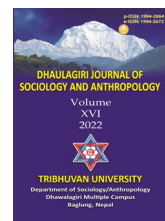


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Discourse on Land in Kathmandu

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Abstract

With increasing migration, commodification of land, and urbanization in Kathmandu, there is growing interaction and antagonism between local landowners and groups who wish to own land, which has generated a discourse about land. This paper considers perceptions, beliefs, practices, and policies about land as discourse on land. Such discourse included meanings and uses of land. On discourse about landownership, land seekers think that Newars do not need the land that they are historically owning, and land brokers (*dalāls*) are suggesting landowners to sell land and build houses or live off on the interest of the money by depositing it in the bank. *Dalāls* act not only as intermediaries between owners and buyers in the land market but as amplifiers and communicators, and often as creators, of discourse. The physical and socio-economic environment of Kathmandu is changing in such a way that landowners are unable to hold, or hold for long, their land, and they are becoming increasingly influenced by the discourse that land is a high-value commodity that should be sold. Such discourse can be explained by the political economic theory that considers the city as a growth machine that commodifies space for private profit-making and capital accumulation.

Keywords: discourse, land commodification, landownership, Newar, urbanization

Introduction

Migration and urbanization lead to growing interactions between landowners, land brokers (*dalāls*), land buyers/new landowners, financial institutions, and the state. This generates discourse about land and land ownership, giving rise to new types of stereotyped identity, antagonism, and agency. In this paper, I discuss the discourse on land of the Kathmandu valley.

The discourses discussed in this paper are regarding: (1) land use—that land in Kathmandu is not for agriculture but for urban development, and that urbanization is development; and (2) land ownership—that Newars need not possess much land in Kathmandu, and that they should sell land and should live off with the money. I consider land policies as part of the discourse. Then, I argue that such discourse is part of the process of land commodification and is correspondingly contributing to a change in landownership.

Research Method

This paper is primarily based on ethnographic fieldwork in the rapidly urbanizing town of Kirtipur in the Kathmandu valley between 2018 and 2019. In-depth interviews for family land history and informal conversations for contextual history were the primary data, and official land records and land-related policy documents and literature were the secondary data. In-depth interviews were conducted with 22 native Newar families, especially of the peasant Jyapu caste, regarding changes in landownership of their families in the last half a century and especially after 1990. These families were purposely selected from the list of persons who owned land in the Dhalpa area of the southwestern part of Kirtipur as documented in the 1961 land survey register. Informal conversations with land brokers (*dalāls*) were carried out on their practice of land brokerage and with Newar intellectuals regarding contextual history. I have supplemented it with my experience regarding such discourse during the fieldwork. This issue of discourse



arose as my research participants shared their perceptions and practices of land as landowners and their experiences of interaction with, and beliefs about, buyers or potential buyers of land and with brokers. For discussing the concept of discourse, I utilize the discourse theory formulated by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) and discussed by Howarth (2000). Moreover, to explain the land discourse, I use the political economy perspective of Logan and Molotch (1985), which conceptualizes “city as a growth machine.”

Theoretical Considerations

Discourse Theory of Laclau and Mouffe

In the discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), as discussed by Howarth (2000), there are three basic categories of discourse: discursive, discourse, and discourse analysis. Discursive refers to all the things that are objects of discourse (Howarth, 2000, p. 8). They define, borrowing from Foucault, discourse as “historically specific systems of meaning which form the identities of subjects and objects (Foucault 1972: 49)”. Similarly, “Discourse analysis refers to the process of analysing signifying practices as discursive forms... and discourse analysts treat a wide range of linguistic and non-linguistic material... as ‘texts’ or ‘writings’ that enable subjects to experience the world of objects, words and practices” (Howarth, 2000, p. 10).

Their discourse theory has social conflict at its core. Discourse “involves the construction of antagonisms and the drawing of political frontiers between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’” (p. 9). Social antagonism arises not because of their intrinsic identities and interests but because “social agents are unable to attain their identities (and therefore their interests), and because they construct an ‘enemy’ who is deemed responsible for this ‘failure’” (p. 105).

Howarth (2000) gives an example of the forest as a discursive. In the discourse of economic modernization, a forest is an object obstructing the path of road construction, and in environmentalist discourse, it is a unique ecosystem with natural beauty. Then, ideas, policies, and actions regarding infrastructure development and protection of nature can be considered as a discourse. There exists antagonism between social actors, such as between “developers” and “environmentalists” (as social actors) and involves exercise of power.

In this paper, I attempt to analyze the discourse on land of Kathmandu in general and of Kirtipur in particular by utilizing the above discourse theory.

Urban theory of Logan and Molotch

The urban theory of Logan and Molotch (1987) assumes that land has use value or exchange value for different individuals and groups. Attempts at simultaneous realization of both use value and exchange value produce conflict. Because theirs is essentially an urban theory, they assume that the urban space is already occupied

by the built environment (buildings and public open spaces). They consider the city as a “growth machine” (p. 1), which means that modern city’s central goal is growth, or expansion. Urban growth and expansion of built infrastructure create jobs, promote local businesses, and meet housing needs. Many individuals, groups, and institutions are involved in making the city grow both economically and physically. Such “growth coalition” mainly includes local businesspeople dealing in property (real estate developers), politicians (local and central governments), and bankers (banks and financial institutions). Real estate agents and developers benefit directly through speculation, construction, and property sale. Politicians and local government officials favor growth because it encourages migration and increases their base of tax/revenue and their base of political power. Bankers favor growth because it increases their investment and profit in real estate development, residential and commercial construction projects, and local businesses. In the U.S., they also regard local media (especially local newspapers) and public utility agencies (such as water-supply agencies and transportation officials) as essential players in that they help utilities to penetrate deeper into the hinterlands. They focus on urban property relations and put “place entrepreneurs” (brokers and real estate) at the center of analysis. Thus, for Logan and Molotch (1987), growth is not just an economic fact of people living in the cities but also a political fact—the “politics of growth,” where “political structures are mobilized to intensify land uses for private gain of many sorts” (p. 63).

