

POLITICAL ECONOMIES AND POLITICAL RATIONALITIES OF ROAD BUILDING IN NEPAL

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Nepal is perhaps one of the few countries in the world today where significant portions of the population and territory lack access to sustainable motor transport. Its hill and mountain regions have some of the lowest road densities in the world. As of 2009, a quarter of the population lived more than four hours' walk from the nearest road head (Shrestha 2009). Although in national terms road density by 2013 had reached 48 km per 100 square kilometers (km) (high compared to other mountainous countries in South Asia, such as Bhutan [20 km] and Pakistan [32 km]), only 11 percent of Nepal's road network had been paved (low for the region, e.g., India [50%] and Bhutan [62%]; World Bank 2013). And, while the road density has by now increased to 55 km per 100 square kilometers, when calculated in terms of roads that are motorable throughout the year, the figure drops to 30 km per 100 square kilometers (NPC 2016). In this context, as an iconic symbol of modernity, roads continue to hold out the promise of connectivity, political power, economic growth, and cultural status. They have, as anthropologist Brian Larkin (2013) put it in a foundational article on the "politics and poetics of infrastructure," an important political address in the aspiration for progress, development and indeed freedom.

State actors have long sought to maneuver the road's far-reaching political address. From the first moment that Nepal institutionalized a modern bureaucratic state apparatus, roads have featured as a priority mechanism for pursuing governmental goals—vis-à-vis its neighbors and those with geopolitical interests in the region as much as its populations and territory. Not a single development plan has been issued that does not accord priority to road building, and on an average transportation and communication infrastructure has comprised 24 percent of the national budget over the thirteen plans that have been issued since 1956. The current Thirteenth Plan (2013/2014–2017/2018) devotes over a fifth of its budget to transportation and communication infrastructure, and the government's 2016 Five Year

Plan for Transportation Infrastructure Development privileges major road construction as a cornerstone of twenty-first century development and modernization (MoPIT 2016, cited in Murton 2017: 329–330).

Roads have thus been a major site of state investment and governmental ambition within Nepal. At the same time, a look at the international literature reveals that roads also feature prominently in contemporary social science scholarship concerned with socio-political relations. “Mobility studies,” for example, has emerged as an entire sub-discipline of the social sciences, with its own journal (*Mobilities*), conference circuits, and scholarly pursuits. This terrain of inquiry takes up *how things move* as a key lens on social life and social organization—encompassing not only roads as an object of inquiry but also any infrastructure or technology engaged in moving people, things, and ideas. In so doing it advocates a *processual* orientation toward the road (or the Internet, or shipping container, and so on), focusing on movement and the infrastructures, experiences, meanings, and representations that constitute movement, as well as the differential patterns of mobility and *immobility* that form in relation to roads (Merriman 2009).

The considerable scholarship on infrastructure at the intersection of political economy and science and technology studies has similarly been engaged to interpret road building as a key terrain of socio-political practice (Star 1999; Barker 2005; Elyachar 2010; Roberts, Secor and Zook 2011; Desai, McFarlane and Graham 2015). Here the argument builds on the impetus to delve underneath mundane, everyday physical infrastructures that insinuate into everyday life and become taken for granted as normal features on the landscape to attend to the invisible socio-political infrastructures that are co-produced with physical infrastructure. Roads, that is, must be seen as a social relation and a political regime as much as a physical feature of the landscape.

Drawing on some key conceptual contributions from the international scholarly literature, this paper aims to render visible the sociopolitical infrastructures underlying road building in Nepal. It takes as its starting point the construction of the first motorable roads during the Rana regime (1846–1951), to trace how road building articulates state building, geopolitical dynamics, and place-based social relations. As a theoretical starting point, we find it particularly productive to engage geographer Fiona Wilson’s (2004) concept of “regimes of territorialization” developed through research on mountain roads in Peru, to regard roads as “stretched out spaces of social

relations.” This orientation contrasts with conventional interpretations that seek to document the roads as vectors of penetration.

The latter approach seeks to document impacts. It is characterized by an epistemology of scale that regards the road as an infrastructure by which once immobile “local” places and cultures become penetrated by global, national, and regional flows (Tsing 2000). Such invocations of the “global” and the “local” produce an understanding of geographic scale as essentially fixed and hierarchal domains in which particular processes are consigned to specific levels.¹ Within this epistemological framing, analysis is limited to chronicling the “impacts” of roads on places and people. We aim to show through this brief engagement with the history of road building in Nepal that socio-political dynamics “impact” the road as much as the road “impacts” society. Based on an analysis of contemporary Himalayan borderlands, Murton (2016, 2017) has similarly investigated the co-production of roads, states, and “spaces of social, political and economic interaction at multiple scales” (2016: 229–330).

The concept of “regimes of territorialization” is helpful in this regard. “Regime” signals centralized political organization and thus denotes a political field encompassing contradiction and conflict. “Territorialization” refers to the way land becomes a terrain for political control. That control is attempted through various regimes, each with its own political rationality, but it is never fully realized because of the conflict that inevitably arises when projects of rule encounter populations (Li 2007). Thus roads can be interpreted as a space of governing where there is a gap between desired governance outcomes of planners and rulers and the actual messy, conflict-ridden landscapes of the “territorialized.” The concept also helps avoid a hierarchical understanding of space. Instead, it emphasizes how the local, regional, national, global inter-penetrate one another in any given space, both through efforts to rule and efforts to resist or subvert rule. Like Wilson, anthropologists Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox argue, also on the basis of research in Peru, that roads are an ideal site for investigating socio-political dynamics because of “what they can tell us about how infrastructural relations

¹ Geographers have productively deliberated the limits of the hierarchical, nested ontologies associated with such scalar thinking and advocated instead the kind of relational approach advocated here. See the “scale debate” initiated by Marston, Jones, and Woodward (2005) in the *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*.

simultaneously make national territories, international corridors, regional circuits, and specific localities” (2015: 25).

We investigate interdependence among local, national, and geopolitical dynamics in histories of road building in Nepal with recourse to the concept of “regime of territorialization.” To do so we develop a typology of regimes as follows: “managing coloniality” (1846–1950), “integrating the nation” (1951–1970), and “building economy” (1970–1990). We stop short of including a fourth regime, which we might characterize as “balancing sustainability, struggle, and democracy” (1990–present), which is the focus of a forthcoming publication (Lewison and Rankin, in preparation); instead we conclude by reflecting on how the historical record offers a perspective on the current and future regimes of territorialization.

The paper is organized into three sections that detail each of the three regimes under consideration, based on an analysis of secondary literature on the history of Nepal (in English and Nepali languages), as well as on selected primary sources, such as National Planning Commission documents. Like any typology, these designations are heuristic, intended to identify and periodize themes in the articulation of road building with socio-political dynamics. In so doing, however, they run the risk of obscuring continuities in political rationalities across the regimes—for example, all three regimes naturally concern themselves with economic development (“building economy”); to address this risk, our approach aims to highlight continuity as much as rupture. The purpose of persisting with a heuristic typology is to render visible the multi-scalar, socio-political infrastructures underlying the material territoriality of the road, in a manner that would denaturalize the prevailing regime of territorialization in relation to the historical record, and open up debate over desirable future arrangements.

Managing Coloniality (Ranas, 1846–1951)²

One of the most stunning images depicting Nepal’s early experience with motorable transport can be found on a webpage of the Department of Transport Management): a green Mercedes being carried over a rocky river

² The periodization beginning in 1846 reflects our emphasis on motorable roads as a starting point for this rendition of road history. “Managing coloniality,” however, was certainly a strategy engaged by the Kingdom of Nepal from its inception (commonly denoted as “unification”) in 1768.

