conservation program, which was later given a legal basis following the passing of the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act in 1973 (Green, 1993, cited by Lim, 2008). The consequent establishment of Protection Areas (PAs) became a promising strategy for sustainable regional development in Nepal—balancing conservation aims while concurrently offering opportunities for local economic mobilization beyond traditional forms of land-use.

One such PA is the Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA), Nepal's largest conservation area, which covers an area of 7629 square kilometers in the Annapurna range of the Himalayas across Manang, Mustang, Kaski, Myagdi, and Lamjung districts. The first measures taken to conserve the Annapurna region commenced in the late 1970s, after it became increasingly evident that

population pressures from intensified agricultural practices and initial impacts from trekking tourism were quickly contributing to various forms of ecological degradation in the forested hills of the Annapurnas. The King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation (KMTNC) (later renamed Nepal Trust for Nature Conservation, NTNC), an autonomous nongovernmental organization, initiated the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) in 1986. What began as small-scale pilot project surrounding the VDC of Ghandruk at the southern mouth of the current ACA, at the request of the Nepali government, was expanded significantly in 1989, and again in 1993, in response to the great successes of the project. The ACA was the first conservation area in Nepal to allow local residents to live within the boundaries of the PA, while still maintaining rights to the use of natural resources—which are conserved through participatory initiatives led by community-based conservation groups (Spiteri and Nepal, 2008). The ACA is considered globally as a successful model of a social-ecological conservation system because local extractive uses of resources are an integral part of the area's ecology, but the management of such resources are socially designed, accomplished through the engagement of communities through their involvement in local institutions (Dahal, et al., 2014).

In addition to the incredible ecology and natural landscapes that have commanded the visitation of millions of people over the course of time, the ACA is also home to a remarkable ethnic and cultural diversity. With over 120,000 people living within the confines of the conservation area, which extends across a considerable amount of spatial geography in western Nepal, a number of diverse ethnic groups with distinct languages, cultures, histories and traditions belong to the ACA. Western interest in trekking and eco-tourism has made the ACA the most visited PA by foreigners in Nepal, attracting over 60 per cent of the country's total trekkers (Dahal, 2011). The ACA thus offers very good prospects for regional sustainable

economic development through tourist expenditure and associated revenue, and communities situated within and along popular trekking routes in the ACA have been the sites of considerable development in recent years. Understanding about the dilemmas confronted and challenged by mountain regions, and their approaches to their sustainable development have taken a primary focus in rural development studies, but a lot remains to be discussed and explored in existing academic and development literature around the dynamics of tourism and the way in which politics and socioeconomic strata are inevitably embedded in the distribution of benefits and opportunities created by tourism, both on local and regional scales. As Pandey (1995) discusses, tourism a “factor of acculturation which affects attitudes, alters popular beliefs, changes mentalities and spreads new concepts relating to work, money, and human relationships.” Such an insight, I think, demonstrates that circumstances incited by tourism have brought both new opportunities for local peoples, but also countless challenges and excruciating dilemmas around livelihood and opportunity, which have taken more and more to mobile means.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **i. Political Ecology: Theoretical Approaches to Situating Opportunity and Mobility**

Political ecology is a field of qualitative inquiry which combines understandings of political economy and cultural ecology to investigate society-human interactions (Robbins, 2012).

Anthropologist Eric R. Wolf (1972) first coined the term ‘political ecology’ in an article in the early 70s, although as a study and method in qualitative research it gained much popularity in the 1980s following geographers Blaikie and Brookfield’s seminal work, “Land Degradation and Society,” which elucidated the interconnectedness of political, economic and cultural issues to

environmental change (Blaikie and Brookfield, 1987). No one definition of political ecology exists because of its vast research agenda, which bridges and draws from numerous disciplines. However, it has been applied as a lens and framework to issues as disparate as food insecurities, soil erosion, landlessness and displacement, resource decline, issues of social access, and more (Dahal, 2011). According to Robbins (2012), political ecology is an “effort to expose the forces at work in ecological struggle...[and]...to demonstrate the way that politics is inevitably ecological and that ecology is inherently political...” Central to this agenda is the critical assumption that costs and benefits (whilst relating particularly to environmental changes) are not equally distributed across social scales. It therefore fundamentally challenges the social and political inequalities present in socio-environmental-political interactions by shedding light on the historical structures and relations that underpin them, as well as the types of knowledge inherently involved in their (re)production. The field of existing political ecological literature is vast, and a great deal has already been studied with regard to participatory relations in community-based conservation management, control of resources, distribution of benefits, and the impacts of these relations on marginalized communities—especially within the scope of Nepal’s development and conservation projects, and those of other third world countries. In particular, a number of recent studies have focused on particular communities and local conservation and development regimes within the Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA) as sites of political and participatory inequality (Dahal, 2011; Dahal, et al., 2013; Spiteri and Nepal, 2008). By adopting a similar political ecological framework, this paper attempts to situate observed processes of human mobility and opportunity production in “trekking”-impacted communities under a political lens—thereby investigating the dynamics and histories involved in the unequal power relations which continually inform degrees of access to opportunity and

thereby create or influence experiences of mobility. Communities that have shifted to so-called “trekking economies” under growing tourism have recently become the sites of immense change from an economic, social and development perspective. Such changes, and how they are advantageous and disadvantageous are inevitably accentuated by preexisting political dimensions and their specific spatialities. So, considering the impacts of regional tourism, this paper aims to frame existing mobilities (particularly, in the form of physical migration) in the context of opportunity and capacity, asking the question of how decisions around migration are mediated by underlying institutional, economic, social, spatial, and political factors at the level of the family and community. Also of interest is the question of how pursuing mobile lifeways—particularly, through physical means—has facilitated new forms of socioeconomic mobility for those of traditionally lower social strata within the community.

It should be mentioned, also, that literature around migration has tended to focus on and distinguish singular motivations for migration (for example, as a simple product of climate change, communal violence, or economic opportunity). However, migration studies have, more recently I think, correctly posited that migration is rarely the result of a single cause (an explanation which, from a political ecological perspective, would be considered an “apolitical” one), but rather it is a complex process shaped by multiple social, political, economic, and spatial drivers (Castles and Miller, 2009). The lived experiences and realities of such mobilities—such as, for example, the decision of where to migrate, or perhaps the decision of *whether* or not to even migrate at all—is often a product of existing albeit unseen power dynamics working at various levels. To quote Campbell (2018), “In thinking how to explore labour dilemmas facing the community I once knew as busy with subsistence work teams, I look to Narotzky (this volume; 2015), who provides some useful pointers in her approach to moral economy, and

recommends anthropologists bring into view lived dilemmas, perturbations, and conflicts as capitalism remakes personal and public interests.” Livelihood practices are indeed embedded in ethical concerns, reciprocities, and the social and political relations local to place. I hoped to approach the processes surrounding mobility and opportunity—and their larger, albeit underlying, political dimensions—in as much of an agent-focused, narrative-based mode as possible. However, there were certain unanticipated limitations to this approach, which will be addressed in the Research Methods section.