Like other Marxist urban theorists (such as Harvey, 1985, 1987; Castells, 1977), Logan and Molotch see conflict in urban growth and identify winners and losers of the growth machine due to the conflict between use value and exchange value. They argue that local residents regard homes and neighborhoods as having use value, in that homes are places where people live, and neighborhoods (such as parks, streets, and public places) are places of social gathering, recreation, and leisure that establish the feeling of community. But realtors, local government, and urban planners view any such place as a space to build housing or commercial property, in which capital can be invested and profits/rents can be made. Thus, the fate of a place depends on the outcome of the conflict between use value and exchange value, in which the “growth coalition” is more powerful as capitalism, and especially neoliberalism, is in ascendance, and the modern city is an outcome of such neoliberal ideology.

In this paper, I try to explain the discourse on land of Kathmandu by considering the Kathmandu city as a growth machine, with commodification of space for capital accumulation explaining the process of urbanization. In Nepal, such urban growth is termed as “development.”

Actors in Land Discourse

In this study, I consider the land of Kathmandu,

especially the outskirts or hinterland, as the discursive, or the object of discourse. In discourse theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), meaning arises from systems of differences. In the case of land, I consider such differences emerge from different uses of land. Land is used as a productive resource, as a place of residence, and as a property. But there does not emerge a discourse on land as long as a particular land is being used for a particular use. I argue that it is the land's potential to be used differently by different actors that gives its meaning. Moreover, land as a commodity is the dominant meaning in capitalism and neoliberalism. Every culture regards land as a non-commodity. Although it may be exchanged at times of distress and contingency, land was never a "commodity by destination," that is, thing produced as a commodity (Appadurai, 1986, p. 16). But in capitalism, it has become a "commodity by metamorphosis," that is, thing intended originally or historically for use value but considered now as a commodity (p. 16). Mass migration, urbanization, and growth, which are important phenomena in capitalism, entail conflict between different uses of land and thus between different users.

In the discourse on land, I identify three main groups of social actors, which I term "owners," "buyers," and "third-party actors." "Owners" comprise of local native landowners, mostly Newars in the case of Kathmandu and Kirtipur. "Buyers" are either individuals or groups, such as *dalāls* (intermediaries), land speculators, and realtors who aspire to buy land from the "owners" for various purposes. "Third-party actors" are other actors of "growth coalition" comprising of planners, financial institutions, and local governments.

The "owners" and "buyers" are directly involved in the land market and have very different meanings of land based on their historical and socio-economic realities. The "owners" usually consider land as a productive resource and think of increasing its productivity for livelihood and as an asset for future or future generations. They consider land as real and have no "imagining" of its alternative uses, as long as they are capable of working on it. Thus, their discourse on land is based on their experience of ownership and their interaction with "buyers" and "third-party actors." The "buyers," on the other hand, seek to "own" land either for use value (such as by migrants for building houses), for exchange value (such as by speculators for speculation), or for construction and subsequent sale of property (such as by realtors for property development), and thus have different "imaginings" of possible and future uses. The "third-party actors" are interested in growth at the ideological or supra-local level, by influencing through policies and regulations. The "buyers" and "third-party actors" are part of the "growth coalition" and are much more numerous, heterogeneous, and powerful compared to the "owners." In Logan and Molotch's theory (1987), it is the "growth coalition" that has most influence on the fate of land.

In Nepal, people are much attached to their land, as land has productive value (agriculture), high exchange value (as property), as well as cultural value (both as familial inheritance and communal value among indigenous people, including Newars of Kathmandu). Moreover, private property rights are strong. Due to such emotional attachment and strong rights, there is resistance to landownership change. For land commodification, this strong attachment to land should be broken, and the neoliberal discourse about land helps to break such attachment.

In Kathmandu, there were more than 350 real estate companies in 2018: 195 in Kathmandu, 93 in Lalitpur, and 33 in Bhaktapur. Banks and finance companies had invested 61.4% of their loans to real estate by the middle of the end of the fiscal year 2017/18; the year prior (2016/17), it was 61.1 (Rajdhani, 2018). Moreover, local co-operatives have also invested heavily in the local land market. The deep involvement of banks, financial institutions, and co-operatives in real estate is to such an extent that they are currently bringing financial crisis, with the government needing to intervene by limiting such investment and restrictions on land subdivision as far back as 2009. Moreover, there are innumerable land brokers, to such an extent that in the Budhanilkantha area in the northern part of Kathmandu, originally populated by Bahun-Chhetri caste group, there is a saying that there is no household without a *dalāl* (Bhandari, 2019), which holds true also for the Newars of Kirtipur.

Migration, Commodification of Land, and Urbanization in Kathmandu

Kathmandu has been an urban center throughout its recorded history. The core cities and towns had gradually grown in size over the centuries, but the process of "secondary urbanization" beyond the city center (Redfield & Milton, 1954) began only with the Rana rulers building palaces outside the core city area. That is, Ranas viewed the hinterland in Kathmandu as a place of residence. Then, migrating to and building houses in Kathmandu began to have a new significance, especially for the powerful Bahuns and Chhetris (Liechty, 2008/2003, p. 54). Common people could not yet imagine settling in Kathmandu until 1950, as a passport was required to enter into Kathmandu from outside, and only those in power could do so.

The opening up of Kathmandu after the 1950 revolution was also an opening of the land of Kathmandu. With the expansion of bureaucracy and the start of the new era of development, land of Kathmandu, as a capital city, was developed for building infrastructure, initially through land acquisition by the government. With the demand, and subsequent enactment, of the abolition of Birta in 1959, the Land Act in 1964, and subsequent neoliberal laws and policies directed at converting all types of land as private property, there emerged surplus land that could be sold and

built upon.

