

GETTING INTO AND OUT OF POVERTY: AN EXPLORATION OF POVERTY DYNAMICS IN EASTERN TARAI, NEPAL

Suresh Dhakal

Introduction

Poverty is a “culturally and historically variable notion” (Rahnema 1997: 69), which is “complex and multidimensional” (Khan 2001). For Mohan, “Poverty is a product of systemic inequalities sustained by a predatory culture” (2011: 3); therefore, it has a political face. Hence, considering its ambiguity and subjectivity, Pieterse rhetorically puts “poverty is in the eye of the beholder” (2001: 100). However, the “mainstream approach” of identifying poverty is to specify a cut-off “poverty line,” where people below the “defined level of income” are diagnosed as “poor” (Sen 1995: 102). Similarly, Hulme and Shepherd (2003) define poor from the perspective of policy makers who define the poor as those individuals who have not been integrated into the market economy; and that is, too, from an “outsiders perspective” (Webster and Engberg-Pedersen 2002: 2). It is generally estimated that about half of the poor are always “in transition” (Kottak 2006: 456), hence understanding the “characteristic of poverty,” for example, “the cause of poverty and the social mechanism through which poverty persists” has become “evermore complex” (Mosse 2010: 1156).

Generally, those households who experience poverty and deprivation for prolonged periods are defined as “chronically poor” and those who move into and out of poverty are the “transient poor” (Hulme and Shepherd 2003: 403). This paper tries to explore the complex mechanisms of getting in and out of poverty over one’s own lifetime.

This study intends neither to measure poverty nor set any poverty line based on the findings. It also escapes the anthropologically favored question of how different cultures define poverty, probably in radically different ways. Nevertheless, understanding why and how a particular household or households get into or out of poverty may have implications in effectively targeting the poor and vulnerable in policy formulation.

With the help of prolonged and repeated interviews with 40 individuals representing 40 families from the Morang district of east Nepal, this paper

illustrates how a particular household escapes or falls into poverty. What enables or prevents an individual household to escape chronic poverty? What are the major pathways to get out of poverty? This paper also looks into whether the larger structural context or an individual agency is more important in escaping poverty. By doing so, we attempt to explore the “social relation of poverty,” that is through a “relational approach to poverty” (Mosse 2010: 1158), by locating poverty into a broader context. In this study, we have considered the household as a single economic unit.

Based on empirical evidences and following the notion of Bourdieu’s (1986) ‘forms of capital’ and possible transactions among them, this paper argues that the dynamics of poverty, a process of accumulating, maintaining and utilizing the different forms of capital to gain more economic capital, and reinvesting the economic capital to accumulate and enhance other forms of capital, or vice versa is a multidimensional process. The constant transaction between economic capital and other forms of capital gives motion to poverty dynamics.

The paper is broadly divided into three sections. The first section describes the background, concepts and methods of the study. The second section presents the findings and discussions. The third section draws conclusions following the analysis of the findings.

Poverty, a Multidimensional Social Reality and Anthropological Challenges

It is common among economists to define poverty in terms of income as a major indicator of poverty (since income can be used to buy food, clothing, etc.), which, however, has been criticized from within in the recent decades (Sen 1995). Generally, poverty is a condition where people are unable to eat, go to school, or have any access to health care, regardless of their income. The UN’s World Summit on Social Development, the ‘Copenhagen Declaration,’ maintained poverty as “...a condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information” (UN 1996: 38). Some would even argue also to include lack of political influence as one of the conditions of poverty (see, Banik 2006; Mosse 2010). The term poverty therefore is a multidimensional concept and a complex phenomenon which is difficult to define.

Sociologists often define poverty as a “social problem” and separate the categories of “absolute poverty,” “relative poverty” and “subjective

poverty” (Haralambos 1998: 140). According to Haralambos (1998), “absolute poverty,” often known as “subsistence poverty,” is concerned with establishing the quality and amount of food, shelter and clothing deemed necessary for a healthy life; that is, the definition is based on the assessment of minimum subsistence requirements. It is usually measured by pricing the basic necessities of life, drawing a poverty line in terms of this price, and defining poor as those whose income falls below the figure. This definition, however, fails to incorporate the idea of ‘basic cultural needs’ such as education, security, leisure, recreation, and so on.

“Absolute poverty” is apparently another version of income poverty, where a household’s income is compared to an absolute income poverty line (Haralambos 1998: 140). The World Bank considers a person poor “if his or her consumption or income level falls below some minimum level necessary to meet basic needs.”¹ Similarly, the Chronic Poverty Research Centre (CPRC) states that if absolute poverty is extended for certain duration, it is characterized as “chronic poverty.”²

Usually, “relative poverty” is measured in terms of “judgments by members of a particular society of what is considered a reasonable and acceptable standard of living and style of life according to the conventions of the day” (Haralambos 1998: 143). Hence, it is fluid and changes according to the needs and demand of the changing society. In our case, ethnicity, class, age, religion, region, etc. may impact judgments of reasonable living standards. In such a case, comparison of the poor in the same society over time becomes complicated. The poor are no longer a homogenous group.

In the case of the idea of relative poverty also, the notion of ‘lack’ or ‘deficiency’ remains as one of the major defining denominators. This in fact complicates the concept of relativity, for example, “when poor is defined as lacking a number of things necessary to life, the question could be asked: what is necessary and for whom? And, who is qualified to define all that?” (Rahnema 1997: 213).

Haralambos puts forward the idea of “subjective poverty” where “a formerly wealthy individual reduced by circumstances to a modest lower-middle-class income and life style may feel poor but other members of society

¹ See, <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/EXTPA/0,,contentMDK:22397595~pagePK:210058~piPK:210062~theSitePK:430367,00.html>; accessed 15 June 2015.

² See, www.chronicpovertyresearch.org/; accessed 15 June 2015.

may not regard him as such. Conversely, individuals and groups judged in terms of majority standard to be in poverty may not see themselves as poor” (1998: 143). The concept of subjective poverty thus appears to be useful as people act in terms of the way they perceive and define themselves. Majid Rahnema however sees poverty as “a myth, a construct, and the invention of a particular civilization” (1997: 215–216). These discussions further lead us to accept poverty as real, but a concept rather than a fact. Rahnema (1997: 213–215) postulated four dimensions of poverty: the materiality; the subject’s own perceptions of his condition; how the others view the poor and SPIMs (socio-cultural space-time) affecting various perceptions of poverty.

Hence, poverty is a ‘constructed’ notion where one’s own perception and others’ subjective points of view is counted. Materiality provides us the objective criteria to measure poverty, which however is also affected by socio-cultural and space-time factors.

