

## CONSUMER TRANSGRESSIONS: NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF RESTAURANTS AND PROSTITUTION IN KATHMANDU

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Why do many people have a restaurant-going habit now when they didn't thirty years ago?

Because the people now aren't the same ones as thirty years ago!

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In Kathmandu people are free to eat anything in a restaurant, but not at home.

Interviews: Kathmandu 1991

All margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way or that the shape of fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its specially vulnerable points... The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins (Douglas 1966:121).

### Introduction

The word "carnal" is a useful window onto the topic of restaurants and prostitution because it illustrates how the dual human obsessions with food and sex are, in many ways, one-and-the-same. "Carnal" comes from the Latin word for flesh or meat (*carn, carni-*), but the word's sexual connotations are long-standing. Indeed the Oxford English Dictionary's etymological essays on words for different kinds of meat read like veritable histories of dirty words: lists of slang terms for sexual objects and sexual acts.<sup>1</sup> While both women and men are often sexually-objectified as meat, Westerners also carry the burden of "carnal sin" based on the notion that one's flesh (their bodily "meat") is the seat of mortal temptation against which their immaterial spiritual beings must fight. Of

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1 Fiddes argues that sex is the domain where one finds "a principal metaphorical use of the concept of meat in the English language" (1991:148).

course the links between food and sex have not gone un-noticed by historians and anthropologists.<sup>2</sup>

That food and sex are so often related human preoccupations is tied to the fact that both sexual and culinary exchanges involve passing or crossing frontiers, thresholds, or orifices, in this case, of the body. As Arnold van Gennep noted a century ago, such passings are almost always *culturally mediated* and in a sense the cultural complexities surrounding the biological imperatives of food and sex are more or less elaborate "rites of passage" (van Gennep 1960). Many of these rites (in the form of rules, prohibitions, etc.) are to protect the body—whether individual or social—from the danger of defilement that uncontrolled crossings threaten to produce (Douglas 1966:121, 139). To the extent that the body is a social microcosm, protecting the body's boundaries is protecting the boundaries of the community.

It is clear that food and sex have long been linked in the Western cultural imagination, but the same can be said for South Asia. Perhaps the most obvious link is the parallel logic of endogamy and commensality. That is, in South Asian caste society the logic that determines who one can marry also determines who one can exchange food with.<sup>3</sup> The boundaries of sexual exchange for the most part correspond with the boundaries of food exchange and together, the boundaries of endogamy and commensality go a long way toward determining the boundaries of caste. Even now in a city like Kathmandu, with its ever-increasingly secular and class-based social ethos, the logic of intra-caste marriage and intra-caste dining remains a powerful prescriptive influence on people's sense of propriety—of how things "should be" and "should be done"—even for people who acknowledge their own social feelings as anachronistic and "backward."

This article considers these still-potent feelings about food and sex in Kathmandu in the context of the parallel rise of two new consumer sectors: prostitution and restaurants. While the commercial availability of either food or sex is not necessarily new, what is new in the past three or four decades is the scale and nature of these economies. As Kathmandu's social logic shifts from a caste-based paradigm to an increasingly class-based paradigm,<sup>4</sup> the meaning, nature, and experience of sociality has been transformed. Social transactions that were once largely confined within an

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2 There is now a growing literature on the relations between food and human sexuality (Fiddes 1991, Counihan 1999, Counihan & Kaplan 1998).

3 For cultural analyses of food transactions in South Asia see Khare 1976; Khare and Rao 1986; Marriott 1968, 1976a, 1976b; Daniel 1984.

4 This article will address certain aspects of this shift in framing paradigms from caste to class, but for a more thorough analysis, see Liechty 1994, and Liechty, forthcoming.

intimate domestic economy have increasingly shifted into the market economy where transactions in food and sexual experience come to be mediated not only by money, but by the consumer aesthetics—of fantasy and longing—that accompany these newly fetishized commodities (Haug 1987). This article traces changing practices and meanings as transactions in food and sex shift increasingly into the market economy.

This article also offers important comparative perspectives onto the histories of prostitution and restaurant-going world-wide. There is now a sizable literature on the modern cultural history of prostitution in the West and world-wide<sup>5</sup> and several recent works have considerably advanced our understandings of the emergence of restaurants (Spang 2000) and the commercialization of culinary arts in Europe (Trubek 2000).<sup>6</sup> Historians and anthropologists of South Asia have begun to chart the development and contemporary dynamics of sex work on the subcontinent,<sup>7</sup> but the history and cultural practice of public eating in South Asia remains largely unexamined.<sup>8</sup> No where, to my knowledge, have scholars considered the interplay between processes of commodification of culinary and sexual services. By focusing on the inter-related patterns of commercialization that characterize the recent development of prostitution and public eating in Kathmandu, this paper both contributes to the history and ethnography of several as-yet inadequately addressed dimensions of modern South Asian cultural life, and offers more general insights into the cultural economies of the body in global capitalist modernity. The public "servicing" of carnal appetites for food and sex are intimately bound up in changing patterns of social structure (caste and class), gender relations, domestic economies, and the cultural construction of public and private spheres.

### Prostitution

In a way unimaginable in a most other parts of South Asia, in the early 1990s prostitution in Kathmandu was still very much "underground" and shrouded with secrecy. For example, while Indian news media found prostitution a totally unremarkable phenomenon (except when it came to issues such as AIDS), in Kathmandu prostitution was the subject of shocking exposé and investigative journalism.<sup>9</sup> It was also illegal. Not

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5 See Gilfoyle (1999) for a useful summary and analysis of historical studies of prostitution since the 1980s.

6 See also Mennell 1985, Habermas 1989 [1962].

7 See n. 11 below.

8 See Conlon 1995, Khare 1976:243-273, Khare and Rao 1986.

9 See for example, "How is Prostitution in Dharan?" [*Dharanko Veśyāvriti Kasarī Ṭikeko Cha?*], *Suruchi Saptahik* Asar 1, 2048 v.s. [June 15, 1991], and "Kathmandu's Elite Families are also Involved in Prostitution: On the

surprisingly finding people who were both knowledgeable of, and willing to talk about, prostitution was difficult. In the hundreds of open-ended, informal interviews conducted by my co-workers and me<sup>10</sup> many people were willing to talk of intensely personal, even sexual, matters (Liechty 2001) but none spoke of first-hand participation in the local sex market, either as workers or consumers. The material presented here derives from interviews with a number of Kathmandu-based physicians in Sexually Transmitted Disease ("STD" including AIDS) clinics, social workers, and journalists who dealt with prostitutes and their clients as part of their professional investigations. These were people who had, over the years, acquired significant insights into the local sex market through interactions with sex workers and clients, and research into the causes and consequences of prostitution. To protect them and their contacts, in this paper I do not cite key informants by name, but rather by profession. In so doing my aim is not to add to the gossip and rumors surrounding prostitution, but to maintain informants' confidentiality.

### History

Not surprisingly, the history of prostitution in Kathmandu is uncertain. It is known that prior to 1951 women from the districts north of Kathmandu were kept as concubines (*bhitrenī* or simply *keṭī*) by Rana elites, many of the women having been supplied by local headmen seeking favor with the court at Kathmandu (Pradhan 2048 v.s:22). Following 1951 the more fortunate of these women were paid off in gold and silver, others were abandoned, and still others were distributed to wealthy Indian friends of the Ranas. Some see this distribution of ethnically exotic "souvenirs" to Indian elites, and the establishment of supply lines between the hill districts and Indian consumers via Rana middle-men, as the beginning of the post-1951 problem of women "trafficking" between Nepal and India (Pradhan 2048 v.s.:23).

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Streets, Prostitutes for up to Rs. 5000" [*Kathmanduko Veśyāvritimā Sambhrānta Parivār Pani Samlagna: Pānc Hajār Sammakā Veśyā Saḍakmā*], *Prishtabhumi Saptahik* Ashad 6, 2048 v.s. [June 20, 1991], p.1.

10 Research for this article was conducted between 1988 and 1991, and in 1996 with the help of the Departments of Anthropology and South Asia Regional Studies of the University of Pennsylvania, a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad grant, and a faculty travel grant from the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Thanks also to the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), in Leiden, The Netherlands, for a post-doctoral research and write-up grant.

Whether or not these Rana "kept women" were technically prostitutes, it is likely that some kind of more standard sex work (fee for service) has gone on in Kathmandu for a very long time. As an economic, administrative, and political center, it is difficult to believe that areas around Kathmandu's barracks and government hostels have not seen some kind of sex trade for centuries. Nevertheless, unlike in most parts of South Asia, prostitution has never become "institutionalized" in Kathmandu. The forms and practices of sex work that developed in colonial and post-colonial India seem to have had relatively little influence on the Kathmandu valley.<sup>11</sup> Whereas "red light" zones are standard features of many Indian cities, in Kathmandu prostitution was and remains relatively discrete. Compared to Nepal's Terai region, where prostitution is a recognized and more or less accepted social and economic institution, in Kathmandu even using the term "brothel" is dubious for the images it conjures of relatively open and institutionalized practice.

During the Rana era prostitution is likely to have been fairly rare in Kathmandu but since 1950, and especially since around 1980, the situation has changed dramatically with the number of prostitutes rapidly rising, and prostitution in general becoming a far more visible public phenomenon. According to one published source, the first known brothels in Kathmandu were established in the early 1960s.<sup>12</sup> But the really dramatic rise in the numbers of prostitutes in Kathmandu can be linked directly to the parallel rise of public consumer settings such as hotels, restaurants, and lodges. In the early 1990s a Kathmandu-based journalist noted,

You know before also there used to be prostitutes. Fifteen, twenty years ago there were four or five pimps who used to hang around by Rani Pokhari, or Ratna Park. If somebody was seen talking with those guys down there, you knew what was going on. And then they had very limited [numbers of] women in from the villages.

But now, I mean it started only about ten years back, around just the beginning of the '80s, you could suddenly find these girls in all the new restaurants. There were even places right in New Road. For fifty bucks [rupees] you could get a girl, and for another fifty a room.

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11 There is now a growing literature on the colonial construction of Indian prostitution (Banerjee 1989, I. Chatterjee 1990, R. Chatterjee 1993, D'Cunha 1991, Ghosh 1994, Levine 1994, Pivar 1981) as well as contemporary practice (Dell 1997, Sleightholme and Sinha 1997).

12 *Saptahik Punarjagaran* (Kathmandu) Asoj 15, 2048 v.s. (Oct. 1, 1991), p. 6. "*Yaun Jivan: Kathmandumā Veśyāvriti.*" ["Sexual Life: Prostitution in Kathmandu."]

As will be described in more detail below, since the 1980s prostitution in Kathmandu has often taken place behind more legitimate "fronts" such as restaurants, lodges, and more recently, "massage parlors".

By the early 1990s there were an estimated 3,500 to 5,000 women working as full- or part-time prostitutes in Kathmandu.<sup>13</sup> Their growing numbers are the result of both growing demand on the part of Kathmandu consumers, and growing supply of women willing, or compelled, to enter into sex work.