Figure 1: Porters Carrying Car

Photo by Voklmar Wentzel, 1949.

crossing on bamboo cross-poles by teams of 64 porters (see also Proksch 1995: 122–123). The car sits on its axles lashed to the cross-poles, shoulder-height to the porters, against the backdrop of a precipitous, grassy mountainside that the porters must traverse on an earthen footpath. The image evokes the exclusive, luxury lifestyle afforded to the Ranas via a consolidated feudal system of in-kind taxation and forced labor and by sumptuary laws restricting privilege to Kathmandu’s elite. In this way the Ranas maintained a form of rule over peripheral regions of the country from the mid-nineteenth to twentieth century that might be characterized as a kind of “internal colonization,” discussed below (Rankin 2004; Gautam 2012).³ Anthropologist Mark Liechty (1997) characterizes these dynamics

³ We use this term to evoke the Rana state’s strategy (as well as that of the foregoing Gorkhali state) to control sovereign territory by developing dependent peripheries geared to supporting the wealth of a ruling core (Hechter 1975, cited in Gautam 2012). Dependency was created not by military or cultural occupation of foreign territory or by an extensive colonial administrative apparatus, as in modern imperialist forms of colonization. It was created, rather, by the imposition of a kind of “state landlordism” (Regmi 1977) that consolidated feudal relations at a national

as a “selective exclusion” of foreignness—at the same time that Rana rulers limited access of westerners to the Kathmandu Valley, they sought to import Western luxury goods for elite ostentation. Nepali colonial subjects “were treated as problematic ‘foreign’ elements in Nepali life” (Gautam 2012: 81)—impoverished through feudal relations, denied access to modern state services like education and health care, and excluded from the articulation of a Nepali culture. The image of the portered Mercedes illustrates well this dialectic of selective exclusion—with the extreme of luxury consumption resting on the shoulders of the enscribed underclass.

The first motorable roads in Nepal were built inside the Kathmandu Valley in 1924 (Chapagain 2015), and luxury cars were transported by porters over the Chure Hills down into the Kathmandu Valley, where they could be used for transport as a form of conspicuous consumption. Rana luxury vehicles had to be carried because there were no motorable roads from Bhimphedi to the Kathmandu Valley. A motorable southward connection from Kathmandu, Tribhuvan Rajpath, was not built until 1953–1956, by the Indian army, after the Rana regime came to an end (Isaacson *et al.* 2001).

To understand this extraordinary conjuncture we suggest that within this period two trajectories were at play, each managing coloniality in contradictory ways. On the one hand, Rana rulers regarded motorable roads as a vector of British colonization on the sub-continent and thus a threat to national security. Indeed the British had built roads throughout India since assuming colonial control in the mid-nineteenth century. During the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814–1816 in particular, the East India Company built roads along the Nepalese border. The territorial gains in the Treaty of Sagauli (which ceded a third of Nepal’s territory) are known to have been achieved in those border areas where the British had built roads to facilitate the movement of heavy guns (Upadhyaya 1992). These roads subsequently facilitated

scale. The appropriation of surplus by extra economic means was ensured by putting in place “classic feudal intermediaries: local elites (and sometimes minor Rana family members) who were responsible for wringing resources out of local people, keeping some, and passing the rest on to the Rana state” (personal communication with Mark Liechty, April 13, 2017; see Sugden [2013] for an account of the persistence of semi-feudal relations in the Tarai and their articulation with capitalist forms of production). In this way the Ranas functioned much like lords over a vast, extended patronage system that functioned to funnel resources to the state by anchoring local patron-client relations to feudal forms of production.

trade in Northern India, and the British exerted considerable pressure on the government of Nepal to allow their extension into Nepali territory.

Rana rulers were explicit about their distaste for British colonization and observed a policy of noncooperation in their bid to construct motorable roads linking Kathmandu, the Tarai, and India. Historian John Whelpton cites Orfeur Cavenagh, one of the British officers attached to Jang Bahadur's entourage during his 1850 visit to England, as reflecting on the candor of Jang Bahadur's position in this regard:

[D]espite all his public protestations of friendship, [Jang Bahadur] retained considerable mistrust of Britain's ultimate intentions towards his country. This came out clearly when Jung explained to him, after their return to India, his reasons for not wanting to build a road connecting Kathmandu with the plains. He said that he was sure Britain would one day take possession of Nepal and that if such a road were available for use by the invading force then its builder would go down in history as the author of his own country's destruction. (Cavenagh 1884: 125–126, cited in Regmi 1988: 11–12)

This position was articulated even with an awareness of the benefits to trade resulting from enhanced accessibility. In 1864, Jang Bahadur told the British Resident:⁴

I know very well that advantage would accrue to Nepal for a few years if we were to open the country to British officers and to British merchants, but even supposing that we were to double our revenue for ten or twenty years, what good would that do to us? At the end of that time you would probably take the country. (Oldfield 1974 [1880]: 46, cited in Regmi 1988: 11)

British Resident Charles Girdlestone summarized the situation for the East India Company in 1880: the Ranas view the hills as “their fortifications and

⁴ Jang Bahadur recalled the bitter truth that Nepal was forced to accept a permanent British Resident in the Kathmandu Valley, tasked with monitoring the practices of the Nepal government and facilitating British interests in trade and Gorkha soldiers after the defeat by the British in 1816.

a good road over them would be a breach in his walls to a besieged General” (Upadhyaya 1992: 78–79, cited in Liechty 1997: 33).

Throughout the Rana era, access to Kathmandu was limited to a footpath. From the Indian border and across the Tarai there was a cart track, but beyond Bhimphedi, “the road is a mere pagdandi or footpath over the hills, impassable for laden beasts of burden” (Wright 1972[1877]: 50, cited in Regmi 1988: 194). In fact, as Liechty (1997: 32–33) puts it, “[I]t was a matter of state policy to ‘maintain’ the road in as bad a condition as was possible”:

Visitors to the valley, from the earliest times up until just forty years ago when the first motor road to Kathmandu was completed (1959), unanimously condemned the miserable, rock-strewn, muddy track over two steep passes. It was impossible to ride a horse, far less drive a car or any other wheeled vehicle, over the passes. Foreigners and elites were carried in on the backs of lurching porters, or in swaying palanquins as was every single imported item, from tiny European gun-flints, to Jang Bahadur’s four-ton equestrian statue.

This mode of territoriality facilitated the Rana policy of limiting the access of Westerners to the seat of state power; the transport of commercial goods, however, was facilitated by an aerial ropeway that, by the late 1920s, was able to deliver up to eight tons of freight per hour, “without in any way opening up for passenger traffic the new avenue into the capital” (Landon 1928: 208, cited in Liechty 1997: 51). Thus, while a regime of territorialization oriented to preventing the upgrading of rough earthen tracks to a motorable condition may have thwarted direct British colonization, scholars have noted that it did not diminish the significance of British colonialism for Nepal’s state building. On the contrary, it ensured that Nepal remained “a semi-colony integrated into British Raj economy, without benefits of investments in infrastructure, education, industry” (Tamang 2012: 271).

A second modality of “managing coloniality” during the Rana period sought not to thwart colonization by an external aggressor, but to colonize territories and populations internal to Nepal, and here again the road proved instrumental. As has been widely documented, Rana rule was achieved through a feudal system of revenue extraction whereby a patchwork of former principalities were accorded some provisions of self-rule in exchange for delivering revenues to the central government. In addition, a large cadre

of state functionaries were remunerated by grants of land in combination with revenue collecting authority (Regmi 1988). The administration of this decentralized modality of feudal rule required the maintenance of roads to facilitate access and collection of taxes throughout the country.

Across this network of non-motorable roads was organized an extensive postal system, the *hulākīsevā*, which was used to pass orders to local administrators and tax collectors, as well as expropriate resources and labor from the colonized hinterlands (Regmi 1983). A reading of the massive volume of orders issued by Rana rulers as undertaken by Nepal's eminent historian Mahesh Chandra Regmi reveals how road construction and upgrading co-constituted the administration of the Rana state. For example, when planning a district tour from Pyuthan to Surkhet, Rana Prime Minister Jang Bahadur issued an order (in July 1866) to the relevant army commanding generals to construct and improve roads good enough for tour.⁵ The order reads,

⁵ The Regmi Research Collection (RRC) translates the original Nepali into English with the word “road,” but given the specification in this and numerous other orders that roads be suitable for horse travel (“wide and strong enough that horses of Arab breed pass through without any obstruction” [RRC 1983, vol. 50: 625–638]), a likely Nepali translation might be *ghoḍeṭo*, for horse trail; in other cases, such as the roads in the area now covered by Rasuwa, Nuwakot, and Dhading districts addressed in Holmberg, March and Tamang (1999), the roads might have been specified as *goreṭo*, or human footpath. Where possible, the Ranas would have sought to embellish pre-existing trails. It is not clear from the Regmi records we accessed or our consultations with colleagues how much new construction the Ranas undertook; certainly the foregoing Gorkhali regimes would have secured a road network for their administrative purposes and trails would have existed to support trade and local-regional travel, and it seems likely that where possible, the Ranas would have sought to embellish pre-existing trails. Dictionaries dating from the Rana period reference both the Nepali translations *bāṭo* and *saṭak/saḍak* for the English word, road (Turner and Turner 2007[1931] and Rana 1993 v.s.[1936]), and photographs from the magazine *Śāradā* similarly depict both *bāṭo* and *saḍak*—with images of *bāṭo* appearing as non-black-topped and of *saḍak* as black-topped (see *Śāradā* 1992 v.s., 1995 v.s.). From this combination of sources, we conclude that the Ranas may also have used the term *bāṭo* in reference to roads used for the affairs of the state. Thanks go to Bandana Gyawali for her generosity and initiative in searching the Nepali terms for road in four dictionaries and reviewing photographs in a few issues of *Śāradā*.

