

INTRODUCTION

The Noodle King



In his book *Making It Big* (2016), Binod Chaudhary, Nepal's most successful businessman and "Noodle King," tells his story of entrepreneurial success and reflects on the hurdles he had to overcome to build a business empire and eventually become Nepal's first billionaire. According to the book, Chaudhary comes from a family of the Marwari caste who originally immigrated to Nepal from Rajasthan at the end of the nineteenth century. Chaudhary's grandfather, Bhuramal Das, laid the foundation for his later success; after a devastating earthquake struck Nepal in 1934, he began a formally registered textile company. The grandfather spent a lot of time training his son, Lunkaran Das—Chaudhary's father—in the art of business, and Lunkaran Das later expanded his grandfather's business beyond the Kathmandu clothing store into a profitable enterprise. The strategy of Lunkaran Das was to diversify the family business, and so he entered the construction business in Kathmandu. He won important contracts in 1968 and established a high-quality retail store called Aron Emporium in Kathmandu. The companies founded by Chaudhary's grandfather and father formed the basis for what has today become the Chaudhary Group of companies.

Binod Chaudhary grew up in this environment and learned the art of craftsmanship not in school but in his family's retail store. In the 1970s, when tourists were flocking into Kathmandu, Chaudhary seized the opportunity and started his own business: a discotheque called Copper Floor. This found quick success and provided Chaudhary with connections to the rich and powerful of Kathmandu. With his new access, he learned an important lesson: dealing with the elite can be extremely profitable. It is a theme that runs through Chaudhary's autobiography. Thus, Chaudhary describes how a few years later, in 1979, through good relations with the political class, he man-

aged to obtain a license to import and assemble parts for Panasonic radios. In return, Chaudhary had to support the Thapa government in its campaign to maintain the Panchayat regime.

Political patronage—as Chaudhary emphasizes at various points in his book—proved to be important in the development of his business empire. Through many clever “deals” over his forty-year career, Chaudhary developed a business empire whose greatest assets were majority stakes in the Nepalese Nabil Bank and in Chaudhary Group Foods, the producer of Wai Wai noodles. By 2020, Chaudhary’s food company, Wai Wai, had factories in India, Bangladesh, and Serbia, with another under construction in Egypt. Chaudhary’s net worth is now about 1.5 billion US dollars, making him the 1,513th richest person in the world in November 2020, according to Forbes (2020).

Chaudhary’s autobiography—which he refers to in the book’s acknowledgments as the Chaudhary Group’s company biography—represents a classic rags-to-riches story of a self-celebrating and highly successful businessman. In this sense it is not surprising that the book’s publication was followed by stern critique from left-wing scholars. In an insightful review of the book, Shubhanga Pandey (2015) pointed to the irony of claiming to “make it big” despite Chaudhary having been born into a family with an already thriving business.¹ Furthermore, Pandey critiqued Chaudhary’s open admiration for neoliberal, authoritarian personalities, reminding the reader that Chaudhary was loose with his historic facts and gave little attention to other leading figures within the Chaudhary Group. Building upon such criticism, I chose *Making It Big* as an entry point for another reason: at the heart of Binod Chaudhary’s rags-to-riches narrative is the omission of the experiences of workers in his food-processing factories and urban construction sites, in addition to the hoarding of the value that has been extracted through their labor.

This book deals with the experiences of those working in food factories and on construction sites—new sites of employment in Nepal that are similar to those that make up Chaudhary’s empire. It is based on eighteen months of anthropological fieldwork undertaken between 2012 and 2020 on the margins of two cities in Nepal: Nepalgunj, a border town located in the western lowlands region (Tarai), and Pokhara, a picturesque city at the foothills of the Annapurna mountains in the central hill region (Pahad). Taking inspiration from E. P. Thompson’s classic *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) and Jonathan Parry’s work *Classes of Labour* (2020), this book ethnographically and ethno-historically explores various as-

pects of Nepal's industrial and urban modernity. More specifically, this book examines how Nepal's recent urbanization has contributed to the rapid growth of certain basic consumer industries such as food manufacturing and water bottling, as well as urban construction and related sand mining. The expansion of these new industries has been accompanied by a rising middle class that has increasing purchasing power and is changing its patterns of consumption. Instead of searching for universal explanations for the contemporary predicament of labor in the Global South (Mollona et al. 2010), this book explores these new work environments in the Nepali context. By doing so, the book aims to develop a more general understanding of the entanglements between urbanization and (industrial) working-class formations and how these are embedded in broader political contexts. More precisely, this book aims to provide answers to the following five questions.

1. As the rapid urbanization of Nepal has given rise to a growing urban middle class with increased purchasing power, what industries have emerged on the fringes of Nepal's cities? What are the working realities in such industries? More specifically, how does the composition of these emerging working classes relate to the consumption patterns of the new middle class?
2. If we look closely at the new work environments in modern food-processing factories, water-bottling plants, the construction industry, and sand mining, how do their respective working classes relate to each other and to the urban middle class?
3. What types of politics of labor have emerged in the new industries that are driven by the urban boom and the growing middle class? How have labor unions begun to challenge inequalities at work and make an impact on the everyday life of workers, as well as on the politics of labor?
4. How do people working in different positions within the industrial hierarchy deal with the fact that Nepal has become increasingly embedded in a broader global context? How does uneven development play out at the local level?
5. How do workers deal with uncertainty and insecurity triggered by the broader context of the Maoist revolution and the earthquakes of April 2015?

Throughout the book, I aim to explore answers to these fundamental questions regarding the development of Nepal's working class on the margins of urban spaces. Such questions emerged largely after a re-

flection upon five larger surprises that I encountered throughout my fieldwork. The first surprise was the rapid process of urbanization that I observed during my travels in Nepal between 2012 and 2020. Land prices in many places skyrocketed, with urbanization occurring in large municipalities like Kathmandu and Pokhara, in small villages along the east–west Mahindra highway, and even in some border towns. This urbanization fostered a growing middle class that often lived in residential villas in the towns. What struck me, however, was the growth in several associated businesses alongside the urban boom: the food and beverage industry produces the most revenue in the country, water-bottling factories have sprung up, construction is booming, and sand is being extracted from the rivers of the country. This surprisingly rapid urbanization gave rise to a core concern in this book: who is enabling the consumption patterns of the new middle class? In a country that lacks large-scale industries such as steel and coal mining, and where the rate of labor emigration is high, such a question should be relevant to academics and the broader public alike.