### **Increasing Local Demand**

The growing demand for prostitutes in Kathmandu stems from a wide range of recent developments. At the most basic level the rise in prostitution parallels the emergence of the city's middle class (Liechty 1994, 1998b), and the great upsurge in levels of cash flow in the city since the late 1970s (e.g., Dahal 2000). As more and more cash enters the local economy, demand rises for a broad spectrum of consumer goods from restaurant meals, televisions, and videos, to drugs, pornography, and prostitutes. Tourism also contributes to the increasing demand for prostitutes<sup>14</sup> as does the growing population of resident expatriate officials and businessmen. But local business culture itself is helping to drive up demand: a variety of sources report that in the early 1990s supplying prostitutes was an increasingly common component of business negotiations and deal-making, especially at the highest levels. In addition to foreigners in Nepal who seek out prostitutes, growing numbers of Nepalis who have travelled and lived abroad may also be spurring increased demand. For example, several sources reported that young men who had travelled to Thailand as couriers became acquainted with the Bangkok sex industry and then sought out similar services at home (cf. Dixit n.d.:12-13). Similarly Nepali military personnel often return from assignments abroad with both cash and a habit for using prostitutes. Another frequently mentioned Nepali "user group" was politicians and government officials, most often people from the districts on short- or long-term postings in the capital. Women working in the sex trade also reported that it was not uncommon for local political workers,

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13 The lower figure was published in an article on prostitution in *Saptahik Punarjagaran* (Kathmandu) Asoj 15, 2048 v.s. (Oct. 1, 1991), p. 6. The higher figure is the estimate of a Nepali doctor working with prostitutes in a clinic for sexually transmitted diseases in Kathmandu (cf. Upreti 1992).

14 As I discuss in more detail below, it is the emergence of relatively anonymous and marginal tourist districts, such as New Road or Thamel, at least as much as tourists themselves, that help to account for rising demand for prostitutes in Kathmandu.

civil servants, and business men—when on assignment outside of Kathmandu—to hire a woman to accompany them. Finally some people linked post-*āndolan* police apathy, loss of authority, and lax enforcement to the city's growing indulgence in prostitution.

Identifying the "typical" customer is not easy. At a minimum, users must have cash, though with prices reported to range from Rs. 15 to 5,000 per encounter, it is impossible to tie prostitution use to any one socioeconomic class. The caste and ethnic background of users seems to cover the spectrum even though the sex workers themselves tend to be from traditionally "low" castes and communities (as discussed further below). As one informant said, "When I've spoken to these women they laugh about how the Brahman boys won't take water from them, but they're willing to 'take a \*kiss\*'<sup>15</sup>." People arrested by the police for soliciting prostitutes are generally between 15 and 35, with the majority between 20 and 30 years of age. Male clients at Kathmandu STD clinics also tend to be young. Said one physician, "You know I come across students and young boys who frequently visit prostitutes. These are mostly campus boys under the age of 25." That young men seem to generate a significant portion of the demand for prostitutes in Kathmandu is interesting, especially in light of other demographic trends such as increasing levels (and duration) of education, un- and under-employment for middle-class graduates, delayed marriage (Liechty 1995), and increased consumption of pornographic media (Liechty 1994:439-450). Yet even though police arrests and public clinic users suggest a youthful local clientele, it is almost certain that prostitution users in Kathmandu also include other groups, including wealthier, older men and foreigners, who are less likely to leave public traces.

One of the main reasons why prostitution in Kathmandu has been able to greatly increase in frequency even while remaining relatively discrete is the emergence of new forms of public space, exemplified in Kathmandu by areas like New Road and Thamel. Here Nepalis encounter foreign consumer goods, and foreigners themselves. New Road was Kathmandu's first modern consumer district, home to the city's first public cinema and shopping center, as well as some of its first restaurants, hotels, and high-end retail establishments specializing in tailoring and imported ready made clothing, consumer electronics, home appliances, photo developing, video and audio cassettes, etc. New Road (and adjacent areas) has for decades been the focal point of Indian tourism in Kathmandu. Prior to India's economic "liberalization" in the early 1990s, Kathmandu (with its relatively unrestricted import policies) was a favorite shopping destination

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15 Asterisks designate English words used in statements otherwise made in Nepali and presented here in translation.

for middle-class Indians (as well as a popular pilgrimage site, and casino gambling venue). New Road shops, hotels, lodges, and restaurants thrive on Indian tourism. Thamel, by contrast, is synonymous with non-South Asian tourists. Since the 1970s Thamel has gone from being a sleepy out-of-the-way neighborhood on the edge of town to the hub of a frenetically-bustling tourist district jammed with hotels, restaurants, curio shops, travel agencies, and trekking outfitters.

With few permanent residents and a wide variety of commercial settings, these new public spaces offer cover for a variety of shadowy transactions including drug dealing (Liechty 1996a) and prostitution. New Road and Thamel are convenient liminal zones, outside of the close social surveillance of the old residential neighborhoods, where drug users and prostitutes can carry out transactions even while melting into the urban flow. According to social workers, many of Kathmandu's prostitutes live and work in the New Road and Thamel areas precisely because of the anonymity these transient, chaotic, commercial districts offer. Unlike almost anywhere else in the city, here prostitutes feel comfortably ignored, able to carry out their own business in an area created by and for commercial transactions.

Although tourism has played an important role in creating both New Road and Thamel, the relationship between prostitution and foreigners differs in the two places. Prostitution thrives in both areas because of their heavy concentrations of restaurants and lodges, but in the New Road area Indian tourists (as well as businessmen: travelers and residents) are its main, though not exclusive, clientele. In addition to shopping, gambling, and pilgrimage, Kathmandu has acquired a reputation as a sex tourism destination for Indians (Dixit n.d.:13).<sup>16</sup> Because New Road caters to Indian tourists, it is also the area where visiting Indians seek out local prostitutes. The huge numbers of Nepali women working in Indian brothels makes Nepal a place associated with prostitution for many Indians. As one Nepali source put it, Nepal seems to attract Indian "*beśyā premī*" ("prostitute lovers").<sup>17</sup> The large volume of Indian tourists, as well as business men (who often live in Kathmandu without their

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16 This development may be another instance of the phenomenon whereby sex tourism shifts locales in search of disease-free women, as in the case of Vietnam's emergence as a sex tourism destination in the wake of AIDS scares in Thailand.

17 *Saptahik Punarjagaran* (Kathmandu) Asoj 15, 2048 v.s. (Oct. 1, 1991), p. 6. "*Yaun Jivan: Kathmandumā Veśyāvriti.*" ["Sexual Life: Prostitution in Kathmandu."]



families) and transport workers (truck and taxi drivers), help to maintain an active prostitution business in the New Road area.<sup>18</sup>

Thamel too is known to be a center of prostitution in Kathmandu though its ties to tourism are less immediate. As in New Road, prostitutes report that a number of well-known Thamel restaurants and hotels serve as pick-up points and/or fronts for organized prostitution. Yet unlike New Road, in Thamel tourists are not prostitution's main customer base. Although people in Kathmandu often assume that the relatively wealthy Western and East Asian tourists that frequent Thamel also keep prostitutes in business, all of my sources agreed that instances of non-South Asian tourists soliciting Nepali prostitutes were rare. Of the social workers I interviewed in the early 1990s, none reported having heard of prostitutes who had served "American" or "*kuire*" (both generic names for non-South Asians) tourists.<sup>19</sup>

Although it is impossible to say why Western tourists are less likely to use prostitutes than are Indian tourists, one reason may be that the youthful Western and East Asian "adventure tourists" who make up the bulk of Kathmandu's non-South Asian arrivals often travel as couples. But certainly more important is that for these people sex is not part of the "imagined place" that they come to Nepal looking to find (Liechty 1996a). In the "First World" touristic imagination Kathmandu is *the place* for Eastern mysticism and exotic culture, Hippie-era throw back experiences, and mountain adventure (or at least planning for, and recovering from, such adventures). For these tourists "doing" Nepal means "roughing it." On the international youth tourism circuit Kathmandu is known for its garbage, hustlers, intestinal parasites, dope dealers, black marketers and labyrinthine bureaucracy, not for its sex trade.<sup>20</sup> In short,

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18 This is not to say that local Nepali men do not also frequent New Road prostitutes. Rather, it is the transient Indian population (along with Indian demand) that helps create the liminal urban space within which prostitution can flourish.

19 One journalist reported stories of Western development personnel keeping Nepali "mistresses" at their project sites while their families were in Kathmandu, but had never heard of Western tourists using prostitutes in the city.

20 This is not to say that there are no contacts between "First World" tourists and local prostitutes. Some hotel owners reported that occasionally a foreign tourist, after getting drunk or high, will come and inquire about prostitutes. One hotel manager reported that now and then a small group of tourists will ask whether prostitutes are available before checking in. Finally one social worker spoke with me about local boys who report occasionally working as male prostitutes for Western clients, though this informant felt that the occurrence was infrequent. Dixit (n.d.:11,

most non-South Asian tourists come to Kathmandu looking for an *exotic* rather than an *erotic* experience.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Social Hierarchy of Prostitution in Kathmandu**

Perhaps even more complicated than the reasons for the growing demand for prostitutes in Kathmandu are the reasons for why growing numbers of Nepali women become involved in sex work. Clearly the main reason is "economic" but the avenues that lead to financial distress are numerous and vary depending on a person's socioeconomic background. People in Kathmandu typically identified three categories or classes (*star*) of prostitutes: low (or "street prostitutes"), middle, and high (or elite). Each of these levels have fairly distinct patterns of recruitment and modes of operation.

Women working at the "lower" end of the Kathmandu prostitution scene are typically from outside of the valley, often from poor hill districts to the North such as Sindhupalchok, Trisuli, and Nuwakot.<sup>22</sup> These women are often drawn to the city by either promises or hopes of jobs in hotels or restaurants, or in garment or carpet factories. Especially vulnerable to these lures are widows, single mothers, step daughters, abused or abandoned wives, rape victims, and unmarried pregnant women: women who find themselves pushed out of the rural social structure. Even if they do find jobs in the Kathmandu valley, wages are likely to be so low that some resort to supplementing their income through prostitution, especially to support children. In other cases young unmarried women from poor hill families come to the city hoping to earn money to send back home. Working in garment or carpet factories, these young unaccompanied women—vulnerable to sexual abuse from co-workers and bosses—may also end up facing social stigmas that leave them nowhere to turn but prostitution for survival on their own (Dixit n.d.:10-11).

Finally there were also reports of some young women from families where older siblings or relatives were involved in urban sex work who—whether or not they came to the city with the intention—turned to

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1990:26-30) reports similar findings regarding limited male prostitution with tourists in Kathmandu.

21 Sometimes, however, exotic and erotic desires do combine in romantic intimacies between Nepalis (especially, it seems, Sherpas and others with the romantic aura of Tibetan culture) and westerners (Adams 1996:59-60, 103; Ortner 1999).

