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Rectifying the anti-politics of citizen participation

Insights from the internal politics of a subaltern community in Nepal

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Abstract

Can 'participatory' approaches to development constitute a viable strategy for promoting citizenship? This paper addresses this question by scrutinising the equivocal reaction of a peasant community in Nepal to the unfolding of one such project, which supposedly reflected their empowerment as equal citizens. Drawing on the notion of 'symbolic citizenship' that values people's 'right to narrate' viewpoints that occur to them naturally, this study proposes a more promising approach that allows people to divulge dilemmas arising from real-world complexities, and then determine the terms of their empowerment, in defiance of the prevailing liberal democratic framework.

Keywords: citizenship, participation, empowerment, democracy, Nepal

Acknowledgements

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1   Introduction

'*Nothing special*...'. This statement was made by a peasant from an indigenous community in a village called Majuwa, whom I was interviewing about a flood control project during my fieldwork in western Nepal in 2000-2001.[1] In the village, there was a long tradition of corvée; it was customary for the indigenous people, almost all of whom worked as tenants or labourers for their landlords, to provide unpaid labour for the construction and maintenance of village infrastructure. Accordingly, the project had initially intended to build flood control structures with the mobilisation of their unremunerated labour, but the original plan had subsequently been changed to assign the obligation to the landowners, owing to resistance mounted by the indigenous group. The landlords were to pay a market rate wage to their tenants and labourers if the former were to deputise the latter to work on the construction site.

This change struck me as a major departure from the past practice of passing such obligations on to the indigenous tenants or agricultural labourers. This unfolding of events could possibly have been taken to reflect their empowerment, not only in that they were to be remunerated for their work for the project, but also given that the change had been brought about as a result of their own protest against the inequitable practice. However, this was not necessarily the case from the viewpoint of the indigenous people, as attested to by the statement above. Through my fieldwork, I had built up a rapport with various peasants from the indigenous group, who divulged stories of their historical plight and their daily struggles. I was expecting the informants to describe the suspension of the corvée rule as a major breakthrough in their resistance to the existing social order. On the contrary, few of them took the change in the project plan in their favour as a particularly important step forward; for them, it was just another incident in their continual struggles to redress social injustice.

Further investigation revealed that it was feasible to attribute this lukewarm reception to two major factors. First, the ostensibly immutable corvée practice had been ceaselessly re-negotiated, as a result of the indigenous people's years of assiduous resistance. Consequently, it had at times been relaxed to meet the particular circumstances in which it had been put into implementation. Accordingly, especially during the busy farming season, the landowners had provided a helping hand at project sites, and even offered the

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[1] This article is based on field research carried out in western Nepal in 2000-2001 to study how the rhetoric of 'people's participation' served as a governmental technology to insidiously prompt the rural populace to regard their empowerment as being subject to external blueprints. As pointed out by Rose (1999), studies of governmentality are empirical but not realist, in that they should not merely attempt to grasp 'reality' through intimate contacts with the people studied, but must clarify more profound meanings than are immediately conveyed by the results of interviews. Accordingly, this article makes sense of the failure of the flood control project, not only through people's accounts of what happened, but also by problematising a narrowly circumscribed normative framework lurking beneath the undertaking.

indigenous people some monetary rewards for their labour contributions, albeit at rare intervals (Masaki, 2004). The project's new modality was thus just an extension of the few exceptional cases that had occurred occasionally before.

It is crucial to make sense of their unenthusiastic response in this way, in view of the contested and negotiated nature of the dominator-dominated relations, to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of local power dynamics. At the same time, this does not capture the entirety of their apathetic reception, which also derived from their own internal politics of difference, preventing them from having a common set of strategies of wellbeing. As will be described in the following sections, the indigenous peasants were positioned multiply in rural society, and therefore viewed the suspension of the corvée rule in multifarious, different ways.

This paper focuses on this second factor behind the indigenous people's lukewarm response, whereby a binary distinction between oppressor and oppressed misled me to simplistically romanticise the collective crusade of the peasants against the corvée practice. Their status as first settlers was intersected by other aspects of social difference, such as class and gender. To belong to the group should not have been equated merely with speaking or thinking as 'aboriginals'. Depending on whom they interacted with, and what issues they attended to, the indigenous residents in Majuwa moved around a variety of positionalities available to them. As a result, different subsets of the group continually staked their claims and waged struggles with one another for hegemony, while each individual's subject position was fragmentary in that s/he usually belonged to multiple networks with diverse, often contradictory, objectives. Special attention could therefore have been paid to the mixedness or impurity of their community, without being fixated on the inside-outside dichotomy.

To delve into the 'restrained' reaction of the indigenous people from the viewpoint of the intra-group tension, arising from their multiple, fluid subject positions, is to call to attention fundamental problems relating to participatory development projects that seek to advance citizenship among a marginal group (hereinafter called projects promoting 'citizen engagement' or 'citizen participation'). Citizen engagement has been attracting growing attention among development researchers and practitioners, as a way to enable people to be 'makers and shapers' of initiatives for their own development (Cornwall, 2002: 16). This move has arisen out of the realisation that past participatory projects tended to condense the complexities of everyday life, and to ignore the competing forms of local realities (for example Guijt and Shah, 1998; Mosse, 1994). Underlying such haphazard knowledge generation was the propensity of the proponents of participation to view grassroots communities as discrete, homogenous entities, and to overemphasise insider-outsider dichotomies while overlooking intra-community divisions.

The new strategy of citizen engagement supposedly rejuvenates such conventional participatory approaches, by allowing the disadvantaged to play a more active role in thrashing out issues and taking decisions concerning '*which* changes in *whom* and in *whose* interests' (Cornwall and Coelho, 2006: 24). In this way, participatory approaches could genuinely recognise the agency of citizens to steer the courses of their own lives, imbued with dilemmas arising from conflicting demands held by local actors. Even in the current phase of citizen participation, however, although more attention has come to be paid to underprivileged people in a locality, the past mistake is being repeated in that their experiences of oppression are liable to be homogenised without 'contextual understandings of the politics of everyday life' (Robins *et al*., 2008: 1085). Simplistic oppressor-oppressed dichotomies are usually at work in contemporary efforts, which thus tend to equate citizen engagement with a linear process of moving away from subjection toward 'liberal citizenship' (ibid: 1076), drawing on such liberal democratic framing as is summarised below.