The second surprise during my fieldwork was the composition of the working classes in the industrial and urban work environments that I visited. As I learned over the years, in many of the new working environments the laborers saw themselves primarily as wage workers, instead of identifying predominantly along the lines of caste, ethnicity, or gender. Of course, there are differences among sites, as the various ethnographic chapters of this book will show. But what is striking is that the division between permanent and contract labor is highly important—at least in the food and water-bottling industries. The book will go into more depth on how this division between permanent and contract labor plays out in different settings.

My third surprise was the role of labor politics within the work environments. I was surprised to learn that in the food-processing companies, labor politics was very militant in the immediate aftermath of the Maoist revolution but declined in the years after. As I will show in detail throughout the first four chapters of this book, radical labor unions entered the factories and pressured management to give permanent status to a workforce that was mainly contract laborers. This signifies, as I will later elaborate, that the appearance of Maoists on the political stage has profoundly shaped the politics on the shop floor of various industries across the country. In comparison with other industrializing countries, I argue that Nepal is an outlier in terms of its industrial development trajectory. In certain industries a reverse of the current global neoliberal trends can be seen—a shift

from casual to permanent labor, and a broad politics of labor among the workers.

The fourth surprise was related to the importance of uneven development between Nepal and other countries in the Middle East and Southeast Asia. This global context had a direct impact upon everyday experiences in the examined workplaces. This theme will crop up in all the chapters of the book and raise some important questions in the conclusion regarding the sustainability of militant labor politics in an environment that is embedded in a broader political economy of the Global South.

The fifth and final surprise was the creative and imaginative ways that people at various levels of the labor hierarchy engaged with uncertain futures. For example, I discovered that some industrialists in the lowland have used the geomancy practice of *Vastu Shastra* to “bring their factories in line with earthly energies” and heighten industrial output (see chapter 3). At the same time, many young workers try to escape the toil of industrial or urban working environments by migrating to distant places. To cope with the uncertainties involved in these difficult work trips, they consult with shamanic priests to figure out the most auspicious day for departure (see chapter 7). This secondary level of analysis will be discussed further throughout the book. Before turning to a more in-depth explanation of these surprises, I will begin the discussion by laying out two histories that are fundamental to the understanding of industrial and urban working classes in Nepal: the history of Nepal’s “slow” industrial revolution and of Nepal’s urbanization process.

Stocktaking of Nepal’s Industrial Revolution

The history of Nepal’s industrial development is relatively short. It goes back to the year 1936 when—after the formulation of the Nepal Companies Act—the Biratnagar Jute Mills were established (Jha 2016). This first industry was followed by other early industrial ventures in the 1930s and 1940s that largely fared badly or had to shut down quickly. By the early 1950s, “modern industry consisted of a few dozen small and medium sized firms, employing no more than 20,000 persons—less than 1 per cent of the total workforce” (Shah 1981:1063). This inaugural phase of industrialization was followed by the establishment of a few more government-owned industries in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly after the government of Nepal launched its first five-year plans in 1956 (Shah 1981:1064). Often such

industries were established with the support of either China or the USSR (Jha 2016).

From 1960 to 1990 the country witnessed the rule of the Panchayat regime. During this period, few industries were established in the country. This may seem surprising, as throughout this time other “developing countries” embarked on courses of import-substituted industrialization. Such a course, for example, led to mass industrialization in neighboring India (Khilnani 1997). In Nepal, however, as outlined by Mallika Shakya, “the three national economic plans covering the period from 1956 to 1970 failed to trigger industrialization” (2018:19). This failure of the ruling royal family to trigger industrialization was rooted in at least two different reasons. First, it is certainly related to the royal family’s preference to siphon off hefty profits from the few industries established throughout that period. This is from anecdotal observations by the aforementioned industrialist Binod Chaudhary, who described the climate of industrialization before the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990 as follows: for every industry being set up, two taxes apparently had to be paid: first the official one, and then the one for the royal family, who often wanted to have a 50 percent partnership in any new industry (2016:107–108). This in turn gave little incentive to the landowning elites to transition into small-scale industrialists or for large-scale capitalists from abroad to invest in Nepal.²

Second, the lack of industrial development in Nepal at that time should be considered in light of the Cold War as well. Neither the United States nor the USSR had an interest in developing Nepal, as both saw Nepal as a comfortable cushion between the emerging powers of India and China. For instance, Narayan Khadka (2000) writes about USAID during the Cold War period, the agency through which America not only supported Nepal’s development efforts but also helped Nepal maintain its independence and neutrality.

It was only at the end of the Panchayat regime, after Nepal’s first *Jana Andolan* (People’s Movement) in 1990, that industrial development in Nepal really took off. While this process is still little understood due to a lack of research, two ethnographies provide some insights. First, Mallika Shakya’s (2018) illuminating work on the rise and fall of Kathmandu-based industrial garment production shows how a treaty between the United States and Nepal that granted quotas to Nepal for exports of garments stimulated the emergence of a large garment industry that employed tens of thousands of workers in Kathmandu in the 1990s. Second, my own previous work on the Kailali district area shows that while few brick factories were already

established in the early 1980s, large numbers of brick kilns in the area were only being established from the 1990s onward (Hoffmann 2018a:171).

Most industries established across the country in the early 1990s were either located in the lowland area of Nepal or in urban centers in the hills. The reason for this restriction was that large swaths of the country remained unsuitable for industrial development due to the difficult hilly or mountainous terrain. Despite this disadvantage for industrial development, the idea of an “industrial future,” also described as the “transition from an agricultural-based economy into an industrial society,” has been a central promise of a number of politicians from a broad spectrum in Nepal. Its core idea—that Nepal can industrialize despite its geographical location—goes back to a 1930s study by a team of Swiss geographers led by the geologist Tony Hagen. Hagen argued that Nepal was “rich” in natural resources, particularly energy reserves, that could be exploited to start the industrialization process (Hagen 1969).

This uneven distribution of industrial development faced another challenge between 1996 and 2006, when Maoist insurgents fought a guerrilla war against the state. Throughout the insurgency, several industries were firebombed, industrialists were kidnapped for ransom, and often a voluntary donation (*chanda*) was asked of industrialists to keep the party’s coffers filled. Some industrial laborers were involved in the conflict between Maoists and the state, while others used the opportunity to press their demands at sites of small-scale production, such as brick kilns (Hoffmann 2014a). In the wake of the insurgency, industrialization remained stalled; many of the industrial elite in the country were suspicious about the fragile peace until the dissolution of the people’s army and its integration into the Nepal royal army in 2011.