## **ii. Study Sites: Ghandruk, Ghorepani, and Hile**

To address these research objectives, fieldwork was carried out over the course of two weeks in the very southern end of Nepal’s first and largest conservation area, the Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA). Within the ACA, the Ghandruk village development committee (VDC) was chosen as the primary study site for this research, where data was collected over the course of 6 days. Located in Kaski district approximately 50km from Pokhara, a 6-hour hike up the steep stone steps ascending from the valley, Ghandruk is situated in what Nepalis commonly refer to as "hill" country, 2000m above the Modi River on the steep southern slope of the ACA. The main village of Ghandruk, which means *kodaa* [“a village on top of the hill”] in Gurung language, faces out toward the western Annapurnas—among them world-renown peaks like *Macchapuchre*, *Hiuchuli*, *Gangapurna*, and Annapurna I, the tenth tallest mountain in the world (Dahal, 2011). As the first village en-route to the Annapurna Base Camp from the valley, the combination of the mountainous landscape and a rich Gurung culture makes Ghandruk a popular tourist destination for both international and national peoples.



Ghandruk is a large VDC, spreading over an area of 281.1 square kilometers and nine wards, with roughly 1,100 households and a total population of 5080 (Dahal 2011). The majority of the population is Gurung (an estimated 48%), followed by Dalits (30%), then Brahmins/Chhetris (13%), and other ethnic groups. The majority of the population today are still subsistence farmers, but a slim and diminishing portion of land surrounding Ghandruk is actually fit for agriculture (an issue that has been aggravated by a growing departure from traditional agricultural practices in rural, mountainous areas of the world) (Khanal and Watanabe, 2006). The village has a long and championed tradition of employment of young Gurung men in the Indian and British Armies, which have resulted in legacies of family wealth and further opportunities for mobility, socioeconomic or otherwise. Notably, recent developments brought to Ghandruk by the growing influxes of tourists and changing circumstances at local and global scale have incited a significant diversification in livelihood and occupational strategies for many villagers, some of which have necessitated more mobile means: the growth of a bustling trekking industry, new forms of wage work, international education and work (for those who can afford to support such pathways), and outmigration for labor.

Recent changes have resulted in more large-scale demographic change in the community, which has observed an increasing trend of families departing from their traditional homes for the city, and even new trends of Nepali workers migrating internally to Ghandruk. It has become, somewhat paradoxically, a place of significant opportunity, and a place from which to leave. All of these dynamics mentioned, in addition to the fact that Ghandruk is both a very developed and well-researched site within the context of Nepal, its development schemes, and the academic literature surrounding topics such as trekking tourism, conservation management, and Gurung culture, made it an ideal site for my study.

The other two sites chosen for this research were the villages of Ghorepani and Hile, where data was collected over 4 days and 3 days, respectively. Ghorepani is a Pun Magar village situated on the other end of Deurali Pass just northeast of Ghandruk, in Myagdi district. It is considered one of the most popular tourist destinations in the ACA region today. A much younger village than Ghandruk, Ghorepani owes its existence almost entirely to tourism from trekking. By the 1980s the panoramic views of over a dozen peaks from Poon Hill, a popular viewpoint located just above the village, resulted in the village becoming a key tourist stopover in the ACA. Ghorepani also conveniently sits at a cross-section of trekking routes—both at the tail end of the famed Annapurna Circuit Trail (ACT), and as a principal destination for trekkers embarking upon shorter routes. Ghorepani’s spatiality has resulted in what has been described as a “bottleneck” effect of trekking traffic (Gurung and DeCoursey, 1994), and a bustling trekking and lodging economy.

Hile, a much smaller trekking village located a full day’s hike south of Ghorepani, is situated on the steep banks of the Bhurungdi Khola river valley. The village itself is comprised largely of scattered lodges that run in a linear fashion alongside the trail to Ghorepani from the lower valley. Masses of trekkers during peak seasons, in the fall and spring, pass through or stop for a night in Hile or its neighboring village, Tikhedhunga, before continuing on to Ghorepani or Birethanthi the next day. I conducted a small amount of research on two larger villages located above Hile on the hillside, one of which was a Gurung village known as Sebet. The other village, slightly adjacent to Sebet was called Naya Gaau (literally meaning “New Village”). This village, quite differently from Sebet and Hile, was comprised mostly of *kaami* people, a Nepali term which is attributed to occupational castes—those belonging to the lowest social strata in the Hindu caste system.

I felt that three field areas chosen for this research, though all representing only a very small area spatially (and therefore a very limited sample), provided a useful microcosm of the issues occurring at a much larger scale throughout Nepal, in tourist-impacted Himalayan communities, and many other places of the globalized world. As discussed prior, the existing power relations embedded within a community—and the spatialities that accompany those relations—have very real implications for all groups, particularly in terms of the facilitation and restriction of certain forms of movement and access to opportunity. This was true in the case of all the communities I spent time in, however, the exact dynamics and processes involved in each site differed markedly.

### **iii. Shifting Lenses and Approaches**

For the purposes of my research, I initially planned to utilize a synthesis of qualitative research methods—namely, ethnographic and narrative inquiry—to investigate questions of agency involved in decisions around mobile actions, particularly those relating to migration for labor. To quote May (2002), qualitative methods have an ability to access the “fine grain of local experience.” I imagined producing a piece of work that dealt primarily with experiences of change brought by migration—and the pressures, vulnerabilities, and opportunities that accompany that change. However, there were certain limitations that changed the course of my project focus. For one, I initially planned to center my research on issues surrounding migration for labor in the Gulf States and Malaysia. I had not anticipated the other forms of migration that are dominant in Ghandruk, namely, migration for work or education in first world countries, and service in the Indian and British armies (though historically, this was much more prevalent). I wound up having to adapt the focus of my research to the local conditions of Ghandruk in

regard to the nature of common mobilities. Secondly, narrative-based methods inherently involve the depth and emotional articulation of language, and I found that my lack of fluency and generally brief interactions with informants (or, at least, interactions that were too short for the quality of rapport and empathy demanded by narrative inquiry), became significant factors. Thus my research topic inevitably shifted its focus when the sociopolitical dynamics present in Ghandruk quickly became clear through questions around mobility, choice and opportunity. This study used qualitative research methods, particularly those involved in ethnographic inquiry fieldwork, like direct and indirect participant observation, unstructured and informal one-on-one interviews and discussions, casual conversations, reflection, and other forms of interpretation. The flexibility and adaptability of ethnographic methods suited the objectives of this study well, which required a more comprehensive contextual understanding of the historical sociopolitical realities of the communities of focus, in addition to the way that those realities are expressed through categories of lived mobility.

More technically, my methods were quite unstructured as far as consistency of schedule, and they naturally changed slightly as I visited different research sites. In Ghandruk, I met with a total of 8 individuals over the course of 4 mornings—two semi-structured interviews per morning, with interviews lasting anywhere between 15 and 40 minutes, generally. Informants were selected with the assistance of Mr. Bidur Kuinkel, Officer in Charge (OIC) at the local Annapurna Conservation Area of Protection (ACAP) office, and one of his coworkers, whom has lived in Ghandruk his entire life. All of my informants in Ghandruk were return migrants of some classification—some of whom were from higher socioeconomic status and were back in Ghandruk running or managing their own businesses, others of whom belonged to a much lower social strata and had led very physically mobile lives, with multiple trips abroad for work. All

were male and of varying ages, at once a limitation, but also a product of the traditionally very gendered mobility within Nepal (which was certainly not an exception in this region, which has a long history of male outmigration). Translation was performed as needed Sudeep Subedi, a 22-year-old office assistant at ACAP who moved to Ghandruk only four months ago from his hometown in Nepal. In spite of this, Sudeep daoi seemed very well acquainted socially within the village, and would often start chatting away with people as we sauntered through the cobbled streets of Ghandruk, from the house of one informant to the house of another.