Anthropologists instead studied similar phenomenon applying concepts such as marginality and development (see, de Sardan 2005). Lewis (1966) argued that “poverty was not simply a question of economic deprivation and social disorganization, but generated a way of life with its own features of strategy and order” (quoted in Scupin and DeCourse 2009: 568). Mosse’s work on “social relations of poverty” where, focusing on India, he argues that “persisting poverty can be viewed as a consequence of the exclusionary and expropriating aspects of long-term process of capitalist transformation;” but he also cautiously puts that “exploitation that impoverishes is equally embedded in, and reproduced by, social process which have their own logic” (Mosse 2010: 156–157). Here he seems to collaborate with the ‘substantivist-formalist debate,’ where he establishes human economy, poverty being an aspect of it, is an ‘instituted process’ (Polanyi 1958). However, Mosse’s (2010) “relational approach to durable poverty” is more relevant in analyzing the poverty dynamics in the study area of my research for it shares so many commonalities with Mosse’s ethnographic context.

Anthropologists used to talk about the ‘culture of poverty’ that was particularly developed in situations of rapid social change, but when in existence it acquired a considerable stability as it was passed on from generation-to-generation (Seymour-Smith 1986). People having a sense of fatalism, apathy and hopelessness with respect to aspirations for economic or social mobility maintained the ‘culture of poverty’ (Lewis 1966 in Haralambos 1998; Scupin and DeCourse 2009), and they are “not very future

oriented” (Lewis 1966, quoted in Haralambos 1998: 154). Thus, poverty and hopelessness were perpetuated from generation to generation, which economists would call ‘persistent poverty’ (Khan 2001). However, this has been vehemently criticized as a way of “blaming the victims” (Scupin and DeCourse 2009: 568), as it gives us a “comforting fatalism and excuse for inaction” (Wilk 1996: 126). Critics argued that the ‘culture of poverty’ is not perpetuated from generation to generation, and one should rather look at the political-economic structure and socioeconomic factors. Poverty is perceived differently in different societies, as it is culturally specific too. But, the “social processes” like “boundary making” and “exclusion” that give particular importance to the “identity” and “social categorization” make the poverty and inequality durable (Mosse 2010: 1162–1163).

Since anthropologists were preoccupied with the notion of ‘culture of poverty,’ they ignored the ‘agency’ aspect of individuals. Consequently, strategic decision making by the poor that are crucial for upward or downward mobility has not been adequately researched. Above all, Wilk (1996: 126) argued, “if the problem is social inequality, land distribution, wrong technology, bad management or inefficient markets, then poverty can be overcome.”

In Nepal’s context, poverty dynamics with an anthropological lens is unconventional and underutilized. This paper, therefore, tries to fill that gap to some extent, and we hope to contribute to a new tradition of anthropological study of poverty in Nepal’s context.

Methods of Study and Analyses

Information used in this paper was collected using the life history method (Angrosino 2002), capturing the contextual and historical details attributed to the poverty dynamics of selected households. 40 household heads were purposively selected from three Village Development Committees (VDCs), namely, Letang, Motipur and Kadmaha of Morang district of east Nepal. These three VDCs represent the three tiers of ecological segments stretching from north to south. The social composition also varies accordingly. Letang lies in the northern *pahāḍī* (hill) belt, therefore, all the households selected from the VDC are *pahāḍes*, that is the people of hill origin. Motipur lies in the middle, and has mixed population representing both of hill and Tarai origin. Kadmaha lies in the southern stretch and all the selected households represent the population of Tarai origin. Households thus selected included

households that moved into poverty, out of poverty and were relatively stable. However, we do not claim that our sample represents the entire region.

It is important but not easy to know more precisely, what ‘factors’ are associated with escape from poverty or descend into it (Krishna 2006). There was no panel/baseline data for comparison and therefore we had to rely on information gathered through the recall method. However, the poverty level of the entire eastern Tarai region, Morang being a part of the same region, has declined from 37.2 percent in 1995 to 22.2 percent by 2010 (Hatlebakk and Ringdal 2013). The methodology enabled us to explore people’s perception and understanding of the complex and dynamic realities of their lives, as we focused on exploring the informants’ actual and lived experiences: how did they manage or cope with poverty and related external factors, including government policy and the development of physical and social infrastructure, which could not have been revealed by standardized surveys only.

Selected informants were interviewed for a prolonged period and in some cases repeatedly. Repeated interviews helped also to validate the previously collected information. The information from the main informants was verified also with others during several formal and informal conversations. Therefore, in-depth interview was the main tool of information collection. Information thus collected was supplemented by observations and conversations with relevant others in the informal sessions.

As an approach to select the households, we spent a few initial days in the villages; research objectives were shared with the interested villagers, so that they could suggest at least a few cases as required. Then, snowball sampling method (Bernard 2011) was followed to get the required number of cases. Households were selected following some objective as well as some subjective parameters. This was to gain a more embedded perspective on poverty and poverty dynamics. For this we adopted Bourdieu’s (1986) formulation of forms of capitals.

Bourdieu believed in a broad interdisciplinary-based human science whose goal was to reintroduce capital “in all its forms and not only in the one form which is recognized by economic theory” (Bourdieu 1986: 241). Thus, it becomes possible to outline the ‘practice’ of the social worlds as directed not only towards the acquisition of economic capital but of all forms of capital. He recognized four different forms of capital, economic, social, cultural and symbolic, or symbolic-cultural in one (Bourdieu 1986: 241).

While analyzing the information, we looked into how one form of capital converts and/or converges into another, and eventually to economic capital. Conversion takes place in the course of ‘exchange,’ through which ‘values’ arises (Simmel in Graeber 2001). Bourdieu (1986: 241) continues, “the different types of capital can be derived from economic capital,” the primary determinant of the state of poverty and/or wellbeing. Therefore, exploring the roles of these four forms of capital and transaction between them in determining the level of poverty or wellbeing of an individual will provide the basic framework of analysis. In the meantime, as Mosse (2010) suggested, analyses also consider the political system, their discourses and the terms of inclusion or exclusion, a ‘relational’ approach to poverty. By the relational approach, citing Wood (2003) he means, “people are poor because of others...unable to control future events because others have more control over them” (Mosse 2010: 1158).

In and Out of Poverty: Findings and Analysis

Among 40 informants included in this study, 21 were able to move out of poverty, six of them had become poorer and the rest 13 did not experience much mobility. There were a few cases where they saw several vicissitudes over the years but they eventually settled where they were before. Hulme and Shepherd (2003) define such a state as ‘transient poverty,’ where households who experience poverty and deprivation for prolonged periods are chronically poor and those who move into and out of poverty (temporary) are the transient poor.

The process of moving into or out of poverty was facilitated or obstructed by the availability or lack of different forms of capitals, namely, economic, social, cultural and symbolic (often cultural-symbolic are combined into one). Despite the fact that poverty is primarily manifested in terms of lack of economic capital, it is not independent of other forms of capital. In the following paragraphs, the major factors that have large roles to play in poverty dynamics are discussed.

