

## ‘Writing as an Activism’: Barefoot Research Initiative in Nepal

### Introduction

This research brief is a report on the experience of managing/executing a “barefoot research” initiative in three districts—Kapilvastu, Nawalparasi and Rupandehi—of Nepal’s Western Tarai from November 2017 to June 2019. An assessment of the intellectual landscapes of rights-based advocacy research in the Western Tarai, from which this work follows, was described earlier in Martin Chautari (2019).<sup>1</sup> The barefoot research (hereafter BR) initiative is different from academic, participatory or action research. BR initiative argues for the inclusion of those who have been directly or indirectly denied the opportunities to do social science research and to disseminate knowledge from below. BR initiative is an attempt to explore the ways in which grassroots-based individuals may be able to claim their “right to research”<sup>2</sup> and advocate their causes for “democratic citizenship.”<sup>3</sup>

The possibilities of BR initiative emerge out of asymmetrical arrangements. Nepal’s socio-political transitions from the Panchayat system through multi-party democracy and the civil war up until the promulgation of the new constitution in 2015 have witnessed evolving academia, civil society and public intellectuals.<sup>4</sup> The current challenge faced in the Nepali intellectual landscape is its inability to harness and articulate grassroots-based voices that are necessary for a devolved democracy. Such disconnect is due to a peripheral blindness



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<sup>1</sup> Martin Chautari. 2019. *Institutional Assessment of Rights-based Advocacy in the Western Tarai*. Available at [www.martinchautari.org.np/files/Research-Brief-25\\_English-version.pdf](http://www.martinchautari.org.np/files/Research-Brief-25_English-version.pdf); accessed August 17, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Appadurai, Arjun. 2006. The Right to Research. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 4(2): 167–177.

<sup>3</sup> Drèze, Jean. 2002. On Research and Action. *Economic and Political Weekly* 37(9): 817–818.

<sup>4</sup> Pandey, Subhanga. 2017. Can We Stop Talking About the Public Intellectuals? Available at [www.recordnepal.com/perspective/can-we-stop-talking-about-public-intellectuals/](http://www.recordnepal.com/perspective/can-we-stop-talking-about-public-intellectuals/); accessed August 10, 2019.



that perpetuates a top-down approach and overlooks locally embedded individual concerns. A Kathmandu-centric intellectual landscape of knowledge production directly or indirectly puts entry barriers for locally-embedded emerging members. These barriers are intensified by inadequate access to knowledge resource and lack of opportunities for research, mentoring and publication. These in turn make the institutions of knowledge production in Nepal centralized and unable to internalize the new challenges that arise outside their limited organizational framework. A weak feedback loop among the academia and civil society members from the local to the federal level has stunted the possibilities of informed rights-based advocacy (RBA) research for democratic interventions at various levels. Given the new federal system in Nepal, locally-embedded academics, activists, and civil society members are in less favorable positions to exert the capacity to influence and to contribute to local as well as national discourses. Henceforth, this research brief attempts to report on a BR initiative that was aimed to enhance locally-embedded individuals' "capacity to aspire"<sup>5</sup> in claiming their right to social research. BR initiatives such as the one reported here could democratize research and writing at the grassroots and provide an alternative to the skewed, Kathmandu-centric knowledge production landscape.

This BR initiative was undertaken for the following reasons. First, the idea emerged with the cumulative progression of the research and writings by the thirteen individuals (whom we call barefoot researchers) immersed in numerous training, writing and mentorship activities at Martin Chautari (MC), Kathmandu and at the Madhesh Human Rights Home (MAHURI-Home), Kapilvastu. The processes of selecting the barefoot researchers were not restricted to some rigid methodology but were kept open-ended. Over three dozen individuals were contacted. Various levels of open conversations with each individual

were held in an informal setting to assess their day-to-day experiences of advocacy and interventions. Numerous visits to the Western Tarai districts were also made between December 2017 and June 2018 to assess the intellectual landscapes. Certain factors were crucial in scouting for researchers/individuals. We were interested in meeting with individuals who may have substantial experiences either informed by their locally-embedded activism or by their fact of being local researchers who work within the communities they research and write about. The formal qualifications of the individuals were restricted to a bachelor's degree without any concern for their disciplinary focus. They were required to be professionally engaged in one of the three districts of the Western Tarai. The individuals inducted in this BR initiative were to represent the social and intellectual diversity of the region as well.