In Ghorepani and Hile, my interviews were much less “structured” in the sense that I went off the record and approached community members—four lodge owners, in addition to two Tibetan artisans and street vendors, a small group of men involved in the construction of a new lodge up the hill, and a few villagers—in a very informal, conversational way, introducing myself and making small talk before asking more pointed questions relevant to my research. I found that introducing myself in Nepali and trying my best to describe the objectives of my research in Nepali helped a great deal to dispel of any initial hesitations shown by my informants. While I never had any hardened set of questions that I used in each interview, many of my questions followed general themes: about the migration and pre-migration processes; experiences abroad; reflections on the outcomes of those experiences; ideas and perceptions of local conditions and opportunities; and, in both personal and contextual terms, about the community in which they lived (particularly, concerning historical trends, thoughts on the impacts of trekking and tourism, perceived changes, barriers and channels to access, etc.).

#### **iv. Addressing Ethical Considerations and Potential Biases**

For a study dealing so much with qualitative methods—particularly, with the participation of informants, some marginalized, through oral interview—ethical concerns must be adequately addressed. In the beginning stages of this research, a proposal of this project was reviewed by a local ethics review board—comprised of the SIT NPR academic director (Suman Pant), the senior lecturer of SIT NPR (Anil Chitrakar), and a language instructor at SIT NPR (Chandra Rana). This process ensured high standards for ethical considerations and any mitigation of their challenges. Over the course of the research process, issues of informed consent, inadvertent pressure to participate, and disclosure of information were handled in the initial interactions with informants, both in a structured and unstructured interview settings. Additional approval of the use of an audio-recording device (when applicable) was given outright, as well as the use of actual name in the finished publication and presentation of research. Lastly, it should be mentioned that only those over the age of 18 and able to give informed consent were involved in this study, and any information present in this study was included with the full knowledge and consent of those who participated.

In a similar vein, I think that presentation of the findings of this research in the following sections calls for a discussion of the inherently biased nature of qualitative research at large and of the potential ways that my own natural biases could have shaped this research in particular. To begin, it is important to understand that bias inevitably exists in all study designs. The individual carrying out qualitative research is integral to both the process and findings of that research, and any separation from this relationship is not possible, nor should it be desirable. It is a researcher's responsibility, however, to aspire to transparency and reflexivity in consideration of the processes involved in research. Such requires critical self-reflection about one's own

preconceptions, assumptions, theoretical approach, and analytical focus as they play into various stages of the research, including initial relation to subjects, collection of data, and the analysis and interpretation of findings.

In an attempt to be as transparent as possible, I will address the bias issues that were observable throughout my own study. It should firstly be mentioned that nearly all of my interviews in Ghandruk were organized with the help of Bidur Kuinkel and one of his coworkers, a Ghandruk local. Hence, my participants were “hand-picked” in a personally biased manner, based on personal social and family connections within the Ghandruk community. In spite of this, I deliberately requested that my participants comprise a range of socioeconomic backgrounds, so that my findings could speak as objectively and inclusively as possible about issues of mobility and opportunity production in Ghandruk. As mentioned prior, I also used the assistance of an interpreter throughout these interviews, which had other biased implications. There were instances during initial interviews in which I would direct a question at a participant in order to hear their impressions and feelings on a certain subject matter, but it would be fielded by my interpreter instead. I managed to avoid this challenge outside of Ghandruk. In Ghorepani and Hile, I conducted interviews without the use of an interpreter, but conversed largely with English speakers of diverse backgrounds. From what I gathered spending time in these particularly tourist-impacted areas, the majority of local people—particularly those who had histories of involvement in tourism and/or migration—knew enough English to carry at least a basic conversation. Consequently, language capacity was not as much of an indicator of socioeconomic status or larger political implications given the context of the study sites, and therefore was not as much of a consideration for my findings.

While the opinions presented in the following findings and results were reported or described by participants of this study in as many of their words as they were able to provide, it is worth mentioning that my theoretical approach to my research likely had greater implications for the nature of the questions that I was posing, and perhaps the types of answers that I heard from my participants. By adopting a political ecological framework, my questions were naturally more attentive to issues related to power and their implications for mobility and access to opportunity. While I made a general effort keep the aim of my questions as even-handed and unassuming as possible, there were a handful of moments that I caught myself leaning into a leading questions bias. By this I mean that I would occasionally, and often unknowingly, ask questions that suggested or elicited particular answers—particularly around the challenges of migration, and about perceived local opportunities in Ghandruk. For example: *“Some people think that there are very limited opportunities for work in Ghandruk, which has motivated them to leave the community for work further afield. What do you think about the level of opportunities for local people like yourself?”* Although my questions were sometimes “slanted” in this way, they did not seem to limit the degree to which informants were able to agree or disagree with the stated premises of my questions, and share their own feelings. The recordings of my conversations later became useful, allowing me to look back and reflect on the languages that I was using, and how they might influence the languages utilized in response.

Lastly, there is the inevitable “outsider” bias that comes simply as a result of being a foreign and white person conducting research in a new place and entirely new contexts. Having only spent just over two months in Nepal prior to the start of my research, my knowledges of the communities in which I conducted research were very limited. Not only did my “foreignness” inform both my own outlook, understandings and approaches to my study, but it also likely



played a substantial role in determining how my presence was perceived by my participants, and how openly or willingly they were able to share their thoughts and experiences with me. Although I tried to mediate this as best I could by concentrating my efforts at remaining conscious of my “outsider” presence and the inevitable power dynamics that accompany that, it was certainly was an aspect of the research that I was continually challenged with.

## **4. Results**

To begin the discussion of my findings, I hope provide something of a contextual foundation to support and situate my interview data, particularly concerning historical and sociopolitical dynamics within Ghandruk. A large portion of my more “unstructured” conversations with informants—typically with one, sometimes two, long-time locals and community members—entailed learning about the context of each of the villages that I stayed in, the local dynamics, and the relations between local peoples. Many of the following topics were expressed in these conversations, supplemented by further reading of the past literature on these sites. I found that these findings informed my research by helping to situate and elucidate my observations on place, as well as the raw data collected through more structured interviews on migration, mobility and opportunity.

### **i. What is Opportunity? Lahure Wealth and the Trekking Economy**

As mentioned, Ghandruk is a *lahure* village, meaning that it has a long and prominent history (some 180 years) of recruitment and service of young Gurung men in the British and Indian Armies as “Gurkha” soldiers. In a conversation with Bidur Kuinkel of the ACAP office in Ghandruk, I was told that in 1980, approximately 90 per cent of all Gurung households in the

community had family members (fathers or sons) who were employed in the British or Indian armies. In recent years, however, employment has been on the decline, following rapidly falling demands for recruitment (personal communication, 2018). To describe this statistically, a poll conducted in April of 1993 revealed that about 50 per cent of the households in Ghandruk still had family members. However, in 1995, it was reported that in the three years between 1990-1993, only one Gurung man had been recruited into the British army (Pandey 1995). The possibility of serving in the army in the years since has dwindled greatly and competition among Gurung boys and young men from other of the so-called “martial castes” for the remaining places has come to an all-time high. I was later told by my “baa” and frequent informant in Hile, Jokar Thakali, that the British army used to recruit 500+ young men from hill communities per year, but demand has fallen to roughly 150 per year nowadays. More than 30,000 young men compete for these positions, and only the “fittest...[and]...most qualified” are chosen (personal communication, 2018). Indeed, historic earnings from service produced a local economy that was, for years, largely reliant on remittances and pensions, and it also shaped a culture of military aspiration, disinterest and abandonment of agricultural practices, and pursuit of other outmigration strategies among young men. As I was told by another Gurung man named Indra, a 43-year-old return migrant from Saudi Arabia and Japan, now the manager of a newly built hotel, “young boys today have become be familiar with migration as [a] life option” (personal communication, 2018). This “culture” of leaving the community has certainly not been a product of isolation in Ghandruk, but it is just one example of the widespread and growing nature of mobility within most rural, historically remote, regions of Nepal.

