

SQUATTING IN THE KATHMANDU VALLEY: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Kathleen M. Gallagher

In recent years the urban population of Nepal living in places of 10,000 population and more increased by 116.5% and grew at a rate of 8.03% per annum, compared to a 2.39% annual growth rate for the rest of the country (Central Bureau of Statistics 1987: 180). Socio-economically, much of this urban populace will be marginalized, and many will end up in squatter settlements.

Squatting refers to the occupation of land to which one possesses no *Lal PurJa* (land ownership certificate), or in the case of renters, the occupation of land, housing or rooms to which the landlord possesses no ownership certificate. Early studies on squatting conducted in 1985 estimated the squatter population in Kathmandu to be approximately 2,000 (Norwegian Institute of Technology and Oslo School of Agriculture 1985:45); by 1988 this figure had nearly doubled to 3,700 (University of Trondheim and Norwegian Institute of Technology 1988:42); and today it is safe to estimate that the squatter population has quadrupled or stands somewhere between eight and ten thousand.

Squatting is a complex issue encompassing a variety of problems at the national, local and personal level. This paper seeks to explore the historical factors which contributed to the present increase in squatting in the Kathmandu valley.

The Urban Form of Kathmandu

Many cities in South Asian have a rich and long history, and Kathmandu is no exception. The three largest cities in the Kathmandu valley (Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur) represent some of the oldest cities in Nepal. Whether one adheres to Hindu accounts that Krishna came here in search of Kamadhenu or more popular Buddhist chronicles that claim Manjushree visited the valley on a pilgrimage to Swayambhunath, both legends profess that the form of Vishwakarma was assumed and he drained the lake covering the valley at what is today called Chobar Gorge (Hasrat 1970:1-33).

Contributions to Nepalese Studies, Vol. 19, No. 2 (July 1992).

Copyright © 1992 CNAS/TU

Historical evidence indicates the existence of Kathmandu as early as 200 B. C. Raja Gunakamdeva is said to have founded the city in 723 A. D. (Thronsen 1989:30). Most notable among the rulers during Kathmandu's "ancient" period (approximately 900 B. C. to 880 A. D.) are the Kirant and Licchavi Kings. The "middle" or medieval period (approximately 880 to 1768 A. D.) witnessed the rise of the Malla kings, especially famous for their patronage of the arts. The modern period (1768 onwards) was under the rule of the Shah kings. A description of Kathmandu would be incomplete without mentioning the Newars, Kathmandu's predominant ethnic group, whose highly developed economy and material life was integral to the development of a flourishing urban culture. A wealth of natural resources, fertile agricultural land, thriving trade with Tibet and India, and a hardworking indigenous populace made early Kathmandu a prosperous, powerful and growing city.

Eliade describes the arrangement of space in many Indian cities as the symbolic and religious reflection of a mythological or celestial mode (Rowe 1974: 230-35). So too the Malla rulers implemented city planning according to Hindu principles.

The diagrammatic town layouts were believed to have the same cosmic-magic effect on the initiated town dweller that the mandala (a Graphic reproduction of the universe used for contemplative thinking) had on the yogi.

(Pieper as quoted by Thronsen 1989:28)

Sekler describes the layout, plans, street patterns and squares, housing and the relationship of narrow streets to open areas in Kathmandu as revealing a superb sense of design, mastery of materials, and highly developed sense of craftsmanship (Kansakar 1988:18).

Preeminent in the planning of ancient Hindu cities was the axiom that spatial arrangements should reflect caste relationships (Rowe 1974: 230-35). Prestige decreased, both secularly and ritually, from centre to periphery. Housing segregation among different caste groups was also prevalent in Kathmandu. The area within the walled city was reserved for high caste Hindus (with the exception of Muslims) while outcastes such as sweepers, butchers, executioners, etc. were relegated to the periphery (Oldfield [1880] 1974:90-100). Furthermore, both housing size (not more than two stories) and roofing materials (no terra-cotta tiles) were prescribed to these outcastes (Kansakar 1988:19-20).