Hence it is not surprising that so little industrial development has taken place across the country. According to a 2011 survey undertaken by the Bureau of Statistics of the Government of Nepal, approximately 250,000 people worked in the manufacturing economy in Nepal. The food and beverage, tobacco, and textile industries made up a large bulk of the workplaces within Nepal’s manufacturing landscape (Gautam 2018:40). The construction sector was found to be the largest part of the informal economy. Obviously, such industrial and urban sites of employment were not distributed evenly around the country but occurred at certain nodal points: in or around large and midsize cities, along stretches of the highway, or close to border towns in the lowland area. This is because in such places there

are larger markets and a growing urban middle class that consumes the few locally produced or processed goods. Let us now look more closely at the urban development process in Nepal.

Boomtown Nepal: From Shangri-La to Concrete Jungle?

Many of the Nepalis I have met over the years prefer to live in, or close to, an urban area. The stance that I heard from many was that life in or close to a city offered more modern facilities such as schools and hospitals, and made life easier. Given such frequent statements of desire for city life, it is hardly surprising that in recent years urban growth has been extremely rapid, and Nepal has become one of the top-ten fastest urbanizing countries in the world. Admittedly, compared to other countries, up till recently Nepal was still ranked among the top-ten least urbanized countries in the world. According to a recent study by the United Nations (2014:53), the level of urbanization raised from 8.9 percent to 18.2 percent within the period between 1990 and 2014. Despite this increase of urbanization, Nepal still ranked as the 6th least urbanized country in the world by 2014. However, as the same report highlights, Nepal is the only non-African country among the top ten fastest urbanizing countries in the world in the estimated period in between 2014 and 2050. It is projected to urbanize at an average annual rate of 1.9 percent over that time period (ibid 2014: 68). It is thus little surprising that a Nepali English-language newspaper headline recently proclaimed that “Nepal is going urban” (Koirala and Koirala 2019).

Importantly, Nepal’s urbanization follows an uneven pattern. Urbanization occurs above all in the Kathmandu Valley, the Pokhara Valley, the Inner Tarai Valleys, and in market and border towns located on highway junctures between the east–west highway and the five main north–south corridors.

The economic consequence of this urban development is not limited to growth in local construction industries. Instead, urbanization is arguably the driver of other industries, such as the modern food-manufacturing industries, bottled-water industries, and sand-mining industries. The former is evidenced by studies in neighboring India showing that urbanization leads to an increased intake of modern industrially processed foods (see Bren d’Amour et al. 2020). The latter is evidenced by chapters 5 and 7 of this book, which show that the history of producing industrially processed bottled water and extracting sand is of relatively recent origin and corresponds to Nepal’s

recent urban growth. Of course, there are other consumer goods that are in much higher demand in an environment of rapid urbanization. But this study limits its focus to the histories of modern food manufacturing, bottled-water processing, housing construction, and sand mining.

By engaging in the linkages between urbanization and the growth of small-scale domestic industries, this analysis aims to move beyond conventional studies that highlight the effects of urbanization on consumption (e.g., Donner 2011) and to focus instead on the production of commodities that are consumed. A central concern of this book is to get to a better understanding of the work behind such middle-class consumption patterns. My aim is not to provide another account of how the new middle class of Nepal emerged, but rather to explore the consequences of rapid urbanization and middle-class formation on local labor forces. After all, the consumer goods purchased by the new middle class must be produced somewhere, and my aim is to shed light on the specific labor regimes required to realize such consumption patterns. Hence, I argue that urbanization combined with the formation of a middle class has profound effects for labor; urbanization creates both “opportunities” as well as new exploitative relations between capital and labor.

The Study of Nepal’s Middle and Working Classes

The study of class has never been a central feature in anthropological studies of Nepal. In what has been written on the topic, little concerns the country’s working classes; much of the limited scholarship on class in Nepal has been oriented around the idea of a “middle class” (Adhikari 2013; Crawford et al. 2008). Probably the first comprehensive attempt at providing a systematic analysis of the complexities of middle-class formation in Nepal can be found in the scholarly works of Marc Liechty (2003, 2017). Liechty’s work indicates that Nepal’s middle class was born in the 1950s, when—after the fall of the Rhana regime—expatriates and foreign organizations came to Kathmandu. In the wake of their arrival, new schools were established and global ideas were transmitted by the NGOs and foreign diplomats operating in the country. The result of this “invasion” was that Nepal’s emerging middle classes strongly emphasized education and the formation of friendships with foreign professionals as a means of access to upward mobility. Since then, as Liechty (2003) shows, Kathmandu has seen the rise of a strong middle class over the last six decades,

comprised of people who share a certain set of consumer practices and cultural codes that include the consumption of new forms of media, food, and sometimes even commodified sex.

Undoubtedly, Liechty's work has been fundamental not only in shedding light on the historical emergence of Nepal's middle class but also in outlining the more general relationship between (being middle) class and consumption. This book builds upon Liechty's work and contributes to an aspect of the overall conceptualization of class in Nepal that has so far been mostly overlooked: the relationship between class and production. More precisely, this monograph attempts to unearth the hidden connections between Nepal's working and middle classes. As James Carrier and Don Kalb (2015) remind us, class is a relational category, and following that, I view the two as interrelated phenomena. Indeed, one of the arguments of this book is that to understand the Nepali middle class, it is beneficial to explore the most common forms of middle-class consumption from the perspective of production. Only when one understands what happens behind the closed doors of food-related factory work and in the everyday construction sites across the booming housing industry can one understand how the rise of the middle class relates to new forms of inequality at the sites of production. While such a view may not broaden our understanding of the differentiations within the middle class, it does help conceptualize the relations between different classes.

One way to begin to consider the relationship between production and class in the Nepali context is to explore the marginal literature of a handful of scholars who have commented on the conditions of Nepal's working class (Kondos 1991; Kondos, Kondos, and Ban 1991, 1992; Seddon, Blaikie, and Cameron 2002; Shakya 2018; Hoffmann 2018a,b). Perhaps the first important work in this tradition was the 1979 book by Seddon, Blaikie, and Cameron, which commented on the general conditions of Nepal's working class and emphasized their strong links to the rural countryside. These authors' more recent works (Blaikie, Cameron, and Seddon 2005 [1980], 2002) may also warrant mentioning in a class-from-production context (even if their rather linear Marxian critique now looks quite outmoded), because they make the important point that not only is government employment a common road to middle-class status, but that the distribution of these jobs (still) disproportionately falls to high castes from the hill regions (this is also a theme discussed in chapter 2 in this book) (see also Lawoti 2005).