According to Bidur ji, in the mid-1970s hundreds of groups of trekkers and mountain climbers began coming through the way to Ghandruk for sightseeing and mountaineering. There

were supposedly no lodges, hotels or homestays in Ghandruk at the time, and trekkers would resort to more rudimentary means of accommodations—namely, camping on available land, paying locals for the provision of meals and “cultural performances” (personal communication, 2018). Though there is some contention over which of the lodges was the first established in the community, multiple informants mentioned 1976 as being the first year a “lodge” was opened, in the form of a homestay with only a few available rooms. In just a few years, a bustling trekking industry would emerge as a response to the masses, drastically changing local lives and livelihoods, and engendering yet another shift in the local economy—one catering to tourists. In a study on the impacts of tourism, Pandey (1995) reported that at the time of the study, there were a total of 15 large lodges in Ghandruk. In the years since, approximately 30 or so large lodges have been built up, and numerous others are currently under construction or renovation. This seemed to be a common theme, as I observed at least three or four ongoing construction projects in Ghorepani, and a few others being erected in between Ghorepani and Hile. With ever increasing numbers of visitation to Annapurna Base Camp, the Annapurna Circuit, and other trekking routes in the southern ACA, the resort business has been an incredibly profitable one for enterprising families, particularly in Ghandruk and Ghorepani, allowing for numerous new forms of mobility, accessibility and privilege. Yearly earnings make it possible for lodge owners to take such actions as invest in real estate in Pokhara and Kathmandu, send their children to good private schools there, as well as afford for the international migration of their children, often to desired first-world countries, for education or work. Although this will be discussed further in a later section, what was particularly notable about these findings, however, was that the immense benefits stemming from tourism have evidently been distributed unevenly across social and spatial scales within the Ghandruk community. Multiple participants in my study emphasized

furthermore that starting a lodging business is no uncostly undertaking and that it was only those who were already economically advantaged—namely, prominent *lahure* families relying on the funds of ex-Gurkha soldiers—that had the economic capacity to start their own businesses. This was true in the case of Ghorepani, too, where lodges were built primarily using the funds of ex-Gurkha soldiers originally from the nearby village of Khibang and Sikhaa, both located just north of Ghorepani (personal communication, 2018).

## **ii. Reversing the Trends: Incoming Peoples**

During the peak trekking seasons, which last from September to December, and then from February to April, lodges in both Ghandruk and Ghorepani remain nearly fully packed, and activities are hectic throughout. To keep up with the rapid comings and goings of people, larger lodges commonly have to employ at least 5-10 employees to help with the lodge's everyday operations, which include but are not limited to cooking, cleaning, reception and guest service, and general upkeep. In the case of a number of the lodges that I visited or stayed at, employees were generally not local and had come to the villages in search of work. In just two lodges that I spent time at in Ghandruk, there were a combined 7 employees (out of a total 14) that came from elsewhere. This is a significant proportion, considering that most other employees were family members involved in the management of the hotel. In Ghorepani, I stopped in to talk with the owners of two lodges during the daily lulls in activity (which typically occurred between 11am and 2pm, in between waves of guests). I had a chance to converse shortly with few of the employees in both places. In one lodge, called the Dhaulagiri Lodge—the first established lodge in Ghorepani Deurali, the upper village of Ghorepani—there has apparently been a history of “internally”-migrated employees. Currently, there were three young women working there, who

came from elsewhere. In another, smaller lodge located nearby, called Snow View Lodge, there were another three workers who were not local to Ghorepani. In particular, two brothers who grew up Baglung had been working as the cooks in Snow View Lodge for just over a year when I talked with them. When I asked employees questions about opportunity and about their general satisfaction working in the lodges, I heard a range of responses. One young man working at the Village Eco Lodge in Ghandruk, originally from Bhaktapur, said that it was “really hard work. I am tired, but it is alright...they don’t pay me a lot but I am content living in this beautiful place” (personal communication, 2018). Similarly, one of the two young men at the Snow View Lodge mentioned that “Ghorepani offers many opportunities for people like us.” (personal communication, 2018).

In perhaps one of the most fascinating informal interviews that I conducted throughout my study, I learned a great deal about the lives and economic pursuits of 9 Tibetan artisans from Pokhara, who biannually trek up to Ghorepani to work through the trekking seasons. On a particular afternoon in Ghorepani, I spent nearly an hour talking with a 55-year-old woman named Tsering at her jewelry and crafts stand, situated in the main “plaza” of the upper village. Tsering wound up sharing her life story with me, which I will summarize here, as I found it so fascinating, but also particularly relevant to my understandings of mobility and opportunity within the context of Ghorepani. Tsering was born in Tingri, a small town in southern Tibet, and a historic trading post where Sherpas from Nepal exchanged rice, grain and iron for Tibetan wool, livestock and salt. Tsering was only two years-old when her family fled during the mass exodus of Tibetans in the late 1960s and early 1970s. From Tingri, her family trekked for 45 days south, to Kathmandu. Tsering recalls difficulties faced by many Tibetans—namely the changing climate and terrain of the hills of Nepal, and the changes of diet that accompanied a

starkly different landscape. These changes would take the lives of many exiled peoples, including Tsering's own grandmother who became sick and passed away along the journey. Tsering was raised in the Jawalakhel Tibetan Refugee settlement, in Kathmandu. At the age of 16, when her parents sought work in India—road construction in Manali—Tsering moved to Pokhara, where she began getting involved in the handicraft industry there. Exiled Tibetans began seeking work elsewhere (in places such as Ghorepani) 42 years ago. Then, craftsmen and businessmen had no other means of physical mobility but to walk everywhere. The trek from Pokhara to Ghorepani, with all the crafts for the tourist season, was a long one—a two-day's trek at least. If there is good business, Tsering and other Tibetan artists like herself must travel twice yearly to the Tibetan border in order to acquire more supplies there, in exchange for cheap Nepali clothes. Nowadays, with the availability of longer road networks and transportation access, Tsering has found it relatively easy to hire a jeep from Pokhara to Jomsom, in northern Nepal, where she then has to trek through Lo Mothang to the border. Oftentimes, this happens in July and January—in between the tourist seasons. Tsering has one daughter, 22-years-old, and one son, 20-years-old, who grew up in Pokhara. When her kids were as young as three- and one-years-old, Tsering or her husband would still go to Ghorepani for months at a time to work, while the other would stay behind and take care of the children. When her daughter was just 12 years-old (and her son, 10), Tsering and her husband began traveling together for entire seasons, a period in which her children learned to fend for themselves; cooking, managing the household, and attending a local governmental school. They now attend Tribhuvan University, Prithvi Narayan Campus in Pokhara. When asked whether she felt that her husband's and her business pursuits were profitable, Tsering simply looked at me and said, "It's enough, for us it's enough." When I asked her *why Ghorepani?*, she noted, "Ghorepani is the main tourist place...it sits at the

crossroads of Nepal's trekking tourist scene...with many different treks" (personal communication, 2018). It is a place for people like Tsering and her husband and friends to create livelihoods, benefit from the inflows of capital brought by trekking, express themselves culturally (though through "commodified" means), and gain socioeconomic leverage.