Land, the Prime Asset, and the Poverty Dynamics

Land transaction is the major form of asset transfer in the study area. Among the Tharus and *Madhesi*,³ in addition to buying and selling, marriage is one

³ *Madhesi* is the collective name for people of the Tarai/plains origin in the southern part of the country.

of the major mechanisms of land transaction. It is common among them to gift a piece of land to daughters on their marriage in the form of dowry. Such land remains as her private property, which later on helps many Tharu families to start a nuclear family following family partition.

Likewise, inheritance is the non-competitive but most common form of land transaction. This means children of landed parents have guaranteed access to land, and have thus better chances of doing better in terms of enhancing the wellbeing of the households, often by exploring unconventional pathways for further betterment.

A 57-year-old Tharu man of Motipur now cultivates 5.5 *bighās* (1 *bighā* = 6772.63 m²) of land; he had inherited four *bighās* of land as parental property and got four more *bighās* as dowry. He later had to sell some of the land for his daughters' marriage; three more daughters and a son are studying in colleges in Biratnagar. He clarified, "Had I not owned land, it could have been difficult for me to manage all these." He was a son of a landlord, therefore, he married a girl from another landlord family. He managed to arrange his daughter's marriage to a well-off family. Hence, being a big landowner he could extend his kin networks to other landed families.

There is a clear distinction between people of hill origin and plains origin in particular when it comes to accumulating or losing the land. The hill migrants of the study area acquired land by various means, including by clearing forest, a popular colloquial term for which is *jhoḍā phaḍānī*. The pattern shows that most of the hill migrants were first or second generation settlers in the area. Most of them had a single strategy to accumulate more and more land as a source of livelihood. They largely succeeded in doing so which led to a better and more prosperous life compared to the past and compared to other neighbors. In addition, those who could keep the land and thus benefitted from the produce were the ones who were able to finance education, money lending, migration and other businesses, and thus eventually moved up in the wellbeing ladder. Hill 'high caste' households were found doing this efficiently.

However, Tharus have a strong belief that land is the only security in old age, but many of them now own less than what they inherited. A 70-year-old Tharu widow from Motipur-6 feels secure as she still holds enough land. Following the death of her husband, she inherited ten *bighās* of land in a prime location of the VDC. She had 11 children. She sold five *bighās* for her children's marriages and now she owns five *bighās*. She can meet all

expenses with the surplus production. In addition, she makes *raksi* to sell; her daughter-in-laws also help her with this. Hence, even though she is a single woman, she never felt insecure as she owned land in her own name.

In the same vicinity, cases of downward mobility following the loss of land were reported. One respondent recalls, “Our grandfather had 75 *bighās* of land, now I live here as a daily wage earner. I have only a few *katthās* [1 *katthā* = 338.63 m²] of land left.” His story was mentioned by many as an example of how a descendant of a big landlord turned nearly landless.

Two major reasons observed for decreased amount of landownership are family partition and selling of land for various purposes. Indebtedness is one of the major reasons for which households sell their land. Some Tharu respondents reported that they mortgaged the land, but could not repay the loan on time, and eventually had to sell the land. Most of the loan was sought for financing labor migration to Malaysia or Gulf countries. They also mortgaged or sold the land to meet expenses for cultural and social obligations and, in some cases, for medical expenses. A Magar man, 53, of Motipur had to sell the land his father had accumulated in order to meet the expenses for the treatment of his father and wife who had suffered from chronic illnesses.

One Tharu elderly man from Motipur remarked:

When these hill people first came here, they did not know how to plow, as they were not used to farm in the plain, now they are champion compared to us. They started with a small plot of land; in some years, they were able to accumulate land to become big landowners. [In the past], land was not as important as it is today. We sold our land, we became poorer.

Thus, land is an effective and functional primary instrument for determining poverty vis-à-vis prosperity of a household. Land transaction therefore is one of the major processes of asset transfers from one person/family to another. The empirical cases illustrated that the access to and ownership of land has remained essential in explaining the poverty dynamics of any household.

We observed four processes of land transactions in the study area. First, inheritance of land as a parental property; second, receiving land as a form of dowry from bride’s family; third, receiving land as a *mohiyāni hak* (tenant’s right), which one could exercise legally – but no longer applicable – and was one of the common forms of transfer of ownership of land; and the fourth, buying and selling of land. In addition, indebtedness leading to mortgaging

of land was also observed as a common process where the debtor eventually loses the land to the lender. In a few cases, acquiring public land, usually by clearing forest or occupying fallow land, was also reported.

The observations suggested that the more land one has, the more he/she accumulates social prestige, connections and social power, which in turn can be instrumental in accumulating economic capital. More land allows a particular household to maintain cliental or patronage relationships, and to enhance one's social prestige and power. The household can have comparatively better access to financial resources by selling surpluses, mortgaging the land or by selling it, which they invest in social ceremonies and education of the children.

Education and Escaping the Poverty

Unanimous to all sites across all social and economic classes, investment in education was considered as an important avenue necessary for increasing human capability and for upward mobility. All households, except a few, gave investing in children's education high priority as it enables an individual to compete for alternative and better paying opportunities. Several examples were cited to illustrate how education helped to get access to new sources of income; through information and access to the job market, in particular. Education was interpreted as one of the reliable vehicles for upward mobility, to get out of the 'culture of poverty,' in particular.

In recent years, due to government policies and programs, coupled with nongovernment organizations' (NGOs) interventions to promote child education, the net enrolment has increased considerably. However, they also remarked, "education alone cannot be sufficient, as one has to have *āphno mānche* (one's own person) to pick him/her up and put in the right place." For them, education is basic but not sufficient to do better in life. However, emphasis on children's education was uniform and consistent across all villages and social groups.

Mr Yadav, 36, a schoolteacher at the government school of Kadmaha is a commonly referred example to illustrate how education helps in building human capital and then bringing prosperity in one's life. Yadav, who also owns a private school and is considered to be one of the prosperous persons in the village, hailed from a poor family who could hardly afford to put him in school. But with the support from the then head teacher of the school and his own hard labor he not only completed high school but also received higher

education. Mr Mandal, 52, a neighbor of Yadav, commented, “It was very dramatic, I had never seen such a big change in a time span of 10–20 years; education is the only thing he had.” Yadav is now well connected with scores of people of all walks of life due to the qualification and capitals he now has.

Dev Narayan of Kadmaha was probably the first person to pass the SLC exam from the Bantar (a Dalit) community. He passed the SLC exams in 1989. He remained landless forever. He had been living in public land with his fellow Bantars. For a living, he sells readymade garments in different *hatiyās*, the weekly markets. He says, “I am not making much money that I can invest in land, however, I am earning enough to support my family. I can send my children to school.” He believes that education enabled him to learn skills and explore new possibilities. “Education gave me the confidence. If I fail in this venture, I will go for another one. I won’t give up easily.”

