

## Malaria, Tarai Ādivāsi and the Landlord State in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Nepal: A Historical-Ethnographic Analysis

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### Abstract

*This paper examines the interplay between malaria, the Tarai ādivāsi and the extractive landlord state in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Nepal by focusing on Dhimal, one indigenous community from the easternmost lowlands. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Nepali state and its rulers treated the Tarai as a state geography of extraction for land, labor, revenue and political control. The malarial environment of the Tarai, which led to the shortage people (labor force), posed a major challenge to the 19<sup>th</sup>-century extractive landlord state and the landowning elites to materialize the colonizing project in the Tarai. The shortage of labor added pressure on the malaria resistant Tarai ādivāsi to reclaim and cultivate land for the state. The paper highlights the need for ethnographically informed social history of malaria in studying the changing relations between the state and the ādivāsi communities in the Tarai*

**Keywords:** Dhimal, Malaria, Landlord state, the Tarai, state geography of extraction

### 1. Introduction

Until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the lowlands of Morang and Jhapa were popularly considered as ‘Kala Pani’, a “deadly” malaria ridden place where hill people would definitely die if they stay for long. The Tarai of Morang was reported to be “extremely swampy with its pestilent climate...the most malarious and unhealthy district” (Oldfield, 1881, p. 61-622). While outsiders feared the malaria and harsh environmental conditions of the Tarai, the aboriginal inhabitants, the Tarai ādivāsi such as Dhimal, Meche, Tharu, Koch and others survived the malaria, transformed these seemingly “deadly places” into their home. They imbued the place with their ethnic histories and identities, and made it a habitable dwelling for all. For the 19<sup>th</sup> century Nepali state, the Tarai was a region to be exploited – for land, labor, revenue and political power – and, hence the malarial environment posed a major challenge for its colonizing project. But for the Tarai ādivāsi, the malarial environment and their ability to survive it provided them relative autonomy in evading the extractive landlord state.

In what ways did malaria – both as an endemic condition and an image – mediated relationships between ādivāsi, outsiders, and the state in the Tarai? The paper attempts to address this question by focusing on Dhimal, one ādivāsi community from Nepal’s easternmost Tarai region of Morang and Jhapa. The primary data for this paper is based on my PhD dissertation research that I undertook between 2007-2009 with the Dhimal community in Morang and Jhapa districts

In this paper, I will discuss how Dhimal understand and analyze their distinctive history of belonging in the Tarai region with reference to the region’s malarial environment in the past. I will foreground Dhimal perspectives and experiences to show how Dhimal cultural capacity and collective agency of thriving in malarial environment shapes their sense of the ādivāsi identity and historical belonging in the Tarai. In doing so, this paper highlights the value and

importance of indigenous historical analysis as central analytics in studying the changing state- ādivāsi relationships vis-à-vis the control of land. Since there is a dearth of scholarly works on social history of malaria in Nepal, this paper also contributes in addressing this knowledge gap.

## 2. Malaria and social imageries

Malaria needs to be approached both as an endemic condition and an image in the case of Nepal's Tarai. In the popular imagination of Tarai history, malaria is the defining image of the region (Guneratne 2002, p. 22). Nepal's hill people still refer to the Tarai as "aul" after "aulo"- the Nepali word for malaria. There is no available record that can help us to understand the nature and intensity of malaria in Nepal prior to the early 20th century. But malaria was equally a major public health issue for the colonial administrators of then British India. The colonial administrative records (circa 19th and 20th centuries) on public health conditions in the British colonies bordering on Nepal's eastern Tarai can shed light on the intensity and occurrence of malaria and its impact in the region during that period.

The Bengal District Gazetteers (1905) describes the Tarai region of Darjeeling areas bordering the Nepal's eastern hills as "a low malarious belt striking the base of the Himalayas" but "the Terai is a tract of reeking moisture and rank vegetation that Nature has marked out as a home of fever" (p. 1). In 1891, it was estimated that 40 per cent of the workers in the labor force in the Dooras (the Tarai) region, especially in the northern-western fringes of Bengal district bordering Darjeeling districts were *Nepali*. These were the regions where malaria was the number one killer (Ray, 2002, p. 89). Citing the Nepali migrants who worked in the tea plantation in the region, the Gazetteers (1905, p. 1) write: "It is indeed common saying among the Nepalese in these parts that any child born to them will not reach the age of two years; and the infant mortality is very great, being over 38 percent, in 1905, for the whole." The prevalence of malaria in the

Tarai regions of India, which border Dhimal ancestral territories (Morang and Jhapa) were "hyper-endemic of malaria" during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, the Bengal District Gazetteers on Darjeeling (1947) report that "...in the Terai malaria is hyper-endemic (90 per cent), and in the hill valleys (specially the Tista valley) the rate is below 20 per cent" (Dash, 1947, p. 7). These reports suggest that the malaria was hyper-endemic in the region's lowlands including Nepal's easternmost Tarai during this period.