This year, we intend to undertake a tour to the west through Pyuthan and Surkhet. Impress the labour of the local people from Palpa to Pyuthan for the construction of roads sufficiently wide for horses and palanquins by the end of the month of Ashwin (October). In addition, arrange for adequate stocks of rice, pulses, maize, millet, flour, wheat, barley, peas, salt, oil, ghee, turmeric powder, chillies, ginger, etc. to feed our entourage. (RRC 1983, vol. 33: 501–502)

While elite tours are not the same thing as colonial occupation, they manifest the kind of feudal consolidation through which core-periphery relations were constituted and maintained. Other orders reveal the significance of roads for the transportation of military supplies, and for this as well, unpaid portorage services (*begāri*) were required from local populations (RRC 1983, vol. 63: 276–278). Roads thus served as a means of communicating acts of rule, transporting ruling and military entourages, controlling public goods, and enacting political repression.

The prevailing regimes of territorialization during the century of Rana rule thus sought to manage coloniality. This was the final century of the era of European colonialism, and as historian Mary Des Chene (2014) has argued, though Nepal was never colonized, its history of “non-colonial nationalism” and its current political relationship with India has deep roots in colonial British India. Roads were critical to the effort to manage coloniality, but they were engaged in contradictory ways. On the one hand, the Ranas sought to thwart British modes of indirect colonization by refusing to build motorable roads between India and Kathmandu. On the other hand, they sought to achieve a kind of internal colonization by extending the *hulāki* road network throughout its peripheral territories as a means of issuing orders, collecting revenues, and repressing the population. In both endeavors we find an articulation among ideas of foreignness, state security, and elite cultural and political power—as well as among multiple scales of practice—foreign diplomacy, state administration, and management of populations. Analytically what remains is to take up the injunction to practice a “post-colonial anthropology of non-colonized Nepal” (Des Chene 2007: 220). This commitment might engage not just Nepali language sources, as Des Chene argues, but sources that can render a social history of the road and its role in constituting the networks of patronage through which surplus appropriation and core-periphery dependency were achieved—as well as a social history of

the place-based conflict and subversion that must surely have arisen within the ruling elite's precarious strategies of managing coloniality.⁶

Integrating the Nation (1951–1970)

A subsequent regime of territoriality, which we have called “integrating the nation,” corresponds roughly with Indian independence and the end of direct colonial rule in South Asia. At that time the Ranas lost their ruling status as a result of a complicated convergence of resistance and revolution by the Nepali Congress party, which had been organizing an underground movement in India since 1947,⁷ and a refusal by the palace to be governed by the Rana oligarchy (Hachhethu 2007). A series of democratically elected governments sought to establish the country's first formal and modern government bureaucracy. A Ministry of Planning and Development was established in 1951; four years later the National Planning Commission initiated the first Soviet-style five-year plan, a system that to this day has governed the allocation of resources and specified development priorities. This moment also marked Nepal's formal engagement with international diplomacy, beyond the quasi-colonial patronage ties with the British (who officially recognized Nepal's sovereignty in 1923 and remained a significant geopolitical presence); Nepal joined the U.N. in 1955 and a U.S. embassy was opened in 1959—with formal diplomatic relations having been established in 1946 and the U.S. Operation Mission having commenced in 1951 (Isaacson *et al.* 2001). Claiming inefficiencies of the numerous governments during this period, King Mahendra seized executive power in a political coup (in 1960) and engineered a new form of government—a partyless Panchayat regime—entailing an active monarchy and a nationalist development apparatus. The administrative structure in effect up to early 2017—the 14 zones and 75 districts—was established at that time.

Building roads was quickly articulated as the fundamental development activity correlated with consolidating a modern bureaucratic state—and in Mahendra's formulation, forging national unity, *rāṣṭriya ekatā*. Transport was specified as the first priority of the Ministry of Planning and Development

⁶ For example, see Holmberg, March and Tamang (1999) for a social history of “forced labor from below.”

⁷ Even before that, other formations such as Prachanda Gorkha and Praja Parishad had been organizing underground movements since their formation in 1931 and 1935 respectively. For details see Rajesh Gautam (1990).

and the first five-year plan launched in 1956. It was considered fundamental to the basic governmental functions of administration and “promoting the people’s welfare” (NPC 1956: 21). In the subsequent two five-year plans, transportation and communication accounted for an astounding 39 percent and 37 percent of the national budget.

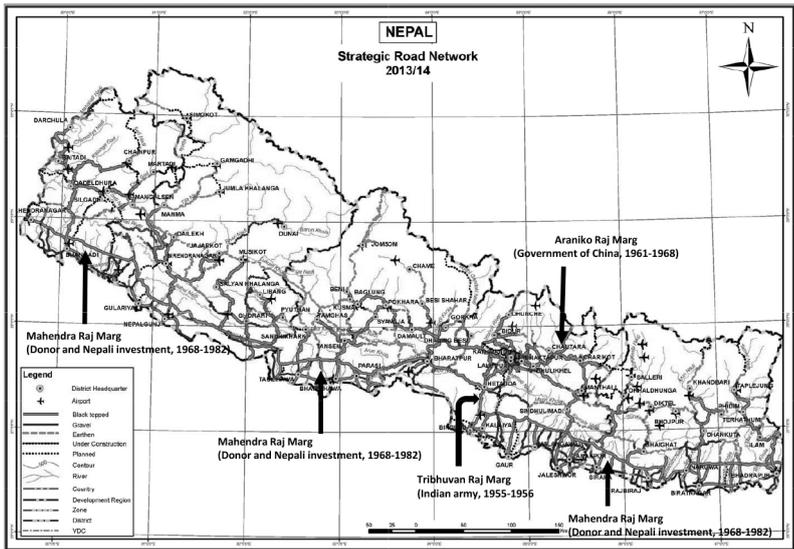
Figure 2: Bikās Rekhā Cover Image



One of the earliest reports issued by the Panchayat regime under King Mahendra, *Bikās Rekhā: 2017 agi ra pachi* (Development Line: Before and After 2017 v.s.; “line” refers to the year, 1960, when Mahendra took power) aims to showcase the efficiency of the Panchayat government in achieving progress in development (HMG 2023 v.s.). Three thousand copies were

issued (cover page shown in Figure 2), and its content would surely have been publicized on Radio Nepal, which was the key medium by which Mahendra's speeches and Panchayat propaganda were broadcast to the Nepali public (Onta 2004). As indicated by the title of the first chapter—"sugam-sahaj yātāyāt" (easy and reliable transportation)—*Bikās Rekḥā* features roads as the primary manifestation of development. The evidence of governmental effectiveness is furnished in terms of numbers of road projects initiated and kilometers completed in the five years before and after Mahendra's initiation of Panchayat rule (the "development line").

Figure 3: Contemporary Strategic Road Network Showing Major Highways Initiated during the Mahendra Regime



Source: Department of Roads, Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport.