Trekking tourism has simultaneously incited the growth and diversification of possible livelihood strategies for local peoples, too, thereby providing livelihood options outside of traditional agricultural and household work. Apart from working as porters and traders, many people in the area run small tea shops, cold drink stalls, restaurants, work in transportation services, or take on varieties of wage labor (such as local road and lodge construction, trail maintenance, farm work for wealthier, land-holding families, etc.). I was told on multiple occasions that while some local Gurung men become guides, the majority of guides working in the Annapurna region actually come from Pokhara or the eastern mountainous regions of Nepal (personal communication, 2018). Still today, many lower-class families in Ghandruk are involved in agriculture and herding practices. However, it is becoming more and more common for these families, who are already economically disadvantaged within the context of the larger economic progression of the community, to have at least one son who has either worked abroad, or is currently absent from the household.

### **iii. In the Eyes of the Returners**

Many of the return migrants that I interviewed, who came from diverse socioeconomic and family backgrounds, felt similarly about the dearth of local opportunities in Ghandruk, and about the many limits to access extant in the community. One of my informants, Indra Gurung, who was quoted previously (who migrated to Saudi Arabia and Japan and now owns a hotel

business), asserted that there was more opportunity abroad than in Ghandruk. In his words, “those who didn’t have anything to do here, most of them went outside from here. Those who are involved in hotel business, they stay here; otherwise they [people] go to other countries for employment...Before, I only did household works (agriculture). But there weren’t any further opportunities to make more money for me” (personal communication, 2018). Another informant, Mekh Gurung, 35, spent three years in Malaysia working at an electrical company, and then 7 years at an electrical shop in Qatar. He faced a lot of difficulty in the initial migration process, as the recruitment office hadn’t prepared a job for him, or given him any details on the potential nature of his work, including information on his wage. Besides this, he didn’t have any working experience and had only done agricultural work with his family prior. Two years later, when there was finally demand for work from a company in Malaysia, he didn’t have any choice. As my translator told me, “He had to go to Malaysia, for his family, to make more money. He didn’t have any opportunities to make money in his own village.” When I later asked whether he or his older brother, Dharma Gurung (also a recent return migrant from Qatar) had observed any changes in Ghandruk while they were away, particularly whether there were more job opportunities created while they were gone, Mekh told me, “we didn’t get *any* changes in Ghandruk...just more lodges, which don’t benefit our family.” Mekh and Dharma’s time working abroad, though it required the family to borrow initial loans from neighbors, helped to relieve some of their family’s financial pressures, as well as pay for their younger brother to get his work documents to migrate to Dubai.

A week or so later, while staying in Hile, I had a conversation with a Gurung man, Arjun, who grew up in Sebet, a once-large Gurung village situated on the hillside above Hile. Beginning at a young age, Arjun has spent a considerable amount time outside of his community, first as a



student in India, as a guide in the Everest region, and then working in the tourism sector in Kathmandu. After many years living in the capital, he returned to Sebet 15 years ago to live with his parents. When asked about why many young men were leaving the hills, he told me:

Some people, the younger generation, young people, they don't have any source [of income]...if you are young people, like from my hometown, you don't have any work to do. Only if you work at your home, at your farm. That is not enough for you...You don't have enough money. So you don't have any options, so you have to go to the Middle East. The easy way to answer money. Also when you go to the Middle East, it is dependent on your luck. If you get a good company then you get a good salary. If the company is not good then sometimes you cannot bring your money also, which you spend to go there. We don't have any work from our government, so we have to go...For USA, you need to spend at least US \$30,000, and for Europe it is also the same. Middle East is the easy way, because it is much less expensive and there is still opportunity there (Personal communication, 2018).

I later asked him, *I'm curious because I was just up and Ghorepani, and it is such a huge tourist place—so with all these lodges popping up, are there local people that are going to work in those lodges...?* He quickly stopped me, “No, no, no...only 5-10% of people work in lodges. The lodges make very very good money...Very, very good business, only for those who run the hotel, not for the *locals*, right? The tourism doesn't make any difference for us.” (Personal communication, 2018). Though I think he was referring particularly to Ghorepani in this case, I found it quite interesting that he made such a seemingly purposive distinction between the local and non-local. From my understanding, most lodge owners are or perhaps, *were*, locals at one point, so he may have not been referring to birthplace but perhaps making a distinction between those who have enough wealth to start their own businesses, and the low-class people, the true “locals,” who don't. I never followed up with Arjun on this comment, as I wouldn't recognize it until my later transcriptions.

Perhaps the most valuable of my more formalized interviews that I conducted throughout my study was on the last day that I spent in Ghandruk. That morning, I was taken to the southern end

of the village, to a small Pariyar neighborhood, where a number of Dalit families lived. I recalled feeling quite shocked at just how physically marginalized these families were within the context of the main village of Ghandruk. While I had been assured by Bidur ji and Sudeep dai that the political situation regarding caste conflict had reached more or less of a harmonious state in Ghandruk, there has been a history of discrimination against lower castes within Ghandruk, and this physical marginalization was only one facet of this (personal communication, 2018). In this particular neighborhood, I interviewed two brothers, Mongul Pariyar, 46 years-old, and Sandib Pariyar, 22 years-old, the sons of a low-class, small land-holding family of agriculturalists. They have a middle brother who is currently working as a foreman of a company in Qatar, and an older brother who went to Saudi Arabia, then Qatar. At the age of 32, Mongul went abroad for the first time, and he had spent a total of 12 years working in the Gulf States. First, to Saudi Arabia for 2 years, then to Qatar for 5 years, and then to Dubai for 5 years. He was motivated to work abroad because his family was “struggling,” he initially had no piece of land or house to inherit, and he had “no choice.” Though he faced lots of problems, both in Dubai and Qatar, and couldn’t return home until the end of his contracts, his work abroad significantly improved his economic situation, allowing for him to buy his own land and home neighboring his parents’ home, pay for the study of his daughter and son, and pay off the initial loan required to go abroad in the first place. After spending 12 years of his life away from home, he has no intention of returning abroad for work. His younger brother, Sandib, went to Qatar two years ago, spent two years working for a groundwater drilling company, first as a laborer and then an operator. He was only 20 years-old, my age, when he first left his hometown for work. While Sandib currently works as a wage-laborer, building new lodges and houses in Ghandruk, and the pay is not sufficient to support himself fully, he says it’s fine. Right now, he is happy. It is something to

experience, and he is working in his own hometown, living with his family. He has no intention to go back abroad, but “later, if there is no choice, then I will have to go.”