According to the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) recent memoir (2001), *Half-a-Century of Development: A History of US Assistance to Nepal: 1951-2001*, malaria, "was Nepal's most serious health problem afflicting roughly 25 percent of the total population" and "endemic malaria threatened the roughly 50 percentage of Nepal's population living below 1,300 meters altitude" (Isaacson et.al, 2001, p. 45). This USAID report suggests that malaria was a serious threat to people's survival in the Tarai until the late 1950s. Hence the popular imagination of the pre-1950 Tarai as *Kala Pani* and *Kala Banjar* (barren land) may have been derived from the region's history as a malarial environment. But I argue that this popular image of the Tarai as the "deadly place" acts against the region, its people and their history. The image reiterates the dominant geographical imagination that depicts the Tarai as merely, until recently, a swampy, malaria-ridden, unhealthy, and wild place without history and civilization. That both Nepal's dominant groups and British colonial scholars often discriminately referred to the Tarai ādivāsi as "primitive" and "wild people" (*jungali people*) bolsters the image of the Tarai as *Kala Pani* (see Guneratne, 1998; Müller-Bücker, 1997; Regmi, RK. 1985).

The travel journal of Major L.A. Waddell (1854-1938), a British surgeon stationed in India who travelled extensively in the Himalayan region, echoes the perception that the malarial "immune" ādivāsi were like "wild beasts." In the his travelogue, *Among the Himalayas* (1899), Waddell describes the landscape of the Tarai as

seen through the window of a small train that he rode from Siluguri to Darjeeling (bordering Nepal's easternmost region):

We're soon rattling gaily across that dreaded belt of fever-laden forest --- the *Terai*, which separates the plains from the foot of the hills.... [W]e streamed through some deserted tea-plantations in clearings in this deadly forest. For this poisonous environment no labourers can be induced to settle. Each fresh batch of imported coolies soon flees panic struck before the "Black-Death" (*Kala-anzar*), "Black-water Fever" and other malarial pestilences which lurk in every brake and lay their avenging hands on every intruder who invades there seeking solitude.... Still it is possible to get acclimatized even to such an unhealthy place as this. *The few wild aborigines, the Mech and Dhimal*, who live in the depths of these forests, and who will undertake no hired service, have acquired almost as *much immunity from the deadly fevers of these forests as the tigers and wild beasts who make this their home* (p. 5-6)" (emphasis added).

Waddell's description of the Tarai's "poisonous environment" helps us to imagine the challenges outsiders faced working in the tea plantations located in the Tarai regions of Darjeeling. Waddell was surprised that aboriginal people like Meche and Dhimal could acclimatize to the malaria-infested forests. Nevertheless he used their adaptive ability to suggest that these aborigines making the malarial forest their home were "wild beasts" akin to tigers. I should point out here that Waddell's emphasis that these "wild aborigines... will undertake no hired service" suggests that the indifference Dhimal and other forest dwellers had toward wage labor (their refusal, in other words, to become wage labor subjects within the colonial economy) may also have made them appear "wild" (in the sense of not domesticable) in the eyes of colonial officers. This image of malaria resistant aborigines as "wild beast" echoes the idea of '*jungali*' or '*jangli*' (in Hindi) widely used in the South Asia to describe people

mostly belonging to the 'tribal' or *ādivāsi* community who subsist by foraging or who live in the fringes of the forest as "primitive" and "uncivilized" people (see Skaria, 1998; Guneratne, 1998)

The Tarai *ādivāsi*, contrary to popular representations of them as "savage dwellers of a primeval forest" (Krauskopff, 2000, p. 35), who are presumed to be "faceless in history" (Panjiar, 1993, p. 20-21), were actively involved in the emergent political transformations in the Indo-Gangetic and the Himalayan regions. Long before the rise of the present day nation-state of Nepal, the hill kings as well as the British colonial regime encouraged and relied primarily on Tarai *ādivāsi* like the Tharus to reclaim the Tarai forests for cultivation and settlement (Krauskopff and Meyer, 2000). Historical documents evidence the important role of the Tharu in transforming "mosquito-infested malarial jungles of the Tarai into the breadbasket of Nepal" (Krauskopff, 2000, p. 25-49). Their bodily and cultural capacity to survive the malaria had actually enabled the Tarai *ādivāsi* like the Tharu with collective political agency to negotiate with other dominant political orders. The non-farming Tarai *ādivāsi* such as Dhimal living in the fringes of forest could evade the oppressive landlord state by subtly refusing to become tax paying tenant subjects (cf. Scott, 2009).

