

“SISTERS AND DAUGHTERS OF BABURAM BHATTARAI”: GENDERED DEVELOPMENT AND SELF-ACTUALIZATION IN NEPAL

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When women from Gorkha district, Nepal want to emphasize their fierceness, power or pride, many invoke a relation to a fellow Gorkhali of national renown, Maoist leader Baburam Bhattarai. This paper examines the values and conditions that underlie rural Nepali women's understandings of — and aspirations for — democracy, development and self-actualization in the context of three decades of intensive women-targeted development, the current Maoist rebellion and the resultant civil war.

Drawing on ethnographic interviews and survey data collected at the height of the conflict, between 2001 and 2005, I argue that rural Gorkhali women conceive of freedom, justice and “the good life” in ways that are deeply gendered and socially-shaped — and that these values are critical to understanding any form of transformative action that they or other Nepali women may or may not undertake, be the aim political, social or economic change. This conclusion poses a challenge to liberal feminist and Marxist theories of women’s empowerment alike, both of which treat economic relations between socially unspecified individuals as the underlying motor of gender equality and thus regard “culture” as an obstacle to women’s freedom — a recalcitrant, regressive force that self-actualizing women must overcome. Beyond this, it also raises broader questions about theories of social action that begin from an analytical focus on production: Is this really the best way to understand Gorkhali women’s practices of self-actualization or does the case call for an entirely new paradigm? Can work be separated from other forms of sociability? Theories of empowerment that rely on non-gendered, a-cultural assumptions about economic rationality can neither explain the widespread politicization of rural women that the Maoist movement has inspired, nor reveal what values and forms of personhood truly govern political, social and/or economic empowerment as it is envisioned and actualized by Gorkhali women today.

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