

# URBAN FRINGES: SQUATTER AND SLUM SETTLEMENTS IN THE KATHMANDU VALLEY (NEPAL)

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## Introduction

Over the last decades, migrations and population displacements have produced new peripheral spaces throughout the world, on the margins of national states and of urban territories. Among these sites are refugee camps, slums, squatter settlements, resettled enclaves, and so forth. At best, migrants live in buildings or camps provided by their employers. Yet the key features of most of these spaces are the non-permanent and transitory conditions, the vulnerability, and the poverty of the populations. For the sake of analysis, they can be called *outplaces*, i.e. neither belonging to the urban territory nor to its outside space. Their uncertainty has a serious impact on education, economic conditions, and the exercise of citizenship rights (Agier 2008). More often than not the people settled there are hardly integrated into global all-encompassing society and are considered urban or national pariahs. They are implicated in national conflictual causes, and are easily manipulated by political leaders and organisations. In South Asia, these spaces are principally multicasite, multiethnic and multilingual. They mix people from different geographical origins and stand in sharp contrast to the previous pre-industrial territories based mainly on kinship, ethnic group and caste hierarchy. A new social fabric is emerging from these settlements, characterised by: new collective identities; an achieved status as far as leaders are concerned; social bonds based on a common neighbourhood and shared impoverished economic conditions; and lastly a vital role played by associative life. This article intends to provide a case study of such *outplaces* in the urban geography of the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. I will focus on slum settlements along riverbanks, and address the various political and sociological issues which are central to the populations of these urban fringes. The data were collected over the last years in Kathmandu Metropolitan City, amidst growing traffic jams and thick clouds of car exhaust fumes.<sup>1</sup>

## The Anarchic Urbanization of the Kathmandu Valley (1970-2010)

The Kathmandu valley, which encompasses a surface area of only about 600 km<sup>2</sup>, has undergone unprecedented and dramatic changes over the last four decades. The massive increase in its population (from 500,000 in 1970 to

above 3 million in 2010) and its subsequent overall urbanization have to a large extent reduced the open spaces available and agricultural fields which formerly surrounded the three major historic cities in the basin: Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur. Similarly, the cities' urban fabric has become denser. The height of new buildings is continually on the rise. It has been estimated that within the next twenty years, the entire Valley will be covered with constructions, leaving far behind the former traditional divide between cities and clustered villages which prevailed in the area for centuries (Toffin 2007). The growth of settlements has been (and still is) generally spontaneous. Little planning intervention has been enforced by the government and municipal authorities. Urban areas continue to grow haphazardly, with no appropriate infrastructure such as water supply and sewerage systems, despite warnings by environmentalists.<sup>2</sup>

Such steady urbanization has produced a considerably negative impact, including traffic congestion, atmospheric pollution, and a total collapse of the former fragile ecological equilibrium between man and his environment. The situation is aggravated by the high elevation of the Valley (1350 m), which accentuates vehicle emissions, and its bowl-shaped topography, which restricts air movement. The rivers have also undergone tremendous pressure from the increase in demographic growth and in economic activities. They are now highly polluted by the discharge of untreated sewage and the widespread dumping of solid waste. They often resemble open sewers. For those who were there in the late 1960s or early 1970s, the Valley has changed beyond any recognition. Its local architecture of dazzling beauty and its exceptional landscape made up of green rice-fields covering rural areas have nearly disappeared or are on the wane. Even the view of the Himalayan peaks in the foreground is now hardly visible due to a haze of pollution. The overall state of deterioration is so serious that UNESCO is threatening to declassify some sites, especially the Pashupatinath area along the Bagmati river, which were designated as major items on the World Heritage List in 1979.

Demographic growth (more than four per cent per year) includes both natural growth and immigration from different regions of Nepal, and even from Northern India. The Kathmandu Valley, which is Nepal's political, cultural, industrial, and hospital centre, has become the favourite destination for rural people migrating from the hills. The concentration of political and economic power, as well as of tourist centres, with their employment activities and numerous opportunities, has favoured urbanization. Due to the Maoist insurgency (1996-2005), there has been a huge influx of internally displaced people in recent years in search of security, employment,



government aid, and shelter. The population of Kathmandu, which in 1971 amounted to 150,000 inhabitants (105,000 in 1952), had already reached 671,000 in 2001, and is most probably more than one million today (admittedly within a larger administrative territory) (*Kathmandu Valley Environment Outlook* 2007). The rate of growth between 1991 and 2002 was 4.67 per cent per year. The density of inner city areas is high compare to the Valley as a whole. In 2001, they were 11,099 persons per km<sup>2</sup> in Kathmandu City, 6,808 in Lalitpur City and 5,700 in Bhaktapur City (*Kathmandu Valley* 2007). In 2001, the Valley's average population density was 1,837 persons per km<sup>2</sup>.