### 3. Malarial Environment and Forest of Belonging

Dhimal, who speak a Tibeto-Burman language they call *Dhimali*, are one of the aboriginal inhabitants of the easternmost Tarai of Morang and Jhapa. Now predominately a subsistence farming community of twenty-five thousand or more people, they live in ninety-seven Dhimal villages (Dhimal S. et al. 2010) scattered in twenty Village Development Committee (VDCs) in the districts of Sunsari, Morang and Jhapa where they comprise less than ten percent of the total VDC population. Before 1950s, the Dhimals' ancestral territory was thinly populated and thickly covered with dense, malarial forests. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Nepali state and its rulers had long

made efforts to colonize the Tarai for land reclamation but the endemic prevalence of malaria and the perceived belief that the Tarai's *hāvāpani* (Nep. literally air and water) was lethal for hill peoples had discouraged settlement. How do the present day Dhimal interpret and understand the Tarai's malarial past?

All senior Dhimal in their sixties and seventies whom I interviewed repeatedly told me, "In the past, these whole areas were covered with jungle. Our ancestors used to wrestle with wild animals; they survived the diseases of *aulo* (Nep. malaria) and *haija* (Nep. cholera)." In their retellings of the past, they invariably mentioned the threats of *wild animals*, *malaria* and *cholera* to emphasize the everyday challenges their ancestors encountered when they transformed the dense forested Tarai into lived geographies. These narratives about their ancestral past also highlight the historical agency of Dhimal in transforming the Tarai into a habitable place for all. Babai, a sixty-two year old Dhimal from Damak area, and one of the prominent Dhimal leaders told me in 2009:

First, earlier Dhimal were not much of a farming people. They lived a *jungali jivan* (jungali life). They could not rely on crops that they used to grow. Wild animals would eat most of it; whatever would have been left after its damage by the animals would not be sufficient. The yield was never high. Unlike today, farming could not sustain our lives. My grandfather used to tell us that our ancestors used to carry dried seeds of *jayā* in a container made out of the dried squash. They used to plant these seeds in some areas in the forests, and after some months, they would collect them. In Dhimali, it used to be called *Jayā Kherakā*; *jayā* means *Kaguni* (Nep. a species of wild millet), *kherakā* means 'to plant by clearing the bushes'. Wild animals don't like *jayā*; they don't eat the crop. So people could freely plant these crops without much effort. Back then, fishing, hunting, and wild fruits must have been our major sources of food (Interview transcript; January 9, 2009).

As becomes evident in this interview excerpt, Babai emphasized that Dhimal ancestors relied less on farming (i.e. on land) as their primary means of livelihood. The threat of wild animals figures prominently in Dhimal narratives (as well as in their village ritual offerings) about the challenges their parents and grandparents faced while living in the fringes of the Tarai forests. More than malaria, senior Dhimal such as Babai recalled that it was the outbreaks of *haijā* or cholera that affected people most severely in the past, often wiping out entire villages when it struck.<sup>1</sup> In the event of the spread of cholera and the resulting deaths of the people, I am told, Dhimal would abandon their villages and move to a new place in order to avoid contamination. They explained to me that since people were forced to move from one place to another due to the outbreaks of *haija* and threats of wild animals, their ancestors continued to live a semi-permanent life until the recent past.

Dhimal believe that the power of their deities and *Dhami* (the village priest) protected their ancestors in such a harsh environment. I should emphasize here that Dhimal religious worldviews and ritual practices are also shaped by their historical experience of the challenges of living in the Tarai. A fundamental aspect of Dhimal ritual is the recognition of all the agents and material objects that contribute to their sustenance and well-being throughout the year. Forests, rivers, soils, wild animals, and other beings in "nature" are reckoned and honored during their rituals. Dhimal explain that their ancestors *began these ritual practices in order to survive malaria, wild animals, and other possible threats when they were living in the malarial environment*. Similarly, Dhimal also claim that their daily intake of *Chiraito*, an herbal plant that they mix in all of their food, their cultural habits such as drinking beer (*Dh. gora*) brewed from herbs like *haroo* and *baroo* and their special consumption of "*gohoro ko masu*" (meat of a species of Yellow Monitor lizard) helped them to

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<sup>1</sup> Some available sources show endemic cholera in Kathmandu and elsewhere including Morang district (Gimlette, 1885; Abou-Gareeb, 1961).

develop bodily resistance against malaria inside their bodies. Regarding the curative and preventive property of the Goroho's meat, one Dhimal told me: "Gohoro eat snake, scorpion, deadly wild ants, and other poisonous insects. It can digest all kinds of poison. So its meat will help us kill the bugs of malaria in our body." So Dhimal credit the power of their ritual mediated by *Dhami* and their traditional food habits for developing their bodily resistance against malaria.