As the modern Nepali state's first development priority, roads also underpin Nepal's early entanglements with the post-war international development project and Cold War geopolitics. These entanglements are evident in the extensive development achievements of this period (see Figure 3): the Tribhuvan Rajmarga joining Kathmandu through Birganj to Raxaul on the Indian border (built by the Indian army, 1955–1956), the Araniko

Rajmarga joining Kathmandu to Kodari on the China border (built by the government of China, 1961–1968), and Mahendra Rajmarga (East-West Highway) cutting across the Chure foothills from Mechinagar in the east to Mahendranagar in the west (built by various combinations of donor and Nepali investment as described below, 1961–1982). An entire bureaucratic machine, known as the Regional Transportation Office (RTO), was established in 1958 to forge a tripartite road-building operation involving the governments of India, U.S.A., and Nepal. Its aim was to facilitate a massive investment in building north-south roads through coordinated contributions of funding and technical assistance (Isaacson *et al.* 2001)—and, as Rose (1971) and Muni (1973) suggest, to mitigate the perceived territorialization of Russian and Chinese influence in Nepal through road building.

This section interprets these dynamics in terms of a regime of territorialization aimed at “integrating the nation.” “Integration” evokes Mahendra’s own stated ambitions to achieve national unity through a development agenda rooted in road construction. It is a political rationality articulating global geopolitics. And, like “managing coloniality,” “integrating the nation” entails contradictory tendencies, including processes of *disintegration* arising out of the gap between the desired outcomes of Mahendra nationalism (*Mahendrabād*), and the messy contingencies of global geopolitics and cultural politics within Nepal.

Of the three major road developments during this period, the East-West Highway most potently represents the integrationist aims of the Panchayat regime.⁸ Started in 1961, a year after Mahendra’s coup, it runs the full breadth of the country across the northern edge of the Tarai where there are relatively few topographical constraints. Its construction involved a complex orchestration of numerous actors, ranging from donors on both “sides” of the Cold War to a peasant population that could no longer be conscripted through forced labor, and thus had to be mobilized by other means. Its construction tells an extraordinary story of struggles surrounding a multi-scalar politics of territorialization.

The centrality given by Mahendra to the East-West Highway for his integrationist ambitions is made explicit in an extraordinary publication issued by the Ministry of Panchayat, titled *Pūrva-Pāścim Rājmaṅga ra*

⁸ Mahendra’s integration objectives also encompassed a north-south strategy involving the planned maintenance of foot trails and suspension bridges in hill and mountain regions (personal communication with Binod Pokharel, March 18, 2017).

Hāmro Kartavya. The appeal to the popular imagination is made foremost in socio-cultural terms—the difficulty, even in the mid-twentieth century, for Nepalis to “meet our own relatives, friends, brothers and sisters walking across our country” (HMG 2020 v.s.: 7); the passage continues:

Without love and affection for each other, there would be no feeling of unity and without interaction ... with each other, affection would not grow. Thus patriotism and national unity of Nepalis belonging to all religions and classes—a crucial need for our country—depends on the roads and trails that connect many parts of the country. The stronger our roads and trails become, the more the fresh breeze of progress will circulate without hindrance across our country leading to the healthy growth of all its parts. (HMG 2020 v.s.: 7)

At the time, it must be recalled, it was not possible to traverse Nepal from east to west without going through India (Isaacson *et al.* 2001). The significance of territorializing national integration has figured powerfully in Nepal’s nationalist imagination long since Mahendra’s own proclamations (Gaige 1975). In an article in *The Rising Nepal*, retired engineer G.S. Agrawal evokes the East-West Highway as a model that might inspire the construction of an “East-West waterway” (that similarly would harness Nepal’s formidable resources for its own development); the article references how the highway made it possible for the first time to “travel from one end of the country to the other without having to step foot on foreign soil.” “Nepal was unified under the late King Prithvi Narayan Shah some two centuries ago,” it notes; “but [t]he real integration was ... completed in 1982” (Agrawal 2013).

To appreciate this legacy, it is worth further probing the cultural-political and geopolitical tactics by which a territorialized integration was pursued through the East-West Highway. In *Pūrva-Paścim Rājmārga ra Hāmro Kartavya*, the significance of the highway is presented in grandiose terms that waver between nationalist sentimentality, evocations of globally circulating liberal ideology, and Mahendra’s own personal ambition. The Highway would “boost the self-esteem of Nepalis,” allow Nepalis to solve their own problems like food shortage, allow for the “exercise of human rights,” and for Mahendra would be “the primary aim of my life” (HMG 2020 v.s.: 7–8). The book tackles the challenge of mobilizing labor for the massive project in ideological terms, with appeals to patriotism; it must be emphasized that

the book was written in 1963 shortly after Nepal was denied initial funding for the project from the U.S.S.R., and after funding had also been rejected by India and the U.S. during the dissolution of the RTO (see below).

Mahendra had assumed direct leadership over the Highway Construction Committee governing construction, and in this capacity he appealed to all patriotic Nepalis to participate:

Our greatest capital is our own potency and collective strength of people.... Regarding this fact, I have announced to build East-West Highway. I believe that Nepali people will consider this as a challenge of our time and struggle hard to succeed. To accomplish this, my announcement will provoke the motivation and spirit of the people to fulfill the need of the country ... by promoting new aspirations and cooperation. (HMG 2020 v.s.: 11)

At a speech inaugurating the Pardi Dam in Pokhara in 1961, Mahendra had similarly appealed to Nepal's citizenry:

Let all the Nepalese people, from their respective positions, put forth all possible efforts for the construction with all possible speed of the East-West Highway, ... which is vital for the all-round genuine development of our country. This is my heart's call to all today, my appeal. Let us all work hand in hand and shoulder to shoulder, and success shall be ours. It may take time but it will do enormous good to our country. Government will provide the required scientists and technicians. All I need is the labour and co-operation of every Nepali for this effort. (Shah 1961: 111)

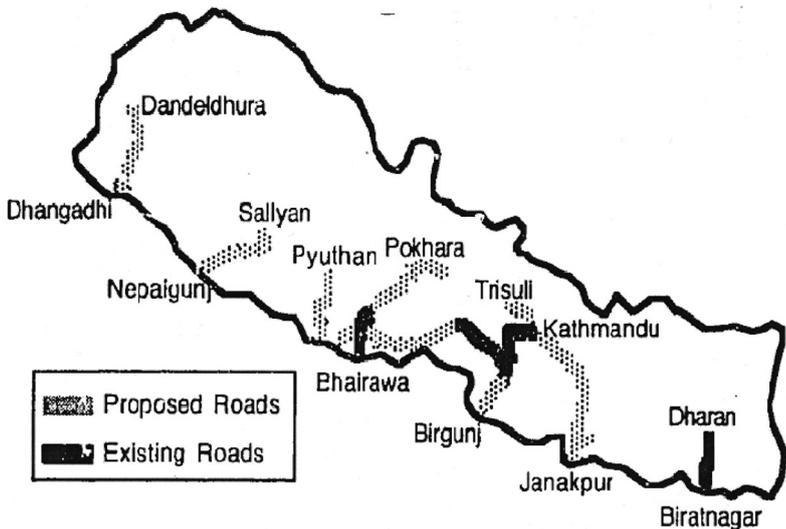
Benefits to citizens were presented not only in terms of free movement on Nepali soil but also in terms of the economic development that enhanced accessibility would afford—presented here with socialist overtones, surely motivated by economic nationalist ambitions to expand market access and trade:

We do not have uniform availability of food throughout the country. Some regions ... have excess of food, teachers, engineers, doctors, traditional healers, or commodities etc. and some regions are

deprived of such things. The operation of this ... highway helps to manage redistribution.... Therefore I have put a great emphasis on its construction, which will interconnect the hearts of peoples from Mechi to Mahakali and could be the foundation for overall progress. (HMG 2020 v.s.: 12)

A key tactic that Mahendra deployed entailed leveraging geopolitical dynamics in the region to secure funding and technical assistance. The appeals to Nepali collective effort notwithstanding, Nepal in the 1960s simply lacked the technical capacity and funding to undertake such a massive infrastructure project. It was thus necessary to seek support from bilateral donors. How Mahendra turned a dearth of funding opportunities into a surplus by strategically balancing the geopolitical interests of donors engaged in Cold War politics is a fascinating story that we have assembled from English-language secondary accounts of the Panchayat regime (Rose and Dial 1969; Rose 1971; Muni 1973; Isaacson *et al.* 2001).

Figure 4: North-South Corridors Proposed by RTO



Source: Skerry, Moran and Kalavan (1991: 78).