This random urbanization began to gain ground in the Kathmandu Valley in the late 1950s. However, the main turning point in this process came from the 1970s onwards. Even in the 1970s, approximately 90 per cent of the entire population lived in rural areas. The economy was dominated by the agricultural sector, which accounted for 71 per cent of the gross national product. The mushrooming of house constructions from this time onwards has resulted in the conversion of a large section of prime agricultural land. Between 1984 and 2000, the amount of agricultural land in the region dropped from 64 per cent to 42 per cent, an annual decline of 7.4 per cent (*idem* 2007). If this trend continues, by 2025, there will be no agricultural fields left in this once fertile Valley. The national urban population is 12 per cent, yet the Valley's share of this urban population is 54 per cent.

Economic and human pressure on territory has brought about an incredible increase in land prices. Between 1990 and 2000, these prices shot up 40 times in most sectors of Kathmandu Metropolitan City. Within the immediate suburbs of Kathmandu, near the Ring Road, plots of land suitable for building are now sold for 15 to 30 *lâkh* of Nepalese rupees per *ânâ* (1/16 of *ropanî* = 31.75 metres<sup>2</sup>), that is 2.4 to 4.5 *crore* a *ropanî*, or 19.2 to 36 *crore* per *acre*.<sup>3</sup> In the new suburb of Koteshwar, a short distance from the airport, the price is 320 *lâkh* (= 3.2 *crore*) of Nepalese rupees a *ropanî*. In central areas of the capital, it fluctuates between 5 and 6 *crores* a *ropanî*, and can even reach higher prices in exclusive and much sought after places. There seems to be no stopping the upward surge, even if the recent (1995-1996) introduction of a 10 to 1 per cent by government tax on land sales has slightly curbed the boom. The growing scarcity of land in sought-after places tends to lead to a steady price increase. Interestingly enough, the soaring of property prices in Kathmandu Valley is quite similar to the one in large Indian cities, such as Calcutta or Delhi (Toffin 2007: 18-20).

The price of land has also increased tremendously in rural areas: in Pyangaon village (Lalitpur District), the cost of one *ropani* of irrigated land with no access to any roads or pathways amounts to: 3 *lakh* NPR (Nepalese rupees) per *ropani* (2007). This corresponds to 24 *lakh* NPR per acre (0.4 hectare), whereas in the same locality, three years earlier the price was 1 to 2 *lakh* a *ropani*. In the more central villages of Harisiddhi and Sunakuthi, a plot of land bordering a pathway costs around 5 *lakh* a *ropani*. The price increases considerably when the field is situated along a road: 8 to 12 *lakh* a *ropani* (2005). In Sainbu Bhainsepati (Khokana), the price of well situated building land is 9 *lakh* of Nepalese rupees per *ana* (2010).

The three major towns in the Valley were founded on Hindu city-kingdoms which existed during the late Malla period (16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries). In terms of urbanism, they still lag far behind the modern megacities of South-East Asia, such as Bangkok or Singapore. Yet they are becoming more and more cosmopolitan in character, with their multi-faith, multi-ethnic and transnational inhabitants. A Westernized educated middle class has emerged, easily identifiable by their activities and expenditures, new dress code, and specific values oriented toward modernity (Liechty 2008). In addition, the traditional territories have been dramatically transformed and reconfigured. Let us take for example two major trends involving new social and spatial hierarchies within urban areas. 1°) Migration towards the periphery by people formerly living in the heart of cities, which maps a new social geography of the region, is very different from that of the past. The houses built in these suburbs are of a different type, made of a mixture of concrete and bricks, with a flat roof, and giving onto a garden. 2°) The traditional opposition between village and city is in the process of becoming blurred. Villages are gradually being swallowed up by cities and the construction of houses in the peri-urban areas along new and old roads has already joined up with former separate settlements. Wealthier peasants are progressively abandoning farming to take up other non-manual activities, for instance trade or government employment. All these changes have prompted major sociological breaks and a major decline in the local rural economy.