Tracing the money involved in the enormous growth of the economy of the valley after 1950, including in real estate, Liechty (2008/2003, p. 50) notes that after 1950 the source of cash for Nepali economy, and especially that of Kathmandu, was the international aid to a large extent, and tourism and carpet industry to a lesser extent. He notes that after 1975 development aid was also channeled through multiple layers of NGOs and INGOs, with a large fraction of the subsequent development aid industry to thousands of middle-class professionals, who began to live in Kathmandu. Also, tourism and carpet industry helped entrepreneurs and some common people to move upward to the middle-class and lesser positions. It then became necessary to commodify land to house them.

After 1990, neoliberal economic policy, including in the land market and labor market, made it possible for people from all walks of life to live and own land and house in Kathmandu. Such migration and urbanization have been materialized, according to scholars, by growing economic fortunes from mass foreign labor migration, financialization of land market, and large infrastructure developments (Shah, 2013; Shrestha, 2011). Urbanization has made Kathmandu valley a metropolis, and according to people I talked with from different parts of the valley, up to 80 percent of the land has already been sold by local people. In this process, there is a growing interaction between landowners, brokers, land buyers/new landowners, financial institutions, and the state, which has generated a discourse about land, Kathmandu valley, and landownership.

In the literature on Kathmandu, urbanization and land issues have mainly been analyzed from the perspective of political economy that favors the point of view of migrants and disregards the role of local landowners; that is, from the “demand side” of land market. However, when analyzing land commodification, which is basically change in landownership for private gain, the “supply side” (Evans, 2004) becomes important. Also, although there have been studies on land conflicts in the context of urbanization in Nepal that prioritize the “owners” viewpoint (see Maharjan, 2017; Nelson, 2013; Upreti et al., 2017), the discursive aspect of the land has not been studied.

Meanings of Land

When land becomes a commodity, its identity changes. As land basically is a space and land market is a production of space, Henri Lefebvre’s (2009) schema of “homogeneity–fragmentation–hierarchization” can be applied to land. In homogeneity, the space is reproduced in a similar form, such as division of land into parcels of similar size and shape in land development. In fragmentation, land is measured in square units and divided into small parcels for individual buyers. In hierarchization, spaces broken down

homogenously are placed in a hierarchy, such as between center and periphery, at varying distances from some center. Such organization is different from agricultural land, which has no fixed shape or size due to erosion, encroachment, and division for inheritance.

In line with Lefebvre’s schema, in the past, agricultural land in Kathmandu used to be measured according to the land’s productivity, such as land producing a certain amount of paddy (*murī* or *pāthī*, with one *pāthī* equaling to 80 kg of paddy and *murī* equaling eight *pāthī*), and more generally according to the amount of seed required for plantation, such as one *pāthī* (which corresponded to one *ropanī* of irrigable land) or *mānā* (one eighth of a *pāthī*). Also, a whole plot of land would be sold, without division.

But with commodification, land began to have new (exchange) value and new meaning. Land came to be measured and sold in area units. In Kathmandu, until the 1990s, land size would be calculated and sold in *ropanī*. Later, with increasing land prices and higher demand, the parcels began shrinking, now to a quarter, 4 *ānā*, and the unit price is now calculated in *ānā* (equals to 342 sq. ft.).

Features of land, such as its irregular or changing shape, big size, location without road access, etc., that did not matter when used for agriculture began to matter to owners when viewed as a commodity for sale for dwellings. In Kathmandu, terraced land that was non-irrigated and hence less productive initially began to have road access and hence were sold first as they fetched a higher price—with the irrigated lowland, usually with no road access, used for agriculture. Moreover, land previously considered as agriculturally unsuitable and thus with no or low exchange value, such as in the hills/slopes or along river banks, began to have exchange value as land market moved to the hilly borders of Kathmandu and to riverbeds; as technology allowed digging, moving earth, and leveling the hilly land, and rivers could be embanked; and as road access could be provided through land consolidation and subsequent parceling. In this way, the identity of land changed from its productivity features to its price, shape, and size. Such land features are generally stable, and “owners” are unable to change them individually. It is also this inability that the “growth coalition” capitalizes and leads people to sell land.

When the “owners” themselves begin to see their land as a commodity, then commodification occurs in real. I found that the language of “buyers” and even of the “owners” themselves regarded land as a commodity. In 2018, when I was asking a woman whose house was the first that was built in the southern outskirts of the town of Kirtipur, she pointed to a land nearby and said that this and that person “have not sold” (*mamyunipim*) land. Later, I talked with her husband. Then, I was not surprised at all when he said, “They (people of Kirtipur) have finished (land by selling) in ward no. 3 and in the ward no. 9..., but there are many who remain to sell (*mamyunipim apo du*). He continued, “There is a piece belonging to S. caste,

4–5 *ropanī*, ‘kept unsold’.” Similarly, when I was asking a man who had built his house near a canal in the southwest of Kirtipur about the owners of the land surrounding his house, he pointed to a plot of land nearby and said, “Now only this (owner) remains to sell.”

Such language and choice of words show that not only the *dalāls* but even the landowner regarded land as a commodity that is destined to be sold, and landowners as those who “have not sold” or “remain to sell.” Moreover, local owners often termed land as *jaggā* (land in general) rather than *bum* (agricultural or productive land).

Discourse on Land

Contestations on land are not just large economic or political issues but also happen at the level of everyday discourse created and circulated for influence by various actors. In this study, I consider various discourses on land prevailing in Kirtipur. I argue that such discourses come to effect during decision-making regarding land at the individual household and urban planning levels.

There was a historical land use pattern in the Kathmandu valley until the 1970s, with the agricultural areas well separated from the settlements. Newars of the Kathmandu valley were the best cultivators in Asia—wrote Brian H. Hodgson in 1847 (cited in Nepali, 2015, p. 44). PADCO (1986, p. 1) notes that the agricultural yield in the valley was significantly higher than the national average, that it had been progressively improving, and that the valley was self-sufficient in food grains as of 1981.