The story begins with the dissolution of the Regional Transport Office (RTO) in 1962. The RTO had failed to achieve the intended construction of seven planned north-south corridors (see Figure 4) as a result of non-compatibility of Indian and U.S. technologies and managerial approaches to road building (labor-intensive vs. mechanized, for example), as well as Nepal's incapacity to broker a Nepal-based approach informed but not dominated by these two influences (Rose and Dial 1969; Isaacson *et al.* 2001).⁹ Mahendra thus sought U.S. and Indian bilateral assistance separately, requesting each to transfer their contributions to the RTO budget directly to the East-West Highway. Both rejected the request. In a bid to mobilize Cold War sentiments, as much as obtain initial funding, Mahendra next approached the U.S.S.R. and China. The U.S.S.R. also declined, but China signed up for the Janakpur-Biratnagar section in 1964. This action prompted an immediate reaction from India, which objected to Chinese engineers working in close proximity to the Indian border. Having shown no prior interest in the project, India offered to construct most of the remaining sections, amounting to more than two-thirds of the highway, provided that Nepal dislodge China from construction work (Shaha 1975: 158).

King Mahendra then pulled off a brilliant diplomatic feat, by persuading China to shift its assistance to the Pokhara-Naubise Road through the mid-western hills. To appreciate how Mahendra finessed the situation to achieve maximum donor investment in roads amidst geopolitical rivalry, it is necessary to trace some further dynamics underlying the relationship between India and China vis-à-vis road building in Nepal. The first engagement between China and Nepal relating to roads had occurred in 1960 during the prime ministership of B.P. Koirala, which preceded Mahendra's 1960 coup. China had proposed to build the Araniko Highway between Kathmandu and Kodari. B.P. Koirala had declined the assistance, claiming that Nepal did not find it "economically feasible and politically sound" (Muni 1973: 121). Underlying these claims, however, was pressure from both India and the US to reject the Chinese offer to improve access to Nepal's capital city from the north (Rose and Dial 1969; Rose 1971). During Mahendra's regime, the pressure from India and the U.S. continued. A brief but violent border conflict had transpired between China and India in 1962 following the Tibetan uprising and India's granting of asylum to the Dalai Lama (Shaha 1975).

⁹ Interview with Prakash Chandra Lohani; November 15, 2016.

In this context, American intelligence reported heightened concerns about “[t]he Chinese Communist ground threat to India,” including the possibility of further strikes by Chinese troops entering through Nepal (Laskar 2017).

Mahendra had quickly distinguished his position from the previous regime and agreed to Chinese construction of the Araniko Highway. This move has been analyzed in terms of a strategic bid to reduce Nepal’s dependence on Indian assistance and domination, and thus attenuate the latter’s influence in Nepal (which notably had increasingly taken the form of support for the now-banned Nepali Congress party [Rose 1971]). In response to reports that the Chinese had been distributing Communist propaganda in Nepali villages along the road’s path of construction, Mahendra again rebuffed the ideologically motivated pressure to dissociate from China on grounds of interference in Nepali politics. In the same speech cited above, Mahendra countered his critics, stating that “some individuals, ready to give cold storage to their human rights and independence for gaining some nefarious favors, blindly shout that communism immigrates in a taxi automobile” (Shah 1961: 109)—or, in other words, denouncing as absurd the suggestion that just because a road has been opened, a whole ideological system can be packed up and exported across the border in a taxi.

Such was the context in which Mahendra leveraged geopolitics for road building. Three years later, in 1964, when he again faced pressure from India to rebuff Chinese assistance, Mahendra managed to broker *both* the massive Indian assistance for the East-West Highway and, not just a withdrawal of Chinese assistance, but its redirection to the less geopolitically contentious Pokhara area. The latter move no doubt rested on China’s recognition of the risks Nepal had taken vis-à-vis India in relation to the Araniko Highway.¹⁰

It is critical to emphasize, however, how a regime of territorialization emphasizing national integration also laid the ground for tendencies of disintegration, and here too, roads play a critical role. The key disintegrative tendency lay in the domain of cultural politics and has manifest more overtly in post-democracy (post-1990) political conflict. It is rooted in a major, twenty five-year, state-sponsored program of resettling numerically and politically dominant *Pahāḍī* (hill) populations from the food-scarce mid-hills belt to the Tarai. As has been widely documented, resettlement began in 1955 with a program to eradicate malaria in the Tarai (Isaacson *et al.*

¹⁰ Interview with Bhekh Bahadur Thapa; November 26, 2016.

2001), followed by an ambitious land reform in 1964 aimed at increasing smallholder agricultural productivity.¹¹ The construction of the East-West Highway also played a key role in two respects—one related directly to state initiatives to concentrate resettlement in new roadside market centers, such as Itahari, Simara and Butawal, as will be discussed in the subsequent section (Shrestha 1990).

The other connection between the East-West Highway and tendencies of national disintegration relates to the cultural politics of its siting across the northern edge of the Tarai at the base of the Chure Hills. Critics have argued that the location of the country's core (Tarai-based) east-west transit corridor as close as possible to hill regions reflects state objectives of maintaining *Pahāḍī* dominance over indigenous (e.g., Tharu, Rajbanshi, Dhimal) and Madhesi populations in the Tarai. It did so by concentrating economic opportunities in the areas of significant hill-Tarai resettlement and also by undermining the existing Padma Road (named after Rana Prime Minister Padma Shamsher), or *hulākī* road, which passed the southern Tarai, as the backbone of the *hulākī* system noted earlier (Jha 1993; see also Lal 2017 for an argument that marginalization of the *hulākī* road dates further back than the construction of the East-West Highway to the workings of the RTO).

Upgrading the *hulākī* road would have benefitted the indigenous and Madhesi populations who had long settled in this region. In fact, the dispute about the neglect of the *hulākī* road continues to the present day. Upgrading to the status of Highway had figured centrally in the Government of Nepal's "Nepal Twenty Year Road Plan" of 2002 (Department of Roads 2002), and the Indian government had offered financial support from 1990. But the work has progressed slowly, and critics suggest the delay reflects the strategic engagement of road investment in the *underdevelopment* of the Tarai and ongoing marginalization of its long-time populations (Lal 2017).¹²

¹¹ Malaria eradication was a major thrust of the first U.S. development intervention in Nepal, beginning in the mid-1950s, and part of its place-based Rapti Valley Development Project, precursor to the integrated rural development projects that proliferated in the 1970s. Sugden (2013: 2) characterizes the land reforms as "cosmetic," in an analysis of the persistence today of feudal forms of production in Nepal's eastern Tarai.

¹² Politics surrounding the construction of the *hulākī* road are complex and cannot be reduced to internal affairs. The Indian government objected to the involvement of other foreign donors and political parties; even Madhesi parties declined to give

Our aim in this section has been to identify a regime of territorialization concerned with “integrating the nation” at a time when Nepal was first consolidating a modern state bureaucracy, and to show the importance of roads to this endeavor. Roads are claimed by Nepali rulers to be a key mechanism for tying the nation together, shoring up autonomy from India (to whose colonial history it had been tied so closely), staking out leverage within a Cold War geo-political context, and mobilizing the labor and legitimation of a peasant population from which it could no longer secure compliance through force and repression. While articulated as a state project, “integrating the nation” entails entanglements with the agendas of foreign donors and foreign beneficiaries of Nepal’s development.

At the same time, we have tried to capture traces of the dynamics of *disintegration* found in the marginalizations and exclusions entailed in the project of unification, specifically related to the migration of *Pahāḍī* populations from the hills to the Tarai. A deeper social-historical analysis would clearly be required to draw out the range of struggles and subversions met by a regime of national integration. Our purpose here is to set out a method and a set of questions that would lead in this direction. It is also to show clearly how infrastructure development entails these conflicts and to suggest that it might therefore play a role in their resolution.