Finally, a spate of recent literature has emerged discussing the meaning of “working class” in the Nepalese context. For example, Mallika Shakya’s (2018) discussion of the garment industry differentiated between those who worked as craftsmen and those who worked in mass manufacturing, echoing Massimiliano Mollona’s (2009a) distinction between artisans and proletarians in a Sheffield-based steel plant. Shakya’s work on the garment industry in Kathmandu (2018) situated garment labor within what she calls an “industrial ecosystem” that goes beyond discussions of the workplace. While such an approach includes actors like the World Trade Organization and the impacts of international trade agreements on local working realities, its downside is that its boundaries are blurred, and every shop floor becomes integrated into a wider international system of trade. The other important work on industry is a more regional view that considers how the country’s rapid political change influences workplaces, while also acknowledging the various layers and hierarchies within the working class. My previous works on brick kilns (Hoffmann 2014a, 2018a) followed this approach, considering changes in the regional political economy, and concluded that the proletariat was not united but was rather split along ethnic differences. Finally, Dan Hirslund, in a discussion of construction work in Kathmandu (2021), considers labor markets to be structured by the broader political economies of the urban housing markets. My book builds upon these observations but also takes inspiration from debates about industrial labor in other countries. Above all, it is inspired by the tradition of industrial sociology that emerged from Marx’s classic studies of the transformations of labor under capitalism (1977 [1848])—both those who followed him and those who critiqued him—as I will outline in the next section.

Anthropological Perspectives on Class and Industrial Labor

Some of the most influential conceptions of class can be found in the writings of Karl Marx (1977 [1848]) and Max Weber. Marx identified class in terms of property ownership and access to the means of production. In his view, under a capitalist economic system of production there were—at least in the long run—only two classes: those who owned capital and those who owned only their labor power (1977 [1848]:222). Importantly, for Marx these two classes were ulti-

mately antagonistic, and he saw the dominant class not only controlling the access over the means of production but also exploiting the other. Hence, in order to rise, a working class needed to ultimately organize itself politically and transform from a “class in itself” into a “class for itself” through sustained class struggle. In contrast, Weber’s concept of class focused less on “exploitation” and more on “life chances” (see Wright 2002). In Weber’s worldview, members of a certain class shared the same life chances, which were determined by both their respective market situations as well as by the resources that individuals brought into market exchange (e.g., property as well as professional qualifications). Furthermore, in Weber’s world, class was only one determinant in the political development of modern societies, and thus he pointed also to the relevance of religion and nationalism in the development of capitalist societies. Yet ultimately these different conceptions of class led both authors to make different predictions on the future of capitalist development. For Marx, the exploited working classes—deprived of the means of production—would ultimately rise up to overthrow the capitalist class. Weber, however, saw working classes only in the early days of capitalism being exploited, whereas later the relationship between capital and labor would be smoothed out.

One important strand in the critique of both Marx and Weber highlights that, in both cases, the notion of class is too structural. Accordingly, in this book I aim to also capture the lived experience of class, and in doing so I take my inspiration from the concept of class that was later popularized by the historian E. P. Thompson in his book *The Making of the English Working Class*. Thompson used class in its singular form to emphasize the growth of a working-class consciousness in Britain between 1780 and 1832. By doing so, he foregrounded the agency of ordinary people in the process of the making of a working class, going beyond a more common assertion that working classes were forged by historical forces. His impetus should not be understated. It was only after Thompson’s discussion of the British working class that a substantial discourse among anthropologists surrounding the nature of class emerged, with the result that from the 1970s onward anthropologists and sociologists began challenging fundamental concepts of class and its manifestations in different societies (see, for example, Breman 1994, 2004; Burawoy 1979, 1985; Nash 1979; Kalb 1997; Parry 1999, 2020; Sanchez and Strümpell 2014).

Certainly, it is now a challenge to review this large corpus of anthropological and sociological literature on class. It is not my inten-

tion to do that here, as others have done so already, at least partly (see, for example, Carrier 2012, 2015; Carrier and Kalb 2015; Parry 2020). But instead of reviewing the literature in depth, I want to emphasize particular aspects of the debate on class and highlight the inspirations that this book draws from and builds upon. This is because, from among the aforementioned literature, this book was particularly inspired by the writings on industrial working classes by Michael Burawoy (1979, 1985), June Nash (1979), and Don Kalb (1997), as well as the work of Jonathan Parry (2020) (which I discuss in more detail toward the end of this section). Importantly, all four scholars argue in their writings against the general teleological assertions that Marx and Weber made: relations between capital and labor took different forms over different time-space complexes, and it was the task of ethnographic scrutiny to unearth such relations. Their contributions to discussions on the nature of class, however, consisted of placing a different emphasis on unearthing such a history.

First, Michael Burawoy, in his seminal book *Manufacturing Consent* (1979), highlights the centrality of the workplace in “manufacturing” consent to a specific regime of labor, and capitalist ideology more generally. For Burawoy, class was socially constructed at one’s own workplace, and this construction did not only have to be mere exploitation. Rather, he examines how the exploitative relationship between capital and labor could be blurred through practices of managerial gamification of the workplace. Second, in her discussion of Bolivian tin miners—among others—June Nash revisits the older Marxian concept of class consciousness. Her work points to the importance of the interplay of culture in class formation processes, particularly highlighting how Bolivian indigenous Cholo culture informed expressions of class solidarity in Bolivia. In her view, class solidarity is not only framed at the workplace; one must take much wider processes of cultural identification into the analytical frame. Above all, as she points out (1979:332), it was the Bolivian tin miners’ geopolitical situation at the periphery of global commodity chains that informed their ideas of class, exploitation, and uneven development.

Third, Don Kalb’s magnum opus *Expanding Class* (1997) emphasizes the importance of analyzing class relationships from an ethno-historical perspective. Comparing Brabant’s quaint central shoemaking district to its electrical boomtown, Eindhoven (home of the enormous Philips Corporation), Kalb shows the significance of working historically to analyze the development of industrial working classes in broad contexts. Moreover, by introducing the concept

of “flexible familism,” Kalb’s work not only examines the importance of gender in class analysis but also widens the scope of what constitutes a class. In this way, Kalb’s work breaks with older Marxist assertions of an essentialized class identity and paves the way for further class analysis that includes questions regarding culture, community, family, and gender.

Parallel to the emerging anthropological discourses of what constitutes class in the industrial context in the United States, South America, and Europe, a debate took place from the 1970s onward regarding the situation of industrial working classes in South Asia (see also De Neve 2005; Parry 2020). The pioneer in this debate was the British anthropologist Mark Holmstroem, who published in 1976 a case study of regular workers employed in four Bengaluru factories, thereby highlighting the importance of the division between those working in the formal economy and those toiling in the informal sector. For him, the former lived in—as he called it—a “citadel” (Holmstroem 1976) that provided safety and—relatively speaking—wealth for all those inhabiting it, whereas the lives of those toiling in the sea of the informal economy (e.g., as street hawkers, transporters, those carrying out small repairs) were marked by insecurity and danger.