It is a common concern now in the village to be able to send their children to school, and for those who can afford, to private school. Informants on several occasions across the villages consistently maintained that education is the key to upward mobility. However, a good number of children from Dalit and marginal families are still out of school. Despite the fact that school education is free and there are scholarships for Dalit children, many were not in schools. Some Bantar families in Kadmaha living on public land and surviving on daily wages maintained that neither their children wanted to go to school nor were they forcing them to. A Bantar man, 50, said, “We are alive so far even if we did not have education, and so will they. What poor people like us can achieve with education? Instead [of going to school], they will look after the household chores.” Bourdieu (1986) characterized such ‘embodied state’ as a form of cultural capital, which has an established link with the economic capital, mediated through time.

It is not surprising that children from economically poor families are excluded from the school education. What is surprising is they were still not keenly interested in sending their children to school, but not for purely personal reasons; rather some ‘structural reasons’ were in place. Our observation in this respect corresponds with Krishna’s (2006: 285) observations in Indian villages, where he found that “education was not a significant aspiration.” Narayan and Kapoor (2005: 6), therefore stressed the need for “a change in opportunity structure within which poor people can pursue their interest.”

Social Networks and Kinship as a Pathway Out of Poverty

Social capital – “a feature of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust” (Putnam 1993: 177) – is the “aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (Bourdieu 1986: 246), “captured only by social relations” (Lin2001: 6); therefore, a “linking, bonding and bridging capital” (Li 2007: 244). Hence, “One does not acquire or squander social capital on the basis of individual choice (the agency driven); rather, one accrues obligation and opportunity to participate in social networks by virtue of one’s social position” (Rankin 2004: 6). However, cases suggested that some used it in more beneficial ways than others.

Mr Chhetri, 63, from Letang, now a successful entrepreneur, started it all from scratch. Traversing through several ups and down, he got into business, and continued despite several shocks and failures. He is now a successful businessperson, in addition to being a political cadre and social worker. His youngest daughter did her MA, is married to an agricultural scientist, and is currently living in the US. The youngest son is a medical doctor, MD, working in one of the medical colleges and is married to a daughter of a Communist Party of Nepal-Unified Marxist Leninist leader of Morang district.

His neighbors remarked,

Mr Chhetri had connections with *influential* people and he was good in maintaining such relations. He was well connected with political leaders and businesspersons, and he was good in utilizing all these networks. His networks and the trust he had gained remained instrumental in his prosperity.

He himself accepted that his connection with politically influential and affluent people remained instrumental in his earlier days. Then, he extended his network up to one of the former prime ministers of Nepal. He joined politics as a member of one of the communist parties of Nepal, which gave him a new height as a politician too, which eventually helped expand his network further, and eventually his business. Hence, in his case, primarily it was the social capital he had that led him to an economically affluent life.

There were a few such cases where established social networks actually worked as social safety nets, and then served as an opportunity ladder, as in the cases of other South Asian societies (see, e.g., Kabeer 2002; Rahaman,

Matsui and Ikemoto 2013). A distinct form of such social capital is the kinship network. Similarly, *āphno mānche*, one's own person, most often referring to their close kin and relatives, is always considered as the key to get access to any resources, including jobs. As Bista explains, *āphno mānche* is the term to designate “one's inner circle of associates – it means ‘one's own peoples’ and refer to those who can be approached whenever need arises” (1991: 98).

Kinship in the study area, as elsewhere, consists of two major types: affinal (established by marriage), called *iṣṭa-mitra*; and consanguineal or lineal, known as *āphanta*. Marital relations are usually established in nearby areas, but since clan exogamy is strictly followed, such networks extend to villages and districts further afield as well. Married daughters have strong relations with the natal home (*māitī*). A third type of relationship, unique to Nepal, is *mit* or *miterī* relationship.⁴ In addition, patron-client relationship also creates strong social networks. People within these networks are collectively called as *āphno mānche*. These relationships are often tied emotionally, economically, socially and culturally, and have instrumental significance since they form part of the ‘social capital’ of the individuals involved. Kinship network is maintained through reciprocity of cash, labor, goods, services and honor, and is reproduced through rituals and cultural practices.

The support and cooperation from *āphno mānche*, in one form or the other, has much to do with the cases of upward mobility. Interviewees felt good sharing about the fact that they had *āphno mānche* to help them out in getting a job or to begin some new venture, which proved fruitful in lifting them up economically, too.

We interviewed three brothers (51, 42 and 40 years) from the same parents. The eldest is the chairman of the irrigation committee, who has maintained good social-political connections. His son is a contractor and has good connections with businesspersons and government officials. The middle brother runs a pharmacy in the village, and is therefore known as a ‘doctor’ in the locality. He earns well, has kept his land intact, and is involved

⁴ *Mit* or *miterī* relationship is a form of fictive kinship common but unique to many parts of the country. These relationships are emotionally, economically, socially, and culturally tied, and often have instrumental significance since it forms part of the ‘social capital’ of the individuals involved. This is the only kinship type that can be established across the castes/ethnicities, i.e., a ‘high-caste’ Brahman can have *miterī* relationship with a Dalit. Such relation is established through certain ritual process, which, however, is varied across space.

in moneylending. The youngest is also a moneylender who has maintained a good social network. He keeps poultry and his wife runs a small shop where she also has a tailoring job. They have rented out the land on a sharecropping basis. The brothers have a good understanding amongst themselves and they stated that they want each of them to do well in his respective place. “We do not interfere in each other’s work, but whenever needed, we back each other up. It is for the pride of our family. After all, *āphno mānche* is *āphno mānche*,” the youngest one explained.

In several interviews, people unanimously maintained that one needs *āphno mānche* to access opportunities. *Āphno mānche* often functions as a catalyst to make better utilization of other capabilities of an individual. Many of the informants who experienced downward mobility during their lifetime reiterated that they did not have *āphno mānche* in place. “If our own people had been in place, they could have saved us,” believes Mr Khan of Motipur, who lost all his property and became poor within two decades.

It is commonly perceived that the *Jana jātis*, in contrast to the high castes, have better social safety nets. However, this study revealed that Brahman and Chhetris cooperate better whenever they are in need. Many Brahmans and Chhetris reported that they could get loans from their relatives and kin in the time of need. However, those who could not perform well and became poorer than they were before, reported that they had no one to support them. In sum, we found that Brahmans and Chhetris are doing better in utilizing their social networks, compared to other social groups. So there appears to be a contrast between social networks as safety nets and social networks that are used for upward mobility.