Second, the idea of BR attempts to appreciate the experiences and knowledge of locally-embedded grassroots-based individuals. The denials of these individuals as social researchers are often not directly imposed but are instead acted upon indirectly. These individuals suffer from minimum or no exposure to training in research during their formal higher education experience, inadequate research infrastructures (namely, lack of proper libraries and no funding and mentoring opportunities), and non-existing intellectual support community. They are also disadvantaged by inappropriate social capital (namely, little or no socio-cultural and political "connections") and economic insecurity.

Third, the dilapidated state of academia in general and humanities and social science research in particular looms large in Nepal. It is often the story of dysfunction, decline and decay which is even more pronounced outside Kathmandu. Hence, the BR initiative is another experiment to explore alternatives for knowledge generation outside the formal university settings.<sup>6</sup> It is an attempt to do social research from below.

<sup>5</sup> Appadurai, Arjun. 2004. *The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition*. In *Culture and Public Action*. Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton, eds., pp. 59–84. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Also see Onta, Pratyoush. 2011. *Locating Academic NGOs in the Knowledge Production Landscape*. *Dhaulagiri Journal of Sociology and Anthropology* 5: 49–80.



This research brief is divided into five parts. The first part deals with the working definition of BR. The second part deals with the idea of “capacity to aspire.” The third part reports how the “capacity enhancing efforts” of the barefoot researchers were executed. The fourth part summarizes the written texts produced by the barefoot researchers in this initiative. Finally, the concluding remarks highlight an alternative through the BR initiative to conduct social research in Nepal.

### **Towards a Barefoot Research (BR) Initiative in Nepal**

There are at least four reasons why a BR initiative for the generation of knowledge in the non-university settings can be justified in the case of Nepal. First, given the dilapidated state of academia, especially outside of Kathmandu, individuals/communities are often excluded from participation in decisions emerging out of research that claim to generate knowledge about them. Their participation in the research processes is crucial as it involves an important commitment in providing conditions to enhance their capacity in acquiring knowledge and thereof their empowerment.

Second, social exclusion across gender, class, caste, region and ethnicity is pervasive and crosscutting in the knowledge production landscapes in Nepal. Based on his Indian experiences, Gopal Guru argues for an egalitarian principle of social science practice. The principle stands to provide the moral opportunity and also the capacity to interrogate the exclusionary cultural hierarchy—in terms of “theoretical brahmins and empirical shudras”—which is accentuated due to lack of “reflective capacity.”<sup>7</sup> One of the crucial conditions for reflectivity is the freedom of individuals from ceaseless struggle for survival and economic

<sup>7</sup> For Gopal Guru, the idea of an egalitarian principle in social science practice is to do with the “reflective capacity” as a necessary condition for doing social science research. See, Guru, Gopal. 2000. How Egalitarian are the Social Sciences in India? *Economic and Political Weekly* 37(50): 5003–5009.

security to enjoy the steady intellectual support of the community resources which the intellectually deprived groups such as Dalits, Indigenous Janajati minorities, and other backward caste groups lack vis-à-vis upper caste Brahmins.

Third, the rationale for BR further builds on the concept of undone social (science) research which attempts to locate the social events under researched and explore the new knowledge production gaps emanating from the grassroots that are either ignored or are not under the purview of Kathmandu-centric intellectuals.<sup>8</sup> Fourth, the politics of what qualifies as research is itself exclusionary at the grassroots. Academic research puts the standards of evidence too high that often requires theoretical richness and methodologically robust inquiry. Directly or indirectly, such requirement not only acts as entry barriers for grassroots-based individuals but also often requires rigorous formal trainings. For instance, buzzwords like “evidence-based policy,” almost equivalent to randomized control trials (RCTs), often sideline the interpretive practices of social science research that are accumulated in the form of experiences. The development economist Jean Drèze argues that there is good reason to make constructive use of experience as data. Experience may also be a rich source of insights without which the decisions that we take will be based on very limited knowledge.<sup>9</sup> The BR initiative is an attempt to relax a structure of denial due to the hegemonic politics of “evidence” practiced in academia.

There are several existing terms in use in which the word “barefoot” appears as an adjective. For example, terms such as barefoot doctors, barefoot journalists, barefoot lawyers, barefoot epidemiologists, barefoot

<sup>8</sup> The idea of undone science is taken from Science and Technology Studies. See, Fricke, Scott, Sahra Gibbon, Jeff Howard, Joanna Kempner, Gwen Ottinger and David Hess. 2010. Undone Science: Charting Social Movement and Civil Society Challenges to Research Agenda Setting. *Science, Technology & Human Values* 35(4): 444–473.