However, in the past half a century, the Kathmandu valley has grown from a population of 104,000 from 1950 to 1,521,000 in 2021, according to the recent census, but with estimates of 5 million people currently living at any time. Its urban/built-up area has increased from 2.16% in 1976 to 14.96 in 2015 (Rimal et al., 2017) and 31% of the agricultural area has been converted into built-up area (Faust et al., 2020). This surely has increased a lot more after the 2015 earthquake, with building of new houses at new sites. The most significant land use change in Kathmandu is the settlement in low-lying areas and even in the floodplains. Moreover, after the 2015 earthquake, there has been a proliferation of a new type of residence—small tin houses built on rented land—by those who cannot afford, or do not want, to rent rooms.

These changes suggest that Kathmandu is becoming less and less an agricultural area. Next, I argue that the urban sprawl in Kathmandu is the direct consequence of imagining of the land of Kathmandu valley as a place of residence rather than as a means of agricultural production.

Land of Kathmandu is not for Agriculture

When reviewing the land and capital transition in postcolonial societies such as India, D’Costa (2017) argues that “land no longer acts as the source of economic surplus nor is the motivation of the state rooted in making

agriculture dynamic in the capitalist sense” but “acquisition of land today is directed at non-agricultural development” (p. 28). This holds true in Nepal, where there is neither an agrarian transition to a capitalist agricultural system nor industrialization, but commodification of land for non-agricultural development. This is exhibited in the discourse about land of Kathmandu as not for agriculture, which mainly comes from (a) urban/agricultural policy perspective, (b) increasing non-viability of agriculture by the local landowners, and (c) increasing demand of land for *ghaderī* (land to build house on).

Regarding the urban policy perspective, I discuss mainly (lack of) land use policy; growth of land pooling (readjustment) projects; and neglect of agriculture—as favoring/inducing urban growth. Firstly, this is reflected in the lack (non-formulation) of land use policy until recently. Concerned by loss of agricultural land due to urbanization, PADCO (1986) had recommended that “[a] competent authority should define and specify the objectives of land use regulations in the Kathmandu valley.” These might include... “preservation of selected agriculture and open spaces”, “separation of uses (industrial, residential, commercial)”, and “prohibition of certain uses in certain areas” (p. 8). PADCO also noted that undue access of road to prime agricultural land should be restricted when developing a transportation plan. However, seeing the trend of urban expansion and lack of land use policies, PADCO was less hopeful, and that “it is wise to preserve the best agricultural lands in the Valley for *as long as possible*” (p. 24, emphasis added), especially the flood plains. The first ever land use law, with classification into ten different land types and restrictions on conversion from one into another, was enacted only recently: Land Use Act 2019 and Land Use Regulations 2022. But they are already becoming defunct, especially in the case of Kathmandu valley. For example, the Kathmandu Metropolitan City has recently (November 23, 2022) decided to categorize all the land inside its jurisdiction as non-agricultural.¹ Moreover, the urban and urbanizing municipalities inside the valley, as well as outside the valley, have been finding it difficult to classify any of its land as agricultural due to resistance from landowners,² and only about 110 local bodies out of 753 have classified land, and even that as only agricultural or non-agricultural, out of the 10 types of land.³

Secondly, the emergence and growth of land pooling (readjustment) projects immediately after the political change of 1990 (and more recently, the drive toward the so-called “smart cities”) shows that the state actors consider Kathmandu as mainly an urban area. A study of land pooling projects in Nepal (K-Hub, 2017) lists 18

1. <https://www.nepalhomes.com/news/2022/11/23/637eed86ffeef8106f1bacc3b>, dated November 23, 2022.

2. <https://www.bbc.com/nepali/news-62533139>, dated August 14, 2022.

3. <https://clickmandu.com/2022/12/223834.html>, dated December 22, 2022.

projects that were completed or being implemented in 2017, with a total of more than 13,000 *ropani* land and providing more than 28,000 developed plots. Most of the 13 projects that were completed had been initiated in 1991 and in 1994 and were completed by 2002. The study found that most projects were delayed by 5 to 10 years, that landowners were unwilling to give up land, and there was even resistance and court cases in some projects. These indicate initial resistance. Moreover, they found that the building construction rate was slow in most projects, as there was a tendency by local landowners to continue to cultivate the land or to keep/hold land vacant. Also, there was insufficient provision and poor maintenance of infrastructure such as roads and sewerage, and land prices and rents were high, making it unaffordable by poor people.

These findings about land pooling projects are supported by a similar and more recent study by Asian Development Bank (Faust et al., 2020). They noted that most land pooling projects in Nepal, including that of “smart cities,” are planned on an “ad hoc” basis. Moreover, in land pooling projects in Nepal, the government makes no financial contribution, and all the expenses are borne by sale of reserved service plots; that is, the project is self-financed. Even the threshold for approval to initiate the project has been reduced from the original 75% to 51% of the landowners through an amendment in 2007 to the Town Development Act 1997, due to resistance from landowners. Also, media reports indicate that often it is the politicians who are hyping the construction of smart cities and ring roads, especially by those who have a political base in the proposed areas, while the landowners are unaware of its implementation processes. All these suggest that land pooling for urban housing and infrastructure development was more an endeavor of the politicians and planners to induce landowners to sell land, to promote the construction sector, and to settle migrants than to provide (affordable) housing to the poor or to fulfill the interests of the local landowners, who may not regard raising land prices as important and are certainly oblivious to the need of housing for migrants or squatters.

On this issue, Newar activists as well as common people alike who opposed land sale regarded the “growth coalition” as acting on their own interests. The wife of a retired Tribhuvan University officer cited a post she had seen on the Facebook:

Those who came to Kathmandu wearing slippers are instructing us to do this and that, to widen roads, after they began to ride in Pajero. Those who were living in places from where even moneys would fall are planning to develop the flat city of Kathmandu.

Her remark expresses opposition to the growing influence of politicians, planners, and bureaucrats in urban planning of Kathmandu, as discussed above.