First, deprived people, irrespective of their 'multiple political identities, discourses and social relations' (Robins, *et al*., 2008: 1079), are mandated to 'act like citizens' on the taken-for-granted assumption that marginal people should invariably strive to be liberated from ongoing relations of dependency. Although the poorest are in a position to gain the most from social transformation, they may opt to secure the patronage of traditional leaders or other 'big men', because they often find it costly to challenge the ongoing social order, and therefore are ambivalent about doing so (Cleaver, 2004). '[C]lientelism may not be quite the negative political form that liberal democratic theory tends to suggest' (Hickey and du Toit, 2007: 16) in that marginal people's strategies include maintaining cordial relations with the powerful to secure their patronage. Such a conformist approach as is problematised by Robins *et al*. (2008) is typified by a book published by the research director of a leading non-governmental organisation (NGO): 'Why active citizenship? ... Active citizenship has inherent merits: people living in poverty must have a voice in deciding their own destiny, rather than be treated as passive recipients of welfare or government action. ... Rather, people must be recognised as 'subjects', conscious of and actively demanding their rights' (Green, 2008: 12-13).

The implicit exclusion of people's choice to remain as 'passive recipients' leads us to the second issue raised by Robins *et al*. (2008), namely, that a discussion-based style of citizen engagement is imposed at the expense of 'non-deliberative' forms of political communication, such as the mobilisation of patron-client relations. 'Citizen-clients deploy a repertoire of tactics ... rather than an ordered, linear process of negotiation, deliberation and consensus seeking' (ibid: 1082). As pointed out by the critics of deliberative democracy (for example, Young, 2000), straightforward assertions are privileged in public discussion to 'smooth the path', while such circuitous, halting expressions as 'nothing special' are viewed as

inadmissible and having no proper place[2] and should thus be withdrawn as 'private' matters. Such dualism of public and private domains pressurises deprived people into subordinating their ambivalent positionalities stemming from real-world complexities. 'For people living in poverty ... the experience of entering a participatory space can be extremely intimidating' (Cornwall and Coelho, 2006: 13).

Because citizen participation proceeds in these narrowly circumscribed liberal democratic terms, contemporary projects that promote citizenship among marginal people 'end up undermining cultural autonomy, thereby disrupting their potential to exercise agency' (Robins *et al.*,, 2008: 1083). The constricting nature belied in current efforts for citizen engagement resonates with the earlier criticism, referred to above, about the formalistic style of knowledge generation under past participatory projects. Under the guise of 'citizenship', people continue to be required to say and do what is expected of them, and 'tone down their demands, present these 'nicely' and responsibly, so that they benefit from the ... largesse' (ibid: 1084).

A clue to overcoming this persistent problem of domesticating deprived people can be found in Mouffe's assertion about the need to recognise internal divisions inherent in their community. A marginal group is composed of 'adversaries', or 'friendly enemies ... who share a common symbolic space but ... want to organize this common symbolic space in different ways' (Mouffe, 2000: 13) because it overlaps with other networks with different goals and commitments. As a consequence, first, disadvantaged people's respective subject position is precariously constituted amid the ensemble of multiple positionalites available to them, to bring about the fluidity of each person's own political persuasion.[3] Second, owing to the multiplicity of the positions held by different members,[4] a coalition of deprived people is composed of and riven by various subsets that compete with each other for hegemony.

'Agonism' among 'adversaries' or 'friendly enemies', who share a collective form of political identification, is therefore an essential feature of group struggles, as opposed to 'antagonism' among arch rivals who seek to defeat each other (Mouffe, 2000: 13). When undertaking a project promoting citizen participation, it is crucial to avoid being content merely to assign a single collective identity to a group of oppressed people, and to take into consideration the multiple forms of their struggles for survival.

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[2] As elucidated by Li's study on Central Sulawesi, Indonesia (2007), the beneficiaries of a development intervention encounter various dilemmas, given that, if it is to produce gains, it also incurs costs. As a consequence, it is not rare for people to feel ambivalence toward a development project. See footnote 15 for an example of such trade-offs.

[3] This is exemplified by the dilemma mentioned above about whether to form an alliance of solidarity in such a manner as to face up to oppressors, or to maintain patron-client ties that can be deployed to facilitate access to their favours.

[4] Feminism has long called into question the essentialist category of women. For example, Spivak (1999: 147-148) criticises international feminism promoting 'global sisterhood' for having often overlooked the specific material conditions, histories and struggles of 'Third World' women, thus bringing about exclusion 'from within'.

How can participatory development projects promote citizenship among a marginal group, while at the same time taking into consideration the agonistic nature of collective struggles? The disadvantaged may possibly agree on the broader goal of attaining a more egalitarian order, but what type of a society is to be pursued and how it is to be sought are open to diverse interpretations. It is therefore crucial that citizen engagement begins 'from the perspectives of citizens themselves' (Robins *et al.*, 2008: 1085). How is it possible, then, to allow deprived people to genuinely use their discretion, in order to manoeuvre through the everyday labyrinth by themselves?

In this regard, it is useful to draw on Homi Bhabha's notion of the 'right to narrate' (2003: 180), aimed at enabling the disadvantaged to propagate those views that are not filtered in the public sphere where there exists a biased focus on 'articulateness' and 'orderliness'. Instead of encouraging underprivileged people to become a public-spirited collectivity while eliminating their plurality and difference, the right to narrate seeks to allow them to represent their own lives in such a manner as occurs to them most naturally, in an arena free from the protocol of decorum. Only in this way, can the ground be laid for the irreconcilable conflicts of views to come into light, which would otherwise have to be withdrawn into the private sphere.

To further cite Bhabha (2004: xvii), the notion of 'symbolic citizenship' can be usefully deployed under participatory development projects that seek to advance citizenship among a marginal group. This novel conception is similar but is not equivalent to the mainstream notion of 'citizen participation', which makes the pretence of valuing the agency of citizens, but only within the confines of a 'normative framework encoded in ... [the above-mentioned] hegemonic conceptions of liberal democracy' (Robins *et al.*, 2008: 1084). Symbolic citizenship, on the contrary, acknowledges the right to narrate an alternative standard by which citizens' conduct is judged.

This paper takes up the case of the flood control project in Majuwa, which the peasant quoted at the beginning described as 'nothing special', and highlighted the limitation of the dominator-dominated divide that glosses over the agonistic aspects of collective endeavours. As will be explained below, the project had similarly drawn on the simplistic oppressor-oppressed dichotomy and thus failed to mobilise the indigenous people. By delving into both my own binary misconception and the misapprehensions of the project, I hope to elucidate the problematic nature of the normative convictions lurking beneath contemporary efforts for citizen participation which, as pointed out by Robins, Cornwall and von Lieres (2008), box marginal people squarely into a pre-given underclass category and filter out their voices in public deliberations. With recourse to the notion of symbolic citizenship, this paper intends to explore an alternative approach that values people's right to narrate the irremediable tension entailed in their collective claims, which would otherwise recede into the background.