<sup>9</sup> Drèze, Jean. 2019. *Sense and Solidarity: Jholawala Economics for Everyone*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



teachers, etc. have been used in different time and space. The barefoot doctor concept was introduced in China in 1968 to deliver health care knowledge and training to indigenous paramedics (with bare minimum formal education and on-the-job training) to address the grossly inadequate availability of health workers in the rural areas.<sup>10</sup> In Nepal, the barefoot journalism idea was practiced to create a network of rural journalists who can write in newspapers about events and processes that affect the lives of the people in villages.<sup>11</sup> The ethnographic studies of barefoot teachers in South Africa narrate the story of unlicensed teachers in community schools in rural areas who are making an effort towards imparting education with professionalism and acquiring formal qualification on the job.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the usage of the term “barefoot” helps to highlight frugality in the approach of conducting interventions and the training of individuals within the economic, cultural and socio-political constraints.

The following ideas are also connected to the BR initiative. Such an initiative allows for the (a) realization of social research and evaluation in a continuous basis to solve everyday societal problems.<sup>13</sup> It also allows for the practice of (b) “do-it-yourself” research techniques by those who are themselves involved in the issues.<sup>14</sup> BR initiatives can (c) empower communities, especially during

conflict, without outside mediation.<sup>15</sup> Such initiatives highlight the (d) the importance of self-enumeration and self-documentation in the process of research.<sup>16</sup>

### Capacity to Aspire

The “capacity to aspire” concept was developed by the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai. He argues for the need to strengthen the idea of aspiration as a cultural capacity of the poor/marginalized. An individual or a group can develop a culture of aspiration not only to voice, debate, contest and oppose as participatory activities in any democracy but also to govern individual or collective life as they aspire for.<sup>17</sup> Such a capacity directly connects with the barefoot researchers’ attempts to self-enumerate experiences and learning in society which in turn enhances their ability to articulate insights in a written form as a research output characterized by “thick description.”<sup>18</sup> In most of the cases, the mentors<sup>19</sup> of the barefoot researchers play the role of a catalyst to enhance the latter’s “reflective capacity” through navigational guidance.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore it must be noted that the BR initiative (a) reduces the cost to barefoot researchers to aspire as social researchers against all the

<sup>10</sup> Zhang, Daqing and Paul U. Unschuld. 2008. China’s Barefoot Doctor: Past, Present, and Future. *The Lancet* 372(9653): 1865–1867.

<sup>11</sup> Koirala, Bharat Dutta and Hem Bahadur Bista. 1995. *Impact Study of Gaunle Deurali: Barefoot Journalists Training and Deurali Readers Clubs*. Kathmandu: Media Services International.

<sup>12</sup> Henning, Elizabeth. 2000. Walking with “Barefoot” Teachers: An Ethnographically Fashioned Casebook. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 16(1): 3–20.

<sup>13</sup> See, <http://www.barefootresearch.org.uk/projects/>; accessed October 4, 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Keith, Margaret, James Brophy, Peter Kirby and Ellen Roskam. 2002. *Barefoot Research: A Worker’s Manual for Organising on Work Security*. Geneva: International Labour Organisation (ILO).

<sup>15</sup> Roy, Bunker and Jesse Hartigan. 2008. Empowering the Rural Poor to Develop Themselves: The Barefoot Approach (Innovations Case Narrative: Barefoot College of Tilonia). *Innovations* 3(2): 67–93.

<sup>16</sup> Appadurai, Arjun. 2012. Why Enumeration Counts. *Environment and Urbanization* 24(2): 639–641.

<sup>17</sup> Appadurai, Arjun. 2004. The Capacity to Aspire. In *Culture and Public Action*. Vijayendra Rao and Michael Walton, eds., pp. 59–84. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

<sup>18</sup> Geertz, Clifford. 2008. Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture. In *The Cultural Geography Reader*. Timothy S. Oakes and Patricia L. Price, eds., pp. 41–51. London: Routledge.

<sup>19</sup> Mentors associated with MC were allocated to each barefoot researcher. Two researchers were also mentored by experts outside MC to cater to their individual research needs.

<sup>20</sup> See, Guru, Gopal. 2000. How Egalitarian are the Social Sciences in India? *Economic and Political Weekly* 37(50): 5003–5009.





constraints and (b) recognizes them as researchers with valuable experiences and knowledge resulting from advocacy, activism, teaching, journalism and related engagements in the local contexts.