22 There were also reports of some poor women from the Kathmandu valley who were drawn into prostitution. Social workers reported several instances in which poor Indian men, working temporarily in the valley, met and married a poor local woman. After some time the men returned to India leaving the women with nothing but a bad name.

prostitution as a known and tolerated, if not socially sanctioned, form of wage labor. Like the brother in the Indian army, uncle working as a night watchman in Delhi, or cousin working as a janitor in Dubai, rural women who work as urban prostitutes are often participating in long-standing strategies of rural family subsistence. Thus the growing numbers of extremely poor prostitutes, those at the "bottom" of the Kathmandu sex work hierarchy, have to be seen as part of larger patterns of internal and international labor migration and wage-remittance economies in Nepal (cf. Dahal 2000). Even under the best conditions rural immigrants face enormous hardships in the city. Not surprisingly the most vulnerable among them may end up in the most desperate forms of wage labor such as prostitution, often as a supplement to other meager earnings.

These low end prostitutes are often referred to as "street prostitutes" even though most of them are not technically homeless. Social workers reported some prostitution among street children, but for the most part "street prostitutes" are so named because they recruit clients on the streets in certain locales around Kathmandu. In the early 1990s these women often worked around the old American Library on New Road, near Bir Hospital, Ratna Park and Bus Park, around Hanuman Dhoka, and in the "Hong Kong Bazaar." Often these "street women" look ragged, disoriented, and ashamed,<sup>23</sup> but others have learned to play to their clients' sexual fantasies, appearing in heavy make-up and dressed in pink and frilly western-style dresses.

While many of these "street prostitutes" contract customers directly, other "low end" prostitutes work through "brokers" who are often proprietors of lodges and restaurants that cater to a low budget Nepali and Indian clientele. One informant reported seeing a hand-written sign on the door of back-street restaurant: "Here for Rs. 50 women can be found." Another told of a Thakali lodge owner who kept several Gurung women that were available to patrons. Depending on whether or not a "broker" was involved, fees at this level ranged from Rs. 15 - 25 to Rs. 100 - 150. In this category women's ages range from their teens (often street children) to late thirties, with some reports of older women (35-40) who have returned from working as prostitutes in India. A social worker I interviewed estimated that in the early 1990s there were approximately 800 "street prostitutes" working in Kathmandu.

Middle-class prostitutes are the ones most often associated with the New Road and Thamel establishments discussed earlier. "Middle class" refers to the fees these women collect—Rs. 300 to 500 per encounter or

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23 One Kathmandu man interviewed by an informant reported that his least satisfactory experience with a prostitute had been with a poor street walker. "This woman," he complained, "just laid there. She showed no emotion."

up to Rs. 1,000 for a full night—but it also often refers to their socioeconomic background. Unlike the poor street prostitutes, mid-level sex workers in Kathmandu are likely to be from the city itself, and from families that would not be placed among the urban poor. When I questioned informants on the point they noted that mid-level prostitutes were often women from established Kathmandu families who, because of some domestic or marital upheaval (death of a parent, abandonment, pre-marital pregnancy, multiple wives, widowhood, etc.), found themselves in a position where they had to support themselves, and often dependent children. Wishing to maintain some semblance of a middle-class lifestyle, these women turned to prostitution.<sup>24</sup> One informant explained how,

The low-class people have their own kind of work to do but the middle-class people don't want to do that kind of \*labor\*. They're embarrassed to do public manual labor. But they still need all kind of goods/belongings [*sāmān*] and that's why mainly it's people from the middle class [who make up this category of prostitutes].

These are women who resort to prostitution not to buy luxury goods, but in order to make ends meet without having to work by the road side crushing stones, or carry bricks at local construction sites.

Informants also attributed growing numbers of mid-level prostitutes to rampant consumer inflation during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Uneducated, unskilled middle-class women face a local job market in which few if any well-paid, public sector, wage earning opportunities are available that are not seen as socially degrading. Yet it is often these very women who suffer the trauma of maintaining middle-class lifestyles in the face of declining real incomes. The vast majority of middle-class women struggle through economic hard times by cutting corners here and strategizing there (Liechty 1998b), but a few gradually turn to a growing dependence on sex work. Once started, the earning power of sex work makes it difficult to stop. A social worker explained that,

Initially [women get into prostitution] for economic reasons but later on, they find that they are earning so much money, with not much effort. So they earn as much as possible, for the future, and for their children.... Maybe initially they feel economic need but later it becomes a habit, an addiction, like a drug.

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24 In his study of prostitution in nineteenth century New York City, Timothy Gilfoyle notes that the "greatest predictor of prostitution" was neither ethnicity, birth place, nor even class, but domestic/marital upheaval (especially the death of a father or husband) that confronted women with the specter of downward social mobility (1992:66).

Earning hundreds of rupees per client, a mid-level prostitute can make between nine and twelve thousand rupees per month, an enormous sum by local standards, not to mention for a single woman without family support. For these women it is the money, not the work, that becomes "addicting."

According to my informants about half of these mid-level prostitutes worked via some kind of "broker" or "madam," while the other half were independent operators. Initially a woman might learn of certain persons who act as go-betweens. For a fee, these people—often (but not always) restaurant or hotel managers—will arrange discrete rendezvous with clients. In other cases certain tables at certain restaurants are known to be locations for pick-ups. Again the client approaches the manager (who takes a cut) to arrange the transaction. In the early 1990s some of the most popular pick-up points in Kathmandu for mid-level prostitutes were K.C.'s in Thamel, Milan Lodge, Shiangja Lodge, and the Potala Guest House in Chetrapati, the Mayalu and Apollo Restaurants in New Road, and the Red Eye Restaurant in Jawalakel. Less common is the standard "brothel" model in which a group of women work for another person who manages clients. Several informants reported such houses run by middle-aged Nepali women who had either returned from sex work in India or had retired from the local sex trade, to set up shop in Kathmandu. Finally there were reports of taxi drivers taking cuts on sexual transactions by arranging and/or transporting women and/or their clients.<sup>25</sup>

Among "middle-class" prostitutes in Kathmandu, many who start out working through a "broker" eventually go out on their own or join forces with other women in similar positions. Once women have established connections with a number of clients they no longer need the services (or fees) of a go-between. One social worker told me that a common pattern is for a group of women to join forces, rent a house or flat with several private rooms and a telephone (for contacts with clients), and hire maid servants to take care of the place and screen visitors. Often in places like Thamel, these houses eventually become known as places where prostitutes are available, but they are not "brothels" in an overt sense. With so many middle-class Kathmandu property owners looking for good-paying tenants, it is rarely difficult to find a new location when police surveillance (or harassment) begins to build.

Perhaps the most striking difference between prostitution in India and in Nepal (or at least in Kathmandu) is this relatively large percentage of independent, well-paid, sex workers. It is precisely *because* prostitution in Kathmandu is so un-institutionalized—without highly-visible brothels,

25 *Saptahik Punarjagan* (Kathmandu) Asoj 15, 2048 v.s. (Oct. 1, 1991), p. 6. "*Yaun Jivan: Kathmandumā Veśyāvriti.*" ["Sexual Life: Prostitution in Kathmandu."]

large red-light zones, and the kind of brutality that any big business attracts (women trafficking, sex slavery, organized crime, etc.)—that at least some women have been able to carve out a niche in the sex market relatively free from the abuse and exploitation associated with the Indian trade.

Yet ironically even this kind of independence can have its drawbacks. Women who are not working under some superior are free to keep all of their earnings, but they also become dependent solely on the client for payment. One informant told me of a woman he had met first in Pokhara and a year later in Kathmandu. When he asked why she had moved she explained the problem of familiarity. She described how after a first meeting, arranged via some go-between, a client may pay Rs. 500. On the next occasion, meeting directly, the client may pay only Rs. 200. After that the client might take her out to lunch, have a sexual encounter, and not pay anything. Finally, the man might show up at her room drunk, demand sex, and threaten to turn her over to the police. The woman explained that after working in a local market for some time a woman begins to appear "shoddy" (*thotro*) in customers' eyes. For this reason she, and presumably other mid-level sex workers, circulate periodically between Pokhara, Kathmandu, Dharan, and possibly other cities.

Compared with "street" and middle-class prostitutes, finding information on "high class" or "elite" prostitutes was more difficult. Because they tended to be better educated, self-sufficient, and knowledgeable of health hazards (such as STDs), these women were less likely to seek the help of doctors or social workers. Other informants also complained that because these women moved in elite circles, it was difficult for "ordinary" people to learn much about them.

I was however able to come up with at least an outline image of elite prostitution in Kathmandu. Like some of the mid-level sex workers, some women at the high end also work through or out of restaurants. Most frequently mentioned were the expensive tandoori/ghazal restaurants of Durbar Marg. There was a sense that much of this "A class" prostitution occurred in the context of business negotiations with business men entertaining clients, and sealing deals, with prostitutes. Several people told of having seen fashionably dressed young women standing in front of Durbar Marg establishments, nervously checking their watches. A large Mercedes drives up, the woman speaks with the driver through the open window, then gets in and drives off. At this level women can reportedly earn up to Rs. 5,000 per night.

Several informants reported that to work at this level women must not only be young, attractive, and well-dressed, but also sophisticated, English-speaking, and have "mongoloid features." I have no idea how many comply with all of these traits, but it is perhaps not coincidental

that "elite" prostitutes are often said to be women from Darjeeling (and therefore more likely to be of Tibeto-burman backgrounds).<sup>26</sup> One informant told of having been introduced to an extremely well-dressed Tibetan woman who spoke English (but not Nepali). The man who introduced her said that she worked as a prostitute (at Rs. 3,000 per night) in the client's private home. When I asked one social worker if she was aware of women from Darjeeling working as high level prostitutes, she said that she had met a few, as well as several from Mizoram in India, but that prostitutes themselves say that there are many "Darjeeling girls," or at least many who *claim to be*, hoping to tap into their exotic reputation.

I was unable to learn much about why these women enter into sex work though more than at other levels, drug abuse was sometimes associated with "elite" prostitution. The wide-spread use of brown heroin ("\*smack\*") in Kathmandu has created a subculture of young male addicts (Liechty 1996a) and it is not difficult to believe that at least some young women may also have slipped into heroin addiction. Informants reported that some women from well-off families gradually turned to prostitution in order to support habits.

One of the problems of dealing with "high class" prostitution is that, at this level, the line between sex work and casual sexual relations is often much less clear cut. For example, I frequently heard stories of wealthy young unmarried men with "girlfriends" who, for a variety of social and religious reasons, they would never marry, but who they frequented trendy night spots with, and kept well-supplied with the latest fashions. Similarly other mysteriously affluent single women were said to be mistresses of wealthy married men. I was also told that it was not uncommon for women to accompany business men on trips to Europe and other parts of Asia, their "payment" being simply the chance to travel abroad. According to one informant, even the police tended to throw up their hands when trying to deal with grey areas of "elite" prostitution, preferring instead to focus on more straight-forward cash transactions that characterize mid-level prostitution.