Dhimal's recollections as well as the earliest scholarly account of them by Brian Hodgson (1847) tell us that their ancestors lived more of a semi-"nomadic" life following an ecological niche that availed them plentiful resources: fish, wild animal and plants to survive without much competition with other human beings.<sup>2</sup> Since resources were plentiful, Dhimal ancestors lived in semi-permanent settlements, moving from place to place within a closed ecological niche. Farming along and inside the forested areas was undesirable and less attractive; more than the people, the other cohabitants of the forests, the wild animals, would consume all their crops. Thus Dhimal ancestors subsisted by foraging, hunting, fishing, periodic farming, and engaging in exchange relationships with the neighboring hill groups as well as people across Indian border. At that time, the Dhimal sense of territorial belonging was not strongly based on cultivation of crops and land, but more on the components of their ecological niche -- earth/soil, forests, rivers, animals, sacred places, and others (Hodgson, 1847).

Hence, Dhimal relationship with and reliance on the land was radically different from the ways in which the 19<sup>th</sup> century Nepali state and its rulers related to land as a state property *rentable* to the subjects with certain obligations (see Regmi, 1971). In the past, when they were living in the malarial environment, Dhimal ancestors did not think of land as something that could be or should be owned. In

the first scholarly account of Dhimal (in India), published in 1847 by Brian Hodgson (1880 [1847]), they are described as "erratic cultivators of the wild (p. 117)." Hodgson further notes that Dhimal are "migratory cultivators of a soil in which *they claim no proprietary or possessory ownership*, but which they are allowed to till upon the easy terms of quit-rent and labor tax, because no others will or can enter the malaria guarded unit (p. 119, emphasis added)." Hodgson mentions that at that time Dhimal possessed no word for "plough," and "agriculture" was described by the term "felling" or "clearing the forest" (p. 103). Hodgson's discussions indicate that Dhimal, during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, had no conception of land as a proprietary possession.

#### 4. Differential Understandings of Land

Dhimal use two different terms, *bhonai* and *meeling*, to refer to land. Though these words can be used interchangeably in everyday usage, *meeling* is more strictly used to refer to land in the sense of its proprietorial possession and ownership, and *bhonai* is used in a broader sense that encompasses the notion of soil or earth. Dhimal use the Nepali word for land "*jagga*" to designate a meaning equivalent to *meeling*. The word "*jagga*" is used specifically to denote personal property and ownership of a piece of land. On the other hand, the Dhimal notion of *bhonai* hews closely to the Nepali/Sanskrit concept of *bhumi* (earth/soil) and the indigenous articulation of land as inalienable wealth (see, for example, Castree, 2004; Caplan, 1970). As examples of the ritual use of *bhonai* as a symbol of purity, the protective power of the altar made of *bhonai* used for the most powerful household deity (Dhimali: *Sa Di Berang*, a female deity), and the offering of *bhonai* to the deceased during the funeral ritual suggest that *bhonai* invokes an elemental aspect of life for Dhimal. "*Māto le baneko jivan tyai māto mai jāous* (life made of soil should go back to the very soil). That's why we offer soil to the dead ones before they are taken to the forest for burial," many Dhimal explained

<sup>2</sup> The word "nomadic" is often used derogatively against indigenous peoples (see Ramos, 1998: 33-40), hence I use it with scare quotes to signify its potential prejudice against indigenous peoples.

to me regarding their practice of *bhonai pilikā* (*Dhi: giving soil*) during their funeral ritual. I suggest that *bhonai* helps to mediate Dhimal's relationship with their deities and spiritual forces.

The concept of *bhonai* as an embedded relationship among humans, deities, and soil suggests that Dhimal in the past did not consider land as a commodity or a property to be owned by an individual. Therefore when Dhimal characterize their ancestral past in terms of malarial environment in the Tarai, they also emphasize that they did not rely on cultivation for subsistence, and as such their relationship to the land was mediated through their notion of '*bhonai*' rather than '*meeling*.' I should underline here that Dhimal differential notion of land and their non-reliance on cultivation of land for subsistence conflicted with the extractive moral economy of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Nepali landlord state and its rulers. In order to locate my focus on the differential understandings of land and their associated moral economies, a brief discussion of the nature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century landlord state becomes necessary here.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century Nepali state and its rulers considered all territories under its sovereignty to be the property of the Hindu king over which he could exercise the proprietary authority to "assign, bestow, license or auction duties and rights" (Burghart, 1984, p. 104). The king was the *malik* (master, lord) or the sovereign *Bhupati* (husband of land/owner of the land) who occupied the apex of the socio-political hierarchy. It was the crown, the epitome of the state power, who could *rent away* the lands (called *raikar*) to its subjects in their capacity as tenants or 'give' it to individuals and institutions (such as the temple) in the form of various land grants (*birta*, *jagir*, *guthi*). The state, in effect, became the sovereign landlord. Under state landlordism, the actual cultivators, the peasants who toiled on the land were at best considered the landlord state's subjects in the capacity of tenants without any ownership rights. They were required to provide free labor service and to pay taxes and rent, generally equivalent to half of what they produced, to the state or to other individual landlords who had been granted lands with the right to appropriate

rents from the peasants using them (see Regmi, 1971, 1978). The state's rights to claim rent, levies, tax and free labor services from its subjects were derived from the fact they were perceived as "receivers" of the land from the king. Thus, it was the land and its rentable property that established the relationship between the king (the state) and his subjects.