In Kirtipur, there is resistance to land appropriation for infrastructure mainly due to the deceitful and forceful acquisition of about 6,500 *ropani* of land from 1956

onwards by Tribhuvan University (TU). However, local people of Kirtipur generally view land pooling as good. For example, many of my participants supported the concept of land pooling, mainly because, according to them, such development does not alienate, albeit decreases land size. In Kirtipur, after the completion of the first phase of Kirtipur Land Pooling project in 2003 and the abolition of the second phase in 2012, due to opposition from landowners in general and mainly by those who already had houses built there, there is currently Dhalpa–Salyansthana Land Pooling underway since December 2020 and the detailed project report of the new Lower Charghare Land Pooling has recently been prepared, in December 2022.

During my personal involvement in (criticizing) the second phase of land pooling, I observed that many landowners considered land pooling as a panacea to most land problems related to shape, size, access to road, dual ownership, as well as growing disenchantment with agriculture. However, I observed that such projects are initiated and led mainly by land investors (persons and institutions such as co-operatives) and brokers, who are concerned with profiteering by selling land that they had bought at low prices before launching the project; by construction businesses, which benefit from subsequent construction; and by local politicians, who benefit economically and politically by administering the project, as local governments are the ones that implement the projects.

On the other hand, although land brokering and “plotting” (consolidating land from a few owners and dividing it into small parcels) had begun in the 1980s outside the city center of Kathmandu, with highly rising land prices after the political change of 2006 and accompanying high rate of migration, individuals and private real estate developers began “plotting” at an increasing rate, as well as developing housing, including high-rise ones. The intensification of “plotting” and subsequent higher building construction rate in such “plotted land” compared to the land pooling areas, as noted by Faust et al. (2020), suggest, however, that landowners wish to sell their land at their own timeframe rather than to develop their land prior. This, in turn, indicates that landowners are slow to embrace the neoliberal ideology of land commodification.

Thirdly, there has been a rapid decline in budget for the agriculture sector in the last decade in Nepal. The annual budget allocated for the agriculture sector was 3.8% in the fiscal year (FY) 2019/20 and 8.9% in FY 2020/21, whereas those of FY 2021/22 and FY 2022/23 were just 3 percent. Kathmandu valley being the capital city, budget for agriculture has certainly not been a priority for many decades. In Kirtipur, for example, the irrigation canal built in the southernmost part about a decade ago has become dysfunctional as not much water runs in it and most land has either been sold or rented for residential purpose in the form of tin houses. Moreover, many mud canals are being converted into roads, giving road access to the previously

low, irrigated land.

Regarding increasing demand of land for *ghaderi*, this is obvious as Kathmandu is the capital city. Every major political change in Nepal, from 1950 to 1990 to 2006, has been accompanied by great spurts of migration to Kathmandu, which suggests that all bouts of migration are politically induced ones. Moreover, fulfilling such demand is also a political endeavor. On the one hand, the thinking that everyone who comes to Kathmandu should have a piece of land and house in it is a political one that is against the spirit of decentralization but favors growth and centralization of Kathmandu at the expense of development elsewhere. On the other, the concept of affordable housing, including for land squatters (*sukumbāsi*), is based more on the perception of planners than on the actual needs and wishes of the *sukumbāsi*. The reluctance to own and stay in the affordable housing with 227 housing units in Ichangu of Kathmandu completed in 2014 for *sukumbāsi* as well as the high rate of change in ownership of squatter plots suggest that even the *sukumbāsi* are intent more on legally owning public land and benefiting from transaction and renting of such land than on settling in affordable houses.

Based on the above, it seems that the politicians and bureaucracy want Kathmandu to become urban in terms of growth and development. Additionally, with rising land prices after 1990 and especially after 2006, and with increasing non-viability of agriculture (as discussed shortly below), landowners do not want policies restricting converting their agricultural land into residential ones. All these show that land is considered more as a commodity than a place of residence by all groups of Nepal.

Increasing non-viability of agriculture is fueling the discourse among “owners” that the land of Kathmandu is not for agriculture. Agriculture has been a despised occupation in Nepal, although the peasant Jyapu caste in Kathmandu liked to self-regard it as the “best” occupation compared to medium business and hateful clerical (*uttam kheti madhyam vyāpār nirghin chākar*), as the saying goes, and as many Newari music videos portray. Even for people who are doing, or are willing to do, agriculture, it has become not just unprofitable but even non-viable. So, nowadays, local landowners in Kathmandu cultivate their land not to produce crops but just to avoid it being encroached.

After landowners became unable to cultivate land on their own, they initially began to let the land to be cultivated by relatives or neighbors, often by not taking any rent. (This should be differentiated from absentee landlordism, where the landlord benefits from the land rent.) But even this has proven futile. For example, a man from the village of Nagaon in Kirtipur had given his land to his relative after his wife got paralyzed.

Then her (wife’s) sister went to cultivate. Previously, it would produce 10 *murī*; now only 10–15 sacks. Then, the sister-in-law also did not like cultivating. She worked very hard; she never stayed in the house. After even such

efforts did not materialize, she came to ask us to give it out in rent. That same year, a Madhesi man came looking for land to rent, saying he would give 60 thousand rupees per year. My sister-in-law said she wouldn’t cultivate the land that produced only 12–13 sacks of paddy. I had given it to her to cultivate without taking any rent, but now she did not want to. Even the low-lying land would not give much.

Agriculture is not only unprofitable but is even non-viable. The effort by a man in Kirtipur, aged 70, to cultivate his land was remarkable:

Now it’s not only that people are not physically able to cultivate, but also there is no water and labor is expensive. I have given one plot in rent to a futsal. Of the other plot of 25 *ānā* in another area, I am cultivating in only 1 *ropanī*... The main reason for selling land is lack of water for irrigation... People were cultivating in spite of high labor costs and whatever. There is water in the low-lying land, and people planted even by pumping water. I planted thrice in the 25 *ānā* land by pumping water from the *dhal* (small mud canal). I planted twice by buying water from water tanker.... In these nine years, I planted rice only twice with the rain water.

Moreover, human settlement nearby in itself makes the land not just unproductive but non-viable. One major problem my study participants complained about was house-owners and especially renters throwing waste in nearby agricultural land. Such waste includes plastics, and clothes/shoes, which can be seen in all lands near the sporadic settlements, and broken glasses, which are the cause of cuts and bruises during farm work, mostly to women. Moreover, keeping land barren is equivalent to turning into a “landfill” by people living nearby. So, more and more “owners” have resorted to renting out land to polyhouses and, more recently, to tin houses.