This captivating image of a citadel drew attention and was dissected in subsequent years of debate. The Dutch sociologist Jan Breman, known for his now famous long-term ethnographic field studies of various forms of labor in the Indian state of Gujarat, over the years increasingly rejected it (1994, 2004), maintaining a picture of the Indian working classes that was marked by gradations of difference rather than a clear division between a labor elite and those working outside. In fact, even Mark Holmstroem himself, in his book *Industry and Inequality* (1984), began to paddle back from his strong assertion of a divided working class, now framing the relation between citadel and its outside more akin to a mountain slope, less clear-cut and sometimes even linked through kinship.

However, Jonathan Parry’s (2020) seminal monograph on Bhilai’s industrial working class—which forms the fourth source of inspiration for this book—provides a different image of the Indian working class that questions the “mountain-slope model.” Parry found that the gulf separating those laboring as permanent workers from those employed as contract workers was huge, leading to the proposition—at least from the canvass of his field site in Bhilai—that India’s working classes seemed divided into two segments: those who had permanent jobs and those who worked as casual laborers. This divi-

sion was not a pure economic division, but it was experienced by both segments as living in two different life-worlds, and therefore he maintained that—for Bhilai—the Indian working class remained divided into two different working classes, thereby not only debunking Marx but also others that followed his lead (e.g., Bernstein 2006).

This book is informed by these debates on the nature and characteristics of the industrial working classes in neighboring India. I want to highlight that class in Nepal is not an alien product but a lived reality that comes with a rich vocabulary. Hence, this book follows Parry's (2020) lead and takes a very close look at the hierarchies of labor that have merged in the Nepali context. For example, chapters 1 to 3 show the importance of the division between permanent and contract laborers in a food-processing factory on the margins of Nepalgunj. These observations prompt the hypothesis that class trumps caste, ethnicity, and gender—at least for the food-processing factories in both the lowlands (chapter 3) and the mid-hills of Nepal (chapter 4). While I am in line with Parry's suggestion that "a dichotomous model of class seems too blunt of an instrument" (ibid 2020:43) to account for the division between permanent and casual workers that also pervades these industries, I argue that in the Nepali context the division between "company" and "contract" workers is likely to be less drastic than he claims, as a substantial amount of Maoist union activism has meant that a substantial number of temporary workers were enabled to acquire the status of permanent company workers (chapters 1 and 4). This confirms my earlier work on Nepal in which I claimed that working-class formation in Nepal has been deeply influenced by both the Maoist conflict (2018) and broader forms of uneven development in the wider region (Hoffmann forthcoming).

And yet this book also suggests that in other work environments, class matters less: for example, in the bottled-water plants in the Kaski district, gender and ethnicity matter more (see chapter 5); in the informal economy of Pokhara, it is again ethnic laborers who do the most backbreaking jobs, and ethnicity and gender are important factors in constituting the local working classes. In this way, the book highlights the complexity of class formations due to the entanglements of class, ethnicity, and gender, and shows how class developments, while pointing to an overarching emergence of class as a marker of self-identity, develop differently in various parts of Nepal. Accordingly, cultural conceptions of the interplay between gender, ethnicity, and work continue to play a central role in managerial decisions about who gets to work at a specific workplace and under what conditions.

Comparing Labor at Different Sites

Comparison is at the heart of the anthropological enterprise. Since the inception of the discipline in the nineteenth century, anthropologists have always compared. Yet since the 1980s, the practice of making comparisons across field sites has increasingly become contested with the rise of the so-called crisis of representation debate. Anthropologists began asking to what extent one field site can be compared with another, and in what contexts. Two camps emerged: those who reject comparison—the “comparison exiteers”—and those who insist on its validity. Within the “exiteers” camp, a prominent segment includes the followers of the influential US anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973). They argue that one must look at the specifics of a culture and should stay within this paradigm. On the other hand, there are those who favor comparison, highlighting the commonalities rather than the differences between groups.

These broader debates within the discipline of anthropology have also influenced the anthropology of labor. Certainly, labor provokes a comparison with other settings as well as the inclination to categorize labor practices into different segments and labels. But nevertheless, most anthropological monographs focus on a specific setting, such as a factory or an industrial town. The influence of Burawoy’s writings (1979, 1985) cannot be neglected. In his influential critique of Harry Braverman (1974), Burawoy pointed to the value of anthropological investigations into the culture of work at the workplace. Much anthropological writing has either followed or critiqued Burawoy while remaining within the confines of one field site. Only recently has a new brand of the anthropology of industrial labor emerged, one that makes comparisons between different cities (Parry 2020) or even countries (Lazar 2012; Parry 2020).

This monograph stands in line with this interest in comparison, and one of the central aims of this book is to cover new terrain in an anthropological comparison of labor. For example, the book asks questions such as: What is the difference between working in a food factory in the lowlands versus the highlands of Nepal? How is food-processing factory work different from working in a mafia-controlled sand mine? By focusing on such comparisons, the book aims to make a contribution to such comparative labor studies. In contrast to the aforementioned scholarship, it contributes to the marginalized field of comparative labor studies in at least three distinct ways. First, unlike most monographs of industrial labor, the book focuses on four

different industries. This focus on distinct fields—both formal and informal—allows for some interesting comparisons between various sectors of Nepal’s non-agricultural economy. For example, one of the findings in this book suggests that work in “mafia-controlled” sand mines is far more lucrative than work in food-processing factories or large parts of the construction sector (see chapter 7).

Second, the industries discussed have all been built within the last three decades. Most of the industries discussed only began to develop after the end of the civil war and the period of post-conflict uncertainty, the two earthquakes of 2015, and the subsequent six-month blockade of Nepal by India. Thus, an alternative reading of this book is as a way to understand the reconstruction of Nepal after the end of the dictatorship in the *Jana Andolan* of 1990. From this historical perspective, the book provides insights into how both employers and workers deal with the uncertainty caused by larger events. For example, we learn that food-processing companies have turned to priests to realign their factories according to the principle of *Vastu Shastra*, and that workers in sand mines consult spirit mediums to learn the most auspicious date on which to leave the mine and travel abroad in search of better employment prospects.