There is a sharp difference between the training economy of other I/NGOs and the trainings conducted under this BR initiative. The former is done largely under the assumption that those at the local level do not have a “capacity” and thus needed to be trained. However, the BR trainings developed tools for identifying the “aspirations” of barefoot researchers based on their prior knowledge and experiences. This required careful and thoughtful encouragement to enhance their skills in research and writing. For instance, when asked what is the difference in the trainings they had obtained previously from what they had under the BR initiative, a human rights activist from Rupandehi responded:

I have been immersed in various trainings of NGOs in different periods. I have found this training contrastingly different. Earlier trainings that I attended were conducted by various NGOs. After the trainings, they barely follow up and the relationship breaks. However, this training process continues by following up with the research progress, supply of relevant reading materials and the coordination of formal and informal training sessions to motivate us during different research phases. Mentors read the drafts and consistently ask us to crosscheck the data and reflect on the evidences from a broader perspective.<sup>21</sup>

In response to the query regarding how mentoring had helped in the research process, an activist from Kapilvastu said: “It boosted my confidence. I realized that I have enough information because of my activism. I felt that I too have the capacity to write.”<sup>22</sup> Mentoring is subsumed as a part of the training to

facilitate learning by doing research. Hence, the BR initiative is an attempt to show an alternative way to democratize social research while turning the usual privileges on its head. Just ensuring the “navigational capacity” serves as a necessary condition for individuals at the local level to conduct research from below.

### **Enhancing Capacity to Research, Document, Analyze and Write**

Until the outcomes of the barefoot researchers are demonstrated in written pieces or their visible impacts on policy outcomes recorded, it will be hard to justify and validate “capacity enhancement” of the barefoot researchers. At the same time, it is also necessary to judge under what conditions<sup>23</sup> the thirteen researchers piloted in this BR initiative. First, the researcher performs within limited availability of research infrastructure such as libraries/bibliographies, access to knowledge resources, universities/colleges training, writing, seminars, workshops and mentoring, etc. Second, the researcher within the community enters the research field almost like their subjects given the society they live in. Third, the researchers may not follow the citation world of social sciences to produce hard evidences and instead make use of experiences/observations as practitioners in the respective field they are involved in. Thus, the researchers’ capacity enhancement needs to be reassessed in the case of the BR initiative.

Given the above three conditions, the researcher begins his/her research pursuit from where the methodology may not be clear, theoretical conceptual framework may not be rich, empirical validity of data may not be rigorous enough, factors which are taken for granted in the case of academic researchers. The barefoot researchers also do not have any pressure to “publish or perish” in contrast to those in academia nor do they desire to continue “research” as a profession.

<sup>21</sup> Ram Bikas Chaudhary, personal communication, May 15, 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Testimony of Moti Kala Pangeni, June 29, 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Yogesh Raj, personal communication, June 20, 2019.



In such scenarios, trainings undertaken cannot be one-size-fits-all type but be adaptive to address the unique needs of individual researchers. Moreover, the training content cannot be assessed in advance for all the researchers given the diversity in the cohort in terms of proposed research topics, individuals' differential abilities and prior trainings that are required for research writings.<sup>24</sup>

Keeping this diversity in mind, the initial training covering varied aspects of social science research was conducted. Extensive discussions were also held amongst MC colleagues and with scholars outside MC for more effective ways to disseminate relevant ideas from social science literature through resource persons. The barefoot researchers were provided with long research articles and short opinion articles in all relevant thematic areas. The thematic discussions with individuals were followed by lectures delivered by designated resource persons. The participants presented their research topic and proposal in the language they were comfortable with (namely, Nepali and Hindi), followed by discussions, criticisms, and comments from the floor. The discussions were structured in such a way that (a) the researchers could know each other's research proposal and thus could discuss their research work with others in the future, which was a part of their capacity building and social capital building, and (b) the researchers would feel somewhat competitive and would do their research activities to the best of their efforts.