No effective policy has been implemented to regulate such urbanization. A number of plans and reports have been drafted by various foreign agencies, such as the "Physical Development Plan for Kathmandu Valley" conducted in 1969. Experts proposed several recommendations and devices. Yet none have been seriously implemented. The future outlook seems even gloomier than it has been over recent decades. Two mega-projects, which are presently under discussion in government offices and local bodies, will obviously



further accelerate this unrestrained urbanization. The first one of these projects, run by the Ministry for Physical Planning and Works, intends to found a new town south of the Kathmandu Valley, to provide full shelter facilities for around 150,000 to 200,000 people. The project, called “Harisiddhi New City Project” (HNCP), is located around Harisiddhi and concerns the Village Development Committee of Harisiddhi, Imadol, Thaiba and Siddhipur, south of the Ring Road, in Lalitpur district. It aims at turning 12,240 *ropanis* of land, mostly devoted to agriculture, into a residential town, with its own markets and central business district. To quote their own terms, “the population problem of the capital city will thus be solved for several decades” (*The Himalayan*, Sept. 2005). According to the proposal, the city area is expected to have a cumulative road network of 195 km. The cost of its completion is estimated at 3.6 billion Nepalese rupees. The second project concerns another Ring Road, much longer (72 km) than the first one, encircling a larger zone. This Outer Ring Road, as it is called, is expected to regulate the flow of traffic and to provide better access to rural settlements. It is heartily supported by the rural areas concerned. However, it will increase mass housing (in an area prone to major earthquakes), air pollution due to vehicle exhaust fumes and it will cause a general degradation of the environment, as was the case with the first circular highway built thanks to a Chinese cooperation. Some people are already lobbying to bring the road alignment closer to their settlement to reap the benefits from the expected rise in land prices (Shrestha & Shrestha 2008: 53). The preliminary estimate shows a cost of eight billion Nepalese Rupees, excluding the cost of land. Both projects will probably worsen the already degraded situation.

#### **Squatter Communities (slums) in Kathmandu Metropolitan City**

The growth of the urban population has contributed to a surge in squatter communities. Such settlements have emerged in various parts of the Kathmandu Valley (Hada 2001). About 75 settlements have been identified so far, 65 of which are located in Kathmandu Metropolitan City. The majority are established along riverbanks, which traditionally formed the borderline between cities. The rivers concerned are mainly the Vishnumati, which flows from north to south to the west of Kathmandu city, and the Bagmati which borders Kathmandu to the south. These two waterways converge in the heart of the capital. A smaller group of squatter settlements are located in a non-riparian environment, in the Kathmandu suburbs, often on the periphery of former independent settlements. This is the case near Baudha (Bodnath), Chabahil, Maharajganj, and Guhyeshvari. In Nepali, all

these areas, riparian and inland, are called *sukumbâsî basti*, and the squatters living there *sukumbâsî*, a word applied to any displaced and landless persons, as well as to families illegally occupying land or a recently deforested area. As a matter of fact, this word has become synonymous in Nepal with an excluded person, with no means of subsistence.<sup>4</sup> Legally, a *sukumbâsî* is a person who can prove that nobody in his family over the last three generations held any land title, *lâl purjâ*.

For the whole Kathmandu Metropolitan City, which covers an area of 50 km<sup>2</sup> and concentrates nine per cent of these shelters within the Kathmandu Valley, *sukumbâsî* represent a population of about 15,000 persons (*New Beginnings* 2005, Lumanti NGO). The figure is relatively low (between 1 and 2 per cent of the city's urban population) compared to mega-cities of India, such as Mumbai, Delhi or Kolkata. It is probably due to the lack of wasteland in the Kathmandu municipality. Nevertheless, the number of squatters is growing steadily. In 1985, their population represented 2,134 persons for the municipality of Kathmandu. For the same area, the figure reached 4,295 in 1990, 11,862 in 2000 and about 15,000 in 2005 (*New Beginnings* 2005). It is therefore an acute problem that municipal authorities have to face and deal with accordingly. This rise in numbers has not slowed its pace since the end of the civil war and the abolition of the monarchy. Since the winter of 2007-08 and spring 2008, two large *basti* have appeared (or rather reappeared in one case): the first, made up of about 300 households, in Thapathali, near the bridge linking Kathmandu to Lalitpur, and the second, larger (about 500 households), in Balkhu. Both these riparian settlements have been set up on the banks of the Bagmati river. The first, which has taken the name of Naya Paurakhi Gaon (from *paurakhi*: "valorous people"), already existed – though to a lesser extent – in the 1990s, but was razed in 2001 at the time of a SAARC Conference. It is located in an area given over to the United Nation to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Organization, and scheduled to be transformed into a UN Riverside Park.

The oldest of these settlements dates back to the 1950s. However, most of them have sprung up over the last two decades. Some of the better known areas are Sankhamul, on the right bank of the Bagmati, near Naya Baneshwar, Sinamangal near the Airport, on the Bagmati, Balaju, in the north, along the Vishnumati, Khadi Pakha (KMC, no.5), Tripureshwar (Bansighat), Tankeshwar (KMC, no.13), Ramhity (KMC, no.6), Kumarasthan (KMC, no.16), etc. In 2008, a significant percentage of Kathmandu's riparian corridor was lined with permanent *sukumbâsî* housing. The banks of these rivers do not belong to the Municipality but to the State. This is one of the



reasons for the concentration of squatters in these areas. Each cluster is made up of 50 to 300 families (*dhuri*), each household living in a shelter.