2 Depoliticising citizen participation: The case of a development project in Nepal

The village of Majuwa, where the flood control project in question was implemented, is situated in Bardiya, the third Tarai district from the western border with India. The Tarai, which is an extension of India's Gangetic Plains, stretches along the southern frontier with India (see Figure 1). In Majuwa, as of November 2000, there were a total of 138 households. Of these, 38 were those of Pahadis of hill origin, whereas the majority of the remaining village population were original settlers called Tharus, including the peasant who depicted the project as 'nothing special', referred to previously.

Figure 1: Bardiya district, Nepal
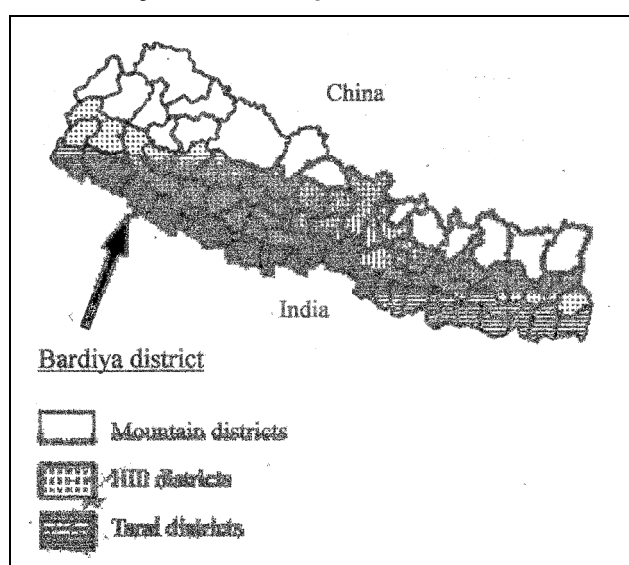
Source: Author's own

The historical dominance of Pahadis, who long relegated Tharus to be their underlings, originated in the 19th century, when the southern Tarai plain was mostly a sparsely inhabited jungle, and was regarded by the then ruler engrossed in state building as a frontier for new cultivation with its fertile soil and sub-tropical climate, and thus as a promising source of revenues. Various resettlement programmes were consequently undertaken for those Pahadis loyal to the regime, residing in the hill region, to migrate to the Tarai, in order that they would assist as local landlords in strengthening the Nepalese state by extracting surpluses from the peasantry (Shrestha, 2001).[5]

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[5] The colonisation by highlanders not only contributed to furthering the integration of the southern plain into the Nepalese state, but also resulted in the formation of a historic coalition of the landowning class with central leaders and officials, which long dominated the Nepalese polity (Blaikie *et al*., 1980). It is this time-honoured alliance privileging local Pahadi landlords that a growing number of militant groups of southerners (including Tharus) are presently challenging through their mass movements and violent protests in many places in the Tarai.

This was also the case with Bardiya, which was thinly populated, mostly by Tharus, until the ruler granted large tracts of land in the district in the 19th century, as rewards to his loyal Pahadi courtiers and generals. As a result, the majority of Tharus became tenants or labourers for their new landlords, while Pahadi immigrants were given power, not only to levy land rents but also to exact from Tharus unpaid labour for the construction and maintenance of village infrastructure,[6] in the name of introducing development into the backwater. Local Tharus consequently had to suffer from the double burden of high rents and corvée obligations (Robertson and Mishra, 1997).

Pahadis thereafter continued to maintain control of governmental programmes, drawing on their caste and kinship affiliations with government functionaries. This was also the case with major land reform programmes in the 1960s and 1970s, in which Tharus had been deceived into waiving their rights to land. As a consequence, the ownership of land remained skewed in favour of Pahadis, even at the time of my fieldwork in 2000-2001.

At the same time, it was becoming less and less feasible to make sense of local power dynamics in Majuwa solely in terms of such Pahadi-Tharu rivalries. In Nepal, the Panchayat system,[7] in which the king had assumed sovereignty as a symbol of national unity, collapsed in 1990, when various political parties joined hands in organising mass movements. The ensuing advent of the multiparty system, resulting in the relaxation of various political restrictions, such as those hindering freedom of speech and association, had opened up larger space for deprived segments of the populace to raise their grievances (for example Bhattachan, 2000; Kisan, 2005). Accordingly, village-level politics in Majuwa came to be evolved at more complex intersections of the power struggles, which manifested themselves along the lines of ethnic, class, gender and other differences.

It is against this background that the flood control project was launched, on the simplistic presumption that it would be desirable to assist the Tharu community to collectively bargain with Pahadis, drawing on the dominator-dominated dichotomy. As will be delineated below, however, all Tharus should not have been regarded as equally downtrodden, but as differently situated according to their diverse social and economic status, their differing proximity to political influence and their varied involvement in organised activities. Moreover, Tharus and Pahadis were not always at odds with each other. Depending on what issues

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[6] Given that Tharus had been engaged in rain-fed agriculture in Bardiya, new landlords sought to boost agricultural production by setting about the development of irrigation systems, and entrusted Tharus to construct and maintain waterways. Moreover, Pahadis exacted unpaid labour from Tharus for other public works, such as the construction and maintenance of village roads and bridges. This tradition of corvée still lingered on in Bardiya at the time of my fieldwork, and its major features remained largely unscathed in most places, namely, those who worked in the field were responsible for building and repairing irrigation canals and other infrastructure.

[7] The Panchayat system started in 1962, after the king dismissed the government run by the Nepali Congress party on the grounds that the multiparty system was unsuited to nation building, by presenting himself as standing aloof from fractional feuding. Although, just as in India, a four-tier structure of *panchayats* or assemblies was instituted, all the political parties were outlawed and dissident opinions were suppressed (Brown, 1996).

were at stake, the two groups often cooperated. The historical Pahadi rule thus did not carry a unidimensional, unambiguous connotation, but had varying, unfixed implications for Tharus.