After the formal training, the researchers were asked to send a final research proposal and accordingly the mentors at MC (and outside in select few cases) were assigned to each individual. Then, the problem in executing the BR initiative started

<sup>24</sup> For instance, some researchers were finding it difficult to use a computer effectively or to use email for communication per se. Many researchers were not aware how they could search for relevant knowledge resources or access relevant literatures from the internet or other search methods. In the training sessions, many researchers faced challenges on how and when to do a citation or to give footnotes.

to appear. The strangeness that lies in conducting research, as described by Appadurai in the case of academic social science research, was also relevant here:

What research is,...what its meanings are, what people think they are doing when they say they are 'doing research' or when they are teaching others to do research. And how do people who are entering the world of research, from outside its western historical home, try to do so? What are the conditions of entry to that world?"<sup>25</sup>

There was a similar anxiety in the barefoot researchers. Laxmi Shrestha of MAHURI-Home, field supervisor for coordinating the BR initiative in collaboration with MC said: "The individuals are confused about how they should start 'doing research' and what exactly they are expected to do."<sup>26</sup>

"Research" then started with numerous informal trainings and with individuals' observations, documentation and self-enumeration of experiences as activists, journalists, lawyers, academics, etc. in the society. In response to the query, "How did you start your research, choose the research topic, and collect data?," one activist responded:

Making use of past experiences and to build on the work of our organization was always my priority. I have been thinking about it. On the issue of the denial of citizenship to women at the household level, wherever I used to advocate, many people ignored the concerns. The issue is not taken seriously. Then, I decided to conduct research myself given the opportunity.

I am not informed about any ideology related to these issues [social science theoretical richness per se]. Nonetheless, prioritising their

<sup>25</sup> Appadurai, Arjun. 2006. *The Right to Research. Globalisation, Societies and Education* 4(2): 169.

<sup>26</sup> Laxmi Shrestha, personal communication, September 10, 2018.



[research subjects] experience and suffering, I tried to understand the problems related to citizenship by listening to them and advocating their rights.<sup>27</sup>

While the researchers enumerated experiences and documented information, two issues started to complicate the process of enhancing the capacity to research. First, while enhancing the capacity of others to do “research,” the criterion of traceability and reproducibility as a scientific research norm are dominant. It means that the citation practices of the social science research world be duly followed and evidences should be reliable and valid. The assumptions are that any good (academic) research stands upon the shoulders of giants. Given the conditions of this BR initiative, the researchers are not necessarily able to bring social science theoretical richness but to document stories based on the information and memory about the incidents they have themselves witnessed/experienced and produce a consistently argued coherent piece of writing. In such an endeavor, a plural outlook to unpack the natural and social complexities from the research field emanating from long experiences and insights of barefoot researchers was put in use.<sup>28</sup> For instance, Brijraj Kushwaha, from Nawalparasi, a water activist and journalist, enumerated the experiences of struggle in his research that he witnessed in his community due to the agreement between Nepal and India related to the Gandak irrigation and power project. When asked how he conducted the research on the issues related to the Gandak Agreement, he said: “The rights-based research is to be followed like *abhiyan* (movement), continuum effort, instead of short term program.”<sup>29</sup> As a spokesperson of the Gandak River Control Struggle Committee (GRCSC),

<sup>27</sup> Testimony of Laxmi Shrestha, June 29, 2019.

<sup>28</sup> On plural outlook, see Raj, Yogesh. 2014. On Methods and Mess. *Journal of Technology Research and Review* 1(1): 1–10.

<sup>29</sup> Brijraj Kushwaha, personal communication, May 15, 2019.

he added: “The research here is a reflection as well as documentation of our over a decade-long struggle to bring out the issues the way we understand them from our experiences”. It is interesting to note that GRCSC is not a legally registered organization but only an informal group of victims in the Gandak region. The write-up by Kushwaha is very informative but is not filled with citations.

The second aspect to think about while doing research or teaching others to do research is the assumption that the research outcome should be “theoretical” in the sense that its argument can be abstracted to a level other than the one supported by the empirical case described. For instance, Laxmi Shrestha presented her topic in an open seminar at Kapilvastu (June 29, 2019) where she shared the story of denial of citizenship from the household to the state level. She passionately argued that patriarchy increases by manifold with already existing legal difficulties of acquiring citizenship in the name of mother. She provoked the concerns from her grassroots activism that the activists in Kathmandu demand for “citizenship in the name of the mother which is indeed important; however, we are also demanding to grant citizenship to the mother [for instance, daughters-in-law] herself first who are facing various forms of patriarchy and thus denials at the household level to acquire Nepali citizenship independently.” Similarly, Sarswati Sharma, lawyer and a woman activist from Nawalparasi, provoked the discussion saying: “Got the judgement but not the justice from the court.”<sup>30</sup> As a lawyer, she has encountered various citizenship related cases of women (across the ethnic groups) in the court that she herself has followed as an activist. In both cases, their research outputs did not pursue any theoretical approach of the social sciences in a strict sense. What they did, however, is to bring insights from the field nearly as subjects themselves in very well-written deliberative texts.