These new territories, seldom studied up to now, are inhabited mostly by Nepalese families who come from various districts of Nepal in search of employment, better facilities than in their native places, and safety. The Nepalese living there form a very composite group of people, reflecting the diversity of the country's population. Most residents (48%) come from the hills and belong to various ethnic groups, *janajâti*, of Nepal: the Rais, Limbus, Tamangs, etc. However, 28 per cent of them also belong to Hindu high castes --a figure which is not in keeping with the discourse of the *janajâti* organizations and their common rhetoric on social exclusion in Nepal, and 13 per cent to the Newars. Some squatters also come from the Tarai plains. As far as most clusters are concerned, it is said that they migrated from the 75 districts of Nepal. Nepali is the language for communication. Leadership roles tend to reflect a person's length of stay in the community, as well as age, respectability and financial prosperity. Interestingly enough, six per cent of these squatters are Christians, a high percentage compared to the mean national figure. Some dwellers (between 15 per cent and 20 per cent) are also transient Indian workers from Northern India (Uttar Pradesh and Bihar for the most part), very often in the Valley on a seasonal basis. In addition, these Indian people establish temporary camps on riverbeds during the dry season, from November until May.

The squatter areas represent a new form of urban periphery inhabited by marginalized people driven out to the city's traditional limits by their impoverished economic conditions and displaced status, just as the untouchables were (and still are to a large extent) relegated to the outskirts of the city by caste rules (Tanako 1997). These two forms of exclusion cumulate their effects and accentuate social and economic marginalization. Their shanties are merely one-storey dwellings with very limited space (only one or two rooms). The lanes separating the long rows of shelters are very narrow. Corrugated iron sheets and sometimes even plastic tarpaulins are held down by stones to cover the roof. The walls are generally made of poor quality brick. Among the very poorest dwellers, the walls are made of bamboo and mud.<sup>5</sup> Nearly 10 per cent of the shelters also house grocery shops or teashops. Most dwelling-places have electricity, sometimes even television. However, a third of them only have private latrines. Water facilities are extremely shoddy: water comes from public taps or hand pumps connected to tube wells and dug wells. There is no solid waste management. Besides, these riverbanks are prone to natural disasters such as seasonal landslides and

flooding. Squatters pile up sandbags to protect them from the rising level of the river. This is one of the reasons why inland camps are much sought after. The people settled there benefit from better living conditions and their houses are of a more solid structure than in riparian settlements. Yet in both cases, from a legal point of view, the future of the inhabitants' tenure is under constant threat.

These squatter communities are often inhabited by permanent residents, with second and even third generations sharing the same shelter. Some shanties are partly or totally rented to newcomers or fresh immigrants deprived of all belongings.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly enough, a common process of creating a new *basti* is to move one part of a settlement (in particular those living in a more precarious way, newly arrived relatives and tenants) and establish a new *bastu* some distance from the first one. A camp, in other terms, foretells the possibility of new squatter beginnings in other parts of the town. More often than not, this move is made in a coordinated manner by several families. Such an internal development process contributes to the mushrooming of encroachments.

Except for inland squatter settlements, which are often scattered among nearby permanent dwellings possessing land titles, these camps are unequivocally place-bound. Although there is no common place of worship or common religious processions during festivals (as is the case elsewhere in Nepalese local communities), riparian *sukumbâsi* camps tend to generate a new sense of belonging among its habitants. Setting up a school specifically in the *basti* and having a committee to represent its migrant and refugee population before the urban municipality help to build an identity based on local ties. The site itself has its own collective memory based on the recollections of the first settlers. In spite of their multicultural and multiethnic character, these spaces thus pave the way for new common ground and new forms of commonality. In many ways, these *outplaces* have been reterritorialized.

The squatter population comprises a large number of unemployed persons: 41.9 per cent (*New Beginnings* 2005, Lumanti).<sup>7</sup> Those who have a job often work as servants or have their own small business. Some women are engaged in spinning wool. Significantly, 50 per cent of this Nepalese squatter population have no citizenship card and 60 per cent no electoral card either. This situation reflects low citizenship consciousness and profound marginalization. Similarly, the small size of households (approximately 5 members) reveals a break up of extended families into small nuclear units.