Ultimately the matter of "elite prostitution" shifts into the shades of gray that characterize new cultures of sexuality and consumerism in Kathmandu. In many ways the dilemmas that Kathmandu police face are similar to those that confronted New York City police in the early 1900s when new "liberal" sexual mores combined with a new cash-based leisure sphere to produce a "dating" culture in which women exchanged sex for consumer entertainments paid for by men (Gilfoyle 1992:288). I suspect that some young women in Kathmandu are like the women in early

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26 In Kathmandu Darjeeling Nepalis often have a reputation of being more cosmopolitan and "hip," in addition to being morally lax.

twentieth century New York described by Kathy Peiss, women who saw sexual relations as an acceptable exchange for male "treats," never thinking of themselves as "prostitutes" (Peiss 1986:108-114). These New York women, like their counterparts in late twentieth-century Kathmandu, were bombarded by intense consumer promotions (for fashion goods, entertainment, etc.) but denied access to jobs and/or decent wages. In contexts such as these—where pleasures are commodified and expensive—it is not surprising that women would objectify sexual acts in order to exchange them for desired goods and experiences. But perhaps most importantly, the culture of "treating" forces us to acknowledge that the modern exchange of money for sex ("prostitution") is only part of a broader exchange-value economy in which fetishized commodities (from sex acts to disco tickets to cosmetics) become interchangeable.

These extremely sketchy observations on the rising demand for and supply of sexual services in Kathmandu only begin to describe a very complex reality that deserves much more attention from researchers. Nevertheless, it is possible to make a few general observations. Rising rates of prostitution seem to stem from a combination of four factors: *cash, mobility, anonymity, and fantasy*. Arguably the rapid expansion of prostitution in Kathmandu occurred only at the moment when these factors coalesced. As the local economy became increasingly infused with cash (and as growing demands for cash left those on the social margins increasingly vulnerable), as Nepalis and foreigners became more physically mobile (moving out of the morally constraining orbits of kin and community), as commercial venues arose to meet the needs of a mobile population (restaurants, lodges, etc.) forming transient, anonymous zones in the city, the supply and demand for—indeed the possibility of—large scale prostitution emerged.

The fourth factor—fantasy—is a much more difficult element to evaluate. Elsewhere I have argued that prostitution and pornographic media consumption are linked consumer trends in Kathmandu (Liechty 1994:439-473). Back-alley "video parlors" that specialize in "blue films" were well known pick up points for prostitutes,<sup>27</sup> and sex workers themselves reported clients combining pornographic videos with sexual encounters. It is surely more than coincidental that the arrival of video technology and wide-spread consumption of videos (including pornography) around 1980 (Liechty 1998a) occurred at roughly the same time that informants noted a sudden rise in prostitution in Kathmandu. What pornography and prostitution share is the collapsing of sexual desire

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27 Citing research by Gertrude Koch, Linda Williams notes that early pornographic films in Europe "were associated mainly with brothels, their major function being economic: to arouse the viewer to the point of purchasing the services of the women of the house" (1989:74).



and gratification into the commodity form. When sexual gratification becomes a leisure commodity, purchasing it in the form of a prostitute is only one step away from purchasing it in the form of a "blue film." They are two manifestations of the same consumer desire. Even if it is impossible to "prove" causal links between the two, it seems reasonable to assume that at least some of the growth of prostitution in Kathmandu is linked to the increased circulation of the sexual fantasies associated with pornographic media.

### **Prostitution: Discourse and Fantasy**

At least as important as the "reality" of prostitution in Kathmandu is the role that "the prostitute" plays in local middle-class projects of self-imagination. Rumors, gossip, and accusations of prostitution are central features in a variety of moral critiques that help define "ideal" middle class behavior, especially for women. Talk of sexual impropriety (and in particular of sex for money or goods) is one of the most common means by which people seeking to create a middle-class culture in Kathmandu morally critique their class "others." For those claiming Kathmandu's moral middle, prostitution is often associated with the seductive allure of fashion and is always something located socially "below" (due to poverty and immorality) or "above" (due to affluence and immorality). It is the almost gratuitous talk of prostitution in so much of middle-class discourse that makes it difficult to separate the reality from the fantasies of sex work in Kathmandu.

When I first heard tales of women prostituting themselves for fashion I thought that I had come upon a particularly heinous twist in the story of Nepal's capitalist modernization. But as the same story was told to me over and over again—"My former neighbor ...," "An old classmate of mine ...," "A secretary at my office ...," "Some school girls ...," "Some nurses ...," "Some waitresses ...," "Girls from Darjeeling ..."—I began to see this tale in a different light. I began to wonder if, when people spoke of women who turn to prostitution to satisfy desires for material goods, they were really telling a kind of morality tale: a tale less about the morality of the women than about the morality of the goods. This is not to say that no such incidents occur—they likely do—but that for the people in the middle class telling this tale and imagining this chain of events, the story of the "fashion prostitute" is a way of expressing anxiety over the power of the new world of consumer goods. Through tales such as these people claiming the moral middle express their fears of a world of alluring but somehow sinister fashion goods, a world that threatens to turn daughters and sisters into prostitutes. By locating the prostitution "fashion fall" in classes below and above, people "in the middle" can at

once claim the moral high ground and abreact their own middle-class nightmares.

The litany of "probable" fashion prostitutes (secretaries, school girls, nurses, waitresses, girls from Darjeeling, etc., etc.) also points to a second form of middle-class moral anxiety: the problems surrounding women's work and women's independence in a patriarchal society.<sup>28</sup> Even while members of Kathmandu's middle class are precisely those people who have used the city's exploding market economy as their vehicle to socioeconomic and cultural independence (free from the "irrational" strictures of the previous caste-based feudal society), these same middle-class people are profoundly uneasy with the prospect of women (especially unmarried women) using the market economy as the basis for their own autonomy. Women in the market were the targets of powerful moral condemnation. I often had the impression that, in the minds of members of Kathmandu's middle class, an unmarried woman without clear social and or kin ties to the community, who was working and appeared to have money (who "does \*fashion\*") was, almost by definition, a prostitute.<sup>29</sup>

Not insignificantly, few people could resist throwing "fashion" into the already evil brew of women and work. One young woman (interviewed by a female co-worker in 1991) described how office work compelled women into both fashion- and moral-compromise:

Some people, they have been compelled to do \*fashion\* just to feed themselves. Like in the \*travel agencies\*, I've heard that they tell the girls, "Ordinary isn't enough!" They are obliged to wear [high] \*standard\* clothing or lose their jobs. They have to look \*tip-top\*. That's why the girls who work there have to do \*fashion\* whether they

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28 For more on the discourse of women's freedom, and the experience of sexual harassment in Kathmandu, see Liechty 1996b.

29 Put simply, in Kathmandu in the early 1990s almost any form of female wage labor, even in the seemingly reputable up-market commercial sector, was likely to be shrouded in a haze of sexual innuendo, at least in popular middle-class discourse. Any wage-based relationship between a male superior and a female employee was open to sexual insinuation, almost as though the only *possible* basis for wage transactions across this power and gender gradient was prostitution. According to this middle-class patriarchal fantasy, the underlying basis for any woman's earnings was some kind of transaction of sexual services: a woman has nothing to offer in the marketplace but sex. Possible exceptions included such things as working in a beauty parlor where wage transactions were strictly between women.

can afford it or not. It's for the \*boss\* too, you know. They have to be good looking.

Working in an office women have no choice but to go beyond acceptable, "ordinary" middle-class attire into the realm of the socially (and sexually) improper. Closing out this woman's remarks is the gratuitous sexual innuendo linking the high-fashion female office worker with "the \*boss\* ... you know."

With so much sexual stigma surrounding women, labor, and "\*fashion\*," it is perhaps not surprising that a great deal of sexual fantasy is also projected onto seemingly independent women in the public domain. Travel agency or hotel receptionists ("They also work as 'escorts' ..."), secretaries ("It's for the \*boss\* too, you know ..."), nurses ("They know a lot about contraception ..."), waitresses, etc., etc.: in the popular imagination all of them are more or less synonymous with prostitutes. The "Darjeeling girl" is another of these fantasy categories. Because people from Darjeeling are likely to have better English skills (as well as being more out-going and cosmopolitan) than those from Nepal, they are in considerable demand for private-sector office jobs in Kathmandu. Based on this reputation, some local women competing for those jobs also claim to be from Darjeeling. The result is a kind of vicious circle: office work is sexually stigmatized; "Darjeeling girls" often take these jobs; therefore they must be irreputable. Because "Darjeeling girls" are involved in subordinate wage relations (and are out-going, sophisticated, and interact with males), they must also be prostitutes. Ironically, according to some informants, it is this sexually charged reputation that makes some local prostitutes *claim* to be "Darjeeling girls."

Perhaps an even more powerfully charged sexual fantasy category is "the school girl." Like wage-earning women, school girls still seem to be a social anomaly that threatens Kathmandu's middle-class patriarchal sensibilities. Along with office women, school girls are females that exist outside of the "acceptable" male dominated domains of household and kin networks. As such they become the objects of unbridled sexual fantasy. I was repeatedly told of scandals involving school girls and prostitution, most often students from Kathmandu's all-female Padma Kanya ("P.K.") College and St. Mary's School in Jawalakele. Some of these stories dated back to the 1970s and most pointed to "fashion" as the compelling culprit.

Informants that I interviewed said that they did indeed encounter some young women from Kathmandu schools engaged in prostitution, but that

much more common were women who *pretended* to be "school girls."<sup>30</sup> One social worker told me of how sex workers, hoping to capitalize on male fantasies, will carry around copies of English magazines or novels and even buy school uniforms "Because they feel that if they look like a P.K. student, the customers will be willing to pay a lot of money." Another informant spoke of a restaurant in Bhag Bazaar (near the Padma Kanya campus) where she saw women in P.K. uniforms being picked up by clients. In 1991 an unconfirmed story circulated around Kathmandu of a young woman in a St. Mary's uniform arrested for prostitution: she was reported to have been the daughter of a business man, raised in Hong Kong with excellent English.

How much "school girl" impersonation goes on among Kathmandu prostitutes is impossible to say but there is no denying that when it comes to sexual fantasies, in the words of one male informant, "Boys really go for girls from these [P.K., St. Mary's, etc.] places." It is probably no coincidence that young men in Kathmandu who mentioned pornographic (or "\*blue\* films") as among their favorite types of film/video (a group which included most urban-born middle-class males [Liechty 1998a:112]), when asked to *name* their favorite X-rated film(s) were rarely able to remember any others aside from ones with "school girls" in the title: "Sexy School Girls," "Private School Girls," etc., etc. (Liechty 1994:439-473).<sup>31</sup>

Clearly erotic fantasies of "school girls," "Darjeeling girls," "office girls," and so on, help to simultaneously drive the local sex work market, advance middle-class projects of social distancing and consumer critique, and validate patriarchal regulation of women's "honor" and "suitable" sexuality. It is because prostitution is embedded in such a complex mixture of erotic, social, and moral enterprises that it is so difficult to separate the "fact" from the "fiction" of sex work in Kathmandu. Indeed it is clear that the "fictions" of erotic fantasies help drive the "facts" of the local sex market.