2.1   Project objectives

The flood control project, entitled Upgrading Disaster Management Capacity in Nepal,[8] started with the support of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in 1996. Its major objective was to enhance the capacity of local communities in disaster management, by assisting some selected flood-affected villages to construct riverbank protection structures. The project began operating in Majuwa in 2001, after completing its activities in the districts of Kavre and Chitwan, where UNDP had assisted people from six selected villages to set up their committees, and to plan and manage the construction of flood control works by themselves. In line with the then dominant view of local communities as homogenous entities, prevailing among donors working in Nepal, the project had failed to address the internal politics of difference in the six villages. Because the project had encountered difficulty in mobilising people in several conflict-ridden localities, its report recommended thereafter supporting areas with cohesive ties among residents, on the grounds that '[h]omogenous communities can make quick and effect [*sic*] decisions' (UNDP, 1998: 12).

UNDP had a budgetary surplus from the project's earlier activities, and selected Majuwa as an additional target area in 2000, given its ostensibly 'commendable' past records of community mobilisation for public works. However, the project manager, who was newly hired in the same year, knew of the corvée tradition in Bardiya, and was aware that Tharus had historically been forced to make free labour contributions, contrary to the distorted impression formed by the donor. Moreover, the project manager learnt during his reconnaissance visit that it was traditional in Majuwa for Pahadis, who led village meetings on how to implement public works projects, to decide to mobilise Tharu labour by default. The majority of the membership of beneficiary committees of village public works had also tended to be filled by Pahadis who had usually dominated the proceedings of village gatherings.

The project manager was therefore determined to assist Tharus, who had been customarily marginalised in the implementation process of village public works, to make legitimate claims of the project. The 2001 undertaking accordingly attempted to grant the disadvantaged the right to participate in the project on a par with Pahadis, through the allocation of reserved seats on the beneficiary committee. The committee was to be composed of eight members,

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[8] The information about the project's actual intentions and processes was gathered mainly through interviews with the project manager as well as his supervisors in UNDP during my fieldwork in Nepal. The meetings took place both in the agency's headquarters in Kathmandu and in the vicinity of Majuwa.

four posts of which were to be assigned to Tharus. This power-sharing arrangement marked a step forward in the promotion of community participation, in that it acknowledged the internal rivalry between Pahadis and Tharus, although its oppressor-oppressed dichotomy subsequently caused the plan to end in failure, as will be discussed below.

In this way, the project manager used his discretion in reorienting the project to address the intra-community tension, in defiance of the project's official strategy of promoting 'community-based' disaster management, overlooking the differences among local people. Underlying the resolve to introduce the affirmative measure were the growing signs in Nepal that past participatory projects had failed to rectify the entrenched unequal distribution of power and wealth,[9] in line with the global trend away from the conventional practice of homogenising the experience of a local community, described previously.

Moreover, the project manager was seeking to rejuvenate the project as an effort to promote citizenship amongst Tharus. At the time, there was a mushrooming growth of social movements for the cause of Tharus in various parts of Bardiya which, however, was not observable in Majuwa or its surrounding areas. The power-sharing arrangement, provided for by UNDP assistance, according to the project manager, was intended to help enhance the skills and confidence of Tharus in Majuwa, in order that they would feel more confident about raising their grievances over broader socio-political circumstances, and eventually start engaging in public campaigns. His main concern was to enable those hitherto excluded from the mainstream society to articulate their voices, instead of merely getting them to take on the execution of the project. This intentionality was in line with the emerging worldwide agenda of reorienting participatory approaches to the promotion of citizenship among disadvantaged groups.

2.2   Project results

2.2.1   Failure of power-sharing arrangement

The project failed to achieve its intended results because Tharus declined to exercise their rights to participate in it as equal citizens of the village. First, few Tharus were willing to assume membership of the beneficiary committee. To fill all the four posts reserved for Tharus, one Pahadi landlord had to coerce his Tharu employees to take on the task, by threatening possible dismissal. Second, those Tharus assigned to the committee did not attend all the meetings; even while in attendance they refrained from actively participating in the proceedings. According to their personal reports, the appointed Tharus backed off from

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[9] For example, the UNDP-assisted Participatory District Development Programme (PDDP), which the agency hailed as its 'flagship' project promoting community-based development in the country, had been criticised by the Maoists, who had been waging their 'people's war' since the mid-1990s, for being insensitive to the entrenched inequalities in society. The UNDP office in Nepal eventually had to publicly admit that 'social mobilisation efforts ... run the risk of being hijacked by the relatively better-off members of the community or by political interests' (2002: 106).

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the project because their hand-to-mouth way of life deprived them of leisure time, or because of their lack of command of the Nepali language used in the gatherings. However, these were convenient excuses disguising their deep-rooted resistance to the binary Pahadi-Tharu dichotomy. As will be explained at a later point, their subject positions were not constrained by their standing as the underlings of Pahadis.

Lurking beneath the project's power-sharing strategy was the liberal democratic framing that Robins, Cornwall and von Lieres (2008) attribute to wider contemporary efforts for citizen participation, which were referred to earlier. First, the project intended to encourage Tharus to 'act like citizens' who would seek to liberate themselves from their oppressors. Accordingly, the beneficiary committee was formed in such a manner as to represent the two 'opposing' camps, that is Pahadis and Tharus, based on a binary misconception that failed to take into account other forms of struggles that the indigenous people engaged in. Tharus were plurally positioned in the composite society riven not only by the Pahadi-Tharu divide but also by other social and political coordinates. Although different segments of the indigenous group – such as a women's group and a cluster of newcomers, both of which will be described below – had their own particular aspirations, no special effort was made to include them in the beneficiary committee or to reflect their viewpoints in the management of the project.

Second, by requiring Tharus to engage in public deliberations in official committee meetings distinct from everyday settings, the project pressed them into making a pretence of acting for the 'greater good' of the society. Given the public-private divide that the project had unintentionally made, while uncritically adopting public discussion as the political strategy, Tharus felt obliged to withhold their multiple viewpoints as 'private' matters, and instead to make collective claims for the cause of the entire Tharu community. However, because Tharus were also part of other networks and alliances, their subject positions were multifaceted and even included contradictory elements. There was therefore ambivalence among them about the project's plan to get the whole indigenous group to engage in joint bargaining with Pahadis, disregarding the multiple forms of their struggles.