These settlements contribute --though only partly-- to the general degradation of rivers, full of plastic, excrement, sewage and refuse.<sup>8</sup> One of the consequences is the sharp decline in the use of the river for ritual and daily activities. It must be remembered that in the Hindu religion rivers are deified and considered sacred. They are viewed as a means of purification and liberation. They have the power to give progeny or to cure disease, and they are the focus of important pilgrimage practices. "River banks are by tradition a particularly appropriate place to practice alms giving, make ancestor offerings, and perform Vedic sacrifices" (Feldhaus 1995: 72). As far as Kathmandu is concerned, the Vishnumati was traditionally the sacred river for the original inhabitants of the city, the Newars. Depending on the exact place where they lived, the location of their ward, and of their caste, people used to burn their dead at riversides and perform a number of rituals on these spots, including bathing (Toffin 2007). These days, dead bodies are generally burnt elsewhere, in particular in a place called Teku, while funeral parties bathe at nearby taps and merely sprinkle a little river water on their heads, instead of bathing. Ashes are still sprinkled over the river but the thin trickle of water running through mounds of refuse and building debris no longer seems to be powerful enough to send the souls to heaven. In addition, few ailing people are brought to the river, to breathe their last breath on a carved stone, their feet dangling in the flowing river water, while the last rites are performed.

**The Politics of Slum and Squatter Settlements: *sukumbâsî*, *svabâsî*, *hukumbâsî***

Squatters are the object of fear, anxiety, suspicion and misconceptions among most of the population. The word *sukumbâsî* itself carries negative connotations. The Nepalese belonging to the urban middle-class in particular view them as dangerous social outsiders, even invaders, and river polluters. Their shanty-encroachments on rivers are seen as obstacles to restoring the original riparian landscape and ecology. It is also said that these illegal settlers are puppets in the hands of Maoists, communists and other leftist parties. They supposedly represent a 'clientele' ready to be summoned at any time to participate in demonstrations and rallies organised by these activists. It is thus believed that *sukumbâsîs* formed the backbone of the huge demonstrations that succeeded in overthrowing King Gyanendra's direct rule and in abolishing the monarchy in April 2006. In addition, the idea prevails that these people are fake indigents and are helped unjustifiably by local bodies and foreign agencies. A word has been coined, *hukumbâsî* (probably

derived from the term *hukum*, meaning ‘order’), to designate this category of person. A *hukumbâsî* is someone who pretends to be a *sukumbâsî* in order to obtain a land title, *lâl purjâ*, as well as other advantages granted to the underprivileged (Yamamoto 2007: 141). The term is used outside the Kathmandu Valley as well as in other squatter settlement contexts. This discourse renders illegitimate the squatters’ claim to be relocated and arouses strong suspicion about them.

The *hukumbâsî* issue has even poisoned relations between squatters themselves. To take just one example, the newly established *sukumbâsî* mentioned above (Thapathali and Balkhu) are seen by older squatters as an operation launched by fake *sukumbâsî*. In 2008, I met the leaders of several internal squatter organizations who openly consider the people living there as *hukumbâsî*. They stressed that most of the people living in squatter settlements are not “genuine *sukumbâsî*”, *bastabik sukumbâsî*, but in fact possess some family land documents in their home district. Some settlers, it is said, are actually tenants who sublet the shelter (or a part of it) where they live. As we saw above, this is indeed often the case. Such internal conflict provokes distrust among squatters and a lack of solidarity.

For their part, advocates of housing rights and the landless poor, such as the Lumanti<sup>9</sup> Support Group for Shelter NGO set up in 1993 to fight against urban poverty and marginalized housing, and other non-government associations, play down these issues and lay emphasis on the poverty and the marginalization of most squatters. These agencies point out that river restoration projects threaten the security of thousand of landless migrants settled in riparian zones. They assert that a solution to their problems is needed before any action can be taken on the urban riverscape. Members of the Lumanti association also underline the fact that *sukumbâsî* play a relatively minor role in the river degradation process. They quite justly maintain that sand extraction from the riverbed, used to make cement for construction projects, has much more damaging effects on river morphology and the riverbanks than any squatter intervention. On the whole, housing rights activists are fighting for better sanitary conditions and schooling, but most of all against eviction. They propose to inscribe housing rights in the future constitution, in the same manner as other fundamental rights of citizen are recognized. Their credo is that political parties are not seriously interested in solving *sukumbâsî* problems. That is why, so they argue, urgent action is needed by civil society organisations. However, they recognize the difficulty of their undertaking and are embarrassed when accused of indirectly



encouraging more squatting in the Kathmandu Valley as in other regions of Nepal.

