Labor Geographies:
Uneven Infrastructures in Nepal's Rana Period

Nadine Plachta and Subas Tamang

On what was probably a cold winter morning in January 1949, Nepali porters carried a German-made Mercedes from Thankot in the Kathmandu Valley to Bhimphedi, forty-five kilometers to the south. The green car was stripped of its wheels and bumpers and was lashed onto heavy wooden beams. Sixty-four men, most of them Tamangs from villages of Makwanpur district, were hired to balance the vehicle on their shoulders. Sweat dripped down their weathered faces. Loose shirts and pants were girded with cotton cloths around their waists. Some men walked barefoot, while others had hand-made slippers woven from straw. They earned less than a rupee for the whole treacherous eight-day journey, which traversed two steep mountain passes. While there were paved roads in Kathmandu, access to the capital was limited to a footpath. Cars and spare tires for the Rana family had to be brought to Calcutta by ship, transported to Amlekhganj in the Tarai by train, driven to Bhimphedi and then carried across the Mahabharat Range. The Mercedes that was heaved up and down the hilly terrain that particular day was to be traded for a new American model in India. When the porters crossed a stream near Chitlang village, National Geographic photographer Volkmar Wentzel captured the scene with his camera (Bhujel 2014; Beazley and Lassoie 2017: 9–13).

From the moment the Ranas established a family rule in 1846, they were confronted with the British in neighboring India. Though Nepal was never officially colonized, its history was largely shaped by having to manage relations with the colonial power on the subcontinent (Des Chene 2007). Tensions with the East India Company had been significant for most of the previous century, and when westward campaigns of the Nepali rulers had resulted in open conflict, they ceded a considerable amount of terrain after a two-season war. In 1816, the Gorkhalis had to accept the territorial limits imposed by the British in the Treaty of Sagauli, which formalized much of the current political boundaries of Nepal as a nation-state. Yet the colonial administration regarded Nepal's sovereign status as ambiguous. It was common knowledge on both sides that the British could have annexed Nepal with little trouble. The Ranas did not want to make that prospect any easier, but they knew that keeping good and amiable relations with the British was essential for any claim to independence. The colonial encounter necessitated constant diplomatic maneuvering.[1]

A consolidated system of taxes and forced labor afforded the Ranas a privileged lifestyle.
Subas Tamang, *Study of History IV*, 2018, 46 x 60 cm, etching aquatint.

Given the challenging situation posed by the British, the Ranas developed a complex approach to managing coloniality. Drawing on Fiona Wilson's concept of "territorializing regimes" (2004), Rankin et al. (2017: 52) write that roads have become a vital element in this regard: On the one hand, the elite class refused to build motorable roads to connect Kathmandu to the swelling infrastructural network on the subcontinent to avoid indirect colonialization, while on the other, it expanded footpaths throughout the rural areas of the country to collect revenue and harness workforce from the peasant society. This strategy kept the British at a distance but resulted in the political isolation and economic stagnation of Nepal. Focusing on the historical context of infrastructure development, this essay argues that the earliest roads and tracks in Nepal were used and maintained, even if in a state of disrepair, in an effort to capitalize on a large volume of bodies, labor and resources to control terrain and secure the state financially and against its own people.

At the turn of the century, the British intensified construction of railways, roads, bridges and irrigation canals across the northern parts of India to support industrial development and modernization. The demand for timber for railway ties and bridges increased dramatically, and extensive logging caused deforestation, which programs for the cultivation and conservation of trees could not avert (Sivaramakrishnan 1995: 6–8). The Rana government, sensing a way to cash in on British demand, began to capitalize on virgin forest and grassland resources in the eastern Tarai. It controlled the export of timber and invested in the manufacturing of sawmills to produce railway ties for the expanding Indian rail system. The completion of the Raxaul to Amlekhganj railway line in the Tarai in 1927 boosted the timber industry, and several market towns developed along the southern border in Nepal to accommodate the growing volume of trade in hardwood and other products (rice, grain, tobacco) that had previously been transported by horse and in buffalo carts (Regmi 1988: 149–79; see also Mulmi 2017). The Ranas strengthened ties with the British, whom they recognized as the dominant power on the subcontinent. But they did not upgrade the rugged footpath leading to Kathmandu as a matter of national security.

The restriction of access to Kathmandu did not mean that the Ranas were averse to the comforts that an expanding global consumer culture and colonial economies promised. From the 1920s on, an aerial ropeway facilitated the transportation of up to eight tons of commodities per hour on cables for the ruling class, and paved roads inside the valley advanced the use of cars, which continued to be portered over steep terrain across the hills (Liechty 2003: 44–45). A photo of a car dealer in Lazimpat showcasing a Dodge, a Chevrolet and a Whippet next to several Fords provides an illustration of the extent to which standard European and American vehicles had replaced horses and carriages as the favored mode of transport for the elite by the 1930s (Proksch 1995: 122–23). Paintings, statues, cigarette cases and silverware likewise decorated Rana palaces and homes. These foreign materials carried their own promise, aesthetic effect and affective force. Considered as vibrant matter, they had a life of their own (Bennett 2010; see also Latour 1993).