2.2.2 *Tharus' ambivalence about direct protest*

The project thereafter progressed in an unexpected manner. One part of the hidden agenda of the project's power-sharing arrangement was to allow Tharus to bargain over the corvée practice, which had historically been the modus operandi of village public works, and was also to be applied to the project as a matter of course. However, without recourse to the reserved seats in the committee, a number of Tharus openly refused to offer unpaid labour, when requested by Pahadi leaders to go to the project site. As a result of this direct protest, the construction of riverbank protection structures did not get underway. By coincidence, at the time, another road construction project was about to begin with Tharu labour input. Moreover, the busy season for farmers was fast approaching at the onset of the monsoon. These factors helped provide the grounds for them to begrudge abiding by the corvée rule.

As the donor and village leaders came under increasing pressure to start the construction of flood control works, it was decided by the Pahadi elected representative to assign the obligation to landowners instead of passing it to their employees. Landlords, a majority of

whom were Pahadis, had to pay a market rate wage to their Tharu workers, if they were to entrust the task to the latter. This marked a major departure from the historically predominant pattern of non-payment for Tharu labour contributions

In this way, the emancipatory move to exempt Tharus from the corvée obligation did not stem from the project's power-sharing arrangement, but arose from their direct refusal to provide unpaid labour outside the public arena for citizen engagement prescribed by the project. This corroborates one of the two issues raised by Robins *et al.*, (2008) concerning the normative convictions underlying wider efforts for citizen participation, namely, the preference for public consultation over 'non-deliberative' forms of political communication, such as protest, which, in the case of Majuwa, had resulted in the suspension of the corvée practice. Tharus had chosen the overt action, among 'a repertoire of tactics ... rather than an ordered, linear process of negotiation, deliberation and consensus seeking' (ibid: 1082).

At the same time, this unforeseen turnaround of the project was portrayed as 'nothing special' by the peasant quoted at the beginning of this article. As mentioned in the introduction, moreover, few of the other Tharu peasants considered the suspension of the corvée rule a major leap in their struggles against Pahadi dominance, although for the first time the labour obligation was imposed on the landlords in lieu of their tenants and labourers. This unenthusiastic response points to the viability of the other issue raised by Robins *et al.*, (2008), relating to the prevailing presumption that citizenship is advanced when people are liberated from inequitable relations. Accordingly, I had also anticipated that Tharus would be delighted with the change in the project, which freed them from the corvée obligation, an integral part of the inequitable social order. Their lukewarm reception attests to the inadequacy of such a normative proposition.

3   Rethinking citizen participation: towards an empowered sense of selfhood

There was a disjuncture between Tharus' own sense of empowerment and the project's primary focus on mitigating their plight under Pahadi rule, or my misconception that they were overjoyed with the suspension of the corvée tradition historically imposed by Pahadis. Neither the project planner nor I was immune to the normative ideas of expecting Tharus to 'act like citizens' facing up to their oppressors. As noted repeatedly, their subject positions were not confined to their identity as the subordinates of Pahadis, and were intersected by other various networks with different commitments. This section will elucidate their multiple and fluid subject positions, and the resultant ambivalence they felt when required to behave as 'responsible citizens' who would suppress their unstable positionalities, in order that the project would move forward in an 'orderly' manner. This section will conclude by considering an alternative strategy that avoids exerting such normalising control.

3.1   Multifaceted, fluid subjectivity

3.1.1   Party politics

The Panchayat system in Nepal collapsed in 1990, marking the start of the multiparty system, which played a central role in adding to the fluid nature of the positionalities of Tharus and Pahadis. Party politics opened up ample opportunities for the two groups to work together,[10] not only to canvass the village for votes but even to ameliorate the predicament of Tharus, as exemplified by the patronage politics discussed below. However, neither the project's attempt to operationalise the beneficiary committee, nor my overestimation of the significance of the subsequent cessation of the corvée rule, was founded on an adequate understanding of the party politics that necessitated alliances between the two ostensibly opposing groups.

There existed two major parties that held sway in Majuwa, that is the Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist-Leninist (CPN-UML) and the Nepali Congress (NC) party. The CPN-UML continued to take up all the elected posts in the village in the 1990s although the NC, which assumed power at the centre during most of the decade, did not fall far short of the poll of the CPN-UML in every election.

The Tharu peasant, quoted earlier, who described the alteration in the project modality as 'nothing special', was also an enthusiastic adherent and worker of the CPN-UML. It is feasible to make sense of his and other Tharus' restrained reaction to the suspension of the corvée rule from the viewpoint of the party competition. The project's unfolding was instigated by Pahadis affiliated with the NC who had plotted to incite Tharus to refuse their corvée obligation. In Majuwa, it had been customary for NC-supporting Pahadis to obstruct the elected representatives from the CPN-UML, who were in charge of executing public works projects. There was ambivalence among Tharus, a majority of whom supported the CPN-UML, about its Pahadi leaders floundering while dealing with their counterparts from the NC. The CPN-UML commanded considerable support among Tharus partly because the party had worked to redress their plight during the Panchayat era as an underground organisation (Masaki, 2003).

At the same time, not all Tharus supported the CPN-UML, but some of them were NC followers. Party politics thus bred 'intra-group' tensions among Tharus. The 'splits' within the Tharu community were further exacerbated by multiparty rivalries for patronage distribution. In 1994, when the CPN-UML was in power at the centre, the party intervened in the

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[10] During the 1990s, party politics degenerated into a 'naked power struggle' (Hachhethu, 2000: 91), causing frequent changes of leadership within central government. The heightened levels of political competition prompted party bosses at the centre to exert pressure on their local cadres to strengthen support bases. This was also the case with Majuwa, where Pahadi party workers felt compelled to align themselves with prominent Tharus, with a view to raising their party's popularity among Tharus who constituted the majority of the voters.

operations of various line agencies, in such a manner as to divert governmental programmes to its favoured voters throughout the country (Hachhethu, 2000). In Majuwa, the peasant who uttered 'nothing special' helped the CPN-UML to grant small plots of land to some Tharu peasants and himself, who were in support of the party, when it used the government's ongoing programme for the landless, for its partisan purposes. The reverse subsequently occurred when the NC re-seized power at the centre in 1996 and arranged for other Tharus to obtain land from the government.[11]

Accordingly, although Tharus had generally been in a predicament under the historical Pahadi dominance, their struggles to overcome it were not always played out within the parameter of the Pahadi-Tharu divide. As is exemplified by the land distribution scheme, Tharus capitalised on their connections with Pahadis affiliated with the political parties, in competition with each other along party lines. This does not tally with the assumption guiding the project's beneficiary committee, intended to assist Tharus in collectively bargaining with Pahadis, on the simplistic assumption that the former could be considered together as the underlings of the latter. As stated above, underlying such a polarised analysis of village dynamics was the oppressor-oppressed dichotomy, which diverged from everyday political life in Majuwa.