When I asked the two brothers if they had experienced much family pressure to work abroad, or if it had been primarily a self-driven decision to leave, they responded that they had. It was some combination of both. As my interpreter told me later, “You have to think about it...practically, they didn’t have any pressure, but they had to think about their family...that’s why they went abroad. Otherwise, it’s better to live in your own country and work here” (personal communication, 2018). There seemed to be a strong and ineludible sense of obligation felt by the sons of lower-class families to provide for themselves and their families—the most sensible and accessible means available to them being departure from home, occasional lack of choice, and sometimes immense challenges on foreign shores. When I asked them about the opportunities in Ghandruk and neighboring villages, compared to opportunities available abroad in regard to their desirability, Sandib told me, “Opportunities here are good, there are opportunities, but there were none for us...opportunity is controlled by the rich” (personal communication, 2018). His family had no means of access to the more worthwhile forms of economic pursuit in Ghandruk, namely the lodging industry, which both produces and necessitates large amounts of wealth. Towards the end of my conversation with the brothers, I asked them, *How do you feel like in the time that you have been away things have changed in Ghandruk? Obviously there are a ton of tourists, bidesh (foreigners), more and more people coming here each year. Do you feel like that has brought more opportunities at all, or are those still lacking for people like yourselves? Have there been recent changes; do you feeling like things are changing?* Their response was that so far, there have been “no opportunities yet...things are still hard for us” (personal communication, 2018). I had just started packing up

my notes and was preparing to say my goodbyes when Mongul told me that that interaction with me had been the first conversation they had ever had of that nature. At first, I was a bit thrown back, wondering if I had perhaps crossed some lines. When I asked if any of my questions had been uncomfortable for them, they said that they were not uncomfortable, but “very happy, by giving this kind of conversation... Nepali person also not coming here for this kind of conversation, but you came, and we are happy” (personal communication, 2018). Leaving their house that day, I felt particularly excited about my research—knowing that it had been considered meaningful to these people, whose lived experiences, at least in the case of Ghandruk, have remained more or less unacknowledged.

#### **iv. Natures of Mobilities: Destination and Choice**

Through all the interviews and conversations with various participants and actors over the course of my study, a general theme around the nature of mobility exercised and experienced by people of different socioeconomic backgrounds became more and more explicit. Migrant destination and motivation varied according to ethnic group and social background. As the previous sections have detailed, many migrants from lower socioeconomic classes, particularly those of traditionally agricultural, small land-holding families (including both lower class Gurung individuals, as well as Dalits) have little choice in their migration decisions. Through a typical labor recruitment process, a prospective migrant initially does not have a say in the destination or nature of their work, oftentimes agreeing to various kinds of unskilled or semi-skilled work in less “desirable,” but less costly destination countries. The choice of destination is a largely a question of assets of all the members of a household, which in the case of poorer families, is not substantial. From what I gathered in discussions with return migrants, those considering leaving Nepal for foreign opportunities generally have a list or grade of destinations,

the first of which being the most prestigious, or those with the possibilities for highest income and best educational opportunities. While top priorities among young men, in many hill regions of Nepal, used to revolve around military aspirations, today new and more feasible options for foreign and profitable work have emerged, changing the priorities of migrants. The destinations, from what I found, followed as such: (a) UK, Japan, Hong Kong, America, and other mainland European countries; (b) British, Chinese, Singapore, or Indian armies; (c) Malaysia, the Gulf states; and (d) India. These findings were in relative accordance with Thieme and Wyss's (2005) study on migration patterns and the role of remittances in Sainik Basti, Nepal, and the preference list which they proposed for prospective migrants from this region. As asserted by Thieme and Wyss (2005), general criteria for the choice of the destination are always a mixture of dreams and goals of an individual (what might be referred to as the "imaginary" spaces involved in processes of physical and socioeconomic mobility), but to greater effect, the financial situation and capacities of the sending families. Investment costs are incredibly high, more than often unattainable, for more "prestigious" destinations. Only the wealthiest and most socially prominent of families can afford such options, whereas many families, including those of five return migrants that I conversed with, do not have a sufficient income to independently actualize mobilities to even less favorable destinations such as the Middle East or Malaysia. In the cases of all these families, they took loans and pooled money with family members or neighbors to pay for the initial costs of migration, which include the provision of a worker's visa, payment to the recruitment office and brokerage agencies, other documents, etc.. This was certainly the case for Dalits, who have historically been the most politically and economically marginalized groups in nearly all multi-ethnic Hindu communities in Nepal. The *Damai* families in Ghandruk, for instance, have adopted labor migration to the Middle East as a primary livelihood strategy, which

has, in spite of initial costs, facilitated new forms of socioeconomic mobility within their communities in small and subtle ways. This was also true for Naya Gau, another village above Hile, which was composed almost solely of *Kami* (blacksmith), *Damai* (tailor) and *Sarki* (cobbler) occupational (previously “untouchable”) castes. According to my informant, Arjun’s estimations, 90% of young men from Naya Gau have left for work in the Gulf countries, which for them and their families—whose household economies rely largely agricultural and local wage work—is oftentimes a large financial enterprise.

The forms and varieties of mobility expressed by those of lower socioeconomic class varied significantly from those expressed by advantaged, socioeconomically mobile individuals in all of the sites of study. As mentioned prior, the greatest concentrations of wealth production in trekking communities today fall into the hands of lodge owning families, who are most commonly *lahure*, descending from ex-Gurkhas or histories of service in the Indian army. Within Ghandruk, these families are the most socially and politically prominent, and their reproduction of wealth through previous advantages opens many imagined mobilities. For one, an important indicator of wealth that stood out in my discussions with villagers, was whether the household had a family member abroad in a Western country such as the USA or in Europe. Regardless of whether they were working or going to college in the western countries, there is prestige and an increased perception of wealth in having a family member abroad in these destinations. Many of these households were already considered wealthy by other standards of land, livestock, and income from tourism and were not in immediate need of remittance money. Also, it is common for many prominent families to send their children to school in Pokhara, where they can access a quality education. Many of the hotel owners, both in Ghandruk and Ghorepani, that I talked to had either studied at English boarding schools in the valley, or their

children had. Family wealth also frequently funds overseas migrations to many of the “priority” destinations listed prior, where they are able to find well-paying work and educational opportunities, and live for prolonged periods of time, which further contribute to the mobility of the family unit. In this way, wealth was commonly described to “snowball” for the many prominent families that are able to afford these kinds of economically-intensive ventures to begin with. For instance, one informant, Surai Magar, 34, whose father was a distinguished commander in the Indian Army, has been running a small restaurant business with his wife in Ghandruk for the past 8 years. He and his three brothers attended a competitive boarding school in Pokhara up until 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and following school, they all led quite international lives: Surai dai traveled to Singapore for hotel management On Job Training (OJT) for six months, his older brother traveled to the UK for work, but returned later to run a successful family business with their other brother, Hotel Annapurna. Surai dai’s other brother moved to Hong Kong, and has lived there for more than 10 years now (personal communication, 2018). I spoke with another man, Prem Gurung, 53, on my second morning in Ghandruk. Prem was visiting his older sister in their family home at the time that I stopped by. A friendly and exuberant man, Prem ji eagerly shared details about his life. As the son of a Commander in the Indian Army, Prem ji and his siblings have all lived lives of privilege—owning lots of land, buffaloes and cattle when they were younger. Prem ji first moved to Kathmandu from Ghandruk 18 years ago, after violence had spread to Ghandruk during the thick of the Maoist Revolution and two of his friends and “near brothers” were killed by Maoist insurgents. Today, Prem ji works for a company that imports and exports electric business with Hong Kong, and he is currently in charge of a construction company in Kathmandu as well. In addition to his sister who has lived in Ghandruk for most of her life, Prem ji has two younger brothers, one of whom lives in Japan, and another who moved

to Hong Kong after retiring from the UK Gorkha army. He also has two sisters, one older and one younger, who live in Belgium and Hong Kong, respectively. In two years, Prem ji plans to move back to Ghandruk to start up his own homestay—what will be both a “business and a passion” for him (personal communication, 2018).