Infrastructural Development and Hill to Tarai Migration

Government policies and development interventions by governmental and non government organizations (NGOs) may have played roles in improving the lives of the people. However, it is not easy to decipher how it actually works in everyday lives of ordinary people. Mr Bhandari, 53, a successful farmer of Letang, primarily spends his time in his farmyard and with business dealings. He was the first one to start commercial vegetable farming in the village. He narrated his story of success to us.

Some 20 years ago, an NGO came to the village to promote commercial vegetable farming. Many did not listen to the NGO person, a few attended the meeting but

only a couple of us were interested. I was curious. I thought they could provide some alternatives to our almost barren land. And, I followed them. In the following year, the District Development Committee (DDC) constructed an irrigation canal, which encouraged us to do better, and I in fact did better. Then, others began to follow me. Market was still a problem. We had to carry the products to Letang Bazaar. Crossing the river to get to the bazaar was not the only difficulty, sales and prices were always unpredictable. Thanks to the DDC, they opened a track to connect this place to the highway, and traders began to come to collect our products here.

When the village got electricity a few years back, they started a milk collection center. Farmers are encouraged to do integrated farming system there. They grow major grains, vegetable, keep cattle and many houses in this village have biogas plants installed. Hence, due to the physical infrastructure development, the villagers were able to carve out various pathways out of relative poverty.

Our observations also suggested that all households of a given village couldn't benefit equally from development interventions. The spatial location of houses and the land also played important roles. Prices of household plots and other land near the main road went up dramatically. In addition, the rent of such houses and land created new opportunities to those households, whereas other houses did not benefit equally.

Following the infrastructure development along with the eradication of malaria in the plains in 1950s and 60s, hill to Tarai migration became common. In 1964, the government introduced land reform program and subsequently land survey was undertaken. This facilitated a stream of migration to the plains, where the migrants cleared forests and settled; some bought land at a low price from those who possessed land above the ceiling.⁵ Those who owned more than the ceiling feared that their land would be confiscated. Therefore, some of them sold land at a low price; some distributed land among relatives and *haruwās*, usually the plowmen, who are basically the 'unfree agricultural laborers' (Dhakal 2007). A few even donated to different trusts and educational institutions.

Many of them, mostly hill Brahmins and Chhetris, reported upward mobility. Had they not migrated to Tarai they would not have accessed the

⁵ According to the Land Reform Act 1964, the land ceiling for the Tarai region was 25 *bighās* for agricultural land and one and three *bighās* as residential land in urban and rural areas respectively.

productive resources there and therefore would not have invested in the education of their children and would not have achieved what they had.

Hence, clearing *jhorā*, “the area in which settlement has taken place and which has been cultivated after clearing the forest with authority obtained legally,” was the biggest attraction for many of the hill migrants.⁶ Mr Khanal, 63, a Brahman of Budhbare, Letang came to this place simply because he had information that the land was cheaper here, and once one buys some land near to jungle areas, he could always clear some jungle, annex it to his private land and cultivate it. This was what he did, and later in 1980s when there was a land survey, he registered all the land, and thus legally owned the land. This was not an isolated case rather this was a general pattern among hill migrants to the inner Tarai foothills.

Khanal’s family actually migrated to the plains to get out of the difficulties living in the hills. Access to the market and information, education for the children, everything was better here than in the hills. They made use of those opportunities. The nation’s land policy, availability of resources, and access to information were the factors that helped Khanal’s family to move upward.

Mr Niroula migrated to Motipur. Though Motipur is on the plains, it was still a remote village at that time. It took a day’s walk to get to Biratnagar, the district headquarters. Niroula started cultivating land, which was covered with tall reeds. He was eventually able to register four *bighās* of land in the *Phaḍānī*, an area officially opened for land clearing; the biggest achievement for him was to educate his four sons. Now, all have government jobs. They still live in a joint family and also own a house in Kathmandu.

There are still some households in Kadmaha, and a few in Letang, that have not been able to get the legal entitlement of the land they cleared years back. They complained that, had there been ownership rights they could have used the land as assets, for example, in mortgaging the land to access loans, etc. Also, they were deprived of social protection measures. People from the Musahar (Dalit) and Santhal (*Janaḷāṭī*) communities, being migrants from India, complained that due to the denial of their rights over the land, they are not ‘recognized’ by the VDC office. Likewise, in some cases it was found that they were not included in different users’ groups, including in the community forest groups. Thus their access to the social and natural resources are denied, and consequently they become more vulnerable. If

⁶ The *jhorā* related act is available at www.lawcommission.gov.np/en/documents/2015/08/act-relating-to-land-of-jhora-area-2028-1971.pdf; accessed 12 June 2015.

their ownership is recognized, that will open other avenues so that they eventually may find new pathways out of poverty.

The migratory movements of some of the Santhals, Musahars and Rajbanshis of Kadmaha are relatively recent. None of the people we interviewed have been living in the present place of residence for more than 20 years. They had the common feature that they are living on public land and have no land ownership certificate. All of them migrated to the present place following information provided by their in-laws. In this case, migration did not serve them as well as it served the hill Brahmans and Chhetris. Therefore, hill to Tarai migration, particularly after 1950s, had a distinct pattern and outcomes, as compared to other types of migration. Most of the hill migrants secured some land while they migrated to the plain, which was not the case with the Tarai migrants.

Going beyond Agriculture: Employment in the Non-Farm Sectors

The Economic Survey 2012 of Nepal revealed that the real Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth rate is 3.6 percent, where growth of agriculture sector is 1.3 percent and non-agriculture sector growth is five percent for the same year, marked by 21.3 percent rise in remittances (MoF 2012). The contribution of labor migration to the household economy was prominent in the study area, too. Three major destinations for labor migrants were Malaysia, Gulf countries and India.

Remittances from Gulf countries were invested in land, house construction, education, and other assets, and have brought about noticeable changes in recipient households over a few years time. Seasonal labor migration to India has not contributed significantly. However, it still remains one of the major sources of income of those households who could not afford the payment required to go to the Gulf or Malaysia. Income from India is often used for daily consumption, some clothing, a mobile phone, or a television bought in India, at the maximum. Labor migration to Malaysia or Gulf countries was not possible for all the individuals of the area as it required a relatively large initial investment.

In the regions where lack of employment and poverty is closely linked, people, in addition to labor migration, were actively exploring new avenues of income generating activities. This was also because those who left agriculture and turned to non-farm employments performed well in improving their

economic condition. In many cases, those who had land to support them or had some level of education tried new pathways.

Kirti, 46, now runs a multi-purpose mill and a shop and has done tremendously well in accumulating prosperity. With the income from the mill and the shop, he has bought several pieces of land. Both running a mill and a shop were unconventional to Tharus as they primarily came from an agricultural tradition.

A Bantar, 40, from Kadmaha, who works as a *haruwā* is still encouraging his sons to find a different unconventional occupation. Three of his sons now work as wagers in rice mills. He said, “After my three sons started working in the rice mills, we are having a relatively better life. Our condition has improved. At least they did not end up as bonded laborers.”