3.1.2   Gender struggles

In Majuwa, the politics concerning corvée obligations or land rights were dominated by men. To praise the direct protest that Tharus staged outside the project's power-sharing arrangement, which resulted in the cessation of the corvée rule, therefore risks masking the ongoing exclusion of women from the public domain. For Tharu women, it was not only a blessing in that it exempted them from the corvée obligation, but possibly meant a misfortune in that Tharu males were at the centre of the informal renegotiations over the modality of the project. In this sense, the change in its initial plan was accompanied by the implicit reproduction and furthering of patriarchy.

Similarly, a gender-insensitive view was evident in the project's failed attempt to operationalise the beneficiary committee, through which Tharus would collectively face up to Pahadis. The project document specified that 'women in the project's target local communities will be proportionately represented' (UNDP, 1995: 16), and the project manager accordingly allocated four out of the eight posts of the beneficiary committee to two Pahadi women and two Tharu females. However, this was largely a perfunctory provision that merely followed the tacit rule of adopting 'gender-sensitive' measures, prevailing among donors; no other provisions were made by the project to rectify in earnest the past practice of the village, where only men gathered in meetings to discuss how to implement public works. The two Tharu women, assigned to the beneficiary committee, were not selected from among those

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[11] For a case study of the politics of land rights in a neighbouring village, see Masaki (2006).

with leadership credentials. Moreover, the four female committee members, both Pahadi and Tharu, remained reticent in the meetings, given their lack of experience in interacting with male leaders in public. The major concern of the project was overtly on getting (male) Tharus to bargain with (male) Pahadis. As a result, just as in the case of the unexpected turnaround of the project, the power-sharing arrangement was not necessarily greeted with delight by Tharu women, although it was to give opportunities for the indigenous community to which they also belonged to make legitimate claims of the project.

Just as in party politics, female activism in Majuwa cut across the Pahadi-Tharu line, as is exemplified by a mothers' group, which a group of women, both Pahadi and Tharu, started in 1993 to address issues hitherto overlooked by male leaders, such as sanitation, hygiene, alcoholism and domestic violence.12 In Nepal, with the constitutional guarantee of gender equity, in tandem with the removal of restrictions inhibiting the freedom of association, women's groups had sprung up throughout the country during the 1990s. The mushrooming of women's movements had provided a favourable ground for the emergence of the mothers' group in Majuwa. Its founding members had been inspired by women groups burgeoning in surrounding localities.

Care must therefore be taken to avoid uncritically assigning a collective identity to Tharus, among whom there existed no natural convergence of interests. Tharus' interactions with Pahadis were not necessarily confrontational but were congenial, as is illustrated by the female group in which both Tharu and Pahadi women joined hands for their own cause. Tharu males did successfully exert pressure to drop their corvée tasks, through their direct protest against the project's original plan. Although the turnaround was welcome from the viewpoint of the indigenous community as a whole, it entailed sidelining Tharu women, many of whom would have liked to see the amelioration of the long-standing gender discrimination in the running of public works projects, as much as the suspension of the corvée practice.

3.1.3   Newcomers' settlement

Another factor that further diminished the cohesiveness of the Tharu identity was a settlement of 15 Tharu households located at the southern end of Majuwa. The residents had been forced to abandon their previous settlement in a neighbouring village, which was washed downstream as a result of a severe flood, and had subsequently been squatting in Majuwa after clearing some of the woodland in the early 1960s. The newcomers' area had not been allocated a fair share of village public works. This was because, according to a local

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12 In Majuwa, all the posts of the elected representatives had been filled by males, except for one seat reserved for a female. The male-dominant village administration had largely failed to address issues that were of particular concern to women, such as those stated in the main text. Within two years after the mothers' group was formed, its membership swelled to encompass more than 80 women. Nearly 30 of them were Pahadis and about 50 were Tharus.

informant, the 'native' Tharu residents had colluded with Pahadis leaders to pre-empt the decisions concerning resource distribution.

The flood control project was no exception, in that its power-sharing arrangement was not geared to their particular plight, but was targeted at the Tharu community as a whole. The project was accordingly designed to protect only the northern end of the village inhabited by the 'native' Tharus, disregarding the settlement of the Tharu newcomers in the south. Majuwa is of quadrangular shape (see Figure 2), two sides of which are bordered by a winding river, which causes adjacent land to be washed away, both in the north and the south. Although the migrant Tharus had reservations about the plan protecting only the northern side, they had no opportunity to raise them since no measure was taken to reflect their views in the running of the project. It was therefore unsurprising that the project proposal was tabled as a foregone conclusion, and was accepted in the beneficiary committee.

Figure 2: Majuwa
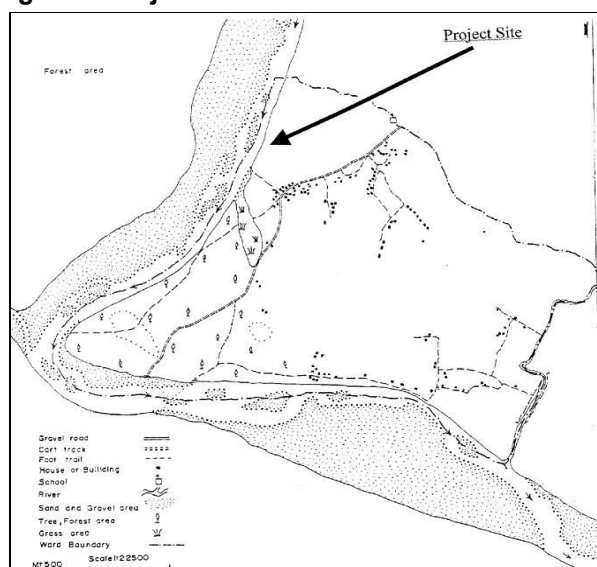
Source: Author's own

The migrant Tharus felt ambivalent about the subsequent suspension of the corvée rule, because what was of particular concern to them was the continued discrimination against them by their fellow Tharus. In a way, it was a welcome change, which was to relieve them from unpaid work. At the same time, it was an insignificant matter that would not contribute to their long-term wellbeing, in that it would neither stop the erosion of the riverbank that was posing a danger to their settlement, nor ameliorate their underclass status within the Tharu community. The newcomers could not feel that they were being adequately recognised as citizens in the village as long as their special concerns were not seriously attended to. They

were not invited to the beneficiary committee[13], nor was the southern end of the village included as a target site.

