

Review Essay

WRITING A REGION FROM WITHIN

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Ujir Magar, Harichan Chhantyal, Jhakendra Gharti Magar and Gobinda Chhantyal, eds., 2025. *Dhorpatan: Itihās, Samāj ra Artha-rājñiti*. Kathmandu: Dhorpatan Sarokar Samaj.

Dhorpatan: Itihās, Samāj ra Artha-rājñiti (in Nepali), edited by Ujir Magar, Harichan Chhantyal, Jhakendra Gharti Magar, and Gobinda Chhantyal, brings together writings by people from the Dhorpatan region, a highland area spanning Baglung, Myagdi, and Rukum districts, with its focus primarily on Dhorpatan Municipality of Baglung. The contributors undertake a self-conscious task: to document their history, geography, and collective memory. As the editors state in the introduction, this project is driven by a desire to record “the self-history of our own villages and society” (p. 2). This explicit claim to authorship marks the volume as a significant intervention against the trend of mediated narratives that have long dominated Nepal’s politics of representation.

This review is attentive both to what the volume makes visible, lived experience that is rich in detail and diverse in perspective, and to the limits of the collection’s chosen form, including uneven representation, inherited analytic frames, and the absence of sustained synthesis. Yet more than simply documenting a region, *Dhorpatan* marks a shift in Nepal’s emerging landscape of community-authored histories. Earlier efforts at self-writing by marginalized groups often centered on single caste or ethnic communities, seeking to reclaim identity within the terms of state classification. By contrast, *Dhorpatan* adopts a regional frame that brings together multiple communities and narrative forms, assembling memories, biographies, and historical sketches into a collective account of a shared place. This review argues that the volume represents the emergence of a new genre of regional

self-histories, characterized by collective authorship and place-based memory, and offers a potent model for publicly-oriented scholarship in Nepal.

The essay begins by examining how knowledge about Nepali society has historically been shaped by state narratives, development discourse, and academic categorization. It then turns to the volume itself, highlighting the forms of regional memory it assembles and the historical themes that emerge from its essays. The final section reads such works as sites where self-authorship, epistemic inheritance, and structural constraints intersect, revealing both the promise and the limits of writing regions from within.

Writing Nepal From Outside: State Narratives, Development, and Academic Knowledge

The question of who writes history has long been central to the politics of knowledge and representation in Nepal. For decades, government agencies, development planners, and outside academics produced censuses, district and village profiles,¹ and scholarly ethnographies that sought to capture the country's social diversity. These exercises, while often undertaken with administrative or scholarly intent, frequently reduced complex social worlds into neat policy and analytical categories.

The *Mulukī Ain* of 1854 can be read as Nepal's earliest act of official self-representation: a legal codification of caste hierarchy, social duties, and moral order that reflected the self-perception of the ruling elites. It provided the ideological ground for "upper-caste" intellectuals to produce texts articulating state vision and caste-based privileges that effectively marginalized the "others." From the 1920s onwards, these elites, within and outside Nepal, further advanced, under the guise of "*jāti* improvement," a homogenized national identity centered on "*bīr*" (martial race) history and the "Gorkha Bhāṣā" (the Nepali language) [Onta 1996a]. After 1950, these were reified in Panchayat-era textbooks that created a monolithic "*rāṣṭriya itiḥās*" (national history) that glorified monarchy, promoted Hindu values, and suppressed ethnic and local histories by denying the "ambivalence" of Nepal's diversities and complexities through simplification or erasure (Onta 1996b). At the same time, the state extended its regulatory reach into family life, entrenching a Hinduized "state patriarchy" (Tamang 2000) that

¹ This practice of publishing area profiles has been continued by the new municipalities as well.

governed women's life in particular, through Panchayat-era amendments to the *Muluki Ain* that ignored diverse indigenous practices under the guise of unity, modernization, and equality.

These state narratives were paralleled and reinforced by post-1950 development paradigms. The first periodic development plan painted Nepal as rural and isolated, home to an undernourished, un-educated populace in dire need of upliftment in “employment, standards of living and general well being” (GoN 1955). “The village” (Pigg 1992) and, in particular, “the Nepali woman” were portrayed by the elites as “patriarchically oppressed, uniformly disadvantaged and Hindu” (Tamang 2002: 163). These representations flattened internal diversity and provided classificatory schema that development experts and scholars have often ended up reproducing without accounting for community histories or people's self-perception (cf. the *Status of Women in Nepal* series, published between 1979 and 1981, a development-led research whose findings nonetheless point to internal diversity and deep heterogeneity of women even within single communities). Disseminated through schools, development training, and bureaucratic practice, these categories shaped how people came to see themselves and how they were seen by others (Pigg 1992; Tamang 2002). As a result, diverse populations were rendered legible primarily as statistical units or policy problems.

This developmental framing did not remain confined to policy documents but traveled into academic scholarship, where similar simplifications shaped the production of social knowledge about Nepal. While such bureaucratic simplification is hardly unique to Nepal, it is a mechanical necessity of the developmental state, what proved particularly consequential was the dominance of development discourse in shaping knowledge production about Nepali society. With development agencies, state institutions, and many external scholars propagating simplified representations of Nepali society, counter-narratives that privileged community diversity, agency, and self-understanding remained marginal. It is within this vacuum of local representation that the significance of *Dhorpatan* must be understood.