While I was in Ghorepani the next few days, I spoke on a few occasions with Hemanta Poon, 29, manager of Snow View Lodge. His mother and father started the family business fewer than 10 years ago, adding to the some-22 lodges that now overlay upper Ghorepani (personal communication, 2018). Heman dai went to private school in Pokhara, leaving Ghorepani after grade 4 (when the local primary school in Ghorepani discontinues). He attended the school in Pokhara from 5<sup>th</sup> grade to 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and then later returned to live in Ghorepani to help with the start of the business. His father, an ex-Gurkha, moved to Ghorepani with his wife before Heman dai and his younger brother were born. Heman dai’s brother currently lives and works in London as a chef, and the family owns a large amount of property and another residence in Pokhara, which they occasionally live at in the trekking off-season. According to Heman dai, the majority of the lodge owners in Ghorepani have second homes, with those who had served in the British Gurkhas frequently owning homes in Pokhara, and other lodge owners owning homes in their home village of Khibang. As such, many of the lodge owners spent much of the year away from their lodge, returning to these locations in the trekking off-seasons with some returning for all of the spring or autumn (i.e. the peak trekking seasons). In one of our conversations, Heman dai told me that “Ghorepani *is* a trekking village,” estimating that there are only 5 or 6 houses in the community that are principally involved in agriculture or farm work. Otherwise, “all are involved in the operation and management of hotels” (personal communication, 2018). I was later told that all fruits and vegetables readily available in all the lodges of Ghorepani are sourced



from villages in the valley, where the climate and terrain are more suitable for agriculture. Because of this, outmigration for unskilled labor—which is an increasingly common phenomenon in many other villages, particularly ones with longer histories of settlement, and an economy principally engaged with agriculture—is not much of a trend. In fact, I was later told that of the lodge owners in Ghorepani, none were born or raised in the village, but they had migrated to Ghorepani in order to start their businesses. This parallels to what a guide had told me on my first morning in Ghorepani. “What are you doing your research on?” he asked me in Nepali, to which I replied *basai saraikobaaremaa* (“about migration”). He threw his head back and laughed, turning away. “There is no migration here, brother... Only *dhani manche* (wealthy people)” (personal communication, 2018).

Another lodge owner that I spoke to, Om Poon, ~60, owns and manages the Dhaulagiri Lodge, which is located just across from Snow View. As mentioned before, he has been in the area for over 35 years now, managing the camping business and teashop that preceded his lodge, and now the some 40-bedroom Dhaulagiri. Om dai has three sons, all of whom attended school in Pokhara in their younger years. His two oldest sons now live and work in Portugal, and his youngest son still lives in Ghorepani, helping with the management of the family business.

Perhaps the starkest example of these findings was discovered in Hile, when I visited the Gurung village of Sebet my first morning there. A once-large village of 61 households, Sebet is now largely unpeopled, with many houses visibly locked up and left, with weeds growing between cracks in the stone flooring and the roofs. I had the opportunity to speak with Bishnu Kumari Gurung, one of the remaining townspeople of Sebet. According to Bishnu didi, many families began to leave Sebet in mass beginning just 20 years ago. When I asked where they had gone, she told me “all are in Pokhara” (personal communication, 2018). Later, in a conversation

with Arjun dai, I heard the same: “All are in Pokhara...some in the UK, some in Hong Kong” (personal communication, 2018). In what is perhaps the most common form of rural–urban migration in this particular region, hill families move from their villages to Pokhara, where they experience a more diverse and gainful range of work opportunities and greater access to social services, like education and healthcare. However, this type of mobility is an economically-expensive venture, and it has become quite common in Gurung and Magar and other *lahure* communities, where many families relying on Gorkha legacies of wealth are socioeconomically mobile and can make such an investment. Originally, Bishnuji estimated that no more than 60% of the homes in Sebet were empty, and yet she later mentioned that of 61 households, only 18 are currently lived in—which actually means that nearly 71% of the community is absent—an astonishing figure which is not all that uncommon in this particular area. As Jokar dai says, “this is not just a problem for Sebet; every village has this same problem” (personal communication, 2018). In spite of this widespread movement from the village, Bishnuji still lives in Sebet with her family—her husband and daughter—who attends high school in Tikeddhunga. Bishnuji and her husband are both agriculturalists. Arjun dai and his mother still live in Sebet, too. His father, who served in the Indian Army, died three years ago, and now his mother still receives monthly pension payments of USD \$400, which is a lot of money for Nepalis living in rural areas. Arjun dai has three sisters, all of whom have lived in Pokhara for the last 30-40 years. All of their husbands are ex-army, working in Hong Kong, and making good money. When I asked Arjun dai how costly it was for families to send their children to private schools in Pokhara, he responded “School in Pokhara is very expensive...from my village, each family from this village, in each house, at least one person is abroad, so they can afford it” (personal communication, 2018).

## 5. Discussion

The findings of this research, among many other things, have tried to reveal just how complex and multifaceted issues of power are, particularly within the scope of rural communities facing—and increasingly becoming complicit in—the rapid changes accompanying our expanding and interconnected world. By using political ecology as a theoretical framework to challenge the common apolitical natures that inform public ideas and understandings around processes of opportunity production, “scarcity,” and access at the level of the community, this study attempts to situate the interactions of these processes within their local political and historical contexts. With the advent of tourism, particularly trekking tourism in Nepal, rural hill villages like Ghandruk, Ghorepani and Hile have experienced inevitable developmental and social changes, and have increasingly become places of opportunity, as well as movement. Yet, in regards to the power dynamics that have been historically present in these three places, very little has actually changed. By looking at power furthermore through what I’ve referred to as a “mobilities lens” — looking at how power and lack of power are expressed through mobility, immobility, and their various shapes and forms across social scales—a lot can be understood about local relations and political structures. Through my interviews with villagers from various social and political standings within the community—namely, return labor migrants, lodge owners, businesspeople and other stakeholders—and from my own observations in the three study sites, I have gained important insights on the implications of these political dynamics for the mobilities of certain groups of people—particularly those who have, in recent years, been more or less ousted from the community by lack of opportunity in order to pursue alternative livelihoods abroad.

**i. “Elite Capture Syndrome” and Reframing Ideas of Community**

The first matter which deserves attention is the observed “elite capture syndrome” in all three communities of study, whereby those originally in places of power and elite status have been able to capture and monopolize the benefits of tourism. I have identified these elites in almost all cases to be those descending from *lahure* legacies, whose families have gained considerable social and material capital from histories of military service. I argue that in many ways, tourism in the form seen in the ACA and many other parts of the world, particularly the developing world—perhaps what some might identify as “pro-rich” tourism—has solidified and reproduced preexisting hierarchies at the local level. Whereas more prominent Gurung and Magar families have been able to take advantage of and expand new tourism-related opportunities through developments in the lodging industry (namely, the construction and expansion of hotel facilities), those of lower socioeconomic class (agriculturalist families and occupational castes) have been largely excluded from such modes of opportunity production. These inequalities are also inherently linked to the history of the ACA and its conservation aims. When the Annapurna region was first designated as a federally protected area in the 80s, this had a range of local impacts which did not necessarily amount to a net-positive—though common conservation discourse has said otherwise (Dahal 2011; Dahal, et al., 2013; Pandey 1995). At that time, non-lodge-owning families, such as farmers and wage workers, faced considerable economic hardship because their land was increasingly encroached upon by the construction of tourist-related establishments and new policies around public land-use, not to mention that they have not been the primary beneficiaries of the wealth created by tourism. The livelihoods of socioeconomically disadvantaged peoples, for the most part, have been maintained through farming, wage labor, and more recently, labor migration. Because of the significant economic

gap that it has produced at the local level, the tourism industry has left local traditional economic pursuits in these areas unpopular, inciting a new culture of mobility (personal communication, 2018). Indeed, the present generation has been socialized to be familiar with international migration as an economic option, thereby affecting decision-making and shifting perceptions of wealth away from agriculture and livestock rearing. This goes for younger people of all social and economic backgrounds, however, as supported by the findings here, there are significant differences in the patterns and configurations of mobility observed by class distinctions. Caste and wealth were large determinants for the nature of mobile pathways, such as, for instance, destination country, type of work (skilled vs. unskilled), general earnings, duration of stay, frequency of migrations, and the level of choice and “capacity” involved.