Thus the enhancement of the capacity to research, document, write and analyze is a learning-by-doing

<sup>30</sup> Sarswati Sharma, open seminar, Kapilvastu, June 29, 2019.



processes in which supplementing support such as that provided at MC contributes to producing research write-ups. In this process, the required skills and tacit knowledge were acquired by the researchers themselves. For instance, in response to the query, “Do you think that you have learned, unlearned, relearned during this research process?” one researcher writes in her testimony: “Acquired some skills of computer to write a research paper.”<sup>31</sup> Another researcher who hails from Kapilvastu responded to the same question: “There are barely any written documents or research articles accessible for reviewing the existing conditions of Natuwa community (Dalit community whose primary occupation has been Snake charming and begging) in Kapilvastu.”<sup>32</sup> In both cases, the researchers operate within the constraints of limited resources of knowledge.

However, a written research piece may be a necessary condition for measurable criteria for capacity enhancement but not a sufficient condition. Instead, a mentor to one of the researchers whose draft could not graduate to a publishable shape said:

Those who have a grip on their subject (issues) should be able to produce necessary information in such a way that they can present it orally (in any language) with empirical details, research, and analysis. If they can engage the public in the form of advocacy that too should be a good criterion for “capacity

building.” “Research”/“doing research” should not be reduced to “writing” only.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, if the assumptions are relaxed about “doing research” and “teaching others to do research,” we can say that research is not only an expert act done after rigorous “formal training” at the university for the most part but it can also be an appreciative inquiry that takes seriously the experiences and information of the individuals/activists at the grassroots as data to engage with analytically. In this context, the BR initiative is useful not only to enhance the research capacity of barefoot researchers but also to unpack the gaps that are under-researched in the formal social science research landscapes.

### **The Resulting Written Texts of Barefoot Researchers**

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz, once said, “If you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories or its findings, and certainly not at what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do.”<sup>34</sup> The BR initiative attempts to conduct social research with the practitioners. The academic researchers may have knowledge resources at their disposal, abundance of funding and the access to formal trainings at university settings. In BR initiative, these privileges are nearly absent. This section tries to summarize the written texts of the researchers who are in the process of formal/informal trainings in the BR initiative. The texts produced by the eleven researchers are discussed in four clusters: gender issues, social audit of the peace process and human rights violations, livelihood, and social inclusion.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Devendra Uprety, personal communication, August 20, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Geertz, Clifford. 2008. Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture. In *The Cultural Geography Reader*. Timothy S. Oakes and Patricia L. Price, eds., p. 32. London: Routledge.

<sup>35</sup> These texts are being published by MC in an edited volume shortly.

<sup>31</sup> Testimony of Moti Kala Pageni, June 29, 2019. Pageni is from Nawalparasi and she had monitored the clashes between Tharus and high caste Hill group in 2069 v.s. as a human rights activist. In her research, she is trying to understand the Tharu movement by studying how a Tharu museum was built and the politics embedded in that process.

<sup>32</sup> Testimony of Sanjay Kumar Pasee, June 29, 2019. This researcher from Kapilvastu belongs to a Dalit community and he has written a wrenching story of the Natuwa community who face exclusion within the Dalit community.





On the issue of gender, the denial of citizenship to women has been a major concern in Nepal. This denial is disproportionately higher in the southern parts of Nepal. Two researchers, Laxmi Shrestha, an activist from Kapilvastu District, and Sarswati Sharma, a lawyer and the vice-president of Nawalparasi District Bar Association, highlight the denial of citizenships from two different lenses. As an activist, Shrestha receives the complaints on a daily basis from women who are subjected to various kinds of domestic violence and discriminations at their households. These discriminations further lead to direct and indirect bureaucratic complexities. Shrestha's written text argues that the marginalization due to the denial of citizenship rights to women increases manifolds in the current three-tier federal governance system under the new constitution of Nepal. Sarswati Sharma advocates for citizenship rights to women through petitioning their cases in the courts. Her written text enumerates the court cases that she has witnessed. She argues that the denial of citizenship is directly linked not only with the economic empowerment of the women but also to judicial remedy from domestic violence. Moreover, she provocatively asks a question in her written research text: "Whose responsibility is it to identify a citizen?" The burden of proof on the part of a citizen to establish her citizenship abdicates the responsibility of the state to safeguard the rights of poor women.