With respect to patterns of land use in Kathmandu, Oldfield observed that the valley lowlands were generally reserved for paddy cultivation (both

because of their productivity as well as unhealthy dampness for residential use); high level lands, on the other hand, housed the cities, town and villages (Oldfield [1880] 1974:95). To further conserve space, housing expansion demonstrated a strong tendency towards vertical expansion; houses were built of two, three and four stories, utilizing as little horizontal spaces as possible (UNESCO as quoted by Kansakar 1988:19)

A transformation of Kathmandu's urban form, however, began with Prithvi Narayan Shah's conquest of the valley in 1768. As the need for protection and separation between Kathmandu, Lalitpur and Bhaktapur became less important after the Gorkha conquest, the fortified walls separating these three kingdoms were allowed to decay and almost completely disappear (Oldfield [1880] 1974:95). At this time the Valley also witnessed the large scale outmigration of Newari businessmen, traders and artisans (particularly from Bhaktapur) as well as streams of immigrants from Gorkha and western Nepal. Not surprisingly, King Prithvi Narayan Shah's high ranking officials as well as other nobility were rewarded with the construction of palatial residences and gifts of land. Moreover, extensive tracts of public and private land were reserved for army barracks and parade grounds (Kansakar 1988: 21-2). The irreplaceable loss of outmigrating Newari artisans combined with the Shah Kings' increased emphasis on military expenditures (reflected in both land utilization and decreased patronage of arts), marking the beginning of the transformation of Kathmandu's urban form.

With very few exceptions, after the death of King Prithvi Narayan Shah, the Nepal politics was characterized by palace intrigues, violence, and a blatant disregard for the welfare of the common people. M.C. Regmi refers to Nepal's nineteenth century political structure as an "agrarian bureaucracy." Specifically, the sole goal of the state apparatus was the continual extraction of the agricultural surplus for the maintenance of power and affluence of the ruling elites. Various forms of bonded labour, regressive taxes and exploitative landlord-tenant relationships were only a few of the institutions that imprisoned a majority of the people in a cycle of indebtedness (Regmi 1978). Likewise, Kathmandu's urban form reflected the turbulence and injustice of the times, especially under the Rana regime (1846-1951).

The large, white Western style palaces and spacious enclosed gardens which were the trademark of the Ranas led to a morphological change in the city (Kansakar 1988:24). The horizontal expansion of these buildings greatly decreased the availability of agriculturally fertile land in Kathmandu. As the number of palaces increased, so too did the need for roads linking them with the city core. In turn, the construction of radial roads from the city core led to the linear development of settlements along the routes such as Kalimati, Baneshwar, Dilli Bazar, Balaju, and Dallu where poor people from Kathmandu

moved for business and at the same time it provided food, shelter and trade for the people coming from outside the Kathmandu Valley including those involved in the military and administrative services of the government (Kansakar 1988:25).

Finally, the appropriation of valuable land in and near the city core considerably limited housing options for a growing urban populace, and many were compelled to construct houses on whatever vacant land was available (Kansakar 1988:25). Thus, the sporadic and uncontrolled use of available public land had begun.

Morphological change under the Ranas continued after the 1934 earthquake, when reconstruction projects introduced the concept of wider roads and New Road assumed the character of a modern commercial center. Prior to 1934, New Road represented one of the most densely populated areas in the city core. After reconstruction, however, land and housing in this area was beyond the reach of many of its former residents; additionally, those displaced by new municipal buildings were relocated in what is today known as Naya Bazar (Kansakar 1988:26-7). Thus, the inefficient appropriation of large tracts of urban land through the construction of palaces, roads and inappropriate municipal buildings continued under the Rana regime.

In summary, the urban character of Kathmandu prior to 1768 was marked by a unity of form and function reflected in the thoughtful layout of the city, caste segregation according to Hindu principals, and a utilitarian use of land and housing. A shift in priorities by subsequent rulers began to manifest itself materially in Kathmandu's urban form. Specifically, the Shah kings' emphasis on military expenditure followed by the palatial residences, roads and "modern" urban planning principles of the Ranas changed the veneer of Kathmandu forever. From the 1950's onwards, however, an even greater modification in Kathmandu's urban form was to take place. Some of these changes (such as urbanization and the introduction of foreign aid) were going to occur at an intense and rapid pace, catching both citizens and government planners off guard. Furthermore such accelerated change was to generate a variety of urban problems, including the emergence of squatter settlements.

The Changing Urban Form of Kathmandu and the Emergence of Squatter Settlements

Urbanization and its concomitant challenges of adequate housing and appropriate urban planning have generated "radical changes in social, economic and political life" all over the world. Thus, any discussion of Kathmandu's changing urban form and squatting must begin with a brief discussion of population growth and migration, two important predecessors to urbanization and the emergence of squatter settlements.