Opening a small shop in one’s own village is seen as a common non-farm activity. Usually women with some school education are found running such shops, by combining it with their daily household chores. This has turned out to be an additional source of income. Ms Kirati, 50, runs a small shop near a small town in northern Morang, where she makes and sells *raksi*, local liquor, which is her main source of income. She explained, “Being a daughter of Kirati (an ethnic group of eastern hill), this is what we learned from our mother and grandmother at home. Now, this skill has helped us keep the family going.” She has managed to buy some land with the money she has made primarily by selling liquor.

A former schoolteacher, Mr Rai is in his fifties now. When he was a schoolteacher, he was also involved in left-wing politics. Due to his political engagements, he could neither earn enough as a schoolteacher nor could he spend time on extra income generating activities. Realizing his situation, his relatives suggested him to leave both the teacher’s job and politics. They supported him in setting up a shop. Running a stationery shop was his interest therefore he started a stationery shop in a small town in northern Morang. He reflects, “If I had continued the job as a schoolteacher and my involvement in politics, I could have saved nothing and I could hardly have fed my family. Thanks to my relatives, they suggested and helped me to go for such an unconventional venture.”

Hence, those who ventured into unconventional non-farm income generating activities have done well in economic wellbeing. Therefore, in other cases, too, usually the policy makers tend to focus on only those poor whom the market can help (Hulme and Shepherd 2003).

Some became Poorer, Downward Spiral of Poverty Dynamics

There are certain processes that attributed negatively in poverty dynamics. Natural disasters and shocks, poor health and social exclusion among others were the reasons for those households who could not get out of poverty. And in some cases they became poorer.

In a nuclear family, a growing trend in the region, when the main bread-earner of the family becomes physically unable to generate income to support his family, the remaining family members find it hard to compensate for this loss. When medical expenses add extra economic burden in the family, it eventually affects the economic wellbeing dragging the family further down to a state of poverty.

Dhruba, 39, a Tharu man of Kadmaha has been bed-ridden for five years now. He was a mason, specializing in marble work. He earned relatively well and could make some savings too. He fell ill some five years ago and could hardly move his body due to the illness. He spent all his savings for the treatment, but it did not help; he has not yet recovered. His wife stated that he is still taking medicines for some ‘mental illnesses.’ Now, it is the wife’s turn to support the family, and she does that by rearing pigs and brewing *raksī*. She has to make some savings for her husband’s treatment. Dhruba sighed and spoke in a mild and sad tone, “I do not think I can fully recover and go back to work again. I can’t earn any more. My life is gone, so is the happiness of my family. Had it not been this [illness], we could have a prosperous life by now.”

There were cases reported where either the main bread-earner or a dependent family member fell sick, consequently lost access to the income generating opportunities, but needed to spend in long-term medical treatments. In such cases, the households become more vulnerable, indebted, and economically withered.

Mr Chaudhary, 55, from Motipur was happy when his son received five *katthās* of land in dowry, and immediately went to the Gulf to work. He was able to add some more land and construct a new house with the remittance. “Now,” Chaudhary exclaimed,

my wife fell sick. We have already spent more than Rs. 30,000 in the last three months for her treatment, and do not know how much more we have to spend and for how long. I have already borrowed money for her treatment, and if it continues, if she does not recover soon, we will become poor again. Now the earning of my son is just enough to pay the loan. Indebtedness is what worries me now.

Hence, cases suggest that chronic health problems of the family members, of the main bread-earner in particular, which require expensive medical treatment, lead to indebtedness and economic vulnerability. This has been the patterned mechanism for the downward mobility of a particular household.

The social security allowance provided by the government might have helped some families in a limited way, but not significantly. Our cases illustrated that some poor Dalit families could neither access such social security allowances, nor could they ever receive the educational support under the Dalit Scholarship Program. They do not know where to go and ask for such support. Lack of information and access to the proper sources has excluded them from getting the government support. In addition, some elderly and widows did not have required documents, including citizenship certificate to prove their age and status. Due to the relatively larger family size but lack of diversification in the sources of family income (namely, rather very dependent on traditional, usually a single source of income), Tarai Dalits are becoming poorer.

For some, social and cultural obligations appear to be the reasons that some families fall into poverty. A Tharu informant from Motipur explained, “We spent a lot during marriages and feasts. We did that to maintain our social position, among our own relatives and kin. Had we failed to maintain that we would have been seen inferior to our fellow kin. So, we even had to take a loan, which has not been paid yet.” Some critics refer to this as a ‘self-annihilating culture’ (Mohan 2011). Hence, on the one hand, it is an ‘investment’ to accumulate ‘social capital,’ status, and self-worth; while on the other hand they are getting economically weaker due to the cost of investment. A point to note here is the transaction between different forms of capital may not be on equal terms or of equal value.

Mr Khan, 60, inherited 2.5 *bighās* of land from his father as a parental property. Khan being the only son of a prosperous father was inclined to politics from very early age. He did not have any other income generation skills and sources, and was less involved in agriculture. He now has only half a *bighā* of land left, hardly enough to support himself. He sold land to meet the expenses of marriage of his two daughters and a son. “Dowry to daughters cost much,” He bemoaned. He never felt proud as he spent a fortune for the marriage of his children. He added, “We could not escape our social obligations, even though this is making us poorer and poorer day by day.”

Similarly, there are other factors also responsible for downward spiraling of some of the households. Interpretations for such downward mobility of any particular household consist of negative connotations. Informants are comfortably explaining, “Probably, it was our fate.” It was probably to console oneself. However, such faith-based views may undermine one’s own agency and obstruct them in searching for pathways out of poverty and creating opportunities for oneself. Narayan and Kapoor (2005: 5) borrowing from Rao and Walton (2004) describe this as “inequality of agency” which plays a central role in perpetuating inequality and poverty. For example, one Brahman respondent of Motipur-2 commented,

They [who blame their fate] lack the aspiration to do better, they are lazy, otherwise they could have done far better than us. We were nothing when we came here, but they had enough but did not try to improve their own situation. As long as they have grains in their granary, they do not care, at all.

For him, the years he lived were much harder and he had already tried several ways to get out of the hardship so that he did not let go any opportunity to improve his life condition. In addition, as he explained, he had some intrinsic drive that led him towards more success compared to his own past life, and also compared to the neighbors.

Neither Up nor Down, Stagnation

As we saw, there can be both upward or downward mobility in the same location. However, some households described that they did not experience much mobility, neither moving into or out of poverty. Our study suggested these include two groups of people: those who were already rich, and those who were landless and marginal. Those who were already rich were able to diversify their investment and thereby their sources of income to meet the growing expenses and even to accumulate wealth to maintain a relatively well-off position. On the other hand, those who were landless also lacked other capabilities to improve their wellbeing. They were not necessarily disappointed, as their economic position did not worsen, however, they lamented for not being able to improve their situation.