In the *Nepal Living Standard Survey (2010/2011)* it is reported that every two in three households in the Tarai receive remittances from foreign employment. About 79 percent of the total remittances received by the households are used for daily consumption while 7 percent is used for loan repayments.<sup>36</sup> Given these stark realities of the Nepali economy, the ratio of remittances to GDP stands at 25.9 percent in 2018.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Government of Nepal (GoN). 2011. *Nepal Living Standards Survey 2010/11* (Volume Two, Chapter 15: Remittances and Transfer Income, pp.78–86). Kathmandu: Central Bureau of Statistics, GoN.

<sup>37</sup> GoN. 2019. *Economic Survey: 2018/2019*. Kathmandu: GoN.

In this context, Uma Paudel attempts to bring out the case of Nawalparasi (undivided) which is one of the six districts (out of erstwhile seventy five districts) that registered the highest number of deaths of Nepalis in foreign employment. She has been working in the Safer Migration (SAMI) Project based at Indreni Social Development Forum, an NGO, in Nawalparasi district since 2014. Her work deals with day to day counseling to widows of migrant workers who have died while working abroad. These widows suffer from psychological trauma and anxiety. Her written text shows that the widows' social, cultural and psychological trouble begins after they receive the insurance compensation amounts. She examined twenty such cases. As a researcher, she already had considerable experiences working in the field to understand the layers of complexities that widows were subjected to and enough information to document, analyze and write about. Meanwhile, she also raised questions regarding the existing policies of compensating the widows through insurance claims or any other economic help that they are provided with. First, whether such amount will be under the possession of the widows solely or the whole family is not clear and this confusion is the root cause of household conflicts. Second, the Foreign Employment Board (Nepal)<sup>38</sup> has not made arrangements to claim the insurance amount in the districts. Hence the widows had to travel all the way to Kathmandu to claim and receive the insurance money which increases their troubles further.

In the last few decades, Nepal has witnessed a series of conflicts—including the Maoist insurgency (1996–2006) and three Madhes uprisings (2007, 2008 and 2015). In these periods, the human rights activists played a substantial role to mitigate the conflicts and negotiate peace. Three research texts by Dipak Gnawali, Ram Bikas Chaudhary and Moti Kala Pangeni narrate the stories of their respective advocacy in human rights issues during the conflict periods in the Western Tarai. For instance, Dipak

<sup>38</sup> The Foreign Employment Promotion Board was recently renamed as Foreign Employment Board.



Gnawali, a journalist based in Rupandehi, reported how the militia was mobilized and deployed, hand-in-glove with the state, as a part of the anti-insurgency operations against the Maoists. Such contemporary social history of the Maoist insurgency and the process of the peace audit is rarely discussed in the Nepali knowledge production landscape. He argues that the residue of the peace process is still remaining in Nepal as the militia did not receive adequate attention.

Ram Bikas Chaudhary, a human rights activist from Rupandehi, responded to the question of how he used his experiences in the research on extra judicial killings during the times of Madhes uprisings as follows:

As a rights activist, I have been thinking and researching about extra judicial killings in Rupandehi district. However, in the data collected for the research, I did not get any encouraging support from the state to cross verify. Still, my experiences in these issues and with the help of newspaper cuttings I have been collecting to monitor human rights violations [an act of self-enumeration and self-documentation], I am trying to prove my point in writing that extra judicial killings happened in Rupandehi.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, Moti Kala Pageni who was a secretary of the Accountability Watch Committee (AWC) for Nawalparasi district, a consortium of human rights groups, enumerated the experiences of monitoring the conflict between Tharu and Hill caste group over the issue of the building of the Tharu Museum. Such written text is an evidence of the ongoing social audit of the peace process in Nepal. She showed how the museum became a symbol of Tharu identity and the history of struggle thereof to achieve such an identity.

Brijraj Kushwaha is currently the South Asia Convener at Nadi Aadhikar Manch (River Rights Forum) and spokesperson of GRCSC. He has over a

decade long association with GRCSC as a water activist. The GRCSC has championed the rights of the displaced and dispossessed people's livelihood concerns in Nawalparasi due to an international agreement signed in 1959 between Nepal and India, popularly known as the Gandak Agreement. His research text highlights the social, cultural and economic adverse impacts in the Nepali side instead of the "common interests" the Agreement was supposed to enhance in both Nepal and India. Further, he enumerated his experiences of the GRCSC and its sustained advocacy over the decade. This was in contrast with the dubious stand and laidback approach of the Government of Nepal for compensation to the victims due to the Gandak Agreement.