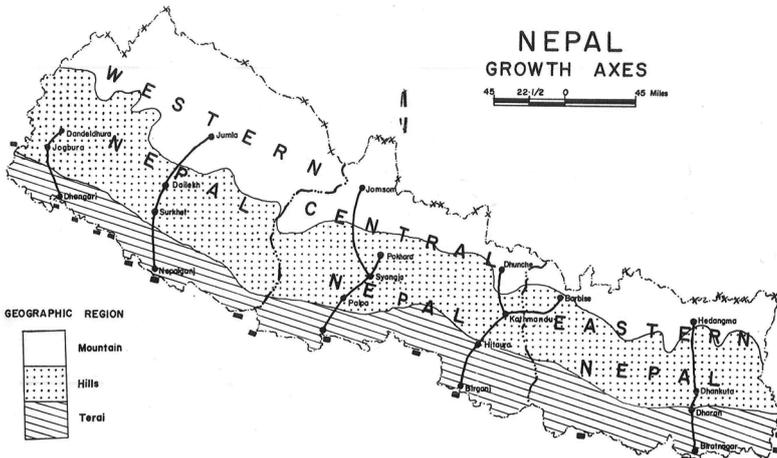
Building the Economy (1970–1990)

Now that the state had set in motion the development of basic infrastructure, a subsequent series of planning periods were devoted to making choices about building the economy in a conscious way—namely, as the Fourth Plan (1970–1975) put it, to “sharing of development benefits by the population at large” (NPC 1975). “Sharing” was to be achieved by a regional approach to economic planning that would involve dividing the country into development regions, establishing a north-south axis linking mountains, hills, and Tarai within each, and strengthening east-west connections among regions for deeper national integration that would address wealth and population disparities (JICA 2003). The planning function was simply extended from infrastructure to economy, and here again, roads featured centrally.

priority to this road for fear that their capacity to exert political pressure in the region might diminish (personal communication with Binod Pokharel, March 18, 2017). India and Nepal were/are skeptical towards *Hulāki* Rajmarga construction.

The key proponent of regionalism within Nepal was the emerging scholar Harka Gurung, who had obtained his PhD in Geography from the University of Edinburgh in 1965. Gurung had for his dissertation conducted “a regional study” of Pokhara rooted in British functional Geography. He was appointed by Mahendra to the position of Vice Chairman National Planning Commission in 1968, in time to prepare the Fourth Plan, which applied the principles of regional planning to the Nepal context: a coordinated approach to land-use management, infrastructure development, and settlement growth that would reflect Nepal’s complex topography, ecology, and demographics. The regionalism of the 1970s in Nepal was no less nationalist than Mahendra’s national integration (and it was also no less anchored in road-building projects). But integration was to be achieved through the deeper articulation of north-south regions as defined by the major river basins that so fundamentally shape Nepal’s topography. And economic development would no longer be assumed to result naturally from improved accessibility afforded by new roads. The economy, too, would require planning.

Figure 5: Growth Axes



Source: Sharma 2007.

The Fourth Plan identified four Development Regions within each of which a north-south “growth axis” would link Tarai and hills via existing overland trade routes and river basins (see Figure 5). The Fifth Plan added

an additional development region, the Far Western Region, within which the growth axis would link Mahendranagar and Dadeldhura (Gurung 2005). The East-West Highway, still under construction, would link the five regions and ensure that regional development would foster national integration. The “growth axis planning approach” would be “the first attempt to incorporate a spatial dimension in national development” by “linking diverse natural regions,” wrote Gurung, in an influential article “Regional Development Planning for Nepal” for *Vasudhā*, a popular journal of the period (Gurung 1969, cited in Gurung 2005: 3). In so doing it aimed explicitly to build a nationally integrated economy:

The main reasoning behind the development of growth axes was to tie-in the economy of the Terai with [that] ... of the hills. In order to maintain and develop economic viability of the hills, and transmit growth from one region to another, it is essential to determine and develop those products in the northern areas for which there is demand in the south. The best way to integrate the national economy is to establish the nature and scope of complementarity of northern and southern parts of the growth axis in terms of organic circulation in trade, labor, and capital. (Gurung 2005: 5)

Along the growth axes, growth centers would act as models for “the creation of polyfunctional settlements to cater to the diverse needs of their hinterland,” as illustrated in Table 1. This was classic trickle-down theory, by which “polarized development” was justified in terms of “spreading growth to surrounding areas”—that is (as Harka Gurung elaborates in a retrospective working paper written for Asian Development Bank), “areas in organic link with the growth would gain from concentrated economic activities through the process of multiplier effect” (Gurung 2005: 4).

Roads continued to be imagined as the critical development intervention to facilitate this regime of territorialization. The central importance given to roads is reflected in Harka Gurung’s retrospective of regional planning:

[An] important aspect of a spatial framework relates to transport infrastructure, which determines the future pattern of development. The north-south road linkages have now become more extended ... and these have been superseded by the East-West Highway with

considerable change in the arterial route system. Yet, there is a lack of economic articulation based on such a vast infrastructural investment. In spatial planning terms, the East-West Highway should be developed as the spine of national development, with the north-south roads as a series of ribs for lateral diffusion. (Gurung 2005: 34)

Table 1: Growth Axes and Growth Centers Envisaged in the Regional Development Strategy

Macro Region/ Watersheds	Growth Axis	Growth Centers (Ecological Region)
Koshi (Eastern) Sector	Biratnagar- Hedangna	1. Hedangna (mountain); 2. Dhankuta (hill); 3. Dharan (tarai); 4. Biratnagar (tarai)
Gandaki (Central) Sector	Bhairahawa- Jomsom	1. Jomsom (mountain); 2. Pokhara (hill); 3. Syangja (hill); 4. Tansen (hill); 5. Butwal (tarai); 6. Bhairahawa (tarai)
Metropolitan Sector	Birganj- Bahrabise Dhunche	1. Dhunche (mountain); 2. Bahrabise (hill); 3. Kathmandu (metropolitan); 4. Hetauda (inner tarai); 5. Birganj (tarai)
Karnali (Western) Sector	Nepalganj-Jumla Dhangadhi- Dandeldhura	1. Jumla (mountain); 2. Dailekh (hill); 3. Surkhet (inner tarai); 4. Nepalganj (tarai) 1. Dandeldhura (hill); 2. Jogbuda (hill); 3. Dhangadhi (tarai)

Source: Gurung 1969; also cited in Sharma 2007.

Thus the Fourth Plan established the objective (which can be found in subsequent plans up to the present day) of connecting all districts in the country through a “fish-bone” pattern of road development entailing north-south corridors linked by the East-West Highway.¹³ The connection between roads and economic development was posed in terms of breaking the “vicious circle” of “no economic activity—no road—no economic activity” (NPC 1970). The core “backbone” of arterial roads would constitute the growth axes and

¹³ Interview with Bhekh Bahadur Thapa; November 26, 2017.

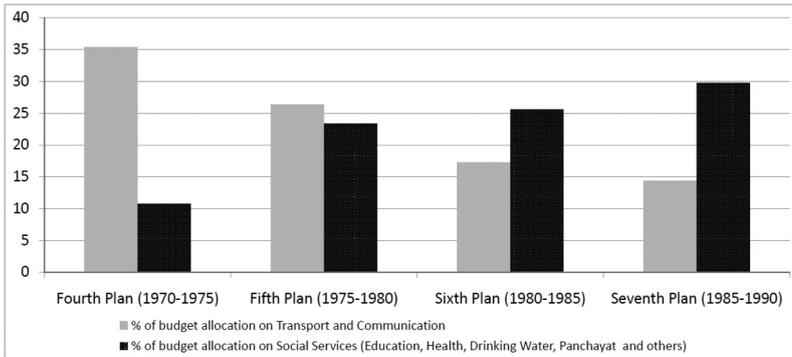
[t]hese roads would link a series of growth centers where development efforts could be concentrated in order to achieve full economy of scale and encourage agglomeration. Since the development corridors traverse through the whole gamut of regional types, the growth centers at specific locations would act as service centers for the regional population. The set of growth centers along the arterial link would further induce growth in terms of agricultural transformation, industrial location, and trade activities as well as social services. (Gurung 2005: 4)

The centrality of roads to building economy during this period was also underscored by donor involvement, which continued to emphasize infrastructure development. In fact, infrastructure planning marked an early encounter with the multilateral International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), which engaged finance as a mechanism for shoring up dominance of a capitalist model of world development. In 1965, IBRD (1965) released a three-volume report on Nepal's "national transport system" that outlined a twenty-year master plan featuring roads as the most efficient and cost-effective transport modality for Nepal. It calls for north-south and east-west connectivity and provides a "technical and cost" rationality for locating the East-West Highway at the base of the Chure Hills across the northern Tarai, despite the larger concentration of pre-existing population farther south and closer to the Indian border. The report thus aligns well with Harka Gurung's spatial planning vision and furnishes a clear rationale for donor support. Throughout this period the U.S., U.K., India, U.S.S.R., and China continued as the major bilateral donors in Nepal, with the Swiss joining in the late 1970s, in collaboration with the World Food Programme, to support the Lamosanghu-Jiri Road branching east from the Araniko Highway that runs north to the China border at Kodari.¹⁴

¹⁴ Based on documentation available to us it is not clear what role, if any, Gurung played in shaping the IBRD master plan, or indeed, in what ways the master plan determined regional planning approaches up to the Eighth Plan. Our interpretation is that the principles of regional development generally informed global development practice at the time, and that in adapting these principles to the specific context of Nepal, Gurung led a planning process that essentially fell within the parameters of prevailing economic development theory.