Thus the 19<sup>th</sup> century tenurial system was "a control hierarchy in which the diverse subjects of his kingdom were brought together by virtue of their tenurial relations to the king" (Burghart, 1984, p. 112, emphasis added) such that "submission of such payments through tiers of the tributary, civil, and military administrations indicated one's inferiority to the recipient of such payments, and thereby defined the hierarchical structure of the tenurial system" (p. 104). In other words, to become a tenant subject in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Nepal was to accept one's inferior position within this control hierarchy. This contradicted the moral economy practiced by Dhimal ancestors based on egalitarian ethics of reciprocity between and mutual recognition among all entities supporting one another's subsistence. But the focus of the landlord state and its landowning elites was to transform Dhimal ancestral territories into *meeling*. For them, the Tarai was a state geography of extraction for land, labor, revenue and political control – a colony (see Regmi, 1971). This state-led land colonization efforts in the Tarai for economic appropriation and political control progressively challenged the continuity of Dhimal non-farming ways of life during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The shortage of labor, an insufficient number of people to reclaim land and expand agriculture by clearing the forest, possessed a major challenge for the Nepali state and its rulers in colonizing the Tarai land. While fear of malaria had discouraged outsiders from settling in the lowlands, many of the local inhabitants had fled to adjoining Indian territory to avoid the oppressive regime imposed when Morang was conquered by the Gorkhali state in 1774 (Regmi, 1979, p. 24). In 1849, Brian Hodgson wrote that the Dhimal people whom he had met at the border between the Nepal and Indian Tarai

regions along the Mechi river informed him that they had come there from Morang sixty years earlier “in order to escape the Gorkhali oppression” (Hodgson, 1849, p. 131). Thus the Gorkhali annexation of the far eastern region, and the territorial disputes and wars with Sikkim, Tibet, and Bhutan had greatly weakened the political and territorial autonomy of indigenous communities such as the Kiranti (Rai, Limbus, Sunuwar) in the hills (Caplan, 1970; English, 1983; Pradhan, 1991) as well as in the plains (Gaige, 1975; Guneratne, 2002; Sugden, 2009). These political conflicts and the oppressive tax regime also compelled many local people from Morang to migrate to neighboring regions of India.

As early as 1799-1800, the Nepali state attempted to promote settlement programs in Morang whereby the settlers could receive “as much land as one could reclaim” (Ojha, 1983, p. 25). ‘Waste land’ or unclaimed lands could be freely allocated to any individual from Nepal or India willing to settle and reclaim these lands for farming, and tax remissions were made for an initial period that ranged from four to ten years (Regmi, 1971, p. 144). Despite such seemingly liberal state efforts, the resettlement programs failed to attract the desired numbers from outside to the Tarai of Morang. The fear of malaria, the exploitative and oppressive land tenure system, imposition of high land tax, extraction of extralegal rents, levies and forced labor service, and opportunities for wage labor outside Nepal<sup>3</sup>,

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<sup>3</sup> Malaria was the number one killer in the northern-western fringes of Bengal district bordering Darjeeling districts but still 40 per cent of the workers in the labor force in the region were Nepali, mostly from the hills in 191 (Ray, 2002, p. 89). This shows that the malarial environment of Nepal’s Tarai was not the sole reason discouraging hill people from settling in Nepal’s own Tarai. The exploitative and oppressive tax regimes in Nepal on the one hand, and the prospects of cash-based wage labor in the colonial plantations located in the bordering regions of India, on the other hand -- seemed to have motivated hill migrants to choose the malarial Tarai of India over Nepal’s Tarai

particularly in the neighboring districts of India, had discouraged people from reclaiming land in the Morang region (see Ojha, 1983; Regmi, 1971). Hence, labor, not land, had become the most important limiting factor in the effort by the state and its landowning elites to extract economic surplus from the Tarai. Thus, Dhimal and other Tarai *ādivāsi* were increasingly coming under pressure to reclaim land and pay tax, rents, and levies to the state and other landed classes who claimed ownership of Tarai lands.

James Scott argues that some tribal populations in the Southeast Asian regions deliberately avoided settled agriculture in order to evade the repressive and extractive states, therefore for a more autonomous existence. This was a political choice (Scott, 2009, p. 178-219). All the senior Dhimal emphasized that their ancestors were less motivated in reclaiming land and thereby become tenant peasants (*ryot*). Their indifferent to the state sanctioned opportunity of “grabbing as much as one could reclaim” did not simply emanate out of their differential understanding of land. Dhimal, like any other social actor, are conscious historical actors, capable acting on the forces and circumstances affecting their lives. In the past, cultivation of land in the Tarai was difficult – the yields were unpredictable and not very high, and tenant families suffered from the burden of tax and rents. Shortage of labor would result from epidemics such as cholera, small pox, malaria, and other calamities. Prices of crops were low and access to market was difficult, and there was no guarantee of tenurial security. Most importantly, the state officials and landowning elites were relentlessly oppressive. Given such conditions, the Dhimal politics of indifference to reclaiming land was a political choice (Scott, 2009), a subversive strategy of avoiding the oppressive landlord state, although they could not evade the state for long.