The findings of this study have furthermore supported the long-held argument in political ecology that human *communities* are not homogenous, static entities. Rather, they are variegated and dynamic. Within a single community, there are inherent social and economic differences which more than often give some individuals more power than others. This creates a political dynamic, which expresses itself in the physical and the material (for example, lodges, signs, infrastructure, and wealth in the form of currency), and perhaps less visibly, in the social and cultural, which inevitably effect the inequitable distribution of socioeconomic benefits across these power differences (Spiteri and Nepal, 2008).

## **ii. Changing Mobilities**

However, migration, like any other economic pursuit derived from deprivation, is an adaptive measure, and one that has generally had positive impacts in regard to its facilitation of different forms of mobility for lower class people from rural villages in Nepal. Nowadays, even people who were traditionally exploited and discriminated against, such as those in the case of

Ghandruk and Nayaa Gaau, can access alternative, more profitable income opportunities outside the village and country, though sometimes at considerable initial costs for the family, as shown by the findings here. In the far majority of the cases of my informants, however, these initial costs were paid back, and other doors of possibility were created. For many previously disadvantaged and social immobile groups, such as the families of the Pariyar brothers I spoke to in Ghandruk, opportunities found abroad have the potential to greatly improve the social and economic standing of the family unit within the context of the community, allowing them to rise above this immobile status and relation of dependency through remittances. Thinking about mobilities in the sense that Urry's (2006) framework might understand them, mobilities shape and interact with other mobilities. In the case of those living these particular realities of labor migration, physical mobilities in the form of physical migration are utilized to facilitate differing forms of socioeconomic mobilities. Translate into greater mobility, both socioeconomically within the community, and in the economic capacity and the physical means to pursue further opportunity elsewhere.

### **iii. Spatialities of Tourism and Their Implications for Power**

One of the particular features of tourism within the general scope of the ACA and my study sites which has not been discussed nearly enough in this paper due to its limited scope, is the spatial nature of tourism and its benefits, and the way in which this influences, generates, and expresses power. In the case of all the sites that I visited, tourism was spatially bound, whereby communities that fall along, or have established themselves alongside, the popular trekking routes, are the ones that reap the most benefits. Even in Ghandruk, the difference between the “main” village and its immediate vicinity, the “old” village, and communities falling along the

outskirts of village (that are still within the Ghandruk VDC but do not see regular access to trekkers due to the spatial dynamics of the trail—and now, road— up to Ghandruk), was very visible. This spatiality has implications for power, access and development. In the same study conducted by Dahal (2011), communities that were not part of the main village of Ghandruk were interviewed extensively, and it was found that the far majority of participants from these communities felt that the benefits created by ACAP had not been equally distributed, helping some groups far more than others. In this study, an *Ama Samuha* (Ghandruk mother's group) member from Uri explained that their village is the only one in Ghandruk VDC where not all the households have electricity. She also added, "I hope in the future ACAP can do something for us too. We have problems of road and electricity. Also I hope ACAP can do something to help tourists come in our area" (Interview conducted by Dahal, 2011). Another resident said, "We would be able to get some extra cash by opening up a tea shop or a store if tourists came to our village" (Interview conducted by Dahal, 2011). Since Dahal's (2011) study, it seems that little has changed in this regard.

Furthermore, for all sites of this study, the recent transition to massive guest houses, hotels and lodges has had notable impacts, both socioculturally and politically. The lodge itself is a symbol of power within the community which creates a visible political and social division between those who own lodges and those who do not (and those will be employed by the owners of lodges, thereby creating a relationship of dependency). Anthropologist Francis Khek Gee Lim (2008) states, "The hotel's [lodge's] current role within Himalayan communities exposed to tourism is that of a main structuring agency of socioeconomic relations. The hotel has become a locus of status valuation and power contestation, reflects the new values of the people, and constitutes an important arena of local political processes." The symbolism of the lodges as a

marker of status and wealth in the community emphasizes the disparity of power within the local community.

However, it should be mentioned that the developments observed within these villages are still very young with respect to Nepal's history of rural developmental efforts and the country's developmental trajectory. Circumstances and conditions in these villages are in a state of constant flux, albeit slow and sometimes unseen. Sociopolitical structures that frame community life are continually being challenged by the dynamic processes associated with tourism and new forms of mobilities and access (namely, migration as a strategy). The cooperation of such processes have small but profound impacts for the lives and livelihoods of more disadvantaged peoples, which should not be ignored. Efforts made through pro-poor tourism have led to new development strategies, including ways to expand positive tourism impacts on a community. However, little research has been conducted specifically on the social dynamics of local communities and how historical power structures and relations inherent within place and community inevitably influence the benefits and opportunities produced by tourism in a broader sense.

## **6. Conclusion**

The purpose of this study, apart from attempting to shed light on the changing realities of community and family life in 3 rural Nepali villages during a time of unprecedented opportunity and rapid demographic change, was to demonstrate the complexities continually being bound and created by processes of development and local political relations at the level of the community. By applying a political ecological framework concerned with issues of mobility as



they play into ideas of opportunity and distribution of benefits at the local level, this paper attempts to demonstrate how local realities, particularly those of disadvantaged peoples, are often controlled by larger political and socioeconomic forces. Conversely, I argue that the natures and forms of observed mobilities both locally and with consideration for outmigration, say a lot about existing power relations in the community.

It should be mentioned that this was a very spatially and temporally limited study, which only took course over a period of two weeks, within a limited spatial area of three study sites. Due to the evolving nature of this research, as well as its brevity, this final project by no means represents a comprehensive view of this issue, but rather only a small and incomplete snapshot of the dynamics and processes occurring at large throughout rural Nepali communities that are increasingly becoming integrated into this developing world. Due to the lack of time and resources, there are likely countless valuable perspectives and experiences that could unfortunately not be included and explored here.

The other limitation that should be considered, with particular regard for future research, is that my study sites were unique as far as opportunities and developments within rural Nepali villages go. A long and convoluted history of tourist influence and government-led development and conservation efforts has made Ghandruk, Ghorepani, and other villages situated along popular trekking routes far more developed than other regions within the ACA, let alone more isolated, less impacted Nepali ruralities. The villages which I conducted research in have, by in large, benefitted greatly from the developments that have occurred there, however, this research has attempted to provide an example of how considerations of local politics need to be incorporated into understandings of these opportunities, as they are inevitably influenced by existing power relations. Even within the dynamic entity that is the community, it needs to be

remembered that there are diverse experiences of development, opportunity and access. The study of how different cultural and social groups forge their own lives and histories in the contemporary world involves a look at the political dimensions that bind and shape their realities.

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