Outsider² scholarship often contributed to this pattern through different logics that, once established, tended to circulate in later writing and shape

² In this essay, I use “outsider” to refer primarily to scholars from the Global North, though I acknowledge the category is inherently relational: a Nepali scholar from a dominant group or even an “assimilated gatekeeper” or a non-proximate insider may occupy an “outsider” position vis-à-vis the *Janajāti* and marginalized communities

subsequent representations. Academic scholarship sometimes privileged theoretical coherence over lived complexity, reducing people and places to analytically convenient types. This tendency is exemplified by the work of John T. Hitchcock (1966), whose “Monal” field site was located within the Dhorpatan region and is frequently cited across the volume’s chapters. Hitchcock’s pursuit of an “ecological” category for the “northern Magars,” a bounded cultural type defined by altitude and subsistence pattern, is a case in point: the category prioritized theoretical coherence over the more fluid, relational social world it purported to show. This incongruity between analytical categorization and lived social worlds forms a structural condition shaping *Dhorpatan*’s attempt at self-representation.

While development discourse and scholarly work both flattened lived complexities, they did so through distinct mechanisms and toward different ends. State and development agencies simplified for administrative legibility and policy intervention, rendering diverse populations into statistical units to be managed by experts. Academic scholarship simplified for theoretical coherence and disciplinary contribution, casting communities as typological categories illustrating analytical frameworks. Both prioritized the preservation of the framework over the accuracy of the representation, marginalizing how communities understood themselves and creating academic conventions that communities like those in Dhorpatan would later need to navigate, negotiate, or contest in their own attempts at self-representation.

Self-writing by Nepal’s marginalized communities has historically progressed in fits and starts; it is only coalescing into a sustained scholarly practice, with this collection offering a potential model. When state and elite narratives dominated the national stage, communities that had been excluded from those frameworks slowly turned inward, seeking to write their own histories and documenting their cultures. The “academic” *Nepal Bibliography of Indigenous Peoples (Janajati)* [Gurung and Bhuju 2006], a compilation of bibliographies on Nepal produced until 2005, reveals that, with rare exceptions, insider writing about their individual communities is

they study. I use this term to foreground a fundamental shift in epistemic authority: where “outsider” scholarship derives legitimacy through proximity to institutional power and theoretical canons, the “insider” scholarship in this volume derives its authority from lived proximity to the land and the region’s collective memory. This distinction emphasizes that regional self-writing is not merely about the identity of the author but of the grounding of the knowledge itself.

a feature exclusive to the period following 1950. The earliest recorded text by a Newar is from 1941, Gurung 1957, Tamang 1959/60, Limbu 1962, Thakali 1968, Rai 1978, Tharu 1980/81, Magar 1981/82, Sherpa 1982, and Chhantyal 1987. Judging by their titles, most of these writings appear primarily concerned with documentation of language, genealogy, and histories of their own communities. Dalit self-writing emerged even later. One of the earliest substantial explorations of the Dalit community from within dates only to 2013 (BK 2013).³ The chronology is telling; these publications reflect not only intellectual initiative but also the unequal distribution of literacy, institutional support, and access to print culture in Nepal. Before the gradual expansion of education after 1950, many communities in Nepal relied primarily on oral traditions as collective forms of history and memory. In addition, during the Panchayat period (1960–1990), state ideology promoted cultural unity while discouraging assertions of ethnic identity, so that “[a]ny claim to ethnic identity was reduced to political rebellion” (Bhattarai 2004: 302).

Alongside the elite-led “*jāti* improvement,” marginalized communities established their own reform associations. Under the “upper-caste”-dominated society of the times, Dalits, at the lowest rung of the caste hierarchy, suffered most acutely. The Nepal Samaj Sudhar Sangh (1947), which advocated for a united fight against discrimination (Maharjan and Kisan 2070 v.s.), was one of many Dalit anti-discrimination movements and organizations to emerge almost simultaneously in different places in Nepal during the 1940s. Around and after the end of the Rana regime in 1951, ethnic and caste communities rapidly came together to form social organizations such as Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha in 1949, Limbuwan Sudhar Sangh in 1952, Gurung Kalyan Sangh in 1954, Thakali Samaj Sudhar Sangh in 1954, Magar Samaj Sudhar Sangh in 1955, and Tamang Bhasa Sanskriti Bikas Samiti in 1956. These organizations were more inward-looking and “promoted social cohesion and cultural preservation within single ethnic

³ This is not to deny the existence of an extensive body of working papers, policy documents, and monographs produced by Dalits themselves. These understandably focus on single issues affecting the community(ies) as they are invariably written for development partners or self-published. This is a reflection of structural conditions under which self-writing and knowledge production is possible or constrained. See *A Bibliography of Dalit Related Studies in Nepal* (Chand 2013) for more details. The cited work by Amar Bahadur BK is not listed in Chand (2013).

groups. ... sought to uplift their own communities through reforming cultural practices instead of challenging the state” (Hangen 2010: 35).

These reforms, some undertaken in a strategic pursuit of modern respectability, had unanticipated consequences for the communities. They led to the inadvertent loss and self-erasure of elements of cultural memory, history, and worldview, losses that would come to be lamented by later generations. This sentiment is echoed in the volume itself, where Chhantyal contributors acknowledge that many of their own cultural practices now survive only as symbolic and representational forms, their original meanings and functions diminished (p. 186). This pattern of reform-driven loss is well illustrated by the Tharu Kalyankarini Sabha, whose initial focus on what Guneratne (2024[2002]: 142) characterizes as “Sanskritization,” social expenditure control, and modernization represented an attempt at cultural makeover from “tribe-like” to “caste-like” (Guneratne 2022). Significantly, it succeeded in ending “backward” practices such as child marriage and in promoting girls’ education. In this process, the practice of tattooing among Tharu women gradually declined. These tattoos had been compulsory for mature and married women and served to ward off the sexual attention of the then ruling elites who considered tattoos marks of tribal people. These tattoos were symbols of Tharu cultural history and memory, understood to accompany the bearer even after death. The disappearance of this practice has become a focal point for younger generations of Tharu, who now work to document and preserve the cultural meanings these tattoos once conveyed (Chaudhary 2017, 2025; Sunuwar and Tharu 2023; Tharu 2082 v.s.).