Environmental and squatter issues are therefore the subject of conflict and of political issues. Anne Rademacher (2005: 128-133) has rightly demonstrated in her work how these urban fringes are embedded in three competing “narratives”: the one of the State and the squatter, plus what she calls the “cultural heritage narrative”. Whatever the case may be, the urban fringes are the object of vehement political debates. Two local squatter associations founded in the year 2000 play an important role in mobilizing people and fighting for better living conditions: *Nepâl Basobas Bastî Samrakchan Samâj* (“Squatters’ Federation”) and *Nepâl Mahilâ Ekatâ Samâj* (“The Nepal Women’s Unity Society”). Both try to provide adequate schooling for children and to facilitate a micro-credit programme in the squatter settlements in favour of local initiatives and entrepreneurship. These associations were formed mainly to prevent any possible evictions and to develop mutual cooperation. When asked specifically about the aim of her women’s group, Bimala Lama, the president of Mahilâ Samâj, explained: “The work of women at home and in domestic affairs is not recognized by men. Women need their own association to fight against the administration”. Both were founded in the year 2000 and cover the entire Nepalese territory. Besides, a number of *sukumbâsîs* in the Kathmandu Valley belong to various left-wing political parties and to the NEFIN Federation of “autochthonous people”, *âdivâsî/ janajâti*, which encompasses all the ethnic groups of Nepal, including the Tarai plains.

NGOs and local bodies (Nagar Palika) in charge of these much discussed and politicized areas make a distinction between squatter settlements and slums (*A Situation analysis* 2001: 12-13). The people ascribed to the first category of settlement live on marginal government-owned land and, for the most part, come from outside the Kathmandu Valley. They do not possess any property title (*lâl purjâ*) for their shelter. Those living in slums, the second settlement category, have been in the Valley for a long period of time and are sometimes even considered the original dwellers in the region. They mostly belong to low Newar castes, such as the Dyola fishermen or Shahi butchers. These castes, among the lowest of Newar society, used to dwell in rudimentary houses on the outskirts of historic cities. Slum dwellers are not *sukumbâsî* per se: some have land documents, others do not. Their houses are small, dilapidated, and have poor sanitary conditions. Whole sectors of the overpopulated centre of old Kathmandu City belong or could belong to this category of housing.<sup>10</sup>

To differentiate themselves from squatters, a new category of persons emerged in the early 2000s: the *svabâsî*, which can be translated as “self-settlement dwellers”. As opposed to *sukumbâsî*, which refers to families that have moved from one place to another and are economic or political refugees, with no local roots, the *svabâsîs* are poor people, mainly belonging to low castes and having lived in the Kathmandu valley for a very long time. They are assimilated more or less to “autochthonous people”, that is *âdivâsîs*. Dinesh Shahi, the president of Jhigu Manka Samâj organization, set up in 2000, explained to me that his aim is to provide property titles to all “self-settlement dwellers” who, for one reason or another, have no *lâl purjâ*. “We don’t consider economic criteria, he asserted, we help all Newars, Tamangs or Parbatiyas”.<sup>11</sup> By the same token, Dinesh expressed his enmity towards *sukumbâsî*, who are outsiders and do not show any *ijjat* (honour) by illegally occupying land belonging to the government. A conflict seems to be emerging here between the old code of honour, very much attached to hierarchy, and new values enhancing the concept of dignity, which is based on egalitarian premises.

### **The Vishnumati Link Road and the Kirtipur Relocation Project**

In 1980, a government programme was instigated to build a 2.8-km long road following the course of the River Vishnumati through the heart of the capital, to link Kalimati in the south to Sorakhkutte in the north, thus joining two sections of the Ring Road. This project aimed at improving the traffic flow in Kathmandu City. In 1992, the Norwegian Institute of Technology conducted a study at the request of His Majesty’s Government. In order to build this new road (Vishnumati Link Road), 142 houses and shelters illegally built along the right bank of the river were to be demolished. They were scattered over five wards (*tol*): Dhukhal, Chagal, Kushibahil, Tankeshwar and Dhaukel, and were inhabited mostly by Newar low castes, butchers, Poda fishermen, and Hala Hulu, formerly classified as impure castes according to the old Hindu national legal code, involved as they were in occupation considered low and ritually defiling. This population originally came from the other side of the River Vishnumati, where these low-status groups traditionally settled, at the boundary with the historic core of Kathmandu City (due to successive divisions of fathers’ houses by the sons). A small number of Tamangs also lived in this area. The oldest squat dates back to 1952 (Tankeshwar), and the most recent (Chagal) to 2000. None of these squatters are formal title holders (*lâl purjâ*).



The families concerned did not oppose the construction of the road. It was clear that the banks of the river were a filthy place to live and that the sewage-filled Vishnumati needed to be rehabilitated. The squatters merely demanded compensation for the loss of their homes and in many cases, their work space. The Lumanti NGO took action among the squatters to defend their rights and mediate with the government and municipalities. *Lumanti* members at that time mostly came from the Newar community of the Kathmandu Valley and chiefly operated in the region. At the time of the Vishnumati Project, this non-government association helped people to submit applications for compensation and organised meetings with the municipality's ward offices. The squatter associations also played an important role in mobilizing people against eviction.