### **Restaurants**

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30 Timothy Gilfoyle provides a fascinating comparative perspective when he notes that in early twentieth century New York City it was not uncommon for prostitutes to pose as school girls, wearing "juvenile attire" and carrying book satchels (1992:285).

31 That most of this "school girl" video pornography is from the US, Europe, or Japan suggests that this erotic fantasy is by no means unique to Kathmandu.

In the same way that prostitution is likely to have existed in some form in Nepal for a long time, restaurants too are nothing new in Kathmandu. But just as the nature, practice, and scale of prostitution changed dramatically in the decades following 1951, so also the culture of public eating has been radically transformed by shifting logics of caste, class, and gender relations in the past few decades. The huge surge in demand for restaurant services reflects the arrival of a new generation of consumers who not only have more access to cash, but who also—as this paper's epigraph suggests—have been socialized into new logics of commensality, prohibition, display, and domesticity.

Although the actual word "restaurant" may be a rather recent addition to Kathmandu's social and economic milieu, a variety of venues offering prepared foods for sale have surely been a part of the urban street scene for as long as the city has served as a regional center for trade and administration. As in Europe where restaurants emerged from centuries-old traditions of cookshops, ale-houses, taverns, and eventually coffee-houses and cafes (Mennell 1985, Spang 2000, Trubek 2000), in Kathmandu also the modern restaurant was pre-dated by a variety of establishments providing snacks, meals, and alcohol, and serving the needs of transients and travellers. For Stephen Mennell a restaurant is a place with "a particular combination of style and type of food, social milieu and social function" (1985:136). In Kathmandu this coalescence of style, menu, and social function occurred gradually in the decades following 1951 with the first restaurants emerging to meet the changing needs of a changing urban population.

The earliest eating establishments in Kathmandu were those catering to travelers, temporary residents, and locals in search of a snack. Writing in 1844 Honaria Lawrence, wife of the British Resident stationed in Kathmandu, noted,

in the town, as all over the country, a sprinkling of small *patees*, a term applied to these public buildings, from the grandest of them down to a mere shed. Those I speak of as so numerous are merely sheds. In these travellers stop to eat and rest (Lawrence and Woodiwiss 1980:174).

Whether grand or (more commonly) modest, Nepali *pātīs* have served the needs of travelers for centuries. Often nothing more than a sheltered platform, *pātīs* were places for travellers to sleep, cook their own food or, in urban areas like Kathmandu, buy prepared foods for sale by locals catering to the needs of visitors. Similarly urban women have long

operated small-scale stills, called *bhaṭṭīs*, selling grain alcohol from their homes as a side-line industry. By the early twentieth century the term *bhaṭṭī* was commonly used to describe any small business, often occupying the ground floor of an inner-city residence, that offered prepared foods like *māsu ciurā* (meat and beaten rice) by day, and *raksī* by night, to both travellers and locals.

While they may have met the needs of soldiers, day laborers, and travellers, most people in Kathmandu viewed *bhaṭṭīs* with suspicion. Taking a snack during the day was tolerated, "but during the evening, no respectable person would go there" recalled a middle-aged Kathmandu man describing *bhaṭṭī* she remembered as a child. Because of their association with shifty characters and strong drink, *bhaṭṭīs* had "a very bad reputation" and if locals frequented them at all, they did so clandestinely, and at their own risk.

Exactly when the first tea shops and sweets shops opened in Kathmandu is difficult to say. In 1988 an elderly professor in Kathmandu recalled that the city's first tea shop opened near Sundhara soon after the end of World War I. I have been unable to confirm this though Ludwig Stiller's observation that Nepali soldiers returned from the First World War with a hankering for the basic consumer goods they had enjoyed while serving in the British Army (Stiller 1993:159-160) would lend credence to the claim. Other long-time residents I spoke with agreed that the city's first tea shop was near Bhim Sen's tower, but remembered its opening as not until the late 1930s. Whatever the date, informants recalled that as young men it was a bold and stylish thing to drink the sweet, milky "English style" tea in this shop and the others that soon followed in other parts of the city. Up until the 1950s few people in Kathmandu drank tea at home, and those that did were often members of Newar trading families who had picked up the habit of drinking Tibetan style tea (with salt and butter). Another elderly Kathmandu resident recalled a struggling early tea shop in Jamal near the Rani Pokhari where, in the 1950s, even at only four paisa a cup, the proprietor sold only 15 to 20 cups of tea a day. It was not until the 1960s that *ciyā* (Nepali sweet milky tea) became the staple of the Nepali diet that it is today. Shops selling Indian-style sweets also became more common after 1951 though everyone I spoke with agreed that the new tea and sweets shops, like the old *bhaṭṭīs*, were never places where locals would go for an actual meal, or even just to "pass time": they were strictly utilitarian establishments. The association of public eating with fun, leisure, and enjoyment came only later.

Kathmandu's first true "restaurant" was undoubtedly part of Boris Lissanevitch's famous "Royal Hotel," opened in the mid-1950s (Peissel 1966, Stephans 1983).<sup>32</sup> Serving the few wealthy tourists who made it to Nepal following the opening of commercial air service in 1951 (Satyal 1988:52), along with a handful of resident "development aid" expatriates, local Rana elites, and the occasional mountaineering party, eating at the Royal was an experience limited to members of the city's most cosmopolitan (and wealthy) circles, both local and foreign. Even after other tourist hotels opened in the late 1950s (serving mainly to absorb the over flow when the Royal was full), many foreigners continued to take meals at the Royal Hotel.

It was not until the 1960s that the first foreign-style foods and eating establishments began to appear outside the walls of a few pricey Kathmandu hotels, a trend that corresponded with the arrival of a new kind of foreign visitor—youth, on a budget. An adequate history of tourism in Kathmandu has yet to be written, but an important turning point in that history must be the choice of Nepal as one of the destinations for the first wave of American Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) in 1962.<sup>33</sup> PCVs were housed in Lazimpat (near the US Embassy) where they were fed by a Chinese expatriate at what became "Wang's Kitchen" (later Peace Restaurant). Unlike the wealthy, usually more elderly, and relatively timid foreigners who were Nepal's earliest tourists, PCVs were young and eager to explore the streets and alleys of Kathmandu, and interested in trying local foods.

By the mid 1960s Kathmandu began to attract a new class of young western tourists following in the steps of the pioneering Peace Corp Volunteers. Many of these began their stay at the Royal Hotel, but soon headed out in search more "authentic" (and cheaper) accommodations. Around 1967 the first low-budget lodges (GC Lodge and Camp Hotel) opened in Jhochan, an area soon known by tourists and Nepalis alike as

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32 A member of a world-traveling Russian ballet company left stateless by the Russian Revolution, Lissanevitch defected from his dance troupe while on tour in India in 1936 (hoping to acquire a British passport). Lissanevitch moved to Calcutta where, with the help of Indian backers, he soon established the ritzy "300 Club." It was at his Calcutta club that Lissanevitch met members of Kathmandu's Rana elite, and even befriended King Tribhuvan himself. After World War II Tribhuvan and others invited Boris to set up a hotel for foreign tourists in Kathmandu (Peissel 1966).

33 Because of its strategic location between "Red China" and Soviet-leaning independent India, the United States had quickly figured Nepal into its Cold War ("development") plans following World War II.

"Freak Street." Wishing to sample local foods (and save money) young tourists (and PCVs) began hanging around Kathmandu tea and sweets shops and before long enterprising locals were mobilizing to meet the new demand.

The first eating establishments to cater directly to the new foreign youth market were pie shops like the "Chai and Pie" shop on what became known as Pie Alley. Not far from Jhochan/Freak Street, Pie Alley was on the edge of the old city in a neighborhood of untouchables, members of the Newar butcher's caste. By the late 1960s a number of people from this area had worked as cooks in the homes of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) personnel where they had learned to make, among other things, American style pies. When their American employers left Nepal, several former cooks established bake shops in their homes which soon became popular with young tourists, PCVs, and expatriates. One Kathmandu resident who was in his mid-twenties at the time recalled,

They knew how to make pies! And they were clean so you didn't get sick eating there, so soon they were very popular with the westerners, the very few young westerns who were coming at that time. They are all closed now but this is how it started.

Although neat and clean, these untouchable-run shops were ritually out of bounds for most Kathmandu residents, especially the upper caste people who could have afforded them.

Before long expatriates and tourists themselves had begun to open budget-class restaurants in Kathmandu. By the late 1960s places like the "Yin Yang Restaurant" and "Aunt Jane's"—opened by an American, Jane Martin, the wife of the local Peace Corp director (Wheeler 1973:200, McHugh 2001:6-9)—were serving up apple pie, "buff" (water buffalo) burgers, and iodine-soaked salads to young tourists, PCVs, and a handful of adventuresome local Nepali young people. One of those local teenagers, a man who by the 1990s had become one of Nepal's most successful hoteliers, spoke fondly, even nostalgically, about the ambiance and almost magical aura of these early restaurants.

Aunt Jane's? Wasn't that beautiful, Aunt Jane's? Look at the atmosphere there! When you go, that restaurant, every Marine boy<sup>34</sup>

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34 The US Embassy's contingent of "Marine Guards" played its own role in the establishment of new forms of leisure and recreation in Kathmandu. Some of the city's first discos and bars were started by friends of marines



used to go there, all these diplomats used to go there, all the rich people used to go there, the rich Nepalese boys used to go there.... [And] restaurants like the "Yin Yang"—that was in Freak Street and that was fantastic!

I used to go to those restaurants and hear the songs of these hippies. That was a sudden change in the life. A new kind of restaurant. I mean restaurants with the dim lights, and the music going on, and the discotheques. You know the discos started in the sixties. So that was the attraction.

We wanted to enjoy the ambiance of that kind of night life. Like, music going on till 10:00 in the night. And at that time, strange kinds of food, like pancakes, pie, cake and all these things. All those were very new things so many people like us, we were very attracted by these kinds of new things. [At that time] it was fashionable. But it was *more* than [just] fashion. It was looking for knowledge, a quest for new things.

What so captivated this young man was a combination of food, ambiance, and sociality—the three elements of Mennell's definition of a "restaurant" (1985:136). For Nepalis this was a "sudden change." These new establishments were about much more than just provisioning food: they were places to be-and-be-seen while eating special foods in an intentionally created ambiance.

By the early 1970s dozens of Nepalis had set up their own restaurants catering mainly to growing numbers of young tourists. By their nature, Western-style restaurants were more expensive than local eateries, further limiting a local clientele. In traditional sweets shops and *bhattīs* food was prepared before-hand and sold to customers as they came along. But for health reasons tourists and expatriates preferred hot foods cooked to order from a menu of choices, a system that required more labor, and expense. As with the early pie-shops, many Nepalis learned to prepare Western dishes from foreign employers and friends. Soon Kathmandu's Freak Street and Thamel tourist districts boasted eateries ranging from bakeries and Mexican restaurants, to pizza parlors and health food restaurants. By the early 1970s Kathmandu had acquired a reputation on the growing global youth tourist circuit as a place where one could find a wide range of western foods at low prices. Along with cheap hashish, food became one of Kathmandu's prime tourist attractions.