The intolerance of societal and political elites and the rise of the Panchayat in 1962 prevented marginalized communities in Nepal from organizing publicly and at scale. In 1959, when the Limbuwan Sudhar Sangh wanted to register as a party, it was denied registration by the Election Commission on the grounds of “‘Limbuwan’ sounding like *‘jatibadi’* [casteist] and *sampradayik* [communal] organization” (Chemjong 2017: 38–39; italics in the original). Other ethnic associations were similarly constrained from collective action under the Panchayat dispensation. For example, the Magar Samaj Sudhar Sangh, which had formally taken steps towards raising social awareness and reform following the 1957 Barse Convention, ceased its activities when Panchayat rule began in 1962 (Thapa Magar 2012) as the Nepali state moved to assimilate its peoples under an essentially homogenized Hindu and Nepali-speaking identity (Onta 1996b).

These organizations produced newsletters and leaflets, acts of history-writing by those usually excluded from the uni-vocal history of the nation. When ethnic organizations were allowed by the state after the political upheaval of 1990, many caste and ethnic groups in Nepal started writing their own histories and cultural texts, often to counter their marginalization within state narratives. Such community histories or ethnographies focusing entirely on a single caste or ethnic group or clan have been the dominant model for community-led knowledge production. In short, the imagination and boundaries of community have, thus far, remained limited to the caste or ethnic group as a cohesive, pre-given unit.

Writing From Within: Regional Memory and Community Self-history

Dhorpatan represents a shift from narrowly framed ethnic- or caste-based self-assertion to collective regional authorship. Rather than advancing a single analytical argument, the volume assembles memories, biographies, interviews, and published scholarship to document a shared past and assert regional presence in written form. Though the editors claim in the introduction that it is an academic endeavor (“*prājñik prayās*,” p. 1), the volume should be read more as a form of collective self-documentation, what Crooke (2012) describes as “community autobiography,” in which history emerges through the accumulation of voices rather than through a unified interpretive framework. This approach allows the volume to register the social complexity and lived experiences that are often flattened in state histories, development profiles, and even single-authored insider accounts. At the same time, the volume’s collective mode carries a constitutive tension: the desire to preserve testimonial plurality and the autonomy of individual voices often comes at the expense of internal dialogue and analytical synthesis, displacing the burden of interpretation onto the reader. The volume’s form follows the fact that the history of the Dhorpatan region is best narrated by those who have lived it, even when that narration remains partial, uneven, or internally unresolved.

The 55 essays in *Dhorpatan* are organized into six sections. The volume moves from regional framing to social institutions, economic life, and finally memory and biography, mirroring a broader shift from external categorization toward lived narration. Except for the fourth section on “experts” views on the region, the contributors are all from the Dhorpatan region. The contributors occupy varied social and professional positions, ranging from

trained academics to community elders, a diversity that shapes both narrative form and authority. Importantly, they reflect the multi-caste and multi-ethnic composition of Dhorpatan: Chhantyal, Magar, Chhetri, Bahun, Thakali, and Newar. At the same time, *Dhorpatan* exhibits striking absences with only one woman and no Dalit contributors.

With no locally written history of the region and literacy remaining out of reach for all but a few until recent generations, oral traditions and collective memories are not merely the available sources, they are the most fitting ones for a self-history of this kind. The case of the old Bhujel Magar kingdom illustrates this clearly: while external histories record when the Bhujel ruler gave away their kingdom to a neighboring Malla prince through princely solicitation, the Bhujel kings themselves survive primarily in local memory. Their absence from the written record reflects not the thinness of the history but rather points at who controlled the archive. *Dhorpatan* is built on precisely these foundations. In committing such memories to text, the volume creates something the region has never possessed: a written archive assembled from its own voices. In this sense, the absence of an earlier written record becomes not a barrier but the very condition that makes the project necessary. Beginning with a brief history of the region, the sections that follow trace how this collective effort at self-documentation unfolds across six thematic parts.

The historical arc of the volume begins with the old Bhujel Magar kings at least from the eighth century, whose rule survives primarily in oral traditions and collective memory rather than in datable written records. According to these traditions, authority later shifted when the Bhujel ruler himself brought prince Pithamba⁴ from Rukum, an event that, unlike the earlier Bhujel lineage, is recorded in external histories and dated to circa 1510 v.s.⁵ This is thought to be a precursor to the powerful Parbat kingdom that later emerged. The essays record how Bahuns, Chhetris, and other caste groups arrived with the new prince-king in the 16th century to settle alongside the indigenous

⁴ Known in mainstream history and genealogies as Anandabam (or Ananda Bam), he is preserved in local oral traditions under various names, including Pithimba, Pithabama, Anamma, and Anamba.

⁵ While scholars broadly agree that this is the date when the Malla kings came to power, displacing the Bhujel Magar rulers, in the region, there are other proposed dates: 1440 v.s. (p. 90) and 1493 v.s. (Adhikary 2073 v.s. as cited on p. 147) and by Baniya (2079 v.s.).