Such experiences of “owners,” when aggregated and communicated, form the discourse. Such discourse is amplified by *dalāls*, who then induce the “owners” to sell land by citing such difficulties in cultivating. When land is no longer viable for agriculture, it becomes a commodity, to be sold, developed for residence use, or rented out. Increasingly, “owners” are renting out land instead of selling.

Urbanization/Infrastructure as Development

In the context of Kathmandu, the dominant narrative about development is that of urbanization and infrastructure, especially roads and buildings. Whenever I visited the urbanizing area south of Kirtipur, the house-owners and landowners commented, by pointing to the gravel or blacktopped roads and houses along them, that their area “is developing.”

The discourse that “infrastructure is development” in Kirtipur was found to be old, which I found out when talking with my participants about the effects of land acquisition for Tribhuvan University from 1956.

There are two opposing views. One view, the common one, argues that people of Kirtipur became poorer due to loss of agricultural land (about 6,500 *ropanī*). The compensation of Rs. 375 per *ropanī* (later increased to Rs. 475) given for land acquired in 1956 was, according to my participants, not enough to buy agricultural land in other places, as such compensation obviously was always much lesser than the market value. Moreover, Kirtipur was geographically isolated by TU, by cutting it off from the core of Kathmandu, and thus arrested its development. On the contrary, mostly those who were educated argued that higher literacy of Kirtipur and Kirtipur's subsequent development was due to the presence of TU. It was alluded even by a person from Lubhu to a retired officer in TU from Kirtipur, when he said that Kirtipur was lucky as it got TU and that Lubhu had rejected it when proposed.

After 1990, the main "benefit" for local landowners with the growing real estate and urbanization was the rise in land prices and the provision of public services. Selling of land and (with that money) building houses to rent out rooms is becoming a common practice, which has become the main source of cash. This was expressed mainly by *dalāls*, who like to take credit for helping tenants get their share of land from landlords or *guthī* and for making people rich by helping sell people's land; and by local government representatives, who boast helping to raise land prices by providing wider or better access roads and through land pooling projects.

People's view of development also included an increase in the service sector, such as retail business, especially around the bazaar area of Naya Bazaar after 1990 (see Pradhan, 1994 for population change, Shrestha, 1994 for land use change, and Nelson, 2013 for landownership change in Kirtipur). The bazaar area is considered as the "most developed" area, which "developed" after the late Pradhan Pancha of the then Chithu Village Development Committee (VDC) distributed the previously public area to the (self-identified) *sukumbāsī* of Kirtipur.

On this discourse of infrastructure as development, a man expressed pleasure at the prospect of having a new college by a "Dr. Manandhar" who was working on to buy about 100 *ropanī* of land, near which there is another college: "On one side, coming of college is good; on the other, people are losing land; that's all." I confronted him by saying, "Coming of college may not be of use to us. We are not rural; we can go to college in Kathmandu downtown... We gave TU that much land, yet how many locals of Kirtipur have studied there?" Then he agreed, "We can count on fingers those who studied at TU; it does not make sense, in a way."

The notion that urban settlement and widening of roads for it is development is also exemplified when local landowners who resist it are accused of being "anti-development," by *dalāls*, land developers, and local politicians. This is especially the case when landowners unwilling to sell land have land at the access road to

the inner plots that had been purchased at low price for plotting, or have land that directly benefit from the development, such as getting access to a wider access road. For example, a former VDC chair was accused as being anti-development (*vikās virodhī*) when he refused to sell land to a Bahun who wished to consolidate land to sell it to build a proposed (now built) campus in the south of Kirtipur. He said to the *dalāls* who came to persuade him to sell land: "If it is for campus, I won't be an obstacle. Why obstruct development? But I need land of this size and shape nearby, then I will give my land."

Another instance of blaming as anti-development is when landowners refuse to allow road widening. This is related, on the one hand, to the landowners' view that the size of their land decreases every time there is road widening, and road widening in Nepal is a continuous process that may occur every few years and will not stop even after buildings are built on either side of the road, as exemplified by the road expansion drive in the central Kathmandu starting from 2011 and still continuing today in many parts of the valley. On the other, once settlement begins, productivity of land decreases, due to obstruction to water/irrigation, overshadowing of land by building, and human activity in the fields, including waste disposal, as discussed above.

But according to my study participants, it is often the new landowner who has just bought the land who is against land development or road widening. The new landowners think that their land is more valuable than that of the native landowner because they had paid "money" for it, whereas the natives obtained it for "free" in inheritance. I have heard this also when there are boundary disputes between new and native landowners. Moreover, migrants buy inner land with road accessed only a trail, and then want to widen the trail. When the local landowners oppose such move, they are accused of being "anti-development."

Similarly, the landowners who opposed the second phase of Kirtipur Land Pooling project covering more than 1,000 *ropanī* of land in Kirtipur that started in 2005 were often blamed as anti-development. Such a perception shows that for *dalāls*, real estate, and landowners alike, land development is just the plotting of land for serviceable parcels and overall development is urbanization.

The discourse of Newars as anti-development requires asking what type of development and from whose perspective: "owners" or "buyers." The charge of anti-development is itself ironical. On the one hand, what *dalāls* and real estate, and even land pooling projects, do is not land development per se, but just plotting, because development requires making not just land parcels suitable for building a house with access roads but also providing public utilities such as drainage, drinking water, and electricity. On the other hand, development in a broad sense is not even just road, building, and public utilities. So, urban development should also be understood from the perspective of landowners, or the "supply side" of urban land market.

Discourse on Landownership

Another aspect of discourse on land is that of landownership, or more appropriately, change in landownership. However, how social actors view landownership at a particular time and place and how they seek to change it are more fruitfully analyzed by discourses about landownership in terms of to whom the land belongs and to whom it should or should not belong. Because the state, through its policy, is always active in changing such relationship, the political discourse becomes important.