The Ranas' consumption was based on a centralized agrarian bureaucracy and dedicated commitment to extracting as much revenue as possible from Nepal's resources. The government granted land rights and titles to state functionaries and

The porters did not know what model of car they were balancing on their shoulders.
Subas Tamang, *Study of History*, 2017, 21 x 30 cm, etching aquatint.

revenue officers as compensation for their services, thus creating a landowning class that extracted surplus from the peasant society (Regmi 1976: 225). An extensive postal system (Nep. *hulāk*) – which was established during the expansionist drive of the Gorkhalis and followed a network of footpaths and trails for horse travel throughout the peripheral regions of the country – facilitated the collection of taxes and demanded compulsory labor (Nep. *jhārā*). The *kāgate hulāk* carried official paperwork and communicated orders, and the *thāple hulāk* transported entourages, goods, gifts, arms and ammunition for the state. Interesting enough, *kāgate* means paper, while *thāple* is derived from *thāplo*, 'forehead,' referring to the strap attached to a bamboo basket and placed around a porter's head in order to take part of the load off his shoulders. The postal services represented a form of forced labor that was crucial to the administration of the regime (Stiller 1976: 34–38). The ways in which the Ranas restricted privileges to the elite class based in the center and imposed constraints on the commoners offer an apt example of the "selective exclusion" that roads enabled (Liechty 1997).

The text lists the enslavable groups described in the civil code: the Bhote, a group to which the Tamang and Sherpa belong, and the Thakali, Chepang, Gharti, Hayu, Kumal and Tharu. Subas Tamang, *Study of History I*, 2017, 21 x 30 cm, etching aquatint.
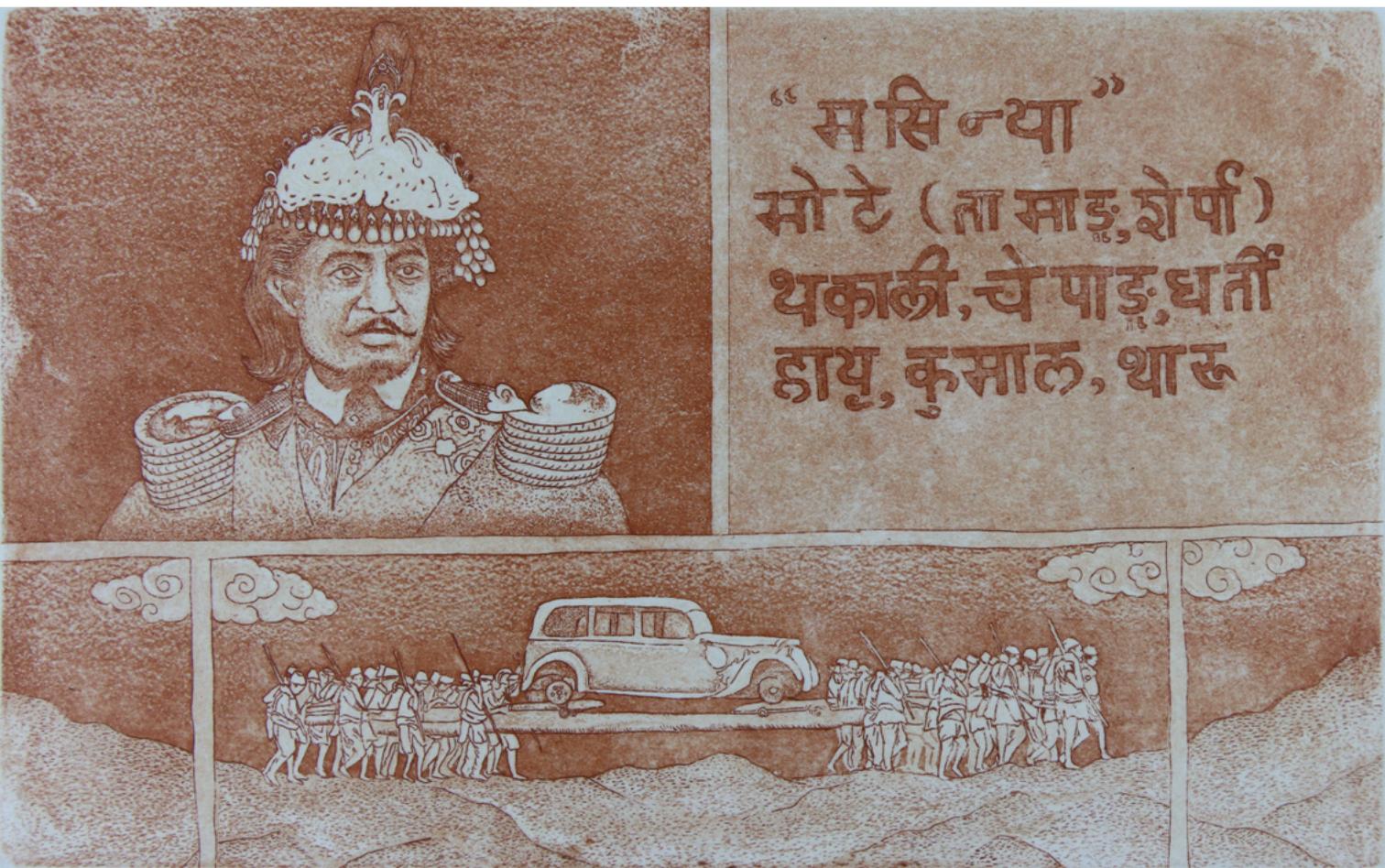
In 1854 Jang Bahadur Rana enacted the Muluki Ain, a comprehensive civil code that provided the legal basis of the regime's extractive economy. It set Nepal's non-Hindu groups within an uncompromising caste system. Complex concepts of purity and pollution placed the clean castes on top and those of low status at the bottom. Though most ethnic communities were in the clean category, some, such as the Tamang, were categorized as enslavable (Nep. *māsinyā matwāli*) (Höfer 1979: 7–10). They carried cars for the elite and built bridges (Bajracharya and Bajracharya 2019), but also worked in paper, but also worked in paper and gunpowder factories and on fruit plantations (Holmberg, March and Tamang 1999). The legal code imposed Hindu moral principles and concepts on Nepal's diverse communities, with offences and crimes being treated differently according to ethnicity and caste. The stigma that has been placed on the bodies of those confined to the lower ranks of society legitimated their regularized labor contributions.