Magar. The essays also show how, over time, various communities came in waves in search of livelihood. Tibetan refugees were the last notable wave of arrivals. In fact, the process continues with new migrants particularly settling in Burtibang bazaar as Burtibang grows in commercial importance in the region. The essays on these communities reveal different times of arrival and internal differences within individual communities but also extensive cross-community borrowing of cultural and ritual practices: cross-cousin marriage adopted from Magars by Dalits; communal worship practices shared across groups; Magar influence on the Nauthar community and other communities in their adoption of Magar identity and clan names and military enlistment; Hindu influence on Kumal cremation practices and Gurung cultural and life-cycle rituals; Thakali influence on other communities to start *dhikur*, a rotating savings and credit system; Hindu and local influence on Newar culture and language; cross-community influence on Tamang marriage and cremation. This influx led to the reorganization of a hierarchical system of social order and land use and resource management, some of whose legacies persist to this day.

The book also traces later developments in the region's social and economic landscape. A major motif is the rise of Burtibang from a seasonal metal trading post located in an open pasture that also served as a resting point along the trail to the region's largest bazaar town now. Its growth reflects both its geographical position, and a more troubling dynamic of loss of Magar lands through appropriation, and investments by state elites. This process symbolizes the region's gradual integration into wider economic networks. Moving from early political formations to contemporary transformations, the essays reveal a set of recurring concerns that together illuminate the historical experience of the region. Read together, the chapters portray a region shaped by a paradox: its geographical remoteness never precluded the constant circulation of people, resources, and ideas through wider networks. Within this social field, six recurring themes structure the volume's contributions: remoteness and connectedness; mining and taxation; migration and diaspora; education and local initiative; politics and state neglect; and tourism potential.

The geographical remoteness and marginalization of the Dhorpatan region from administrative machinery is a thread that runs through all the essays. Here, remoteness is neither isolation nor the provincialism that renders the wider world irrelevant. Dhorpatan region emerges as historically connected through trade, migration, and movement. Salt-procurement

journeys involved grain barter to Dolpo and Mustang and later the sale of ghee in Butwal and Tansen. This linked the region to wider economic circuits, even as travel remained perilous enough that travelers carried funerary implements in anticipation of death. Far from a marginal backwater, Dhorpatan region appears as a long-standing thoroughfare. It was on the main trail to Jumla during ancient times as “Boordebang” [Burtibang] and “Nusi-bhauji” (reported by Kirkpatrick in 1793) and served as a staging post for journeys to Dolpa later on as reported by Karna Shakya in 1966, James Fisher in 1968, George B. Schaller and Peter Matthiessen in 1973.

Yet if Dhorpatan was never truly isolated, what then constitutes its remoteness? The answer lies less in geography than in the state’s selective reach, a distance not from the world but from the state’s services. As the thematic threads explored below make clear, the region’s sense of marginality derives from a persistent asymmetry between the state’s extractive presence and its developmental absence, a condition produced over generations rather than given by terrain.

If multiple forms of mobility were one pillar of pursuing livelihoods in Dhorpatan, mining was another. Mining shaped the makeup and growth of settlements across the region. Dhorpatan fell within the Upper Baiskhani, part of the mining region known as Western,⁶ Upper, and Lower Baiskhani, the areas with 22 mines, a region spanning present-day Rolpa, Pyuthan, and Rukum (Western), Baglung and Myagdi (Upper) and Parbat, Gulmi, and Arghakhanchi Districts (Lower). Chhantyal, Dalit, and Thakali migrated to this region to work the abundant copper and iron veins. Mining work sustained and bound them together for generations. The metals they extracted and refined undergirded the state’s military production and supplied raw materials that were forged and crafted into everyday household items. These multi-ethnic mining settlements paid “*bhejā*” (taxes) in the form of metal, initially to the Parbat kingdom and later to the Gorkhali state.

Around 1980 v.s., mining activity declined and eventually ceased, for reasons that are as yet unclear. A 1957 v.s. Rana government order to close “down the mines [sic] of Beni, Baglung, and Tansen and retaining only the local depots for handling the monopoly trade in copper” (Regmi 1988:

⁶ While Upper and Lower Baiskhani nomenclature is accepted and used in historical texts/works, this category Western Baiskhani (p. 211) is uniquely present in this volume and its historical basis warrants further verification.

141–142) seems to have precipitated this decline.⁷ While the obligation to supply copper to the mints was removed, copper still had to be sold to the government-appointed contractors to supply to the above government depots so the miners smuggled copper in large quantities to places offering higher prices (Regmi 1998: 144–145). Community memory and some scholarship suggest that an increase in taxation was a major reason. During the Rana rule, taxation reached 5 to 25 *dhārni* per family, a burden so heavy that the Chhantyal (miners) completely abandoned their villages, dispersed, and concealed their identities by adopting Magar names and enlisted in the British Indian Army. While the communal memory is imprecise on the details, similar history is echoed in other mining areas in the region. A Khadgakot VDC Commemorative Volume from the Lower Baiskhani region notes that in 1966 v.s., the state increased the mine tax from 6 percent to 50 percent, which made mining unprofitable for those in the Baiskhani region (cited in Budhathoki 2025). The taxation extended not only to the miners but to the non-mining residents in surrounding areas as well (Budhathoki 2025: 193).