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so as to provide them with places to "hang out" (and spend money) while off duty.

### **Public Eating, Public Sphere**

People in Kathmandu are "socially starved" complained a middle-class college graduate in a 1991 interview. He described what was to him an acute lack of places and opportunities for him and his friends to socialize, echoing the refrain of many of his generation, "There's nothing to do in Kathmandu." Although I had first met him and several of his friends in a Kathmandu bar, for this young man Kathmandu still had far too few places for formal and informal public socializing. How is that this young man, and many others, could feel socially deprived in an urban society that in earlier times, and still for many people, was known for its extraordinarily rich social life?<sup>35</sup>

Between 1960 and 1990 the number of public eating establishments in Kathmandu rose from no more than perhaps a few dozen to, by one informant's estimate, at least 7,000, including everything from tea shops to "five star" restaurants. While some of these establishments serve expatriate and tourist clientele, few do so exclusively, and most (especially at the "lower end") cater almost entirely to local Kathmandu residents. The growth of Kathmandu's restaurant culture has to be seen in light of the new social demands of an increasingly class-based society. In the new class/consumer society—with its changing patterns of labor and social distinction—restaurants, as public consumer spaces, serve as important venues for a new kind of sociality. Class society demands a new public sphere governed by the logic of the market and its enveloping constellation of "modern" values (achievement, progress, consumer materialism).<sup>36</sup>

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35 Many have noted that "traditional" urban life in the Kathmandu Valley featured an annual cycle of seemingly perpetual festivals, feasts, and community events (Nepali 1965, Lewis 1984, Vergati 1995). While for some these traditional ritual events retain their social salience, many others in Kathmandu experience different social needs, and different logics of sociality. As the experience of sociality shifts from the matrix of caste (with its elaborate ritual-infused social life) to a class matrix (organized around a new set of social demands and rituals), in the past decades the city has become, for many Kathmandu residents, a social desert where people are "starved to socialize."

36 In European history the rise of restaurants (along with literature, theater, and other commodified leisure forms) is seen as an important part of the transition from aristocratic to bourgeois control of the public sphere (Habermas 1989 [1962]:31ff.). While acknowledging the fundamental differences between the moral economies of early-modern Europe and

In 1960 almost no self-respecting Nepali would have eaten in one of these public eateries but by the 1990s tens of thousands of local residents of all caste and ethnic backgrounds frequented restaurants on a regular basis. What had happened? While the arrival of foreigners and foreign-style restaurants had some impact on local perceptions—surrounding public eating with a new aura of style and desire—other developments in the city were much more important. By 1990 Kathmandu residents were simply not the same people they had been thirty years earlier.

At one level, changes in the local population were quite literal: once Rana-era restrictions on internal movement were lifted, people from across Nepal streamed into Kathmandu swelling the valley's population. From around 100,000 in 1951 (Bjonness 1990:7), by the 1990s figures for Kathmandu's population ranged from around 400,000 to 1.2 million (depending on how much of the city's rapidly growing suburbs are included). Wave upon wave of new arrivals, especially when not accompanied by families, likely helped swell demand for commercial food services.<sup>37</sup>

But perhaps even more than creating new *demand*, Kathmandu's growing population generated an ever-growing *supply* of new public eating establishments. With more and more people wanting to start small businesses, and more and more people seeking employment, a variety of new food-serving establishments began to spring up right and left. Opening a tea shop, liquor bar, or low-end restaurant requires relatively little capital and, although on a small scale, can provide significant returns on investments.<sup>38</sup> Large numbers of poor immigrants—especially children with little choice than to work for extremely low wages—provide the labor that help keep small-scale public eateries a profitable and attractive option for new entrepreneurs. The *growing demand* for commercially prepared food is at least in part a function of the *growing availability* of relatively affordable and convenient food services.

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modern Nepal, the emergence of restaurants in Kathmandu over the past decades illustrates similar developments in the rise of a new class-based bourgeois public sphere.

37 Mennell notes that the rise of restaurants and restaurant-going in Europe was closely tied to growing rural-to-urban migration in the late eighteenth century (1985:139).

38 One Kathmandu entrepreneur estimated that a momo (steamed or boiled meat dumpling) restaurant can easily generate a three time return on material investment. At five rupees per plate, 500 rupees of materials can generate sales of around 1,500 rupees a day, a significant amount of money by local standards.

Growing demand for restaurant fare is also a reflection of the general surge in cash flow that has accompanied Kathmandu's post-1951 transformation into an increasingly middle-class labor and consumer market (Liechty 1998b). Returning to Kathmandu in the late 1980s after five years spent abroad, one Nepali academic exclaimed, "From what people buy, I just can't believe how much money is floating around! I mean suddenly there is *a lot* of money." The huge growth in middle-class employment since the 1950s in government offices, education, "development" related International and local "Non-Governmental Organizations" (INGOs and NGOs), tourist services, retail, and other small business, along with a booming international remittance economy (Dahal 2000), all feed surprising amounts of cash into the local consumer economy of which restaurants have become an important part. A man in his mid-thirties explained,

Kathmandu isn't a rich city with a lot of money but somehow cash flow is there. And when there's a cash flow, they may not purchase big things, but small expenditures happen, like drinking beer, having fun, or going to a restaurant. People who have cash on their hands will just say, "Hey guys, let's go and have a beer."

New forms of middle-class employment have also influenced traditional eating patterns. Kathmandu residents have probably always supplemented the standard Nepali two-meal (mid-morning and evening) regimen with snacks eaten outside the home. Since 1960 however, snacking has become both much more common, and much more likely to be taken from commercial food providers (as opposed to eating snacks brought from home).<sup>39</sup> As the city's middle class has grown, as more and

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39 As in many other Asian societies, in Nepal to ask someone if they have eaten *rice* ("*Bhāt khānu bhayo?*") is to ask if they have had a meal. For many people a meal without rice is not a meal; it is *khājā*, a snack. In this context a large part of the public eating that goes on in Kathmandu is "snacking," even if a sizable quantity of food is being consumed. With the traditional evening meal often not served until 9:00 PM or later, there is plenty of time for (usually) a man to drop in at a restaurant with colleagues on the way home from work. After a plate of momos or other meat preparation a person will eventually find his way home to wife or mother for a "meal" of rice, dhal, and vegetables. Tourists, transients, and some elites who patronize expensive restaurants might purchase full meals, but most restaurant-goers in Kathmandu are technically out for a snack. In Nepal cooked rice (*bhāt*) is one of the most ritually sensitive foods (Höfer 1979:59). It is perhaps not coincidental that even with the proliferation of public eating, few Nepalis eat rice outside of home,

more people work farther from their new suburban homes, and as daily work schedules (for men *and* women) increasingly encroach on traditional domestic cooking and eating routines, taking food outside the home has become not just increasingly common, but necessary.

The emergence of the Nepali "*momo*" restaurant is important as both cause and effect of new eating patterns in Kathmandu. Most people associate *momos*—steamed or boiled meat (usually buffalo) dumplings—with Tibetans, yet this dish has a more complex local history. Prior to the 1960s Kathmandu Newars looked forward to eating *momocās* during certain annual festival times. The Newar *momocha* is similar to the Tibetan *momo* and was likely a culinary borrowing picked up by Newar merchants who for centuries have traded with, and lived in, Tibet. Following the Chinese crackdown on Tibet in 1959, thousands of Tibetan refugees fled to (among other places) the Kathmandu valley where they struggled to reestablish their lives in a new context (Gombo 1985). Along with producing carpets for the then nascent tourist trade, one common entrepreneurial venture for Tibetan refugees was to sell *momos*, at first as street vendors and soon in small restaurants. A few of these restaurants, like the famous "Utse" in Thamel, catered to foreign tourists eager to get a taste of exotic Tibet. But most of the newly-available *momos* were downed by local Nepalis, especially Kathmandu Newars who were delighted to be able to eat something approximating their own Newar *momochas* not only during the holidays, but throughout the year.<sup>40</sup> In the 1970s and '80s *momos*—relatively cheap and plentiful—became the local snack-food of choice, meeting the changing needs of a changing urban population.

### Eating Class Culture

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preferring to "snack" on a variety of meat dishes and sweets, or eat foreign-style meals. Watson (1997) provides a host of examples of similar cases in other Asian countries where the home/meal, restaurant/snack equation also holds true.

- 40 The transformation of the Tibetan/Newar *momo*/*momocha* from holiday fare into everyday commodity is a classic example of what Stephen Mennell refers to as the culinary process of "diminishing contrasts" (1985:323) whereby the seasonal/festival foods of a previous era "become the commonplace dishes of industrialized eating" (1985:39). Removed from its original cultural context, the *momo*/*momocha* retained the old aura of pleasure and enjoyment in a new utilitarian, commercial setting.

Shifting demographics, greater cash flow, increasing availability of prepared foods, and new patterns of labor and time use are all important factors in understanding the rise of public eating in Kathmandu but, in some ways, all of these are only surface manifestations of more important cultural shifts. The attitudes that kept most Kathmandu residents out of public eating establishments up until the 1960s had little to do with purely socio-economic matters. The surge in demand for restaurant fare since the 1960s is intimately tied to the ever greater framing of an earlier *caste-based* logic of social interaction by an increasingly inescapable *class-based* cultural dynamic in Kathmandu. As caste-based ritual concerns are increasingly confined to private, domestic settings, the new public sphere revolves ever more around the new logic of wage labor, market transaction, and consumerism.<sup>41</sup>

Prior to the 1960s and '70s (and still for many elderly people) food and eating were extremely important, sensitive, and consequential elements of daily social life. Food—its cooking, eating, giving, and receiving—is one of the principle domains in which social rank and prestige are played out in a caste society.<sup>42</sup> One elderly woman from a high-caste Kathmandu Newar family recalled how for most of her life the matter of food had been tightly bound up in issues of rank, purity, and avoidance. She emulated the behaviors of the Rana elites and, even in the early 1990s, recalled with obvious pride that she used to serve food to Ranas and they would eat it, a sign of ritual and social parity. This woman—like most others of her generation—was constantly attuned to questions of *who* prepared the foods

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41 One large and fast-growing segment of Kathmandu's new food service economy that is not considered in this essay is food catering. Catering services, while not technically tied to "public eating," are implicated in many of the same shifts in ritual and status concerns associated with restaurant-going. Kathmandu's catering industry thrives by filling the need to serve food to guests at weddings and other life-cycle rituals, events that represent perhaps the most powerful remaining caste-based imperatives in the city's social life. Yet as these life-cycle events are drawn into the orbit of claiming and negotiating class status, a new consumer-based logic of status display propels catering services (in which earlier caste-based concerns for food preparation and transaction are ignored) into the very heart of "traditional" caste rituals. Ironically, many people who would never dream of allowing a crew of low-caste cooks into their kitchens to prepare a wedding feast do not think twice about who is preparing or serving the food for their daughter's catered wedding in their own homes.

42 Khare 1976; Khare and Rao 1986; Marriott 1968, 1976a, 1976b; Daniel 1984.

she ate, *how* they were prepared, and the ritual status implications of food transactions.