Third, a comparative view on labor and its politics in both the lowland region and the mid-hills of Nepal allows for a deconstruction of common regional stereotypes. Since the end of the insurgency period, there has been a view of the hills and highlands as being “civilized” while the lowland region—the Tarai—is somehow “wild,” “full of unrest,” and maybe even considered to be “dangerous.” My ethnographic material shows, however, that many of these stereotypes are exaggerations and that the lowlands and highlands have much in common in terms of labor politics and the ways these stereotypes play out within the factories.

Last, a comparative view of labor allows us to make some assertions about the role of political patronage in industries. Chapter 7 of this book, for example, shows how political patronage matters in sand-mining industries. This might be familiar ground to those who are acquainted with South Asian labor politics. Jonathan Parry, for example, shows in his ethnography of mine work outside the steel town of Bhilai that the left must sometimes engage in shady deals with mine owners to advance its cause (Parry 2020). In the last chapter, we see how the new Maoist government of Nepal engages with shady deals of “dons” in the sand mines, while they remain less invested in everyday construction work (see chapter 6). That is

not to say that ideology does not matter anymore in Nepal, but such an analysis allows for a more complex understanding of political patronage in Nepal's industrial and urban labor landscapes.

This book has a twofold ambition. First, it aims to shed light on the labor regimes and forms of inequality found within the emerging industrial landscape and construction industry of Nepal. Examining class-based processes in such industries over the last three decades is important because of the continuing large-scale migration of Nepalis to other places abroad. Second, it highlights the role of unions in such industries and how unions—and their associated middle-class activism—challenge inequalities at work. As a result of this ambition, one of the main insights of this book is that while the working classes are primarily from ethnic indigenous groups, the inequalities among them have been addressed by unions, particularly in the direct aftermath of the “People’s War.” However, the labor union activism that made these gains subsequently faded over the years, and it now takes place only in certain parts of the economy. This book also contains an account of the partiality and spatiality of labor union activism in Nepal. But before elaborating on this, the next section provides a more detailed description of the two towns in which fieldwork was conducted.

The Field Sites: Nepalgunj and Pokhara

Nepalgunj is a border town in the western lowlands of Nepal and ranks among the poorest of Nepal's cities. It is known in the wider area for its predominantly Muslim population, the Madesh uprising in the aftermath of the revolution, and its local community of gold smugglers, who operate across the nearby border with India. It is not a beauty spot, but instead is known for its main artery road strewn with rubbish and lined with shops, businesses, and other half-built concrete buildings, with roads leading off into residential areas on both sides. Undoubtedly, for any visitor, the town has a slightly Wild West atmosphere, where labor migration to faraway places in the Middle East and Malaysia, as well as smuggling and cross-border trade with nearby India, are probably far more important economic activities than industrial labor. Nepalgunj is in Banke, which is one of the five districts in western Nepal where the *kamaiya* system of debt-bonded labor existed until 2000. The town's population is a mixture of groups such as Madheshi and Tharu, who are referred to by others and who also view themselves as Adivasis (literally “original

settlers” or autochthons), along with Hindu and Muslim communities. The town is also known for its trading community and its small industrial corridor along the highway from Nepalgunj to the neighboring city of Kohalpur. It is unique in Nepal for its predominantly Muslim population, and locals refer to the Muslim neighborhood, Eklaini, as a “little Pakistan.” There are many local rumors that the town hosts a few international security specialists who carefully watch the Muslim community and its madrasa schools for any activity by Taliban fighters or other extremist groups.

Pokhara, on the other hand, is in the Kaski district in the mid-western hills of Nepal and ranks among the country’s most developed and prosperous towns. The city has witnessed spectacular growth from a remote village with a few thousand inhabitants in the 1960s to Nepal’s second largest city with an estimated 402,000 inhabitants. Over the same period, the city has developed a massive tourism industry; early foreign tourists were adventurous hippies arriving in town via the famed “magic bus” tours along the hippie trail. Others followed later, and by 2000 an estimated 100,000 tourists came to town every year. One of the most striking elements to a tourist visiting the city is certainly the cleanliness of the streets in Pokhara, which may be unique in Nepal.

Unlike Kathmandu, Pokhara has never been a center of Nepali politics. Its residents engage mainly in tourism, trade, or self-employed businesses, and hail from a large variety of religious, caste, and ethnic backgrounds. In terms of religion, the majority of inhabitants are Hindus, followed by Buddhists, Christians, and Muslims. In terms of caste and ethnicity, the dominant groups are those from the traditional Nepali higher castes, such as Brahmins and Chhetris, as well as those from the Gurung and Magar ethnic communities who reside in rural villages on the town’s outskirts. Throughout the Maoist insurgency – also called the “People’s War” or the “Maoist conflict” – the town was mostly spared from bomb attacks or other spectacular forms of violence that were seen in other Nepali towns such as Tikapur (Hoffmann 2018a) and Nepalgunj (Hoffmann 2018b, 2018c).

One resident described Pokhara as a city “where all kinds of people can live together peacefully. It is like a little Switzerland.” However, the innocent image of ethnic harmony conveyed by such statements has not always been totally accurate. Although there has not been a major violent inter-ethnic conflict as in Nepalgunj, a group of activists from the Gurung ethnic group fought for the establishment and recognition of an autonomous Tamuwan region in the af-

termath of the Maoist revolution. In 2012, activists from this group held a conference in Pokhara,³ which ended with the demand for a separate Gurung state, and in the following years at least one strike was held by Tamuwan activists and a road junction was decorated with Tamuwan insignia. But the activities of Tamuwan activists have been largely forgotten after the restructuring of the Nepalese state into different zones. Few of those who would be old enough to remember the group's activities like to talk about the Tamuwan idea.

Despite the differences between the two sites of my fieldwork—the Agrawal food-processing factory on the outskirts of Nepalgunj and the instant noodle factory at the margins of Pokhara—I discovered an axis of comparison that became more interesting as my work progressed: in both cities, Maoist unions had challenged the distinction between permanent and contract labor over the years. In both cases, the food-processing factories were initially run largely on the basis of casual labor. Later, when the Maoist unions began to organize in the factories and draw members from the already operating unions, the prevailing industrial labor relations were seriously challenged.