The heavy mining tax burden is corroborated by historical accounts. In 1895 [1951/1952 v.s.], “*khānīko nagadī*” and “*phalāmko nagadī*” levies were instituted in place of lost metal income, and in 1916 [1972/1973 v.s.], the Nepali state imposed taxation in metal (Regmi 1978). Community memory from Dhorpatan as well as elsewhere in the Baiskhani region notes that in 1980 v.s., mining *mukhiyās* from the region traveled to Kathmandu to petition the government (p. 191, 296). Following this petition, the annual 3 *dhārnis* of copper was commuted to rupees 150 per family, a payment that continued at least until 2014 v.s. (Shreesh [Thapa] 2014: 50). The greatly impoverished Magars from the region started migrating to India (Shreesh [Thapa] 2014: 49). Notably, while “*khānī rakam*” levy for other (mining) areas was abolished in 2012 v.s. through notification in the Nepal Gazette (GoN 2012 v.s.), people from the region continued paying “*khānīko nagadī*” and “*phalāmko nagadī*” levies until at least 2014 v.s., suggesting that these

⁷ This closing of the “mines” is a rare typo from Regmi. Obviously he meant closing of the mints as he later in the same volume cites how “*Āgrīs*” [miners] were forced to work in copper mines for three months in a year on a compulsory basis (Regmi 1988: 146; italics in the original).

particular taxes were not included in the 2012 v.s. abolition.⁸ This points to state negligence of these marginalized areas.

In the face of extractive taxation, while old miners simply left their areas and dispersed, more recent times have seen people opposing such state-led attempts at community interference and extraction. One such case cited is the “*ḍhol kāṇḍa*.” In 2026 v.s., the government awarded a contract and license to a Madheshi-origin businessman to import and sell “*mauwāko raksī*” [distilled liquor] from the Tarai while banning the production and sale of traditional local “*raksī*.” This was violently opposed by local (mostly Bahun) teachers and students, and the businessman left the area. This recalls a similar incident in the Rolpa District, which adjoins the Dhorpatan region, around the same time, with women opposing import of “*mauwāko raksī*” and the banning of home-made liquor, which served as their source of income and was central to rituals, festivals, gift exchanges, and hospitality (Molnar 1982). Both episodes illustrate the state’s strategy of rendering the hills legible through extraction, imposing fiscal regimes on resources and livelihoods rather than extending services.

With the decline of mining, migration became central to Dhorpatan’s story. People started going to India (Jalandhar in local parlance) in large numbers, in addition to enlisting in the British Indian Army. By the 1970s, men were migrating to Arab countries in search of employment. Migration remains central to household economies and local development today. While the state failed to provide essential services, outward migration generated new resources. The diaspora has played a key role in financing and authoring this volume itself. Migration, thus, appears not only as a survival strategy through financial remittances but also as a source of significant social remittances. In one telling instance, the returnee migrants conceptualized and contributed towards the education infrastructure that transformed the region.

Education has been pursued in the region in the face of overwhelming constraints, internal competition over resources and dominance, and profound neglect. Before 2010 v.s., only a handful of people learned to read and write.

⁸ There is anecdotal evidence that these two levies were only repealed during the mid-1970s, but documentary evidence is lacking. If any government decision led to the stopping of the payments in 2014 v.s., it could be the 2014 v.s. amendment to the Nepal Mines Act, 2013 v.s., which declared that all the minerals “lying or discovered” inside the country before or after the Act is the property of the Nepali state (GoN 2014 v.s.).

Three pathways to literacy existed: attending “*dalāne gurukuls*” or veranda schools run by Brahman priests, traveling to Banaras in India specifically to acquire education, and acquiring literacy incidentally while in the British Indian Army. The first “formal” school in the region was established in 1212 v.s. Community memory records that another school was established in Ghartithok in 1213 v.s. by an “itinerant” teacher from Jumla, the “*Jumli master*” whose name has gone unrecorded. This school would later go on to become Bhujhi Himalaya Primary School in 1214 v.s. Operating in private homes, cowsheds, or temporary sheds, these schools were staffed by teachers from adjacent districts or even from Kathmandu and Bhagalpur, Darjeeling, and other places in India, highlighting a critical shortage of teachers across Nepal in the 1950s (Upřety 2082 v.s.). In the struggle to build and sustain schools, often with minimal facilities and uncertain funding, former soldiers and wealthy landowners gave land, money, and time. These accounts echo wider observations of early community-led schools in Nepal, underscoring how community initiative, rather than the state, laid the groundwork for educational advancement (Parajuli, Onta and Upřety 2022).

The volume shows how resolutely the people of the region pursued education in a context of profound inaccessibility. In one essay, a woman who became the first nurse paramedic (auxiliary nursing midwife) of the region in 1237 v.s. recalls that her father, a World War-II soldier who had learned to read and write in the army by writing in the dust, returned home on the condition that his daughter could get an education. Her mother’s support enabled her to leave the region to pursue it.

The essays frequently stress the theme of neglect. While the taxation on mines had made the state’s extractive presence felt, schools, health services, and roads were largely absent for a long time. Contributors describe this absence not as a single failure but as a persistent pattern that continues into the present. This neglect manifests in the long-running but repeatedly derailed demand for a separate district for the region. It also appears in the belated arrival of the regional administrative center, banks, modern communication, and hospitals that came decades later. This was not for lack of politicians, activists, or social workers from the area as recounted in the memoirs and biographies in the volume. Rather, it reflected the state’s systemic indifference.