Sanjay Kumar Pasee worked as the Kapilvastu District Project Coordinator of the Nepal National Dalit Social Welfare Organization (NNDSWO). From 2013 to 2016, he did rights based advocacy for education to Dalit youths. Given his long associations in Dalit rights advocacy with various NGOs, he has encountered the problems of Natuwa community (snake charmers), one of the poorest of the Dalit communities in Kapilvastu and elsewhere. He made an attempt to collect information and document the existing situation of the Natuwa community in his written text. Such type of research is often not in the radar of mainstream researchers. He passionately makes a case on behalf of the excluded miniscule minority like the Natuwa community whose livelihood depends mostly on "begging." He argued that so far, the government plans and policies have been dismal and disappointing for the Natuwa community.

Ram Chandra Shrestha is a teacher in a secondary school and an MA student of Anthropology at Butwal Multiple Campus, Rupandehi district. He has lived in Butwal and witnessed the emergence of slum dwellers in the city over the period. He attempted to research how slum dwellers negotiate their everyday life and livelihood. When asked how he would collect data and produce a thick description of the lives of slum dwellers he said: "As a local researcher (within the community), I can understand the symbols and

<sup>39</sup> Testimony of Ram Bikash Chaudhary, June 29, 2019.



expressions of slum dwellers [research subjects] beyond words. I can build rapport with them easily as I live here. I can easily enter the subjects' field to narrate their daily negotiations in the city. This helps me to do participant observation in a natural setting."<sup>40</sup> His research highlights the social history of Binapate, a slum area, in Butwal.

In the caste based Hindu hierarchal society in Nepal, pervasive form of caste sentiment and thereof entrenched caste networks lead to direct/indirect exclusion in the everyday public sphere in Nepal. The text by Sona Khatik—who is currently a station manager of the Community Radio Kapilvastu 104.2MHz—enumerates the stories based on her experiences as a radio journalist and those of her five colleagues who have faced discrimination in their radio journalism career in Kapilvastu and Rupandehi districts. Her research highlights the entry barriers faced by Dalit women in radio journalism. Even if they enter radio journalism as a career, Dalit women face exclusions in terms of equal pay and dignity, access to trainings/capacity building, and various forms of socio psychological violence in their respective workplaces.

Raksha Ram Harijan hails from Kapilvastu. He received his secondary/post-secondary education locally and is self-trained as a Dalit activist with plenty of work experiences with NGOs. This raised his curiosity to pursue further his second degree in law. During his professional career, he passionately advocated for the inclusion of members of the marginalized community in Nepal, particularly from the Madhesi Dalit community. In his written text, he documented twenty-five cases registered in the court and thirty-six applicants who filled petitions on various issues related to social inclusion policies as a "right" instead of a "charity." At least in ten cases, he has direct/indirect involvement. He has raised issues of inconsistency in the court verdicts related to inclusion theme. Further, he has also highlighted the subjective interpretations of the law and the delays incurred in the hearing of the petitions in the court.

<sup>40</sup> Ram Chandra Shrestha, personal communication, November 17, 2019.

### Concluding Remarks: Lessons Extrapolated

This research brief described the process and practices of the BR initiative with the pilot study undertaken in the three districts of the Western Tarai of Nepal. Given the three propositions: the knowledge production landscape in Nepal which is predominantly Kathmandu-centric; those who are in this domain are largely privileged (in terms of training and access to knowledge resources etc.); and the assumption that social science research is largely in the university settings, the cases presented here help us to argue that the BR initiative is a possible alternative to currently dominant ways in which knowledge production is happening. It is high time to democratize social research and hear the voices from below. To do this, it is necessary to appreciate the knowledge and experiences of "practitioners" in the field. These "practitioners" at the grassroots-level may lack the necessary skills that the formal university research training may provide but the BR initiative with short trainings may reduce the cost to let barefoot researchers to "aspire" for enumerating their experiences for research against all the constraints.

This BR initiative was an effort to conduct research by the individuals uniquely positioned within the community to make use of their experiences informed through activism. It stressed the importance of self-documentation by the barefoot researchers to mobilize knowledge about themselves and not rely on outsiders, mostly social science research "consultants" to generate knowledge. These barefoot researchers can produce "thick description" of social events and issues. Thus, "writing as an activism" can graduate into social research that may turn the privileges of knowledge production on its head. Such BR initiative is necessary to locate social events that are either under researched or not adequately highlighted in the university formal social science research landscapes.