If building economy was the primary objective, however, there was also growing sentiment within Nepal over this period about the imperatives of redistribution and inclusion. Gradually, emphasis shifted from building new roads to upgrading existing infrastructure; from the Fifth Plan, greater attention was given to drawing rural populations into the benefits of economic development, and for this purpose new roads and infrastructure were no longer assumed to suffice. A diminishing share of Plan budgets was directed to infrastructure and an increasing share to “social” sectors, like health and education (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Public Sector Budget Allocation, 1971–1990



Source: Compiled from NPC (1970, 1975, 1980, 1985).

By the Fifth Plan (1975–1980), a language of “widening the [social] base” appeared, in order to address the

wide development disparity between the Hills and Tarai sub-regions, on the one hand, and that between the Central and Far Western regions on the other hand ... to effect national economic integration through the east-west and north-south growth axes, the medium term strategy during the Fifth Plan emphasizes more on economic return from areas that have been made newly accessible. (NPC 1975: 1–2)

Thus a place-based strategy called small area development programs (a precursor to integrated rural development programs of the late 1970s and 1980s) came to assume a central focus, and rural development was

“elevated to the main component of regional strategy”(Weiss *et al.* 1972, cited in Gurung 2005: 7). Within the rural development framing, the Sixth Plan specified investment in agricultural production. A Ministry of Local Development was established and appointed local district officers across the country to administer integrated rural development programs oriented to promoting the small-scale production sector.

By the Seventh Plan, social investment was characterized as poverty alleviation and meeting basic needs, in keeping with global currents of investing in small-scale technical assistance and subsidized production credit rather than large infrastructure projects (Isaacson *et al.* 2001). The earliest, and iconic, road project associated with place-based rural development was the Lamosanghu-Jiri Road built between 1975 and 1984 with Swiss assistance, to serve as the “backbone” of an integrated rural development program which would include interventions in agriculture and forestry, small-scale and cottage industry, environmental protection, education and health (Schaffner 1987: 2, cited in Seddon 2000). Despite the echoes of a regional planning approach scaled “down” to a rural planning context, Harka Gurung, who stepped down from the National Planning Commission in 1975, refers to this trajectory in his 2005 retrospective comments as a “diversion in focus;” when the emphasis itself changed to rural development, there was “a virtual cessation of meaningful research relating to regional development” (Gurung 2005: 7).

These comments signal the controversy and politics that inevitably surrounds any attempt to build economy in an explicit and self-conscious manner. Building the economy in Nepal during the late Panchayat period also entailed dynamics of polarization. One key such dynamic relates again to the politics of *Pahāḍī* migration and Tarai governance. Throughout the Fourth to Seventh Plans, a key pillar of regional planning, even its “rural development” permutations, had been the principle of linking food-deficit hills to food-and-land-surplus Tarai. This objective was to be achieved not only by integrating the hill and Tarai economies through regional development strategies, but also through ongoing resettlement of hill populations. Resettlement continued as official policy through the 1980s, justified in Malthusian terms—restoring ecological balance, diffusing population pressure, managing agricultural decline, famine and food shortage (Taylor 1969; Ojha 1983; Schuler *et al.* 1985). The East-West Highway furnished a subsidy to resettlement objectives, and the state promoted the formation of new roadside market

nodes, like Hetauda and Itahari, where caste Hindu and *Janajāti* populations from the hills were encouraged to settle.

The Seventh Plan is explicit about the link between highway construction and planned migration:

Necessary steps will be taken on the basis of studies to be carried out with the aim of developing sub-towns or towns at crossings of Mahendra Highway ... and north-south link roads in order to rehabilitate the migrated population from the hills to the terai in a well-managed manner. (NPC 1985: 234; see also Miklian 2009)

This approach to managing internal migration had also been advocated by a Task Force of the National Commission on Population, which had been constituted in 1983 under the chairmanship of Harka Gurung. From this position, Gurung continued to advocate the principles of regional development and integration of hill and Tarai economies.¹⁵ The task force report directs the government to promote growth centers at the major intersections of the fish-bone highway layout for the explicit purpose of facilitating resettlement of hill populations, while also advocating intensive investment in development in hill regions, with the aim of reducing economic disparity between the hills and Tarai.

In this way, *Pahāḍī* settlement was concentrated in the northern Tarai, and state-led, donor-funded development assistance disproportionately benefited *Pahāḍī* populations relative to Madhesi and indigenous Tarai populations concentrated in the more densely settled regions of the southern Tarai. Few *Pahāḍī* migrated to already established towns such as Janakpur, and practically none to the large Madhes settlements like Biratnagar or Nepalganj (Shah 2006: 4). Resettlement thus manifested a state-sponsored spatial logic that maintained the segregation of Madhesi and indigenous Tarai populations from caste Hindu and *Janajāti* populations.¹⁶ The relative privilege of hill Brahmans, Chhetris, and Newars, in particular—as a result

¹⁵ The report also advocated regulating the open border with India in order to control India-Nepal migration—a provision that generated a powerful backlash from Madhesi leaders and helped to catalyze and deepen Madhesi political organizing.

¹⁶ In addition to government re-settlement programs there was massive “spontaneous” migration from the hills into the Tarai during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (as well as immigration from India), causing all kinds of problems around

of their greater access to education, government employment, and state-subsidized land—also created opportunities for “leadership dominance,” not only in their own settlements or regions, but also in the entire Madhes region (Shah 2006: 6). It also solidified their control over valuable agricultural and industrial assets (Miklian 2009). The technical rationality of Malthusian planning thus underpinned the political subsumption of the Tarai to *Pahāḍī* dominance—a cultural politics that would, of course, erupt several decades later in the Madhes *āndolan* of January–February 2007.

A second polarizing dynamic in building the economy emerged out of processes of evaluation and analysis. Once the rationality for road construction is articulated in developmentalist terms—not merely strategic ones, like national integration—then an apparatus of professionalized assessment gets set in motion. Projects require *ex-ante* feasibility studies to anticipate impact; and the overall sectors of infrastructure and transport development require *ex-post* impact studies to assess distribution of costs and benefits, as well as long-term economic and social impacts (Seddon 2000). During the 1970s and 1980s such studies proliferated in Nepal (e.g., Schroeder and Sisler 1971; Singh 1974). One in particular proved particularly contentious to the project of building the economy as thus far conceived (Blaikie, Cameron and Seddon 1977). This was not the conventional cursory evaluation study characterized, as collaborator David Seddon (2000: 5) puts it, by “wishful thinking and positive prejudice.” Rather, it was a major, independent, academic study investigating the long-term impacts of road construction in rural areas of Nepal on the basis of field studies across hill and Tarai regions of three major highways in west-central Nepal, the Siddhartha Rajmarga (connecting Pokhara to the Tarai and India), the Prithvi Rajmarga (linking Pokhara and Kathmandu), and the Mahendra Rajmarga (or East-West Highway). The report challenged long-held assumptions about the positive impacts of roads on economic development and spawned a major debate within Nepal about development rationality, by introducing a much-needed political-economic perspective.