Though *Dhorpatan* is essentially a history of the region, the volume nurtures the hope that Burtibang town, which has grown through community

initiatives and need, will catalyze change in the broader region. With the town now the municipal headquarters, the volume calls for responsive leadership to transform the region. The volume also highlights the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve as holding potential for the future of the region. Currently, wildlife (specifically *nāur*, one of the reserve's two game species) numbers are declining (p. 336) amidst restrictive national conservation policies while the communities receive no share of the revenue generated by the trophy-hunting tourists who pay the state. One contributor has argued in a related work for community involvement in land management, proposing a framework of balanced utilization that conserves resources while benefiting communities (Thapa 2082 v.s.). The contributors see potential in developing Dhorpatan Valley and its surrounding areas for tourism and sports, a process already underway. Yet this is a fraught path as tourism's benefits tend to accrue primarily to service-providers and outside visitors, bypassing broader communities (Shreesh 2020).

Across these six threads, a coherent narrative emerges, even if the volume does not always make it explicit. Dhorpatan is revealed to be a region whose marginality was not a product of geography but of political economy: connected to wider networks through trade, migration, and military service, yet systematically excluded from the state's provisioning functions while remaining firmly within its extractive reach. Mining taxes reached the region before schools did; roads came after remittances had already begun financing local development; and the demand for a separate district has persisted across generations precisely because the state's administrative presence remained largely indifferent to local needs. This is the underlying story the volume assembles, yet the archive it constructs is itself incomplete, shaped as much by who is absent from its pages as by who speaks within them, and it is to these absences that the discussion now turns.

Absences and Their Meanings

While *Dhorpatan* represents a significant act of collective self-historicization, it also brings into view a set of structural gaps that characterize community-authored histories more broadly. These gaps do not diminish the volume's importance; they illuminate the constraints and trade-offs in such projects.

The absence of a map is a practical limitation that makes it difficult for readers unfamiliar with the area to follow narratives as they move across the region's geography. It also points to a deeper challenge: cartographic

representation has historically served as an instrument of state legibility rather than community self-expression, and reclaiming territory in memory while also anchoring it spatially remains a challenge that this emerging genre will need to confront. The gaps in the volume's spatial representation are, however, not its most consequential ones.

The volume's authorship is uneven. Although contributors span different caste and ethnic groups, Dalits are present only in passing references and a brief biography despite constituting more than 40 percent of the region's population. Women are also notably absent: there is one female contributor, and only three essays recount women's memories. These silences are not unique to *Dhorpatan* but reflect persistent inequalities in access to education, authorship, and public narration that continue to shape who can participate in projects of self-writing. During the book's launch, the editors candidly admitted to unsuccessful attempts to find authors from marginalized groups, underscoring the broader structural inequalities that such grassroots projects must contend with. *Dhorpatan* reproduces a familiar pattern in Nepali history-writing, where insider authorship has often remained restricted to educated men from dominant groups. Rather than a failure of the volume, these absences signal the need for future regional projects to invest in the long-term work of nurturing diverse voices well before the writing begins.

Beyond the question of who speaks lies the question of what is spoken about. The collection contains little sustained discussion of cultural life, festivals, or collective rituals that are alluded to throughout but never examined in their own right. Given the centrality of locally embedded cultural practices in the region, the absence of dedicated chapters on communal worship, festivals, or feasts leaves an important dimension of regional life underexplored, especially as many of these practices are increasingly in decline.

While transhumance is occasionally hinted at through references to pastoral movements, customary systems that secure access to pasture through the upkeep of trails and bridges, and skirmishes with neighboring communities over pasture rights, it receives no systematic treatment, a gap I address in the next section.

The Weight of Epistemic Inheritance

These absences limit the volume's capacity to trace how local place-based practices have been reshaped, or displaced, by successive humanitarian,

administrative, and conservation regimes. A further dimension of limitation becomes visible when the volume's narratives are examined not for what they omit but for the analytical frameworks they carry unreflectively into their own telling.

With the editors refraining from imposing analytical coherence onto the volume, its narratives can absorb inherited concepts uncritically. The "northern Magars" label, introduced by Hitchcock (1966) and already noted as an instance of outsider simplification, offers a more specific lesson when examined in the context of this volume. Hitchcock later acknowledged that the neatly bounded ecological type he sought did not exist in the coherent form his theory required (Hitchcock 1970), and his candor extended further still. In the same work, when asked by his own participants what he stood to gain from his research besides "earn money," it was they who supplied the answer: "name;" he could only agree. That a scholar of his generation committed both admissions to print is itself significant. What is more significant still is that neither the recantation nor the admission of personal stake prompted direct critical engagement from the subsequent scholars who reproduced the label in their work on shamanism in the region, including Wolf D. Mich, Anne de Sales, and Michael Oppitz, none of whom directly engages Hitchcock's 1970 reservations, though de Sales's later writings move towards a more qualified position without explicitly challenging the categorical assumptions on which the label rests (all cited in the volume). More significantly for our purposes, the term reappears in the essay on Magars written by sociologist Jhakendra Gharti Magar (pp. 123–145), not as critically examined inheritance but as working vocabulary. The term is not an emic category but a legacy of external scholarship, of an "occidental taxonomy" [sic] (Lecomte-Tilouine 2000: 74, fn 3). The gravitational pull of the category proved stronger than its originator's own reservations about it, persisting even within scholarship "from within" and revealing that the core challenge transcends the insider versus outsider dichotomy. It lies in the categories themselves.