In the 1952/54 census, Nepal's population stood a just over eight million; by the 1981 census this figure exceeded fifteen million. Between 1961 and 1971 the population growth rate accelerated (2.50%); in the 1981 census this population growth rate reached an all time high of 2.62% (CBS 1987:7). A decrease in the crude death rate due to improvements in health care is usually attributed to this growth. While medical care may have improved slightly, worsening conditions in rural areas due to population pressure precipitated a stream of outmigration from the villages. Sinha (1980: 76) states, "In a sense, all decisions to migrate are based on economics." While marriage, natural disasters and occasionally social reasons are all motivating factors for migration in Nepal, economic factors predominate. According to the 1981 census, nearly sixty percent of the male lifetime migrants had migrated for reasons of trade and commerce, agriculture and service (CBS 1987:168).

Push factors for outmigration in rural Nepal include archaic land tenure systems, physical degradation (erosion and deforestation), spiralling unemployment and increased modernization of the village economy accompanied by changes in consumer behaviour inappropriate to most villagers (UNICEF 1987:8-35). Unfortunately, marginalized families in the rural sector, though targeted as the main beneficiaries of various land reform acts, were usually too vulnerable economically or unorganized to claim any newly established rights (UNICEF 1987:26). As more and more families are pushed into the subsistence and landless categories, migration is their only option for socioeconomic survival, and many migrate to urban areas. In 1971, 12.2% of all inter regional migration was from all areas to urban areas (Sharma 1989:61). Not surprisingly, many of these migrants are pulled to Kathmandu with the hope of securing jobs. That Kathmandu also functions as Nepal's administrative and political centre, offering an array of educational, medical and other facilities, undoubtedly also attracts these migrants.

In addition to worsening conditions in the villages, two other factors precipitated an increase in immigration throughout Nepal. After the advent of democracy in 1951, the Kathmandu valley opened up to Nepalis and foreigners alike. Indian businessmen and Western development workers poured into the capital. During the Rana period, entry and exit visas into the valley had been strictly controlled (Kansakar 1988:27). The introduction of air travel and extensive road building in the 1960s not only expedited travel within Nepal but linked it with the outside world as well. Of special importance were the Tribhuvan Rajpath and the Arniko Rajmarg. The road to Kathmandu had been literally paved, and many migrants followed it. Next to the Terai, the Kathmandu valley ranks second in destination for all inter regional urban migrants (30.4%) (CBS quoted by Sharma 1989:61). Kathmandu remains the prime destination for white collar employment and

the major locale for the convergence of the middle class from all over Nepal. In recent years it has also attracted a sizeable immigrant population that thrives on the increasing demand for services generated by an expanding city (Sharma 1989:42).

Such immigration as well as natural population growth combined to give the Kathmandu valley an urban growth rate between 1971 and 1981 of 3.83% (Sharma 1989:21). In 1987, Kathmandu Town Panchayat alone was estimated to have 308,000 inhabitants (Throndsen 1989:21). During 1970s, increases in the population of the city core and adjacent areas were especially high; the density in the ten core wards of Kathmandu is above four hundred persons per hectare, with two wards approaching densities as high as twelve hundred persons per hectare (Sharma 1989:43). Sharma (1989:43) notes that these densities are extremely high, as Kathmandu is not characterized by high-density, high-rise buildings common to most Western cities. Needless to say, the combined effect of natural population growth, immigration, urbanization and increasing population density not only radically altered Kathmandu's urban form, it also created a shortage of adequate housing.¹

According to Nepal's Basic Needs Strategies, the minimum housing requirement for urban areas was defined as thirty square meters of floor space per household (Malla 1990:21), or six square meters per person. Basic Need's targets were designated as 380,000 housing units by the year 2000 (Malla 1990:26). Despite these well intention projections, about 50% of the households in Nepal are estimated to own floor space below 5.25 square meters per person (Throndsen 1989:41). In Kathmandu alone, approximately 10,000 houses are said to be "substandard," and an estimated 21% of the total population is homeless (Shrestha and Kaltenborn-Lunde 1990:7). Obviously there is a shortage of adequate housing in Kathmandu.²

Thus far this section has described how the forces of natural population growth, migration and urbanization created a dense urban environment and thereby contributed to the housing shortage in Kathmandu. While an effort was made to elucidate the relevance of these factors to Kathmandu, they are nonetheless national trends shaping the development of urban areas all over Nepal, especially in the Terai. This discussion now moves from the general to the specific, recounting events in Kathmandu's recent past that not only changed Kathmandu's urban form but also created the background for squatting. Specifically, attention will be given to changing patterns in land use, alterations in traditional styles of housing, economic factors and sociocultural factors.