For this elderly woman the thought of going to a restaurant (herself or others) was still anathema. Her son told of his mother's distress upon hearing that he had eaten in restaurants. Rather than leaving home to eat, she promised that all he had to do was ask and she would prepare any kind of special food he wanted. Sensitive to her son's "modern" attitudes toward caste, she warned him that eating in a restaurant is dangerous not only in terms of ritual pollution but because food is a particularly conducive substance for the transmission of other kinds of evil.<sup>43</sup> Eating outside opens the door to evil spells, spirits, and witchcraft. This young man noted how his own wife picked up where his mother left off, discouraging his restaurant-going habit with warnings of unsanitary conditions and possible infections. "Those places cook for money, I cook for love" she told him.

From ritual pollution, to witches, to germs, the reasons that women use to discourage men from eating commercially-prepared foods may have changed, but the implications of restaurant eating for domestic relations between women and men remain. Kathmandu's new middle-class public sphere is by no means limited to men; women control a large part of a family's domestic budget and are a clearly-targeted market sector. But public eating remains a gender-marked consumer activity and, at least in the early 1990s, it was still unusual to find unaccompanied women, singly or in groups, in a restaurant. In an interview conducted in 1991 by a female co-worker, one unmarried woman in her mid-twenties—the owner/manager of a small Kathmandu "beauty parlor"—described her feelings about eating in restaurants.

**Do you like to go to restaurants?**

Yeah, some. There's one in front of the \*beauty parlor\*. I just go there and ask them to bring some \*chowmein\* for me while I'm working. And they just bring it to me. But I don't go to other restaurants, where I don't know the people. This is the one that I know and have been going to.

**Why don't you like going to other restaurants?**

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43 Höfer (1979:53) quotes a passage from the Sanskrit *Grhastharatnakara* according to which: "Food is the filth of men . . . the evil deeds of men resort to their food. Whoever eats the food of another partakes of that man's sin."

I don't know, I just feel odd even eating in a restaurant. That's why I just take it and eat it at the \*beauty parlor\*. I get the feeling that people are probably thinking [when they see a woman sitting in a restaurant] "Hey, what could they be talking about?"

**But you don't look like you would feel uncomfortable in a restaurant. You seem very frank and free.**

Yes, but if somebody sees me eating in a restaurant, then they'll go and say to my family "Oh, we saw her sitting in a restaurant" and I feel that this would be not good for my reputation—it would earn me a bad name. I mean there could be no bigger loss than this, no? So I don't go to other places. I just order \*chowmein\*, momos, and things like that.

Especially for urban middle-class women prestige or honor (*ijjat*) is too precious and precarious a possession to risk losing at a restaurant.

Beyond concerns for their personal reputations, there are other reasons why women remain a relatively under-represented segment of the restaurant-going public. At one level, because women have traditionally been *preparers* of food and men *consumers*, women and women's status are that much more tied to, and invested in, the domestic production and consumption of food whereas men have relatively less to lose by eating outside the home. But even more fundamentally, restaurant-going is a noticeably gendered (male) activity because of the "unsavory" associations restaurants have with the consumption of meat and alcohol. As I discuss more below, both meat and alcohol have traditionally been marked as vulgar, defiling, and dangerous foods best avoided by women and upper castes.

Changing attitudes toward meat and alcohol, especially among upper-caste men, have contributed enormously to the rise of public eating in Kathmandu. As in other parts of Hindu South Asia, high caste groups in Nepal have traditionally followed prohibitions on meat and alcohol, though in a somewhat more relaxed manner than among similar caste groups to the south.<sup>44</sup> For example, both Nepali Chetris (Ksatriyas) and Brahmans eat goat meat (unlike most Brahmans who have purely vegetarian diets) but traditionally neither have consumed alcohol or buffalo meat. Indeed the eighteenth and nineteenth century Chetri and Brahman rulers of Nepal classified Kathmandu Newars as ritually untouchable on the specific grounds that Newars used "liquor and buffalo meat both for ritual and domestic consumption" (Nepali 1965:148). Many

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44 See Zimmermann (1987:180ff) for a discussion of the moral logic of vegetarianism in Hindu philosophy.



of the people I spoke with agreed that until very recently Chetris or Brahmans in Kathmandu could expect to be ritually out-casted if they were known to consume alcohol or buffalo meat.

By the 1980s, however, a general easing of prohibitions against buffalo meat among upper-caste men had helped swell demand for commercially-prepared foods, and momos in particular. Describing the proliferation of momo restaurants in Kathmandu, one middle-aged Kathmandu Brahman explained,

Newars have always been eating [momos], but the higher castes didn't. Now they do, but they don't eat openly. They eat only *inside* a momo shop. They won't take it home, but when they go to a restaurant, they do eat.

He went on to describe how before the 1970s it was very risky for upper-caste people to eat momos.

But when this restaurant culture started, when they started selling momos in a proper restaurant, *then* it really picked up. Because initially people felt it quite difficult to have momos, especially Bahuns [Brahmans] and Chetris, they felt quite uncomfortable eating outside. So when these Tibetan refugees started opening a restaurant, a *closed* restaurant, the business really picked up.

Ironically it was the *privacy* of these *public* eating establishments that finally allowed the upper castes to relax their dietary prohibitions against buffalo meat, ignore the ritual impurities imparted by the low-caste cooks, and succumb to allure of the new "restaurant culture."

The anonymity that allowed upper-castes into restaurants is also an important factor for other patrons. For many Kathmandu residents going to a restaurant, especially the "lower-end" momo and *māsu parikār* (literally "meat menu") shops, is still a somewhat shameful practice, even for people who are not high-caste. Consuming meat, and especially alcohol, outside the home carries the stigma of crudeness, vulgarity, and lack of control. When it comes to meat and alcohol consumption, for many patrons restaurant-going is a matter of "*Lukī, lukī, jāncha*" ("Hiding, hiding, one goes"), as one middle-aged Newar family man explained. For many men a primary concern is to avoid being seen by one's "*āphno mānche*"—one's "own people"—including in-laws and kin (especially seniors). It is his "aphno manche" that a man tries to avoid being seen by when exiting a back-street meat and alcohol restaurant.

What has changed is that increasingly a person's *āphno mānche* are no longer their caste and kin fellows, but their class fellows. Unlike in

previous generations when a man would have most likely worked everyday with his *āphno mānche* in various kinds of caste-based craft, farming, or trade occupations, changes in middle-class employment now make it far more likely that a person's work associates—and social acquaintances—come from a range of caste, ethnic, and regional backgrounds. Yet even while work places become increasingly socially integrated, it is still awkward for people to entertain friends and acquaintances from other caste or ethnic backgrounds in their own homes. The logic of caste hierarchies and ritual pollution may have retreated (for the most part) from the new class- and market-dominated public sphere, but its legacy lives on in the domestic setting. Several people explained how, out of deference to their parents (or other elders), they will not bring work colleagues to their homes. But even in many nuclear families (where no one need fear offending the sensibilities of elders) the domestic acts of cooking, serving, and eating food are still inescapably surrounded by an aura of ritual propriety that allows people to be fully at ease only when matters of purity are properly observed. For all of these reasons restaurants have become more and more important focal points for a new kind of sociability emerging from new conditions of labor and class. Whereas the home continues to preserve the commensality of caste, restaurants offer venues for the commensality of class.

### **Evil Spirits: The Dangers of Meat and Alcohol**

In earlier times meat and alcohol were relatively rare items enjoyed mainly during festivals when people (excluding Brahmins) might consume large quantities of both. Many current Kathmandu residents recall childhoods in rural areas of Nepal when, especially during the autumn Desain festival, people would eat, in one man's words, "mountains of meat." Others noted that rural people consider festivals to be the best time to drink alcohol precisely because of abundant meat. Like the momo—once a seasonal treat—in Kathmandu meat and alcohol are now everyday staples of the restaurant trade.

Meat and alcohol may be cheaper and more readily available, but earlier ideas about their co-consumption persist. In many people's minds drinking liquor requires eating meat, and vice versa. Alcohol helps to digest meat, and a person who does not eat meat while drinking alcohol gets drunk easily. Even worse, because alcohol is thought to "cook" (*pāknu*) meat, failure to eat meat along with alcohol puts the drinker at

risk of having *their own* "meat" (stomach, liver, etc.) "cooked" instead.<sup>45</sup> People I spoke with said that nowadays no one associates these properties of meat and alcohol with any kind of broader South Asian "humoral" understandings of foods as "heating" or "cooling" (cf. Daniel 1984, Zimmermann 1987), yet still they retain an aura of danger. There is a sense that what gives pleasure or enjoyment (*majā*) also brings danger. One man likened alcohol to the *kickannī* of Nepali folklore—the beautiful female ghosts/spirits who seduce, feed off of, and kill men through copulation (Hedrick & Hedrick 1972:80, cf. Kakar 1982:27-28). Alcohol too, it is thought, provides pleasure while actually consuming the consumer; the common association of liver disease with alcohol consumption only confirms such a view. By this logic, eating meat is almost an antidote to drinking alcohol.

Perhaps in part because of its association with danger, consuming meat and alcohol has become a central attribute of male restaurant culture in Kathmandu.<sup>46</sup> There is a popular saying to the effect that a man who doesn't drink, eat meat, and smoke, doesn't have any friends. To the extent that this kind of consumer sociality depends on commercially-provided services, restaurant-going has become a central feature of male sociability. One man explained how a friend, or group of friends, will come by and say "Let's go to a restaurant!" where it is assumed that each man will pay for himself. Saying "no" not only puts you at risk of being seen as anti-social, but even worse, being unable to afford it, being hen-pecked, or not being tough enough to handle liquor. Restaurants serve as an important venue for this variety of subtly competitive, risky, and macho male consumer sociability.

Although restaurant-going is premised on at least some minimal discretionary cash income, in Kathmandu meat and alcohol restaurants span the full consumer gamut from cheap to elegant. From *chang* (Tibetan barley beer) and momos in a filthy back street dive, to Johnny Walker and *khasī* (goat meat) in a "five star" restaurant or bar (and many

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45 Whether these modern Nepali ideas about digestion as the "cooking" of meat have anything to do with the somewhat similar ancient South Asian ideas described by Zimmermann (1987, especially 159ff) is impossible to say.

46 See Fiddes (1991:145-146) for a discussion of the common ethnographic association of meat consumption and maleness. Around the world, "meat is almost ubiquitously put to use as a medium through which men express their 'natural' control, of women as well as of animals" (Fiddes 1991:146).

stages in between), there are meat and alcohol combinations and venues to match almost every income and level of distinction. Somewhere above the rock-bottom momo and chang establishments are the small, back-street Newar *māsu parikār* restaurants. *Māsu parikār* shops serve a variety of meat dishes (fried buffalo, goat, or pork, momos) and *raksī*, the clear, potent, distilled rice liquor. In the early 1990s 12 to 15 rupees bought a plate of fried meat and a half glass of *raksī*, an amount well within the reach of the mainly Newar small businessmen, drivers, contractors, and skilled tradesmen (electricians, mechanics, etc.)—people with regular cash flow—who patronized the *māsu parikār* shops. These are men who often have some education but prefer the "traditional feeling" of the un-decorated and utilitarian, but intimate, back-street restaurants where one can slip in and out without attracting much attention.