Magars, as Gharti Magar's essay itself eventually notes, use a different framework entirely: the Bahra Panthi and Athara Panthi distinction, organized by language and geography, within which the Magars in Dhorpatan fall under the latter (p. 125). That this counter-perspective appears only after unreflective use of the "northern" label suggests less a conscious analytical choice than an unexamined default; the outsider category reaches the

page before the insider framework does. The geographic logic of the label is itself unstable: if “northern” Magars designates Kham-speaking Magars surrounding Dhorpatan (Watters 2021), it overlooks Magar groups further north still, in Dolpo, who speak Kaike and Tichurong (also known as Poike, Poinke, Rongke, and Tichurongke) [Budha, Daurio and Turin 2021]. The evolution of the Bhujel label illustrates what such cartographic and categorical rigidity obscures. In *Dhorpatan*, the Bhujel label began as a geographical designation for communities living in the Bhujel River catchment and was initially associated with the historical Bhujel Magar kings. Over time, however, it has evolved into a separate ethnic identity, no longer subsumed within Magar identity, while elsewhere in Nepal, Bhujel continues to appear as a Magar sub-clan (Shreesh [Thapa] 2014). The same label, in other words, means different things in different places, a reminder that inherited categories risk imposing rigid boundaries on identities that were historically far more place-based, relational, and dynamic than such typologies allow.

Dhorpatan makes visible the tensions between inclusion and coherence, documentation and interpretation, insider authority and inherited narrative forms. In doing so, it exposes questions that future projects of regional self-history writing will need to confront more explicitly, among them the anomaly introduced by the volume’s fourth section, where four essays by outside “experts” sit alongside the insider voices that define the rest of the project. This juxtaposition raises broader questions about the boundaries of self-history and on the terms on which expertise is recognized.

This points to a deeper structural tension that the volume raises but does not fully resolve: what happens when a project of self-history admits outside expertise on its own terms? The fault line between regional self-authorship and inherited analytic frames extends beyond ethnographic labels to the wider epistemic regimes within which the region has long been represented by others. It is especially visible in the contrast between locally embedded knowledge of land, livelihoods, and resource use and the outsider scientific and conservation agendas and developmental authorities that have historically shaped how Dhorpatan has been spoken about and is understood. In foregrounding lived experience and long-term engagement with pastures, forests, mines, and trade routes, *Dhorpatan* hints at forms of knowledge and circulation that predate modern academic and state frameworks. Yet these local epistemologies often sit uneasily alongside normative conservation

science, planning categories, and expert assessments that continue to define legitimacy, access, and benefit-sharing in the region. This asymmetry between place-based practice and institutional authority becomes most visible in debates, and silences, over conservation and resource governance.

Seasonal movement of people and livestock across ecological zones has long shaped land use, social relations, and ecological balance in the region. The absence of a sustained discussion of transhumance is, therefore, more than a descriptive gap; it limits the volume's ability to trace how customary systems of pasture use were gradually displaced by externally imposed frameworks of land classification and management. The marginalization of transhumance in the volume suggests that even insider writing can be captured by the sedentary bias of modern print culture and statecraft, drawn toward fixed settlements, bazaar towns, and administrative centers at the expense of the fluid, mobile social worlds that have historically structured the highlands.

This bias becomes especially visible in historical encounters over land use. Dhorpatan's highlands were organized through shared grazing rights and locally regulated use of pasturelands, practices that rendered the landscape legible to its users even when it appeared "empty" to outside observers. Around 1959/1960, a foreigner reportedly characterized the valley as "not occupied except for a few 'squatters'" (quoted in Hitchcock 1970: 180), and this reading informed the state's decision to allocate land for Tibetan refugee resettlement. As Harka Gurung later noted, "[W]hoever had sought out Dhorpatan as a virgin place for resettlement had not realized the full significance of this open alpine pasture for the neighbouring people" (1980: 90).⁹ When the villagers later moved upward with their herds, they encountered refugees occupying their cowsheds and pastures (p. 238). Although relations between the local communities and the Tibetan refugees became amicable later, with exchanges of gifts and hospitality during their respective seasonal movements, the episode is nonetheless revealing. The characterization of the valley as empty and unoccupied was not merely a factual error; it was a consequence of rendering the landscape through a sedentary lens that could not read seasonal mobility as a form of occupation. Customary grazing rights, shared pasturelands, and the

⁹ The quote is taken from an essay also included in the volume, a reminder that the archive *Dhorpatan* assembles contains more than its editors may have fully reckoned with.

rhythms of transhumance left no permanent markers that outside observers recognized as evidence of use or belonging. It was precisely this illegibility to outside eyes that made the valley available first for resettlement and later for conservation.

The establishment of the Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve in 1987 repeated the same logic, translating a lived and locally regulated landscape into an administratively bounded space governed by scientific forestry and wildlife management regimes that similarly struggled to see what was already there. While contributors acknowledge that conservation has affected the way of life and livelihoods of people, they also express hope that tourism might generate income. Their accounts nonetheless suggest a familiar pattern: decisions about land and resources were made without meaningful consultation with traditional users, and indigenous ecological knowledge has remained marginal to official planning. A dedicated engagement with transhumance could have brought this history into sharper focus, revealing how successive humanitarian, administrative, and conservation interventions redefined pasturelands as vacant, degraded, or in need of regulation, thereby privileging scientific authority over long-standing communal practice. This is the deeper irony the fourth section exposes: in turning to outside experts to fill perceived gaps the community's own voices could not cover, the volume risks re-centering the very scientific authority that projects of regional self-history emerge to challenge. It is a dilemma that future projects will need to confront more deliberately.