3.2   People's right to narrate their lives

To summarise the overall situation in Majuwa, village politics were played out at the complex intersections of differences, not only in ethnicity but also in party affiliation, gender and class. This had added to the multiple and fluid nature of the positionalities of Tharus, who were far from being a cohesive entity, and were not always in confrontation with Pahadis. It was therefore inept for the project to attempt to set up the beneficiary committee and to expect the indigenous group to speak with a voice and to challenge the historical Pahadi rule placing them at a disadvantage.

This does not mean, however, that the Tharus' struggles to rectify their status as the underlings of Pahadis should be discarded altogether, given that the Pahadi-Tharu division was a main source of village politics. The project could have proffered, to use the term coined by Young (2000), 'differentiated solidarity', locating the Tharus' campaigns against the Pahadi dominance within a broader context, in which various forms of oppression were challenged by different subsets of the indigenous community, such as Tharu women and migrant Tharus.

Contrary to the prevailing normative view that citizenship is advanced when deprived people are liberated from particular oppressor-oppressed relations (Robins *et al*., 2008), the case of Majuwa indicates that citizen engagement cannot be reduced to a logical, step-by-step process of moving away from a state of subjection. For example, we could not determine with certainty if the newcomer Tharus should have given priority to their separate desire to have the southern side of the village covered by the project to safeguard their settlement, or to the broader interest of the entire Tharu community to overturn the corvée obligation. Moreover, it would not be feasible to decide straightforwardly whether Tharu women should have been content with the unexpected unfolding of the project resulting in their exemption from unpaid work, or should have resented it in that it was driven by their male compatriots who had patriarchally excluded them from the public domain.

The case of Majuwa illustrates the importance of heeding the agonistic nature of collective struggles (Mouffe, 2000). At the same time, Mouffe's view fails to address one of the two major issues raised by Robins *et al*., (2008), namely, the imposition of public deliberation as the political strategy of the vulnerable populace. Although the notion of agonism helps to evade a strict focus on a given 'public' identity, to allow more room for those views 'privately'

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[13] It is to be noted, however, that even if the deprived Tharu settlement had been invited to the committee, its representatives probably would have only been able to make an 'impaired inquiry', given the tacit norm of privileging 'articulateness' inherent in public speaking (Masaki, 2009: 78).

held by various segments of the group to be aired in the open, 'the public/private distinction is not abandoned, but is [only] constructed in a different way' (Mouffe, 2005: 85). Citizen engagement continues to take place in a public domain, where those subjugated to multiple forms of discrimination are more likely to be required to suppress their particular needs and wants, as exemplified by Tharu women or the newcomer Tharus in Majuwa. Public deliberation is thus liable to compel the most needy to sacrifice their minority aspirations, in order to allow the promotion of citizen participation to proceed in a predetermined manner, usually in favour of the more privileged sections of the vulnerable populace.

Most probably, Mouffe would respond to such a critique by stressing the importance of ceaselessly ascertaining and acting on those particular choices that are sidelined when a group decision is taken. The shared will thus defined by a community should be viewed as a 'vanishing point' (Mouffe, 2005: 85), something that can never satisfy all needs and wants. It is therefore imperative for those involved in projects that promote citizen participation, to engage in a continual process of evolving a political alliance, while salvaging subaltern voices that are kept off its agenda.

However, such a general rule does not in itself ensure against the danger of silencing the circuitous viewpoints held by the most disadvantaged.14 In this regard, Bhabha's notion of 'symbolic citizenship' (2004: xvii) holds promise, in that it specifically problematises the prevailing practice of filtering the voices of oppressed people with recourse to the public-private divide. It thus pays special attention to those personal views held by the underprivileged that would not rise to the surface in public. It is a novel type of citizenship that honours their 'right to narrate' (Bhabha 2003: 180) to represent their lives in the manner that comes to them most naturally. Rather than insidiously regulating the manner in which citizen engagement is promoted, within a 'narrowly circumscribed liberal democratic framework' (Robins *et al*., 2008: 1083), it accords marginal people the leverage to set the terms of their own citizen participation. For this to take place, it is crucial for the advocates of citizen engagement to assure deprived people that 'to tell their story is to know that there is a 'public culture' in which it will be heard and could be acted upon' (Bhabha, 2003: 181).

To nurture such 'an assured empowered sense of selfhood' (Bhabha, 2003: 181) requires us to engage in informal, spontaneous encounters with the disadvantaged, with a view to creating an atmosphere in which they feel at ease to divulge their intricate life stories that fall outside the acceptable bounds of citizen engagement, which thus would remain untold otherwise. Even such a naturalistic approach could not entirely erase people's reactivity, that

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[14] Mouffe's 'agonistic' view of collective struggles can lapse into a procedural matter of seeking a reasonable compromise, like the deliberative democracy tradition that proposes reaching a rational middle ground through equal and open interactions. To avoid this risk, rather than merely insisting, like Mouffe, that the arbitrariness of political decisions must be ceaselessly called into question, it is crucial to spell out what specific 'new hegemony [is to be] articulated through new egalitarian social relations' (Mouffe, 2005: 86), as this paper intends to do by drawing on Bhabha's notion of 'symbolic citizenship'.

is, the influence of the observer's presence on them. At the same time, without trying to conduct such ethnographic interactions, those involved in the promotion of citizen participation could not even begin to gain a nuanced understanding of the agonistic nature of their collective struggles. The concluding section will further consider how best to promote citizenship among marginal actors involved in development projects, while recognising their right to represent their own lives.

4   Conclusions and provocations

As illustrated by the case of the Majuwa, it is normally implausible for a group of marginal people to define their common interests in a clear-cut way, nor is feasible to set up a monolithic platform for them to coalesce around a single set of collective concerns. What is most apparent is the 'agonistic' confrontations among 'adversaries' or 'friendly enemies' (Mouffe, 2000: 13) who share a common identity. The subjectivity of the deprived is multifaceted and fluid, and cannot be boxed into a pre-given category, as is attested to by the case of the Tharu activists of the ruling party, Tharu women or the newcomer Tharus in Majuwa – all of which groups were unable to decide straightforwardly whether they should act in the interest of the entire Tharu community or should give priority to their own conflicting demands.