I argue that the moral economy imposed by the landlord state worked against the ethos of relatively egalitarian, non-farming Tarai *ādivāsi* like Dhimal. From the perspectives of the *Bhupati* king, the tenant Dhimal were seen to be accepting the tenurial sovereignty of the king (the state), and agreeing to become morally and legally

accountable to pay the required taxes, rents, and levies and to provide free labor services to the 'malik' of the land. When Dhimal reclaimed land for the state and became its tenants, they were required to produce not only for themselves but also for the state and other "parasitic groups" (Regmi, 1978: x) who had rights to extract rent and levies because of these groups' tenurial ownership of the land on which Dhimal labored so diligently. This was a contradictory political economic relation imposed upon Dhimal whereby they, by virtue of reclaiming the land that they had always used, also became a subordinated peasant class subjected to payment of tax and labor services to those who claimed ownership of their ancestral territories. It restricted the relative autonomy that they had enjoyed when they were pursuing a non-farm based customary ways of subsistence life, enforced a new moral economy based on the ideologies of state landlordism and caste hierarchy, and thereby restructured village-level social relationships into an unequal and exploitative feudal social order. Hence, it is important that we take into account the characteristic feature of 19th century agrarian relations, the subordinated (pauperized) position of the peasant in the hierarchical structure of the extractive political economy to understanding why the ancestors of the present-day Dhimal preferred as much as possible to avoid coming into a tenurial relationship with the state and the landowning elites in the past (prior to the early 20th century).

### 5. Dhimal Majhi and the Landlord State

By the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the expansion of market economy in the north India, particularly the development of railway facilities, added new value of the Tarai land (Regmi, 1978, p. 141; Mishra, 1987) for the revenue seeking rulers and profit making landowning elites. In 1861, the Rana rulers introduced the *jimīndāri* system as the local apparatus for state revenue administration of the Tarai region. The purpose behind promoting *jimīndār* was not only to collect land tax but also to encourage "private enterprise in the colonization of large

tracts of forests and other uncultivated lands whose development lay beyond the capacity of the local farmers because of the inconvenient location or paucity of capital" (Regmi, 1978, p. 141). In other words, the *jimīndār* was expected to play the role of an agricultural extension agent, who was capable of mobilizing the required financial capital and labor to reclaim new lands.

Thus the introduction of the *jimīndāri* system which operated at the level of villages intensified the stronghold of the landlord state over the local villagers, led to increased class differentiation between villagers, and further reinforced the domination of the hill landowning elites over the Tarai people. Increasingly, the evolving state-led feudal relations and the recognition of the property right of peasant cultivators in *raikar* (state owned land) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century further increased the importance to state and revenue functionaries of the village head and other socially recognized community leaders or economically dominant indigenous families (Regmi, 1978). Dhimal customary political institutions of village head called *Majhi* were also increasingly coopted by state revenue officials as well as by the hill landowning elites for their land colonization project.

Since the landowning elites (*birta* and *jagir* land holders) who controlled a substantial part of the Tarai land seldom lived in the villages where they held their lands, they also needed the services of local village leaders such as *Majhi*. In the absence of tax collection offices in the village during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the state and the landowning elites *relied on* these village heads to collect agricultural rents and taxes on their behalf (Regmi, 1978, p. 70-88; Guneratne, 1996). These village heads thus played an "intermediary role between the landowning elites or the government and the peasant" (Regmi, 1978, p. 70) without any formal emoluments for their services. Rather they were given special status and privileges vis-à-vis the peasantry that made it possible for them to take a share of the agricultural surplus in lieu of emoluments (*ibid.*). Thus the state's cooption of the indigenous institution of governance for its land colonization project delegated some state-sanctioned authority such as



collecting taxes to Majhi, who added this role to the communal power he enjoyed as village chief.

As an alternative to becoming tenants of the state or of the landowning elites, many Dhimal cultivated the land holdings of their village Majhi as sharecroppers or recipients of a fixed share of the yield. According to Dhimal, the village Majhi would hold the village land under his name and thus he would deal with tax officials and other state functionaries, while other villager members would cultivate the land and share the produce with the Majhi. In other words, the hardship of owning land as individual families and the state's appropriation of indigenous institutions, such as the Majhi system impacted the existing customary social relations between Majhi and villagers. Thus the Dhimal traditional cultural ethos and practices implied in the Majhi system were molded into a new relationship based on the state's imposed ideology of the hierarchical landlord-tenant system as a means to address the continuing challenges for Dhimal of gaining subsistence on the land. I argue this development was an effect both of the state's land tenure and revenue policies and also of Dhimal efforts to use their cultural institutions to blunt the effects of the oppressive state tax machinery. Dhimal insisted that the hardship of land tenurial relations in the past compelled them to be non-owners of land and that they found it convenient to work for or to cultivate the village Majhi's lands needs an empathetic analysis.