A Magar landless from Letang explained his situation, “I have never seen a single day of abundance, and have always remained in poverty. I have never seen a single day of rest, but why we remained always poor?” He believed his labor is not adequately paid.

A Tharu, 52, from Motipur narrates,

I have been working all my life. I also worked in the factory, where my son works now. I bought some land and later sold it to make profit, but that did not work. I am also working as a *kamtiyā*, a caretaker of the farm of a landlord. The income was so meager that I could not save and therefore could not progress.

He explained as if he realized, “Probably, we were not able to utilize our incomes properly.”

Mostly Musahars, Rajbanshis, Santhals of Kadmaha shared similar stories: that they were poor and remained poor throughout their life. They are living in public land, as squatters, and work as daily wage laborers. None of the interviewees inherited any land from their parents.

Forms of Capitals and Poverty Dynamics

The pathways discussed here were somehow the continuation of the main pathways that Hatlebakk (2008) observed from 1995 to 2003, which were landless farm workers who became subsistence farmers, construction or manufacturing workers, and subsistence farmers who added to their income by working in the construction and manufacturing industries, or as labor migrants in India. Labor migration to Malaysia or Gulf countries was a more recent trend among the study population.

However, in an agrarian community land, the prime asset, represents the source of economic prosperity, social prestige and political power, therefore, it is the prime mover in poverty dynamics. A piece of land of one’s own still seems to be a critical prerequisite for upward mobility for the majority of rural households. Accumulation or loss of land is interpreted as the prime indicator of economic mobility of the households. Our cases also confirmed “different types of capital can be derived from economic capital” (Bourdieu 1986: 249). Therefore, as cases from elsewhere have also indicated the state’s land reform policy and programs are critical but necessary steps for pro-poor growth (see, Akram-Lodhi, Borass and Kays 2007).

Subsistence farmers firmly argued that there was little or no chance for them to move up by continuing the same traditional farming. Those who came out of subsistence farming, and ventured opportunities in non-farm sectors performed better. Therefore, if the investment climate and environment, which Fields and Pfeffermann (2003: xvii) consider to be “two pillars” in the fight for poverty reduction are improved, then more sources of income

will become available for the rural poor contributing to poverty reduction. A few cases indicated that families participating in the market, for example, doing commercial vegetable farming, were gradually making better incomes compared to other forms of farm activities.

Among the non-farm activities, tailoring and operating a small grocery store were found to be quite common, and helpful in getting out of poverty. Both were found to be the domain of women, which meant that women started contributing cash income to the household. Education apparently has played a major role in encouraging ideas and pursuing new ventures. However, many resource poor and marginal families were unable to send their children to the school and thereby lacked chances, however feeble, of moving out of poverty. Suggestively, imparting potential labor migrants with required technical capabilities may help them to earn more than today, which in turn will have a direct bearing on the economic mobility of the remittance-receiving households.

It is well argued that poverty reflects economic exclusion (see Bhalla and Lapeyre 2004). To include the excluded ones in the economic mainstream, the government may adopt ‘transformative social and public policy’ that provide opportunities for the households for systematic upward mobility. This includes a range of policies, from housing rights to minimum employment guarantee; similarly, land to the tillers to rations of food for identified poor households, and many other policies targeted to the poor. But field observations suggested that all households do not have equal access to, and get, benefits from such policies. Even some elderly and widow were not able to acquire social security allowances, suggesting that policies were barely translated into practices and were less effective in overcoming marginalization, social exclusion and poverty traps.

Government physical infrastructure development programs had positive impact on those who could build on their existing assets or resources, and find a way to climb the ladder. Those with sufficient land benefitted from roads, irrigation canals and electricity. Those who could grow commercial vegetables and sell to the market or, for example, build a cooling centre for dairy collection, could get more benefit than others. Easy market availability for their products was a motivating factor for some to grow them for the market.

Government claims of poverty reduction through social security measures for the vulnerable was not effective as the poor and vulnerable did not get

regular access to those services due to lack of political and social connections. Absence of local elected bodies and effective local government has worsened the situation for years. For example, no Tarai Dalit in the study area was found to have accessed any of the social security measures, for example, scholarships for Dalit Children, interest-free credit to Dalits, minorities and other marginal groups, employment schemes of the government, etc. Many were found to be unaware of the existence of those programs, and a few explained that they do not have *āphno mānche*, or linkages to those who provided such opportunities. Hence, let alone the program, information on these initiatives have not reached the targeted sections of the populations. The Government of Nepal has realized that, despite some success, it has largely failed to achieve the set targets of poverty alleviation in the country, “due to the problems like discrimination and inequality, weakness in structure of the economy, small production base, low productivity, weak governance, exclusion and discrimination, discrepancy in policies, weak redistribution system, and ineffective targeted programs” (NPC 2010: 60). “Policy interventions may support the inclusive growth process” (Hatlebakk 2008: 14); however, except a few development interventions, there is still much to be done when it comes to policies that can lead to a fair, more equitable and inclusive economic growth.

On the other hand, poverty alleviation programs through micro-credit operated by NGOs are apparently the most far-reaching programs in the study areas. However, only a few families have been found utilizing these financial resources to diversify their livelihood portfolios and enhance income generation. Presumably, access to micro-credit has reduced the burden of high interest rates on loans taken from moneylenders, but except in a few cases this has not been found so effective in reducing the poverty level of the member households. A few cases of upward mobility, attributed to micro-credit, were actually the ‘deviant cases.’ It is noteworthy that the poorest of the poor are often excluded from getting benefits even if they were members of such NGO-supported groups. Different benefits, whether they are economic (employment, loans, direct financial support, etc.), social (social safety nets, social security, free health and education, etc.) and political (political positions and representation), are not equitably shared among the members. These findings correspond with the conclusion drawn by another study that we carried out in the same district (Dhakal 2010). Hence, apparently people who also had other capabilities, including ideas

for further investment, benefitted from micro-credit. But the groups did not focus on those extra requirements to start businesses. Just being in a group was not a sufficient condition for poverty reduction.

NGOs in the study area were not contributing substantially to reach the poorest of the poor against their claim, and uplift them from poverty. No organization or movement recorded launching any public action against discrimination, exclusion and poverty, issues that could have visible impact on peoples' lives.

Finally, those who had to spend on health care and treatment of any of its household members, particularly those suffering chronic health problems, reported loss of money and opportunities and therefore were bound to be poor. If that person is the chief bread-earner of the family, the case becomes even worse. Those who did not experience such shocks had better chances of moving upward. Earlier, social safety nets or social capital seemed to have worked in those cases. Now, the traditional, community based, customary mechanism that worked well in the past to protect members of the community is gradually weakening or eroding and has not been able to prevent its weaker members from becoming relatively more vulnerable. Traditional social security systems that were believed to be embedded in family, clan, caste/ethnicity, community, village, religion and so on are weakening.