By contrast, Kathmandu's "bars" usually cultivate a more "westernized" ambiance with music, more comfortable seating and lighting, and at least some consciousness of "decor." Although they may display some pricey imported liquor behind the bar, these establishments trade mainly in Nepali commercially-produced rum, whiskey, vodka, and beer. Along with the ubiquitous momo, the classic meat accompaniment at Kathmandu bars is "chicken chili," bite-size chicken pieces in hot chili oil. Bar patrons tend to be younger, more cosmopolitan, better off, and more interested in seeing and being seen. The lines of motorcycles parked outside bars in Kathmandu's New Road commercial district link this form of urban public consumption with the city's exploding middle-class suburbs.

Toward the upper end of the meat and alcohol spectrum was what some people in Kathmandu referred to as the "Tuborg<sup>47</sup> and tandoori" set. In the late 1980s and early '90s relatively posh, Indian-style tandoori restaurants, often featuring live light-classical Indian musical entertainment, were the rage among Kathmandu's upper middle class. Even if the owners, cooks, patrons, musicians, and even songs were Nepali, the intended ambiance was "sophisticated Indian" and paid homage to trends in commercialized middle-class nostalgia and "invented tradition" to the south. Although family groups were not uncommon, especially in more suburban restaurants, it was mainly more successful businessmen who frequented the tandoori and ghazal (classical song) establishments

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47 Tuborg beer is brewed and bottled in Nepal for domestic consumption and export to other parts of South Asia.

where consuming meat and alcohol was often a part of the business of doing business.

Especially in the upper strata of Kathmandu's business world restaurants play an important role as places where business relations can develop on terrain outside the work space. Restaurants function as neutral spaces where clients can be courted, indulged, and swayed, or where people of diverse cultural backgrounds can meet as class equals to "open up" to each other and build trust through rituals of class commensality. Restaurants are places for making contacts, and contracts. (Not coincidentally, the tandoori and ghazal restaurants were often identified as pick-up points for upper-end prostitution, another reported element of local business culture.) It seems that in capitalist modernity the principles of non-violence and (hence) vegetarianism, on which Brahmans' claims to purity and superior status were traditionally based, have given way to the powers of meat. Once associated with the warrior King's (*ksatriya*) literally embodied power and privilege,<sup>48</sup> meat eating—when transformed into a commodity transaction—becomes a way of embodying new forms of market power and privilege.

### **Conclusion: Consumer Transgression**

Recent transformations in the economic cultures of food and sex in Kathmandu exhibit several important parallels. First, from the 1960s onwards both food services and sex services quickly stratified into a fairly clear hierarchy of levels or grades, each with its own clientele and practices, reflecting broader trends in the stratification of Kathmandu residents by class. Second, the emergence of both restaurants and prostitution represent the public commodification of transactions (whether in food or sex) that had been almost exclusively private and domestic. The fact that restaurants and prostitution have been so closely linked in the city underlines the fact that both industries have emerged only as the caste-based transactional logic that once regulated both food and sex has been pushed increasingly into the limited confines of a new "private" sphere. As commodities both food and sex can now be "publicly traded." And third, the rise of prostitution and public eating are both manifestations of the new moral economy of the market, an economy of

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48 See Zimmermann (1987:180ff) for a discussion of violence and non-violence, meat-eating and vegetarianism, as the basis for two competing forms of power and claims to status (between Brahmans and Ksatriyas) in Hindu philosophy.

"free trade" that depends on the *anonymity* of commodity transactions. The commodity form creates a space of anonymity—the public privacy of the bourgeois public sphere—in which an earlier form of sociality gives way to the market based sociality of class. These convergences, or parallels, in the rise of prostitution and public eating in Kathmandu point again to the intimate ties between social transactions in food and sex, ties that remain strong even as these transactions move out of the domestic economy of private interpersonal relations into the public economy of impersonal commercial relations.

This move from the interpersonal to the impersonal in the transaction of culinary and sexual services has, as we have seen throughout this paper, major implications for gender relations both in the home and in public spaces. For women the increased commercial availability of (typically male) bodily gratifications (whether of food or sex) graphically illustrates the emergence of a largely male-dominated middle-class cash/wage economy. In this new economy not only is paid women's labor often sexually stigmatized ("It's for the \*boss\* too, you know...") thereby limiting women's access to the new "freedoms" of the market economy (Liechty 1996b), but also women's "services" to men (both culinary and sexual) become matters of public market transaction. Male "appetites" that were once almost exclusively "serviced"—but also regulated, manipulated, and mediated—by women within a domestic political and moral economy become increasingly transacted within the moral economy of the cash/commodity market and its "modern" politics of gender. Ironically a growing number of women—often poor and/or widows or single mothers—*use* the new economy to transact in sexual commodities as a way of surviving in an increasingly cash-driven world. But for most women the gendering of the new cash economy and the commercialization of domestic transactions amounts to a reduction in social status.

Indeed it is this gendering of the new market-based urban landscape—with certain zones or institutions marked off as exclusively male—that leads us back to the question of why restaurants and prostitution are linked (perhaps even symbiotic) consumer domains. Ironically, the very fact that most women refuse to patronize restaurants (especially alone) makes restaurants ideal pick-up points for prostitution. The same logic that excludes "good women" from the dangerous, male-dominated, meat- and alcohol-tainted confines of the restaurant, implies that the only women who *do* frequent restaurants are "not-so-good." By this logic, a woman entering this male consumer sphere not only marks herself as a potential object of male consumption, but her own "transgressions" (crossing the

boundaries of "acceptable" female behavior) heighten her erotic appeal in the eyes of male clients.

But the logic (and power) of transgression also informs and impels male consumer acts in several ways. First, the transgressions involved in the recent rise in consumption of meat, alcohol, and sexual services by men in Kathmandu help to solidify and confirm male authority in the new market-driven class culture. The very acts that only a generation ago might have resulted in out-casting (because of transgressing the boundaries of caste endogamy and commensality) now help to construct *a new sociality of both gender and class relations*. As we have seen, the new public servicing of male carnal appetites has important implications for the re-creation of patriarchy. When they become "freely traded" leisure commodities, food and sex help to marginalize women in the new gendered public cash/market culture by eroding their control over these transactions in the domestic sphere where a very different moral economy pertains. When they enter the public (market-driven) consumer/leisure sphere, the commercial purveyance of culinary and sexual services (and the transgressions entailed in their consumption) help to consolidate male authority. And, as we have also seen, restaurants (and to a certain extent prostitution) help to produce a new class-based (male-privileging) social practice: what I have referred to as the commensality of class. Commercial transactions in both food and sex (as when prostitution is associated with business negotiations) are among the pillars of a new form of sociality that lays out new class strata even while cutting across old caste divisions.

Here, ultimately, may be the most fundamental link between restaurants and prostitution. When food and sex are commodified--when transactions in food and sex are re-created as commodity transactions--cultural domains and practices that had once been infused with the moral logic of caste take on the value-free "freedoms" of the "free market." The parallel social logics and practices of caste endogamy and commensality show that exchanges of food and sex are also clearly linked in the sociality of caste. But as commodities, food and sex are united in new ways. When institutionalized as commodity transactions, exchanges of food and sex become homologous within the leveling calculus of exchange value. Meat, alcohol, and sex emerge as homologous male consumer (carnal) pleasures. When consubstantiated as objects of (male leisure) consumption—united under the sign of the commodity—food and sex are "naturally" co-institutionalized in the modern space of the restaurant.

But in Kathmandu what ties modern transactions in food and sex together goes beyond their formal equivalence as commodities, and beyond even their shared status as objects of male carnal gratification, to their shared cultural logic of transgression. As we have seen, in Kathmandu the consumption of meat, alcohol, and sex are modern consumer transgressions: modern because of their recent commercial objectification and wide-spread consumer availability, and transgressive within the still-potent ethos of caste society and its transactive logic. Transactions in food and sex are transgressive both literally (because they involve crossing or penetrating body margins or boundaries) and culturally (to the extent that these crossings are forbidden and/or regulated in the moral economy of caste society). As anthropologists have long noted, border crossing is dangerous: crossings threaten the stability of the macro- and micro-cosm, the social body and the individual body. In South Asian caste society the corporate and corporeal dangers of transgression are clearly articulated in the cultural strictures surrounding exchanges of food and sex (commensality and endogamy among others).

It is surely more than coincidental that the three perhaps most highly-marked (dangerous) transactional acts/substances in caste society (meat, alcohol, and coitus) are precisely those that have emerged as among the principle commodities of a new male-privileging class sociability. Food and sex, when united in the commodity form, seem to harness the dangers of a caste-informed social logic, transforming them into the very stuff of a new male, market-based form of class sociability. Restaurants and prostitution, each consumer domain stratified into levels corresponding to Kathmandu's emerging class society, become the institutional sites for the exercise of a new male, market-based, privilege. They become the privileged sites for a new exclusive (and exclusionary) male class sociality. In this way the market structures both class and gender hierarchies. As modern, male consumables alcohol, meat, and sex retain their traditional dangers but in the context of the capitalist marketplace the same transgressions that would have once been anti-social (with serious social consequences such as out-casting) now emerge as constitutive elements of a new form of sociability. In short, the meaning of consumption changes in the transformation from caste to class society. Consumption is about the production of sociality. To the extent that two transactive logics persist in Kathmandu, consumption produces two different kinds of sociality with the social logic of caste increasingly confined to the private or domestic sphere even while class sociality increasingly claims the new capitalist consumer public sphere.



These transformations in patterns of sociability surrounding transactions in food and sex bring us back to Mary Douglas' observations on bodies, boundaries, and change cited in this paper's epigraph, and introduced in its opening paragraphs. "Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins," observes Douglas (1966:121). In Kathmandu the vulnerable structure is caste society (with its attendant transactional logics), and the margins are those of the body in exchanges of food and sex. Douglas encourages us to see how the margins of the body *are* the margins of society: the body *is* the social body. Yet to the extent that an earlier caste-based transactional logic has been increasingly relegated to a limited private domestic sphere, while the new public sphere is increasingly dominated by market and class-based rituals of purity and danger, in effect there are now *two social bodies*. On the one hand restaurants service the new commensality of class, while the middle-class fixation on prostitution as a *class discourse* (with prostitution always socially above or below) shows how both food and sexual prohibitions are shifted out of a caste paradigm and into a class paradigm. In the new middle-class public sphere the body's margins are those of a new class social body. But on the other hand, to the extent that domestic space, and women's domestic roles, retain the ritual logics of caste exchange norms, and to the extent that caste endogamy is still the ideal and the norm in marriages, there remains a caste social body.

It is clear that, in Douglas' words, in Kathmandu "the shape of fundamental experience is [now] altered." People's physical bodies remain the same but as they move from private to public space the vulnerabilities of their body margins--and the meanings of their transgressions--are transformed as they move from one social body to another, each with its own moral and material economy.

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