The dominant explanation espoused by many scholars that the village heads in indigenous communities were essentially a 'landed elite class' (Mishra, 1987; Sugden, 2010) at the village level reduces the institution of Majhi to an instrument of class exploitation and subjugation. But the Majhi role cannot be reduced to that of landlord in any elemental sense – he was not merely a creation of the feudal mode of production dominated by Nepal's ruling elites. On the contrary, Dhimal claim that their Majhi institution predates the formation of the present-day state of Nepal. For them, the Majhi of

the past represented an important customary institution, indispensable to the governance of Dhimal communal life including village ritual, marriage, and maintenance of social order.

Like the *Dhami* (priest) whose spiritual power used to protect Dhimal from malaria and other afflictions, the village Majhi, also called *deuniya*, a patriarchal hereditary social position, was entrusted with responsibilities such as: maintaining social order in the village, organizing and managing the annual village Shrejat ritual, representing the village during the marriage processes, and mediating in quarrels or disputes among villagers, divorces, and other incidents that could potentially create conflict between villagers and villages (see S. Dhimal, et al. 2010). Though the Majhi could exercise social power to make and impose decisions on behalf of the villager, it was not a vertically ranked social position nor was it a permanent position that one could continue in without enacting and being part of locally embedded social relationships and a moral economy mediated by kinship, ritual obligation, reciprocal exchange, and other community making practices.

Many Dhimal preferred to cultivate their village Majhi's lands, not because the village head represented state power or controlled all village lands, but because the Majhi-villager relationships, unlike the tenancy relationship with the state or other landowning elites, were *relatively* egalitarian and mediated by the ethic of exchange and reciprocity embedded in Dhimal moral economy. These new "class" like relationships between the Majhi and his tenant Dhimals still maintained the reciprocal relationship of production and distribution mediated through their kinship and ritual obligations. One Dhimal farmer whose families in the past had cultivated the lands of the Majhi, the brother of his grandmother in Karikoshi village, explained to me: "During that period, we did not need much land. Then we did not need many things and money. Our biggest *pīr* (Nep. worries, concern) then was the marriage of our children. However, we used to get support from Majhi and others to marry off our children. We could always rely on the Majhi if we

needed any money and rice. We could pay him by plowing his fields. He was our own kin.” Kinship ties, ethics of reciprocity, and the assurance that they would be helped in times of need equally defined and structured individual families’ tenurial relations with Majhi. Accumulation of wealth for future investment (or expenses) was not a salient feature of Dhimal’s household economy.

Tenancy under the village Majhi served to collectivize village labor and redistribute agricultural production among the villagers, though not necessarily on an equal basis. As Dhimal themselves emphasized, Majhi-villager relationships transcend the political economy of land tenure and economic production. I do not underestimate the issue of “tenant exploitation” in the tenancy of land under the Majhi (see for example, Guneratne, 1996). It was obvious that Majhi benefitted more from retaining large tracks of land. Yet they also risked the challenges of meeting the stipulated tax requirement and pleasing the state functionaries and revenue collectors. Given the shortage of labor and relative absence of immigrants from outside, the Majhi, even for a purely instrumental purpose, needed to be caring and providing. Otherwise, he had a higher chance of losing the locally available supply of labor and its loyalty, the loss of which could potentially deprive him of his land entitlements. On the other hand and most importantly, in the absence of the immigrants Dhimals were able to keep village land, though it would registered be under the names of a few individuals in the state records. Hence, by the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, a marked differentiation of Dhimal families based on their ownership of land had emerged.

But this class differentiation also emerged through peoples’ strategies of evading the oppressive landlord state. In his important study of the impact of revenue collection on Tharu subsistence strategies, Arjun Guneratne (1996) shows how Tharu peasants in Chitwan, despite the availability of land, opted out to become landless by choice and secured their subsistence by working for the Tharu landlord families. In the case of the Chitwan Tharu, it was not the scarcity of land, but specific historical and material conditions such as

the shortage of labor in the Tarai, the extractive relationship of the state with peasants, and the local manifestations of the oppressive revenue regimes in existing village social relations (landlords and peasants of the same community), that combined to lead many Tharus to opt for “voluntary landlessness” (Guneratne, 1996, p. 31). Yet they still secured their subsistence from the land through the exchange of their labor.