A further significant limitation of the collection lies in the lack of internal referencing and synthesis. Just as inherited academic categories are sometimes reproduced without interrogation, *Dhorpatan* also hesitates to draw connections across its own narratives, inadvertently placing that burden on the readers. In scholarly writing, internal cross-referencing functions not as an external imposition but as a means of making causal, temporal, and social relations visible. The recurring discussion of schools illustrates this limitation. References to schooling and education recur across multiple chapters, in the essay on education, in social histories, in personal recollections, interviews, and biographical sketches.

Most interesting for our purposes here is the case of two schools, both in and under the same geographical and local administrative region, that presents what might appear to be an inter-village rivalry. In 2021 v.s., given resource constraints, either Bhuji Himalaya Primary School, Ghartithok,

initially started by the “*Jumli*” master as noted earlier, or Shivalaya Primary School in Dogadi could be upgraded to a middle school. Ultimately, the former was upgraded to the first middle school of the area. But it suffered from inadequate classroom space, teachers, and financial resources (p. 248). The competition over which school was to be upgraded also resulted in community fractures that proved lasting (p. 257). A similar situation unfolded in 2055–2056 v.s. Initial agreement to establish one high school in the area gave way to disagreements, and both schools were upgraded to high schools. Similar challenges of physical infrastructure and financial and human resources followed (pp. 257–258, 363, 477–478). The Bhuji School narrative also illustrates a wider tendency, which other projects of regional-history writing will need to overcome, to prioritize written records. The volume has made progress towards de-textualizing history, but the need to make connections across accounts remains. A case in point: contributors lament the absence of first four years of meeting records (p. 254) and presume no names survive of the first student cohort (p. 478). Yet, at least four names appear elsewhere in the volume: one whose memoir is included in the volume (p. 410) and four in the biography of one of the celebrated English teachers of the region (p. 506), and probable ones in the list of “*Jumli*” master’s students (p. 246). Editorial signposting could have made these connections visible while still respecting contributors’ experience and memories.

The history of these two schools, like other schools, is scattered across the volume. Read in relation to one another, these accounts suggest a shared narrative, but the absence of editorial cross-referencing leaves this synthesis largely to the reader. The school narratives illustrate where selective engagement with academic conventions, such as modest signposting and thematic cross-referencing, could have strengthened the volume’s own critical potential without compromising its testimonial plurality. Future projects of this kind might consider such tools not as analytical imposition but as means of helping readers see how parallel experiences speak to one another.

Towards a Genre of Regional Self-History

Dhorpatan brings together a wide range of writings that collectively seek to document a region through its histories, memories, and everyday experiences. In doing so, it demonstrates that the absence of an established written archive need not define the limits of regional historiography; it can instead become

the impetus for communities to document their past collectively and on their own terms. Rather than centering a single caste, ethnic group, or lineage, the volume adopts a regional frame that accommodates multiple social positions and respects the messiness of community history and individual memories. It assembles historical sketches, memoirs, biographies, and reflections that together offer an accumulated account of place, privileging testimony and lived experience as the primary means of recording the past. Consequently, *Dhorpatan* functions less as a unified historical argument than as a repository of regional memory, one that makes visible the social complexity of the region while trusting the reader to assemble the connections. As readers, it invites us to make common cause with a form of self-history writing that is necessarily partial while recognizing the importance of recovering the complexities typically flattened by mainstream historical narratives.

What the volume makes possible, in doing this, is a working definition of regional self-history as a genre: multi-community rather than mono-ethnic in composition, place-based rather than identity-based in organizing logic, and assembled from diverse narrative forms such as memory, biography, oral tradition, historical sketch, rather than unified by a single analytical voice. It is a genre that does not claim to speak for a community but to gather what a community of communities remembers and knows. Earlier efforts at community self-writing in Nepal centered on single caste or ethnic groups, seeking to reclaim identity within the terms of state classification. *Dhorpatan* departs from this model by organizing around shared landscape and collective regional experience rather than shared blood or administrative category, a departure that is more significant than it may appear, because it refuses the very units of social classification that state and development discourse imposed.

The tension between testimonial plurality and analytical synthesis that runs through the volume is not a problem that better editing could have resolved. It is the genre's defining condition. To impose synthesis is to risk reproducing the very analytical authority—authorial, academic, institutional—that projects of regional self-history seek to displace. To refuse synthesis entirely is to leave readers dependent on inherited frameworks the volume has not yet equipped them to question. *Dhorpatan* does not resolve this tension, but it makes it legible in ways that will matter to every subsequent project of this kind. The absences it leaves, Dalit voices, women's perspectives, sustained engagement with transhumance and cultural practice,

are not simply editorial oversights. They mark the structural conditions under which this genre emerges: inequalities in literacy, access, and authority that community self-writing can document and partially contest, but cannot by itself undo.

For future projects of regional self-writing, *Dhorpatan* offers both inspiration and instruction. It demonstrates the possibilities of collective authorship while simultaneously revealing the value of selective synthesis, internal dialogue, and reflexive engagement with inherited categories. The challenges it leaves unresolved are not its failure. They are the agenda it bequeaths to those who come after.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Pratyoush Onta for inviting me to review *Dhorpatan* and encouraging me to develop the review into a full essay. I am also grateful to Surabhi Pudasaini for her incisive comments and generous feedback across multiple drafts, which sharpened both the argument and the essay's form. While their insights greatly improved the manuscript, I accept full responsibility for any remaining errors.

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