The Shah kings' and Rana's legacy of changing Kathmandu's traditional patterns of land use has continued up to the present day. An increase in government buildings, industrial estates, the Ring Road and the Tribhuvan

International Airport were four of the worst offenders in this regard (Kansakar 1988:28). Increasing needs of the new partyless Panchayat System prompted a surge in building construction. Between 1964 and 1978 government institutions accounted for a 7.8% increase in land use. The government institutional buildings between Tundikhel and Tukucha and the National Trading Building at Teku are just a few examples. Various industrial estates (such as the Balaju Industrial Estate, the Bansbari Shoe Factory, etc.) not only used up huge tracts of land, they also resulted in new residential areas in nearby vicinities. Kanti Hospital at Maharajgunj, the Maternity Hospital in Thapathali, the Royal Nepal Academy Hall at Kamaladi, and the introduction of diplomatic missions likewise generated residential growth (Kansakar 1988:27-8). Two of the largest encroachments upon agricultural land were the airport and the Ring Road. The Ring Road alone required 162 hectares of land (World Bank quoted by Kansakar 1988:30) (more than Kathmandu's old city boundaries) and continues to consume valuable space, particularly at busy intersections, as isolated houses and small settlements spring up along its edge. Of course, this outward expansion of Kathmandu was greatly enhanced by both increased public bus service as well as the availability of electricity, piped water and other infrastructure to increasing numbers of outlying residential areas.

Not only were more and more buildings being built, their manner of construction unnecessarily used up urban space. Housing construction in particular ran counter to traditional patterns of land use. Foreign personnel that came to staff diplomatic missions and development offices also brought with them a preference for "bungalow" style houses, which were quickly adopted by Kathmandu's middle class. These Western style houses took up more horizontal space than their traditional Newari counterparts; furthermore, they also always had a compound enclosed by a wall, thereby taking up even more area. In summary, the rapid horizontal expansion of Kathmandu in the 1950s and especially the 1960s depleted the city of fertile agricultural land. The practice of reserving the Valley's rich low-lying *khet* for paddy cultivation and relegating residences to the higher, less easily cultivable tar became less and less popular. In short, recent patterns of land use and housing style do not conform to the traditional land use system to even a limited degree. Kathmandu's urban form was not only changing, it was becoming unrecognizable.

Obviously, if land availability in Kathmandu is decreasing while the urban population continues to increase, competition for both housing and land will also increase, driving up the prices of these commodities. According to the Land Revenue Department, from 1954 to 1964 the average cost of one ropani of land within Kathmandu skyrocketed from Rs 1,000 to Rs. 7,000

(Kansakar 1988: 57), in 1978 this figure rose to Rs. 42,000 and in 1985 the average cost of one ropani of land in Kathmandu cost Rs 561,000 (Kansakar 1988:58). Housing in Kathmandu has become an expensive marketable asset. As stated in a recent report by the Ministry of Housing and Physical Planning, the urban housing situation is characterized by an increasing gap between affordability and shelter cost (Ministry of Housing and Physical Planning 1988). Spiralling land prices and construction costs have made it considerably difficult for even a middle class civil servant to build a house (Kansakar 1988:51).

As elucidated in the preceding paragraphs, much of Kathmandu's urban sprawl can be attributed to an increase in residential area; such areas, however, do not cater to low income families. According to the 1988 Nepal Rastra Bank Household Budget Survey, 58% of all urban household earn less than Rs. 1,000 per month; 17% do to even earn Rs. 500 per month (Malla 1990:23). The absolute minimum cost for a house with a floor space of thirty square meters, a plot costing at least Rs 23,000, comes to a total of Rs. 68,000, a figure far exceeding the affordable limit of most households in Kathmandu. The situation is even more severe for households whose monthly income is less than Rs. 500. Low caste families near the city core are especially vulnerable to rising prices of land and housing. Historically, the land prices in Kathmandu varied between different caste areas. Low caste and out caste residential areas (located primarily on the western side of town) were less expensive (Throndsen 1989:45). Today, however, all land close to the city core is of high value.