Notes on Methodology

Prior to this study, I had already undertaken a larger research project on Maoism and debt-bonded labor in western Nepal (Hoffmann 2018a). Yet my first systematic encounter with the worlds of industrial work was on an initial trip to Nepal while doing research for the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology in April 2013. I visited a hydropower plant bordering the districts of Accham and Dhailekh in the far-western hills of Nepal and soon learned that the construction of the hydropower plant had been stopped due to an alleged Maoist splinter group having ransacked the construction site. The development company then withdrew its workforce from the site. I then moved into the Tarai where I knocked on factories' doors, making inquiries about the possibility of doing research. Several declined to let me conduct any research for my project, but the manager in one food-processing factory was very helpful in my inquiries about industrial development and the new forms of inequalities that emerge from it. Research was carried out in this factory as well as in some adjacent food-processing factories between October 2013 and April 2014, with a short return trip in September and October 2014. This was the first phase of my research into industries and inequalities in

and around the city of Nepalgunj. After carefully reviewing my ethnographic material, I decided to return to Nepal for a second round of fieldwork in October 2018 until April 2019, followed by another short trip between January and March 2020 before I had to leave Nepal due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout these two trips, I decided to focus on industries in Pokhara, a city in the mid-western hills in Nepal.

The reason for this choice was that Pokhara has an industrial area, which hosts food-manufacturing factories. While waiting to gain access to such industries, I was also beginning to investigate labor in the industrial water-bottling plants of the town as well as in the informal economy of the town. In particular, I focused on the construction industry in the city and on the unregulated sand mining that was occurring in the nearby rivers. The latter two industries are closely related, as sand is one of the most essential raw materials needed in the construction industry. While weaving together these different strands of research, I began to understand that all my different research sites were related in one or another important way. First, each of these industries was linked to a growing middle class and their aspirations for modern concrete houses (which require sand), bottled water, and industrially processed foods. Second, while spending time at construction sites I learned that some of the labor in both Pokhara and Nepalgunj hailed from ethnic Tharu villages in the western lowlands of Nepal. In the construction industry I even met two Tharu construction workers who previously worked as debt-bonded laborers in the agricultural fields of Bardiya. Similarly, as chapter 2 will discuss at length, some of the former bonded laborers also worked in the food-processing factory in Nepalgunj.

One challenge in choosing these “multiple” field sites (see Marcus 1995) was my own fears and doubts that the resulting study would be lacking in the depth of ethnographic insight that one would gain from focusing on a single site. In the early phase of this study, I sometimes felt that I should have stuck to one field site and sat out my time like a mole on his hill. Nevertheless, over the course of my fieldwork, I followed the lead of chance encounters and sometimes even my own gut instincts and allowed myself to develop multiple field sites. I increasingly saw this as less of a problem. By engaging in multiple field sites, I could steer my fieldwork back to the margins of the grand anthropological tradition of comparison. Here I want to explicitly emphasize the phrase “to the margins” —not “to the core” —because in this book the anthropological tradition of comparison does not play the role it actually deserves. But it is my hope

that my resulting approach will be an important contribution in advancing the debate toward a comparative analysis of labor.

Second, I must admit that the fact that there has been so little academic attention paid to Nepal's industrial landscapes facilitated and made my own gathering of ethnographic data on the industries in the region more meaningful. Spending time with employers, unionists, and workers in various industries in both the lowlands and the mid-hills produced valuable knowledge and insights that could not otherwise be obtained. The first phase of my fieldwork in the food-processing factories in Nepalgunj gave me a better understanding of workplace dynamics that proved helpful in the second phase of my research in Pokhara. I could often point out differences between work practices and discourses in the lowlands and in the mid-hills, which employers generally found interesting and sometimes even amusing. Over time I also realized that being an outsider from a European country who had gathered some small understanding of Nepali labor relationships helped me facilitate conversations with management at new workplaces. Employers who allowed me to visit their workplaces and spend time with the workers were often keen on engaging in debates comparing the industrial development in Nepal with processes in Europe.

Nevertheless, I do not want to romanticize the challenges of accessing the workplaces that I encountered throughout my fieldwork. During my first trip to the food-processing factories in Nepalgunj, I was only occasionally allowed access to the factory floors within the factory compound. The time I spent on the factory floors helped me gain an understanding of workplace dynamics, but most of my fieldwork was spent outside the factory at tea stalls where I could conduct interviews with workers. In addition, as I visited with management frequently in the beginning and later befriended Maoist unionists on the factory floor, I had to constantly renegotiate the relationships between management, unionists, and workers in the factories near Nepalgunj.

However, my experience in the lowland food-processing factories helped me later in gaining access to the factory in Pokhara. I was now aware that management was more worried about industrial espionage than about uncovering inequalities among workers. Therefore, in my initial interviews with management, I always carefully assured them that I was not interested in sharing sensitive data about the company's technology with third parties. Access to the construction sites and sand mines in Pokhara was surprisingly much easier to obtain. But access to the bottled-water factories proved difficult for

several reasons, mainly related to the small size of the factory setting (see chapter 5). Probably the most challenging point in the fieldwork was when I interviewed workers in a small water-bottling plant outside of Pokhara while the employer sat next to me and prohibited me from asking in a survey about the wages in the factory. However, frequent visits to this and other water-bottling factories allowed me to learn more about both the history and character of the water-bottling industry as well as the dynamics of the factory floor.

In my first months of fieldwork in Nepalgunj, I was fortunate to be able to frequently visit the management of a food-processing factory to discuss many different aspects of work in the factory. Throughout these visits I was also allowed to visit various work areas inside the factory. Initially, a junior manager followed me around, but I was soon allowed to roam more freely inside the factory compound. It turned out that the workers were often too busy to talk while at work, and so as not to disturb their routines, I began to conduct interviews in the tea stall outside the factory gates. To get to know workers better, I initially used a survey to interact with them. With the help of my assistant, I was able to get to know a large part of the workforce inside the factory. There were several individuals who I came to know very well, including some of the Maoist unionists, the contractors of the factory, and some of the workers. For reasons of confidentiality, their personal information has not been revealed in this book. My interest in the lives of workers seemed to be taken as a sign of solidarity, and my previous work with former bonded laborers (see Hoffmann 2018a) allowed me to draw upon my knowledge of the history of the western Tarai region to get workers from the Tharu community engaged in conversations about their current situation. I also visited the houses of former bonded laborers in Bardiya and those of Madheshi workers in the villages nearby.

In the second phase of field research conducted between 2018 and 2020, I divided my time between the food-processing factory in the town's industrial zone, the water-bottling plants outside the zone, the construction sites spread all over the town, and sand mines at a nearby riverbed. The research on construction sites and sand mines began while I was waiting for a permit to enter the water-bottling plants and the food-processing factory in the industrial zone. The personal contacts of my research assistant were very helpful in this process, and they put me in touch with the contractors in the city. I often visited the day labor market in town where casual construction workers hung out in search of employment, and I was able to make friends with some of them. Since the construction industry was

unionized and everyone referred to the union building as the one “near the bus station,” I also visited these offices several times to get an idea of how the construction industry was organized and what labor struggles had been fought over the years.