The study engaged an interdisciplinary team from the Overseas Development Group at the University of East Anglia, who, with funding from the ESCOR Committee of the Ministry of Overseas Development, pioneered a mixed-methods research design that would distinguish short-, medium-,

issues of “citizenship” (see Gaige 1975 on this for the late 1960s). Thanks to David Seddon for this comment.

and long-term effects; specify impacts in locations on, near, and far from the road; and focus on evolving patterns of spatial and socio-economic inequality (Seddon 2000: 23). The multi-volume report titled *The Effects of Roads in West Central Nepal* interjected the first major, public critical commentary on road building in Nepal (Blaikie *et al.* 1976). It argued that overall the roads considered did not promote agricultural development as anticipated—and more generally that wide-scale, political-economic conditions significantly determine whether roads promote development or underdevelopment. In the context of West Central Nepal in the 1970s, roads had the effect of transforming existing commercial and transport systems, displacing and relocating populations, promoting rural-urban migration, inflating land values in road-side and near-road locations, and generating a new broker economy of contractors and middle men. The findings were consolidated in a book *Nepal in Crisis* published in 1980 by three of the interdisciplinary research team, David Seddon, Piers Blaikie and John Cameron. The book drew attention to the relations of dependency between the rural periphery and urbanizing centers, subsumption of indigenous modes of production, and aggravation of socio-economic inequality within and between regions—revealing how development opportunities like roads create enhanced opportunity for those with capital to invest, but can lead to loss of livelihood for those who do not (Blaikie, Cameron and Seddon 1980). Thus expansion of foreign aid and the state apparatus in general, and road construction in the specific context of the Western Development Region in particular, had exacerbated, not resolved, Nepal’s crisis of under-development. In a review of roads-related literature three decades later, co-author Seddon summarizes the intervention this way:

There were major environmental, political-economic and social constraints which prevented a more profound transformation of agricultural production and rural livelihoods, and ensured that the distribution of economic and social benefits was limited, for the most part, to a small minority of the population, predominantly from the wealthier sections of society. (Seddon 2000: 23)

The extensive evidence base deriving from a wide range of methods—from a large rural household sample survey, to traffic surveys, to in-depth interviews with particular social groups, such as Dalits, porters, and low-paid workers—gave the report some traction. It is difficult to know

without conducting further interviews how this intervention rooted in the perspectives of neo-Marxist dependency theory influenced state action and policy direction in the 1980s at a time when the monarchy still essentially governed the country. Certainly the correlation is remarkable: the report was issued during the very five year plan when the National Planning Commission began to reduce the share of budget given to roads and increase spending in soft sectors like health and education.

The lines of causality, however, are not clear. Geographer Pitamber Sharma (2005) argues that *The Effect of Roads in West Central Nepal* did discourage donors, as well as Nepali intellectuals and development planners, from prioritizing development of roads in the hills at a time when donors were experiencing some kind of a “road fatigue” due to lumpy, long term investment commitments and problems of construction technology and management.¹⁷ As a proponent of regional planning (and former student of Harka Gurung), Sharma underscores the need to account for either the lag in impact on production in economies that are underdeveloped (the “lag effect”) or the conditions necessary to benefit from roads—namely the package of complementary investments in agriculture and other sectors required to enhance productivity and specialization in tradable goods. Engaging both issues, he suggests, would yield planning approaches aimed at improving the opportunities for road production to stimulate local economies and their links to wider regional economies. Sharma’s aim is to argue that constructing roads must be the main backbone of state development and a key indicator of rural economic growth. Rather than cut road development, (which, it must be emphasized, is not what *The Effects of Roads* itself advocates) he advocates attending to the conditions under which roads are built, in order to effectively engage roads as an instrument of the state to negotiate in favor of marginal farmers and occupational caste groups.¹⁸ In fact both Seddon and Sharma

¹⁷ Personal communication with Pitamber Sharma, May 3, 2017.

¹⁸ Personal communication with Pitamber Sharma, May 3, 2017. The basis for Sharma’s critique thus differs substantially from the ideological basis of the report’s mixed reception among donors and planners. While the conclusions of the report may have aligned especially well with donors’ “road fatigue,” its neo-Marxist analysis was widely dismissed. According to David Seddon himself, “our initial three volume report produced some very interesting reactions in the Ministry of Overseas Development—to say it was controversial is to understate the matter. Our book *Nepal in Crisis* also created a furor” (personal communication, March 13, 2017). The key

share the fundamental position that roads are a necessary but not sufficient condition for rural development; they seem to differ foremost on conditions of sufficiency rather than on stark “for” and “against” roads positions.

Anthropologist Mary Des Chene (2014) entered the debate nearly a decade later, posing the question of whether roads introduce “development” or “destruction,” *bikās* or *binās*. Her query is based on a disaffection with the massive urban road expansion in Kathmandu during tenure of the Maoist government led by Baburam Bhattarai. Like Blaikie, Cameron and Seddon (1977), she argues for an approach to building roads that accounts for political-economic conditions and environmental impacts. Like Sharma’s intervention, however, her piece is written more as a political treatise than analysis of empirical findings from scientific research.¹⁹

The key point to emphasize for our purpose is that road building itself spawned a significant and politically charged debate about the determinants of development and underdevelopment. Thus, if roads had been specified as the key instrument for building economy during the late Panchayat period, they also figured centrally both in processes of spatial and social polarization, and in the dissemination of political-economic perspectives that would soon gain wide currency in the People’s Movements and Maoist insurgency.²⁰

contributions of the report and many other subsequent publications (e.g., Blaikie, Seddon and Cameron 1979; Seddon, Blaikie and Cameron 1979; Seddon 1993)—namely their clear, empirically grounded and theoretically informed articulation of the political-economic basis for poverty and uneven development—was thus largely ignored in official planning circles.

¹⁹ Around the same time, in a study of the “road project, connectivity and livelihood” in Rasuwa District, Anthropologist Ben Campbell (2010) produced more evidence, based on ethnographic methods, to challenge the expectation that road building in rural areas would improve the livelihoods of Nepali villagers.

²⁰ Particularly relevant is the PhD dissertation of Babu Ram Bhattarai, one of the leaders of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), which in 1996 launched the People’s War. The dissertation was eventually published (in 2003) in revised form as *The Nature of Underdevelopment and Regional Structure of Nepal: A Marxist Analysis*. The study adopts a similar perspective to that of *Nepal in Crisis*—arguing the need for a radical transformation of existing political and economic structures if balanced and sustainable “development” were ever to be possible. Thanks go to David Seddon for suggesting the addition of this reference.

Conclusion

A subsequent, and contemporary, regime of territorialization might be characterized as “balancing sustainability, struggle, and democracy.” In this regime, globally circulating currents of neoliberal economic ideology dispel notions of state-led economic development in favor of self-regulating markets and local, self-help entrepreneurship. These ideological currents intersect with prevailing responses to climate change that similarly seek to create incentives for local practices of sustainability and conservation. At the same time, the *Janaāndolan*, Maoist revolution and subsequent trajectory toward political democratization have, at the very least generated new forms of collective and political consciousness through which prevailing cultural politics can be questioned and challenged. As in previous regimes of territorialization, roads can be read as a trace on these developments. This is the time of devolution of road planning and budgets, mobilization of local users’ groups for “labor-based,” “green roads” construction. And it is also a time in which those seeking to challenge legacies of exclusion and marginalization regard the road as a key site for making claims and staging protest.

Our goal in this paper has been to put the concept of “regime of territorialization” to work, to render visible the multi-scalar, socio-political infrastructures underlying the material territoriality of the road. For the case of Nepal, this objective yields a typology through which to interpret distinctive yet overlapping processes by which the road and multi-scalar socio-political dynamics are co-constituted. We have periodized these processes under the designations, “managing coloniality” “integrating the nation,” and “building economy.” And we have sought to underscore the tensions, conflicts, and contradictions entailed in these various historical episodes of enlisting the road in projects of rule.

As always, one key objective of typological periodization is to denaturalize the prevailing regime of territorialization in relation to the historical record. We recognize, for example, that roads have always played a key role in constituting state developmentalist visions and practice, as well as Nepal’s geopolitical relations. Continuities can be traced from the conscription of forced labor during the Rana era to the mandatory “participation” in users’ groups today, and also to the role of that historical memory in contemporary

claims for resources and opportunities related to road building—e.g., local budgets, contracts, or employment.²¹

Contemporary political contestations, like the current debates about the contours of federalism, can likewise be interpreted through road histories. The experience of marginalization against which the Madhes *āndolan* and subsequent protests have been articulated, for example, is rooted squarely in the politics of the East-West Highway in relation to *Pahāḍī* resettlement and protracted delays in upgrading the road linkages among municipalities in the southern Tarai. The political opportunity in tracing these continuities, as well as historical ruptures, lies in the possibility of opening up debate over desirable future arrangements for road building that would meaningfully express the ideals of democracy and justice over which struggles in Nepal have long been waged and which the contemporary political restructuring aims to reflect.

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