In January 2002, the government published notices warning residents about the move. *Lumanti* worked with residents, the Mayor of Kathmandu, Keshab Sthapit, and various government departments to try to delay the eviction and secure an agreement. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was finally signed. According to this agreement, residents who were identified as *sukumbāsi*, "genuine squatters", i.e. residents possessing no land elsewhere, and who could not afford housing on their own income, would be paid 2,000 Nepalese rupees a month for three months' rent once they had moved. After three months, they would be provided with alternative housing. After extensive discussions among community members, a list of about 50 households, the most vulnerable among the people concerned, was drawn up. In April 2002, bulldozers moved into the area and demolished any structure still left standing.

People resettled wherever they could find shelter, mostly in the nearby area. The money for the three months' rent was paid. However, in June 2002, the national government dissolved all elected local government bodies. The Mayor was forced to stand down. For more than a year, nothing happened. The situation became difficult for those who had been displaced. Rent payments had ceased, with no alternatives being offered. Lumanti decided to seek help for buying land and building houses, which could then be sold to the families on a low-cost credit system. *Action Aid*, a United Kingdom development charity organization working in Nepal since 1982, expressed its interest and started to explore options for funding. In September 2003, Sthapit was reinstated as Mayor of Kathmandu and new negotiations took place. Finally, Lumanti and the Kathmandu Metropolitan City succeeded in establishing an "Urban Community Support Fund" with several national and international development agencies. The objective was to buy land and to

provide low-interest loans to the families concerned. The municipality, which at first was reluctant to launch a relocation programme, played a very positive role in this affair. In 2003, six *ropanis* of farm land (3000 m<sup>2</sup>) were purchased for 30 *lâkhs* rupees by the Fund at Paliphal, beneath the hill-top settlement of Kirtipur, about 45 minutes by bus from Kathmandu City. In collaboration with the displaced community, a total of 44 low-cost two-storey houses (of a total surface area of about 70 m<sup>2</sup> for each house) made of bricks and concrete with corrugated iron for the roof, were built on the site, with an adjacent open space and water facilities.

The Kirtipur Housing Project was inaugurated on 24<sup>th</sup> December 2005 in the presence of the Mayor of Kathmandu. The houses were immediately occupied. The respective families will have to pay about 350,000 or 320,000 rupees (depending on where their house is located, at the front or back of the settlement) over the next 15 years to the Fund to obtain full ownership of their houses. They actually pay between 500-100 Nepalese rupees per month. This rehabilitation and resettlement project, based on a partnership between the urban poor and local government, was the first of its kind in Kathmandu and probably in the whole of Nepal. It proved to be a complete success and can be taken as an example for the future. Unfortunately, the price of land is so high at present, especially in the Kathmandu Valley, that it is difficult to launch a new project of this kind. Incidentally, the road on the bank of the Vishnumati was opened in 2009.

I made several visits to Paliphal between 2007 and 2008 and conducted interviews with resettled people. All together, 43 houses are currently occupied, with one used as a common building for meetings. Noticeably, a kind of community solidarity has been forged through the squatters' common struggle against the state to establish their right to live on public land or to be relocated. In spite of some internal dissensions which occurs at some stage, such committed cohesion has been substituted for older forms of attachments (caste and kinship networks) that prevailed in their father or forefathers' days. The majority of the population is made up of Newar butchers and Parbatiya Vishvokarma blacksmiths, two low castes. Besides, the dwellers of the settlement comprise four Newar Dyala (musician of temple), two Tamang families, two Newar Napit barbers, two Dalits from the Tarai (Pariyar), two Newar Maharjan farmers, one Rai, one Parbatiya Brahman, etc. Three houses have been sold to poor Newar farming families from Kiripur, to maintain good relations with the Newar community of the neighbouring city. The same credit advantages have been granted to these families. Contrary to what is sometimes said and casually asserted, all the resettled families still live in



their Paliphal houses. Nobody has sublet their house to tenants. Most male inhabitants have found jobs outside Paliphal, mainly in Kathmandu, or have set up a small business. The people I interviewed all expressed their satisfaction at having been resettled in such good conditions and are perfectly aware of the luck they had. Everybody has private toilets, though water has to be fetched from a common tap operated by a motor pump. Relations between families seem excellent and the local committee has established a series of rules regarding the consumption of alcohol, quarrels, and the noise level which seems to be respected by most inhabitants. House-dwellers feel totally at home. There is even a sense of pride in having been relocated there. The beneficiaries of the programme will receive their house property titles when the leasing has been totally reimbursed.