Guneratne’s pioneering work in the case of Tharu also provides an insightful comparative perspective to the Dhimal case presented here. The Dhimal case, I discussed here, also affirms Guneratne’s overall conclusion. However, Dhimal, unlike the Tharu, became peasants relatively late (circa after the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century). Tharus, especially their village chiefs, had a longer history of alliance with the state rulers in Nepal (see Krauskopff and Meyer, 2002) with the consequence of influencing “the form and organization of the Tharu society, even to its nature as a moral community” (Guneratne, 1996, p. 32). Class differentiation based on land and political power had also emerged in the Dhimal community after they became incorporated in the state land tenure system by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, but they lacked the kind of stratified and hierarchical social relations that Guneratne has described for Tharu society.

Guneratne’s analytical model is based on the concept of peasant and state-peasant relationships over land. I approach Dhimal explanations of why many of their ancestors did not own land in the past by first considering the fact that Dhimal were not peasants. Dhimal were not landless in relation to the people who owned the land on which they lived, because that land was not historically subject to ownership – it was not yet *meeling* for them. Thus when they were forced to become tenants for the Nepali state, Dhimal had to struggle to secure their subsistence as well as to reproduce the moral economy that sustained their customary use of land and other resources. Hence, my analysis of the Dhimal case will add the ādivāsi perspective to Guneratne’s very rich analysis.

## 6. From Ādivāsi to Sukumbāsi

Refusing to own land was a political choice that many Dhimal cultivators made in order to avoid the hardship of being tenant subjects. But this strategy which worked for Dhimal in the past, thanks to the malaria environment that discouraged the settlement of outsiders, became counterproductive in the emergent political and economic conditions affecting them. Following the expansion of market economy and the railway transport facilities in northern India at the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Nepali rulers emphasized the private reclamation of land through fiscal concession and *birta* allotments for any land colonizer, made rights to reclaimed land inheritable, encouraged the hill people to cultivate the Tarai land, promoted irrigation developments in the Tarai, encouraged colonizers to procure settlers from India and introduced the *jimindāri* system (1861) in order to facilitate private enterprise in the colonization of large tracts of forests and other uncultivated lands in the Tarai during the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century (see Regmi, 1971; 1978). These renewed state interventions in the Tarai brought more people to the Tarai, and increasingly land ownership began to shift from Dhimals to non-Dhimals, particularly to the hill “high caste” groups. The monetization of economy and increasing need for cash led to increase land alienation through mortgage and sale.

After 1950, with the ‘eradication’ of malaria in the early 1950s in particular, the Tarai became the most sought-after destination for land-seeking migrants from the hills and elsewhere. Implementation of the state-led land reform of 1964, the land settlement projects of the 1960s to 1970s, the construction of the East-West highway (early 1970s), and the resulting expansion of infrastructure like roads, schools, markets, electricity, and hospitals, drew more and more people into the Tarai. This ‘frontier settlement’ (Shrestha, 1989) in the Tarai progressively dispossessed Dhimal from their ancestral territories and further marginalized them politically, economically, and culturally. Dhimal often refer to the end of the

Tarai’s malarial environment as the catalyst that propelled their political-economic and cultural marginalization. “It was not just the eradication of malaria. It almost eradicated us: Dhimal Jāti and our culture,” the chairperson of Dhimal Jāti Bikas Kendra, the national level indigenous organization of Dhimal, remarked at a village level meeting that I attended in 2008. This remarks poignantly shows how Dhimal culturally mediated capacity to adapt and survive in the malarial ecology of the Tarai informs their sense of ‘relative autonomy’ from state intervention in the past. Dhimal collective belief that their ancestors survived and stamped these malarial forests with their culture and history has profoundly shaped their sense that they are the original inhabitants (ādivāsi) in the Tarai.

For Dhimal, the Land Reform of 1964 was the defining state intervention that led to the progressively land alienation and landless. It disproportionately benefitted the hill immigrants, particularly the hill “high” caste groups in the Tarai (see Gaige, 1975; Chaudhary, 2070; Guneratne, 2002). The land reform worked against the landowning Dhimal Manjhi landlords, who because of their lack of political connections, lost most of their landholdings. And many Dhimal families who used to till the Majhi lands also could not secure their legal ownership of the land and became landless. From ādivāsi, they became *sukumbāsi* (landless squatters) on their own land.

## 7. Conclusion

Land is central to the study of the history of changing relations between ādivāsi and the state; this analytical focus should moves beyond the framework of peasant-class-state relationships. In this paper, I have highlighted the critical need for an ethnographically informed social history of malaria to approach the Tarai history, that of the Tarai ādivāsi in particular. Similar to Arjun Guneratne’s work (1996, 2002) on the Tharus, this paper brings new approaches to the study of the relationship of Tarai ādivāsi with the land by focusing on the interplay among the territorial sovereignty of the state, the role of

malaria in mediating relations among ādivāsi, the state, and other social groups, and Dhimals' historical agency in resisting the extractive Hindu state.

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