At the policy level, the state changes landownership through redistribution, such as the Land Act of 1961; through facilitated or forced migration (such as the resettlement of hill people to the plains in the 1960s and forced/induced migration due to Maoist insurgency of 1996–2006); through land acquisition for public infrastructure, such as for hydropower, industries, or public buildings; and through commodification, such as converting virtually all types of land into freeholding (*raikar*) and ending of dual landownership. While such policies are aimed at effecting the whole country, their effects may be directed at or become pronounced at certain regions and to certain groups of people. The land reform of 1961 mainly benefited the Newar peasants/tenants of Kathmandu, where it was implemented initially and more fully, which increased the tenants' share of crops and subsequently land ownership. Similarly, a lot of land in Kathmandu was acquired after 1950, as it was developed as a capital city with a lot of public infrastructure such as industrial areas, universities and other educational institutions, exhibition centers, hospitals, etc. Similarly, various amendments to the Land Act were made to privatize the public land, most notably the *guthi* land, in the interest of the tenants, but resulting in the selling of land both during the process of transfer and more rapidly after gaining ownership.

Now I discuss the more recent discourse on land ownership.

Why do You Need This Much Land in Kathmandu?

A common remark that my participants in Kirtipur recalled when “buyers” discussed buying land in Kathmandu is: Why do you need this much land? The remaining agricultural land in Kathmandu strikingly contradicts the imagination of Kathmandu as an urban space by new migrants. In my own case, one day I was taking on my bike a land surveyor from the Survey Department of Kalanki to measure a plot of my land (about 12 *ānā*) as there was a boundary dispute with my land neighbor. On the way, when we were talking, he asked, “Why do you need so much land in Kathmandu?” I was surprised to hear this thing told to myself by an official who knew that I was doing research on the same issue as I had been visiting his office for the last three months. I found this remark made to my participants to be a common one by “buyers” in Kathmandu.

One direct aspect of this question Why do you need this much land? is that Newars do not need this much land in Kathmandu. My Newar participants of Kirtipur found such remark insulting, especially given the history of the loss of the land of Kirtipur to TU as mentioned above, which had left its people unable to sustain themselves. Local Newar landowners viewed it as “buyers” opposing Newars' ancestral landownership in Kathmandu. They related it with the past and present practices of land acquisition, road expansion, and land grabs that are rife in Kathmandu, as described by Malla (1997) and Malla K. Sundar.⁴ The continued opposition by Newar landowners in Khokana village to land acquisition for Kathmandu–Tarai fast track from 2020 and the “smart city” project, and the massive uprising of Newars against the eight amendment to the Land Act 1964 (the “*Guthi* bill”) approved by the Parliament on August 21, 2019, converting *guthi* land into state or private property with the intention of profiteering by renting, show that local people value private and public landownership over land alienation.

Another aspect of this remark is that land in Kathmandu is not for agricultural or other purposes but just for residential one, as discussed above. In the “buyers” view, Newars usually already have a house in Kathmandu, and they need not possess any agricultural land in Kathmandu. The suggestion that Newars already own a lot of land (whether in terms of its size or in terms of its market value) is untrue, as land in urban areas, and even in rural areas, outside Kathmandu—whether in the hills or in the tarai—is rising rapidly, as all of my such friends themselves attest. Moreover, for agriculture, whether for subsistence agriculture or for commercial vegetable farming, large plots of land are required, and land often need to be consolidated, as can be seen in the case of polyhouse farms in Kirtipur. In this sense, for agriculture, much more land is required. As one participant, a former VDC chair and whose grandfather once owned more than 60 *ropani* of land, put it: “I wish to do commercial farming, but I do not have enough land.” While renting land for commercial farming is an option, this is not to the liking of Newars, who want to stay in their own settlement rather than in the farm. Then, the remark Why do you need this much land? reflects stigmatizing of the agricultural occupation and consequently of Jyapus as urban peasants.

Such discourse about the non-use for agriculture, and useful only for selling and for residential purpose, is aimed at inducing people to sell land to let others build houses. In the parlance of land market economy, the “buyers” are pointing to the “surplus” land. In other words, it is an attempt at “creating,” through discourse, a sense of surplus land in the mind of the “owners,” which is crucial for land commodification as well as for land alienation.

Yet, according to my participants, Newars seem powerless to respond to such remarks. For example, a

4. <https://jhannaya.nayapatrikadaily.com/news-details/1056/2020-07-25>, dated July 25, 2020.

Newar intellectual/activist in Kirtipur, said:

Soon after coming inside Kathmandu, outsiders think of buying land in Kathmandu. They say, “Why do you need this much big land? With this much land, you should sell half of it and build house on the rest.” “Oh, yes, that’s correct. Ok, ok, I will sell half,” says the Newar. We don’t know to say we need the land for this or that, for our offspring. That Newars are unable to say that they need the land for this and that purpose shows how simpleton they are.

Moreover, Newars themselves have begun to adopt this discourse and began to sell land. On this issue, an agricultural scientist in Kirtipur views such rhetoric and subsequent sale of land as “acting on other’s mastermind.”

Local Newar *dalāls* did not directly express such remark, maybe because they were/are also landowners and as it is an insulting remark. However, they have another way of say it—Why do you need to do hardship when you have this much property (land)? You can sell a part of it and live off comfortably with the money. This will be discussed next.

Why Do *Dukkha* Instead of Selling Land and Keeping Money in Bank/Building House?

Another common discourse is that Newars should sell a portion of their land and with the money build a house. I could not find any historical records, and there seems no practice, of selling land for building house before, and even soon after, the 1934 earthquake. With the modern concrete house becoming a status symbol after 1990, which was to some extent triggered by the 1989 earthquake, building house by selling land became a common practice. This practice was so prevalent after the land market boom of the 2000s, and especially after the 2015 earthquake, that *bum calān, chem dalān* (land gone, concrete house stood) has become a common saying by Newars in many parts of Kathmandu, including in Kirtipur.