### **Conclusion**

The frenzied urbanisation of the Kathmandu Valley has thus created zones of uncertainty, poverty, and unemployment that are the subject of delicate political issues. For instance, in these shanty-enclaves there is a growing concentration of people that can be easily mobilized by populist and skilled politicians to rally their causes. They also provide a convenient source of “vote banks” for political parties which encourage settlers to enrol on the electoral lists. That is why, so it is said, they are not evicted. For a large part of the urbanite population, *sukumbâsî* squatters have become a figure of otherness, localised on riparian urban margins, an image of a “social other” who does not share the same values as other urbanites, and is a threat to urban sites, cultural integrity and ecology. They are looked upon as an undesirable population. In other words, a study of these urban fringes sheds light on the broader political context and reveals a nascent class conflict between, on the one hand, the poor, and, on the other hand, a middle-class that has taken advantage of the economic changes and which does not recognize the rights of these illegal settlers. In many ways, it is a valuable key to understanding the urban contemporary entities.

Furthermore, the building boom over the last decades has considerably degraded the environment and has produced a highly dangerous situation given the seismology of the region. The probability of a major earthquake occurring in the near future is unfortunately very high, with an expected loss of thousands of lives. Obviously, the failure of the state and municipalities to manage these problems is related to the political crisis that Nepal has been undergoing for two decades. State-development bodies are notoriously incapable of enforcing any regulations, despite the plethora of proposals

circulated in reports, conferences and housing policy statements, and they are well-known for their ineffectiveness. The Kathmandu Municipality is even incapable of banning existing practices of sand extraction from rivers which is causing serious damage. Interestingly enough, any attempt at addressing to these ongoing problems is passed on to NGOs, which in turn tend to despise politicians for their inefficiency. Such overall degradation of the ecological environment and of the cityscape seriously challenges current methods to develop the former Himalayan Kingdom.

In addition, it must be borne in mind that slums and squatter settlements are not a specific phenomenon restricted to the Kathmandu valley. It concerns many other regions of Nepal situated in the lowlands. In 1998, the National Planning Commission estimated that seven per cent of city dwellers throughout the country live in squatter settlements (Pradhan & Perera 2005). This figure is constantly on the rise. The eviction of illegal residents had already taken place before 2008 in places such as Nepalgunj and Dangadhi. Since the end of the civil war and the promulgation of a democratic and federal republic in the country (May 2008), the marginal squatter population has continued to grow. As a matter of fact, peace has not yet totally been restored in several parts of Nepal, and a large number of hill people long settled in the Tarai plains are migrating to the Valley for safety reasons. For an increasingly large number of Nepalese, the Kathmandu Valley is not seen only as a source of employment, but also as a refuge from outside threats and the uncertainties of the current political regime. Today, the fate of many Nepalese people seems either to migrate abroad, or to settle in the Valley which, for most, is still seen as a desirable place to live.

### Notes

1. I am grateful to Sama Vajra, a leading member of Lumanti NGO (Tahachal, Kathmandu), who acquainted me with these slums and their politics in contemporary Nepal. Sama introduced me to some leaders of the local federations concerned, with whom Lumanti is currently working. I am particularly indebted to Bimla Lama, Krishna Pariyar, Nani Hera, Dinesh Shahi, and Arya Ram Kumari, for their help and the interviews they granted me. I would also like to express my thanks to Anuj Rimal, who accompanied me to these settlements during his spare time, to Amita Baviskar for her comments and bibliographical advise on a draft paper presented at the Villejuif CNRS workshop ("Territorial Changes and Territorial Restructings in the Himalayas", 17-19 December 2007, organized by J. Smadja), to Tristan Bruslé for his



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2. For the Pokhara Valley, see Adhikari (2007).
  3. One *lâkh* : 100,000. One *crore* : 100 *lâkh*.
  4. Slums are sometimes referred to as *picharâ bastî*, meaning that they are backward in terms of housing, water facilities, schooling and so on.
  5. The shacks belonging to Indian migrants are much more rudimentary than Nepalese ones.
  6. It is difficult to make an estimate of the number of fully or partly rented shelters. It varies from one settlement to another. Yet in most cases, the percentage does not seem to exceed 25 per cent.
  7. This figure needs to be viewed with caution, as most squatters work in the informal sector of the economy.
  8. Noticeably, rich and large private houses have also been built on public land close to a temple and sometimes on an exposed riverbed. These wealthy riverbank encroachments are yet again evidence of the blatant failure of the “democratic” days between 1990 and 2001.
  9. *Lumanti* means “memory” in Newari.
  10. The distinction between slums and squatter settlements also exists in India (Dupont 2007).
  11. The office issuing such documents is the Malpot Karyalaya.

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