After the Rana regime collapsed, construction work on a motorable road to the south from Kathmandu was completed with Indian assistance in 1956. According to Dhan Bahadur Gole, who was among the last surviving car carriers, the porters ceased lifting vehicles through Tarai valleys and across the hills to Kathmandu once the Tribhuvan Highway linked the capital to the Indian border. That does not mean, however, that social constraints disappeared. The uneven impact of infrastructure development continues, albeit on different scales. The construction of roads, dams, power plants and transmission lines remains a complex process. As Galen Murton and Tulasi Sigdel demonstrate in their research on reproducing marginality through infrastructure, "the engineering challenges of road construction in Nepal are exceeded perhaps only by the social disruptions that they also create" (2019). Roads produce boundaries, prop up social hierarchies and draw lines. They are not setting aside structural differences but rather produce, and reproduce, particular uneven social terrains.

Notes:

[1] Various gazetteers, including a 1909 map of India's political divisions, depicted Nepal as a princely state, thus adding to the complicated nature of the neighboring situation. As a dominant power, the British wanted to exert control, when necessary, over Nepal. But they did not want to overthrow a buffer state that provided what the British considered an important resource: the Gurkha soldiers. Gurkha recruitment into the British colonial armies began in 1816 and continues to this day in both the Indian and British armed forces.

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Nadine Plachta is Resident Representative at the Kathmandu Branch Office of Heidelberg University's South Asia Institute. Trained in social anthropology and global studies, she is interested in how ethnicity, indigeneity, and citizenship are produced in Nepal's constant state of political transformation. In her research she asks how democratization processes affect struggles for social justice and political participation. Based on her fieldwork in Tsum, Nadine is also working on a study of historical documents to investigate the creation of the Nepal-China borderland and changing terms of sovereignty, subjectivity, and belonging at the margins of the state.

Subas Tamang is a visual artist and founding member of ArTree, an arts collective based in Kathmandu. After receiving a BFA from Tribhuvan University's Lalit Kala Fine Art College, his work was exhibited at various venues and galleries in Nepal and Bangladesh. He uses techniques such as painting, printmaking and carving, and engages in multi-media art practices to create meaningful dialogues about critical subject matters. Belonging to the Tamang community, whose historical knowledge provides a tangible encounter with suffering from displacement and dispossession, Subas' artwork examines past patterns of social exclusion in Nepal that are still pervasive in the current political moment. Based on Volkmar Wentzel's photograph, the series *Study of History I–V* offers the possibility to explore the political, material and social vulnerabilities of Tamang life.

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