To avoid compelling underprivileged people to withdraw their ambivalent viewpoints as a price for their acceptance into the public arena, it is crucial to engage in less formulaic, ethnographic interactions while undertaking participatory development projects that seek to promote citizenship among marginal groups. Indeed, 'nothing special' was uttered by the peasant, quoted at the beginning of this article, while walking home after a formal interview in which he had contrarily dwelt on the significance of the change in the project's modality, exempting Tharus from unpaid labour. A similar point is made by Li's (2007) study on Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, where she contrasts the types of narratives that are produced under participatory projects that insidiously dictate the terms of people's empowerment, and an open-ended approach of a social movement allowing them to express themselves. The latter stance runs into various dilemmas arising from real-world complexities,15 as opposed to the managed participation in which a complex issue is reduced to a technical matter of arriving at an optimal solution.

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[15] For example, the anti-state sentiment was held by a majority of the people in the highlands of Sulawesi, who resented regime-sponsored violence and corruption, and nevertheless hoped to call on the state apparatus for more assistance. Although major highways had been built to service timber corporations and plantations, resulting in a massive eviction of peasants from their own land, they did not necessarily reject the roads, which also offered other benefits to them, including their improved access to nearby towns, which provided them with new employment and income-earning opportunities. In such complex circumstances, straightforward advocacy of subsistence-oriented neighbourhood self-reliance is dangerous in that such '[d]ogmatism ... pushes relations of trusteeship toward the authoritarian pole' (Li, 2007: 279).

Ethnographic engagement is certain to encounter those contradictions that come to the surface while interacting with marginal people, and should not be pre-empted by the need to formulate technical interventions. An inept example of a contrary governmental stance is an anthropologist of the World Bank, referred to in Li's study, whose major concern was to delineate a field of practicable activities, and who thereby forged the imagery of 'natural communities' that readily speak with one voice and can supposedly identify and act on their shared will (Li, 2007: 231-235). Those involved in citizen participation can instead allow the disadvantaged to pose freely a principled challenge to the way in which citizen engagement is promoted. Otherwise, the past mistakes of haphazard knowledge generation will continue to be repeated, resulting in participatory processes that homogenise people's experiences of oppression.

Contemporary participatory projects that aim to promote citizenship often fail to accord deprived people autonomy in working out the cacophony of their perspectives, and instead impose a 'narrowly circumscribed liberal democratic framework' (Robins *et al*., 2008: 1083). First, wider efforts normally draw on simplistic oppressor-oppressed dichotomies, and expect a group of disadvantaged people to become a public-spirited collectivity that faces up to its dominators. Second, underlying such a linear world view is a liberalistic divide between public and private spheres, according to which the deprived not only subordinate their ambiguous positionalities in public deliberation, but also forgo other non-deliberative forms of political communication, such as the direct protest that was 'successfully' adopted by Tharus in Majuwa.

The advocates of citizen engagement can instead extend 'an invitation to participate in a political process' (Li, 2007: 276) in which deprived people decide by themselves when, where and how to intervene to improve their livelihoods. In forging such a new form of praxis that recognises 'symbolic citizenship' (Bhabha, 2004: xvii), it is useful to draw on Arendt's notion of 'the space of appearance' (1998: 199-207), in which people gather together and disclose themselves in deed and word. The disclosure does not take place purposefully, unlike in the spaces that are created as a means to a particular end, such as the project's beneficiary committee in Majuwa, where its Tharu members were required to take up the cause of their rights. In the space of appearance, on the other hand, deprived people remain 'who' they are, rather than behaving in accordance with 'what' they are, or their socially sanctioned identities.

It is seemingly feasible to make an analogy with the distinction, often used by the proponents of citizen participation, between 'invited forums of participation created 'from above' by powerful institutions and actors, and those more autonomous spaces created 'from below' through more independent forms of social actions' (Brock *et al*., 2001: iii). However, the latter type of spaces that come from within society cannot necessarily be equated with the space of appearance. For a spontaneously created space to serve as a venue for 'who' somebody

is to appear, those involved in its promotion should ensure that they throw off the shackles of the normative framework of citizen engagement, mentioned above.

At the same time, to paraphrase Derrida, the space of appearance is 'the experience of the impossible', given that an effort for citizen engagement begins by assigning to a particular group of people a certain attribute, such as 'impoverished', 'deprived' and 'oppressed'. '[T]he moment we want to say who somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying what he is' (Arendt, 1998: 181). However, we need not resign ourselves to this ostensibly pessimistic verdict.

On the contrary, in line with the Derridean view concerning struggles for justice, the promotion of citizen participation should be a relentless effort that pushes against its irresolvable limit. A coalition of marginal people can be regarded as a 'vanishing point' (Mouffe, 2005: 85), something which they relentlessly review and revise of their own accord. The target populace of development projects for citizen engagement deserve to be provided room for manoeuvre, in order that they can unwaveringly call into question the arbitrary nature of their group formation and to deconstruct 'what' (others think) they are. This is particularly important because, as exemplified by the case of Tharu women or the migrant Tharus in Majuwa, social arrangements for citizenship promotion tend to operate to the systemic detriment of those who suffer from plural forms of discrimination. When a political coalition is established, their particular aspirations are more likely to be sidelined than those views held by relatively privileged segments of their community.

It is therefore crucial to make special efforts while engaging in informal, ethnographic encounters with the least powerful, to salvage their hidden grievances over a prevailing sense of 'we' that does not adequately include them. In this way, the promotion of citizenship can force open all limitations inherent in a collective struggle, by assuring its target populace that they do not have to conform to their socially sanctioned identities and interests. The advocates of citizen engagement, unless they value the plurality and distinctiveness of 'who' somebody is, are liable to insidiously empty citizenship of its potential to relocate participatory development projects 'within a more radical theoretical and political approach' (Mohan and Hickey, 2004: 60), that is, its intrinsic capacity to encourage grassroots activism for change.

If citizenship is to be reconstituted as a viable approach to rectifying the 'anti-politics' of participatory development, it is important to honour marginal people's 'rights to narrate' (Bhabha, 2003: 181) those viewpoints that occur to them most naturally. '[I]t is only by acknowledging such cultural resources as a 'common good' that we can ensure that our democracy is based on dialogue and conversation' (ibid). Citizenship 'has one meaning when it is seen from the standpoint of who governs, i.e. as a category of governance' and 'will have a very different meaning when seen from the position of the governed, i.e. as a category of democracy' (Chatterjee, 2004: 69). The promotion of citizen engagement can

become an integral part of our endeavours for a more democratic society when it is reframed from the viewpoint of the governed, by allowing them the leverage to reshape and expand the terms of their own empowerment.

Rectifying the anti-politics of citizen participation: insights from the internal politics of a subaltern community in Nepal

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