Because sand is a fundamental part of the construction industry, my research on construction inevitably led to the sand mines that have been dug out of the rivers around Pokhara. Starting in October 2018, I frequently visited a sand mine on the Sethi river, which flows through Pokhara. After about two months, I also visited other sand mines in two villages nearby. Despite the sand mines’ reputation for being run by a mafia, it was surprisingly easy to connect with sand-mine workers, and frequent visits allowed me to form friendships with some of them. Sometimes I had tea with some of the sand miners at a cooking area at the entrance to their dormitory near the river. I also met a contractor at another mine and visited his community to better understand how the contracting system works. In addition, I sometimes visited sand mines near Pokhara in the guise of a “potential investor” to get a better understanding of the going rates for sand and labor in the mines. Such roleplaying seemed to be the only way to get an accurate understanding of the investments behind sand mining.

The role of curiosity in one’s own research topic is often left out of accounts of research methods, but with new research being conducted on the role of emotion in ethnographic knowledge production (Davies and Spencer 2010), it is worth mentioning. While the general assumption seems to be that anthropologists are always curious about their topic, my own experience in the field proved to be different in retrospect. While doing my fieldwork, I realized that I tended to get most interested in the experiences and discourses surrounding different forms of work after I had made a visit to a workplace. It was at this point that I could understand the basic organization of the work, and when the more productive research questions evolved, that shaped the post-fieldwork writing of this book. For example, when I was told by Maoist unionists that they had indeed given out permanent contracts to the casual workforce, I was eager to follow up and double-check with other actors such as management, workers, and state authorities in the field. In another instance, when I realized that work in the sand mines outside of Pokhara is organized by so-called dons, my curiosity in sand miners was raised sharply.

Certainly, the underlying structure of curiosity is shaped by one’s journey through the academic institutions and by the people with whom one meets and works. In this sense, I believe that academic

curiosity is not an individual affair but rather is socially produced by one's own history in academia. This is not to belittle my own achievements but to honestly acknowledge the influence of other academic "curiosity seekers" in shaping the course of my research. For example, the work with the Max Planck Institute group on comparing rates of permanent versus casual labor shaped the research focus of the first part of this book. The stay at re:work in Berlin, where I worked with many historians, led me later to pay more attention to local histories of industry, for example in the local construction industry in Pokhara. I also realized throughout my second period of fieldwork that staying away from social media and email accounts was productive to stimulating my own curiosity while conducting fieldwork. These heightened and lowered forms of curiosity are a part of anthropological fieldwork, and how one's own research curiosity is shaped by wider institutional frameworks in addition to the fieldwork itself remains a topic of future anthropological exploration.

Map of the Book

This book is an account of a segment of Nepal's new industrial and urban working classes. It focuses on those working in modern industrial food-processing factories, water-bottling plants, urban construction sites, and sand mines. It depicts a situation in which a particular group of people has emerged as a working population that silently operates behind the scenes of the country's rapid urbanization process. The Nepali industrial and urban working classes, which hardly existed a few decades ago, are currently taking new shape(s); new divisions between permanent and casual laborers as well as the interplay between ethnicity, caste, and gender are key to understanding the formation of these emerging working classes. The broader political context in which the working classes form must also be considered. At the same time, while Nepal's industrial and urban working classes are emerging, the country finds itself drawn into wider labor markets in distant places like the Middle East and Southeast Asia. Uneven development between countries, as well as between different regions and cities within a country, begins to impinge on the value of work and on the ways people see their personal circumstances and futures. We can only make sense of modern Nepal and its future if we begin to understand the dialectical context in which modern working classes respond to broader forces of uneven development.

Chapter 1, besides serving as an introduction to the urban context of the study, zooms in to observe the industrial food-processing factories that have sprung up on the margins of the urban municipality of Nepalgunj. We examine how working classes are divided between permanent and casual labor, and how Maoist union activism has distinctly shaped the new working class in the food industry. Chapter 2 provides a detailed description of those who were left out of union activism, while chapter 3 shows how religion functions to legitimize the emerging division between permanent and casual labor—thus opening a window into the everyday lives of workers outside of their workplace. Drawing on these chapters' insight that the post-revolutionary political context has fundamentally shaped the course of class formation in the lowland region of Nepal, chapter 4 maps out how Maoist union activism has been equally important in the formation of class in a modern food-processing factory on the edges of Pokhara. Why, for example, have unions been so successful in organizing workers in the modern food-processing industry? Why has their initial enthusiasm and authority declined in the post-conflict context? Answers to such questions are explored in chapter 4. Chapter 5 turns away from the food-processing factories and begins to examine labor in the water-bottling plants in Pokhara and the Kaski district. Here we encounter a working class that is highly gendered and ethnicized, and that has not seen much of the union activism observed in the food industries. The chapter explores the reasons for this absence of union activism and aims to capture a more nuanced picture of the impact of Maoism on manufacturing industries more generally.

Chapter 6 begins to move beyond the factory gates into the informal urban economy of Pokhara. It focuses on the construction workers in the city, the interplay of class, ethnicity, and gender, and the failure of unions to organize workers more substantially in the construction economy. Finally, chapter 7 moves into the sand mines that have been dug out of nearby riverbanks and examines the conditions of work in this lucrative industry. It further explores the themes of class formation and class politics in relation to new forms of uneven development, as well as the uncertainties that emerge from these changes. An understanding of the situation of labor in both the industrial and urban working environments leads to a key argument of the book: that Nepal's industrial and urban working classes have been profoundly shaped by broader political economies and uneven developments in the region.

Notes

1. Pandey's critique concerned the original Nepali version, which was published as *Binod Chaudhary: Atmakatha* (Nepalaya, Kathmandu, 2013).
2. Binod Chaudhary describes the relationship between industrialists and the royal family as follows: "We would invest the capital and do all the work, and the royal palace would stake a claim for a majority of the shares. They would fix their share ratio themselves and 'grant' the remaining share to us. The prevalent ratio was 49:51—49 per cent for the real investor and 51 per cent for the Palace. Anyone who would not accept such a deal was better off packing his bags and leaving the country" (2016:108).
3. This only relates to national politics. In terms of ethnic politics, Pokhara became the center of the Tamuwan movement. For example, according to one publication: "A Three-Day Conference of Indigenous Nationalities Held from 29 April in the City of Pokhara in Western 'Tamuwan' Region Concluded Yesterday Issuing a 12-Point 'Tamuwan' Declaration," <https://aippnet.org/nepal-indigenous-nationalities-comprehensive-conference-concludes-with-a-12-pointdeclaration/>.