In central Kathmandu, only with migration of government employees after 1950 was there a need of house rent and real state wealth. However, local landowners could not build house to rent out until the 1980s due to lack of money and credit (PADCO, 1986, p. 4). But after 1990, with increasing migration and growing land prices, Newars in the core Kathmandu city began to sell land and build houses to rent out. This practice started in Kirtipur only after the TU cut down student hostel facilities and closure of cafeteria in the 1990s, and the growing number of students began to live in rented rooms, and also after the rise of carpet industry in the 1990s, mainly worked by migrants. Currently, Kirtipur has higher rate of renting rooms and houses compared to other towns and villages of Kathmandu.

For example, a man from Kirtipur and now living in Nagaon says that such suggestion/discourse has truth:

If one sells land and gets 20 million rupees, one can buy some land elsewhere, also can build a house, and save

5 million in the bank and live off from its interest. It appears true, at the first glance... For uneducated persons, it sounds true. “See, uncle. Paddy won’t increase by just you going to the field every day, one *murī* of rice costs only this much, but this much interest on deposit you will receive.” When said such things, he thinks it is true.

Obviously, such rational calculations were made by landowners, including my participants, as agriculture is becoming unprofitable and non-viable. Interestingly, although all landowners did such calculations and held such view, my participants attributed such remarks mainly to *dalāls*. For example, the agricultural scientist mentioned above said:

There are many who says it is better to sell than to keep the land fallow; if money is kept in bank, you will at least get interest. They also say: When you have enough to live off by staying in house, why do hard work in the field? I will give you this million rupees. Then people will think about that lot of money. Many have sold land and kept money in the bank and are living off the interest.

The emphasis here is on the comfort of not cultivating land and living in a concrete house with amenities, or getting interest from money put in the bank, which they had never dreamed of earning in their lifetime.

Such discourse seems plausible when one sees that many Newars in Kirtipur are becoming well-off due to land sale and due to rent economy. The growing consumerism of Newars who until a decade or two ago had, and many still have, no decent occupation attests to it. Money from land sale led to an increase in financial institutions such as banks and cooperatives after 2000. Regarding this, one of my relatives (when he inquired about my study) probably correctly remarked: “Most of the money that are in the banks and cooperatives in Kathmandu belong to Newars.” Moreover, when I inquired about this with some of my friends who had access to financial data in one of the banks and a few cooperatives, they found that most of those who deposited money in fixed accounts in these financial institutions were the locals (Newars in case of Kirtipur and Tokha), and the majority of those who took loans were non-locals (non-Newars, especially Bahuns and Chhetris in Kirtipur and also in Tokha). This suggests that land-selling Newars are ascending into middle-class status, as defined by Liechty (2008/2003), on the basis of consumption.

However, it should be noted that building house, keeping money in the bank to live off on interest, and/or sending children to developed countries became possible only after 2006, after the end of Maoist insurgency, when land prices drastically rose in the Kirtipur area. Moreover, the choice of building house for rent by selling land is more indicative of lack of ways to productive investment of a large amount of money got from land sale.

Such discourse and practice suggest a land market where not only the land entrepreneurs, financial institutions, and construction businesses benefit but also the landowners when land prices are high.

Conclusion

The process of migration, land commodification, and urbanization has generated a discourse on land, its uses, and its ownership. Such discourse is based on the imaginations of potential uses of land by both the “owners” and “buyers,” which give new meaning and identity to the land. The above discourse has been analyzed from the perceptions and experiences of local landowners. In this discourse, the meaning of land changes from a productive asset or property for use value to a high-value commodity to be exchanged multiple times for speculation before ultimately used mainly for urban housing. The discourse on land ownership is directed toward generation of surplus land and inducing toward an economy based on living on rent on property, where house is becoming a consumption good and the center of consumptive activity, rather than a production unit, as a result of penetration of capitalism.

I have explained such discourse in terms of Logan and Molotch’s (1987) political economy theory of “city as a growth machine.” The “buyers,” especially the land speculators along with the *dalāls* employed by them, are the primary agents in the land market chain who alienate land from the “owners” for private gain. The local *dalāls* are a critical link between “owners” and speculators/realtors and benefit by match-making. The *dalāl* is not just a match-maker or intermediary but also a conveyor/communicator as well as creator of discourse, and both “owners” and the “buyers” project their own discourse through the *dālāl*. Although not in direct contact with “owners,” speculators and realtors have the main agency in changing the agricultural landscape, as they are the linchpin that has connections with local *dalāls*, local governments and politicians, and banks and financial institutions.

Continued effort at planning land development projects in spite of opposition in many projects and even failure in some (Faust et al., 2020) suggest that such projects are conceived more by the politicians and land entrepreneurs for their private gain than by either the landowners from whom land is taken and said to be benefit, or to address the “demand” of housing and planned settlement and resettlement of migrants and squatters. Moreover, the “self-financing” nature of such projects and lowering the threshold of consensus for launching them suggest that politicians and government have “rent-seeking” mentality.

Moreover, analysis of such discourse suggests that local Newar landowners fear losing their land, yet at the same time they wish to enjoy the consumerism and higher living standard that only the money from land sale can bring. Moreover, they are ambivalent toward the local *dalāls*, who, on the one hand, serve them by helping in gaining land and yet are influential in alienating land from them. This shows that landowners are not just victims/losers of capital accumulation by others, but they themselves are involved in the mechanisms of creating capital from land as a resource through land sale and land development.

Overall, such discourse on land is aimed at and/or is consequential of commodifying the land in Kathmandu, and should be considered as a part of commodification of land, perceptual generation of land surplus, creation of land market, and urbanization. Moreover, due to all of this, the physical and socio-economic environment of Kathmandu is changing in such a neoliberal and consumeristic way that landowners are unable to hold, or hold for long, their land, and the discourse by non-owners seem to be prevailing.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

I declare that this research has been conducted ethically.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data will not be shared, as my PhD dissertation is still going on.

Competing Interests

There is no competing interest with any individual or agency.

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