Those living along the embankment of irrigation canals, or alongside the rural trails and riverbanks are legally insecure as they do not have any land ownership certificate and thereby cannot use the land as an asset. In addition, they are prone to be vulnerable, as they can experience shocks such as floods, illness and the sudden death of the main bread-earner anytime. It is less likely that they have any resilience capacity to recover from such shocks, since such capacity also depends on the assets possessed by the families concerned.

The cases illustrated that land as a prime asset determined the level of poverty – gaining more land meant moving up and likewise losing land meant moving down. There was no single pattern of gaining or losing land, and much the same could be said about poverty dynamics. But, having land was not a single and sufficient condition. How one used the land to be more economically efficient and to extend positions to build other economic, social and political connections was key to sustaining one's upward mobility. Those who could strategically use their social connections to access opportunities also did better in terms of economy as they used social connections to

connect themselves to the mainstream economy. Accessing new opportunities required capabilities, in many cases, education. But, several cases illustrated that the lack of economic capital and political, social connections meant that some even could not send their children to the school. Finally, our findings indicated that economic capital is the base on which other forms of capital, social capital, in particular, rest upon; cases otherwise were rare.

Hence, some households emerged out of poverty while others fell into the poverty trap or some neither moved up nor fell down. No single reason can be underlined for such dynamics; rather, objective conditions and household strategies were found to be working jointly in producing different outcomes.

Summary and Conclusions

Our study demonstrated that a household's poverty is manifested in terms of a lack of assets – land in particular – lack of access to the labor market, political institutions, government social security schemes, lack of education and information, exclusion or isolation, and poor health of family members. This is, however, not unique to our study area, but can be generalized in other contexts, too (see, Webster and Engberg-Pedersen 2002; Bhalla and Lapeyre 2004; Krishna 2006).

In this study, we observed three distinct patterns of poverty dynamics: upward mobility, downward mobility and relative stability. Poverty being a complex and multidimensional social phenomenon, no single cause of poverty or pathway could be singled out. Even if different families share the same or similar political-economic and geo-ecological context, they cannot be considered as homogenous and therefore different factors affect individuals' lives in different ways. In this process, despite the fact that land is still a prime determinant of the level of poverty, shifts to the non-farm sectors, particularly into the labor market operated by the private sector, has appeared to be one of the pathways to escape chronic poverty. Households in different social positions and with different economic capabilities participate differently in the non-farm markets and achieve different benefits. However, unlike Mosse (2010) this does not always operate on 'broader categories' disregarding the 'individual attributes,' rather individual agency also plays equally important roles, and individual nature of mobility becomes visible. But the wage laborers who cannot make surplus also cannot make choices and escape the impoverishment.

A combination of different forms of capitals, namely, economic, social, cultural and symbolic, shape the process and nature of poverty dynamics. Hatlebakk, Iversen and Torsvik (2010: 23), have also found that “household social networks” improve the chances of getting “lucrative migrants jobs” and “attractive government jobs within Nepal.” However, the present study demonstrated that there is no single pattern of mobility as the situation may vary from case to case. Our findings are consistent with Bourdieu (1986: 250) where he maintained “convertibility of the different types of capital is the basis for the reproduction of capital.” The empirical evidences also suggested that such conversion of one form of capital into another in general and from non-economic to economic capital, in particular, neither follows a single pattern nor is predictable. As Kabeer (2002) maintained, ‘culture’ and ‘political economy’ that determine ‘social reality’ require serious attention in the analysis of poverty dynamics in a given society, like the one in our case.

We saw a dichotomous situation, where at one end a family with limited social-political connection was able to accumulate economic capital, which was further reinvested to strengthen the social and political connections, and consequently to move up. On the other hand, some families maintained their patron-client ties and felt secure, but at the cost of potential participation in the better-paid market and losing the chance of escaping chronic poverty. People still tend to maintain such ‘moral relationships’ to feel ‘secure’ even at the cost of the possibility of moving up. Therefore, even if the patron-client relationship works as a safety net in some cases, it can also prevent one from participating in the larger labor market. At the same time, a person with strong ties cannot expand his social network, as he always has to maintain a good relationship with his patron, and therefore, is always dependent, too. Such situation is often attributed to maintaining the ‘culture of poverty’ (Mohan 2011), which even justifies injustice and inequalities. But our study also illustrated many of the cultural traditions based on unequal exchange, for example, between patron-client or a landlord and a *haruwā*, or a ‘high caste’ and a Dalit, have irreparably been ruptured. This has provided new opportunities for the subordinate ones to break their previous dyadic relationship and consequently to escape their chronic poverty.

Fulfilling cultural obligations was reportedly costly among some households against the remaining benefits. They no longer function as they used to function in the past, that is to complement their economy (Dahal 1981). It is now more symbolic, justifying self-worth, but may not

necessarily help to accumulate more economic capital, and to move up the well-being ladder.

The dynamics of poverty therefore is a complex and multi-pronged process depending on various factors, from the levels of assets or vulnerability of a household to individual agency or structural processes. Likewise, household size, ratio of economically dependent members compared to economically active members in the family, indebtedness, access to the credits, spatial location of the settlement, education, etc. also affect the poverty level. In the meantime, it was also evident that the individual skills and opportunities affect whether people can invest and utilize the different forms of capitals they have, be that economic or social (symbolic) ones. A conjecture that micro-credit, NGO interventions and government social security and targeted programs had increasing roles in poverty dynamics is not supported by our findings. Effectiveness of national policy, for example, social security for elderly population and Dalit scholarship programs, in addressing poverty in household level was not perceptible. “Public action challenging the exclusion and subordination of dalits or adivasis” (Mosse 2010: 1172) was evidently absent in our context. Furthermore, the absence of local elected bodies and effective local government negatively impacted the situation.

Transaction between different forms of capital was not even and uniform. Economic being the primary, those who held land or had access to the labor market could also have established and maintained social relations, which in turn, could help them to gain more economic benefits. However, no clear-cut pattern could be drawn as different households followed different pathways to escape poverty. This study concludes that poverty dynamics are multidimensional in nature and cannot be generalized across all time and space.

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Biographical Note

Suresh Dhakal teaches anthropology at the Central Department of Anthropology, Tribhuvan University. His research interests include issues related to land tenure and agrarian relations, food security, history of peasant movements, political and economic anthropology and labor migration. He has published books and articles on these issues. His most recent publication is *Land and Agrarian Questions: Essays on Land Tenure, Agrarian Relations and Peasant Movements in Nepal* (2013). Email: ds32770@gmail.com