Even renting a room is becoming less and less of an option for low income families that cannot enter the competitive land and housing market. In the 1950s and 1960s less well-to-do families had a fairly good chance of securing inexpensive rooms on a rental basis. Such rooms were usually located in a building's least desirable location: the damp ground floor, and other areas lacking light and ventilation, etc; living conditions may not have been ideal, but they were cheap. Soldiers serving in the capital at that time were even more fortunate; city dwellers were happy to give them ground floor rooms for free, sometimes with the added bonus of firewood, for security reasons (Gurung 1990). Increasing population density, however, has forced the conversion of these inexpensive ground floor quarters into other uses - *pasals* (shops), for instance. And where such rooms are available, they are no longer affordable. It is even becoming difficult for families fortunate enough to own some land and a house to meet their own space requirements. Partitioning of rooms is a common response to a lack of living quarters. With each passing generation, however, the amount of available space that a father has to pass on to his sons decreases; ultimately even family members

are forced to leave.

In addition to renting cheaper ground floor rooms, a second option for extremely poor families in search of housing in Kathmandu was the *dharmasalas*, *satals*, *pauwas* and *patis*.

Traditionally, these public rest houses connected to a temple have served a variety of functions; lodging for pilgrims, resting stops for transient travellers, residences of a longer duration for gurus and sadhus, and the meeting place for many local events of both a religious and secular nature. Additionally, these public rest houses were often permanent homes for Kathmandu's most destitute, who had been abandoned for various reasons: the mentally and physically handicapped, elderly women, orphans, etc. Only occasionally were entire families found to be permanently residing in a *satal* or *dharmasala*. Gradually, however, whole families have begun moving into these public rest houses; nowadays even the space in the *dharmasalas* is completely saturated. *Satals* and *dharmasalas* are graphic examples of Kathmandu's changing urban form; once quiet sanctuaries nestled amidst art and architecture, today they are not unlike crowded slums.

Sociocultural factors are also modifying Kathmandu's urban form, especially changes within the caste system and family structure. With respect to caste, it would have been unthinkable a few generations ago for low castes and untouchables to dwell in the same vicinity as higher castes as they are now doing throughout Kathmandu. As Muller-Bonker (1988:31) points out, however, "spatial organization structures are also disintegrating because they often no longer fulfil practical requirements, such as the need for space in a growing population. Ritual factors, then, are slowly being abandoned in favour of economic and practical considerations.

Kathmandu's family structure is also evidencing change, with an increasing number of families choosing to live separately instead of within the more traditional structure of a joint family system. It should be noted, however, that this may not be indicative of a complete breakdown of the joint or extended family system per se. To elaborate, while many families in Kathmandu may be nuclear by residence, ritually and economically they may still be classified as joint. Nevertheless, whether a family is completely or only partially nuclear, if they are residing separately then they are taking up space, thereby adding one more unit of consumption to an already inadequate housing supply.

Conclusion

The incidence of squatting in the Kathmandu valley and the rest of Nepal continues to increase. Solutions to the problem begin with an understanding of the phenomenon itself. Any exploration into squatting in the Kathmandu

valley means very little without the perspective of history. The first portion of this paper tried to recapture Kathmandu's traditional form, particularly as it existed under the Licchavi and Malla Kings prior to unification. This section concluded with a description of how Kathmandu's urban form began to change with the conquest of Prithvi Narayan Shah and also under the Rana regime. The second portion of this paper dealt more exclusively with events in Kathmandu's recent past that helped create today's squatting, such as rising rates of urbanization, an increasing gap between housing affordability and cost, sociocultural factors, and so forth. It is hoped that such historical perspective lends insight and sensitivity to current understanding about squatting in the Kathmandu valley and the rest of Nepal as well.

Notes

1. The above urban statistics are invaluable indicators of trends, but it should be noted that as of yet Nepal still lacks a clear and comprehensive definition of an urban area. To illustrate, the 1961 census designated an urban area as a locality inhabited by not less than 5,000 people, the 1962 Town Panchayat Act raised this figure to 10,000 and this number was lowered again in 1976 to 9,000. Changes in nomenclature (an "urban area" was called a *Shahar* in the 1952/54 census, a Nagar Panchayat after 1962 and is today known as Nagar Palika) also occurred. Finally there have been many changes in the boundaries of urban areas. These limitations must be kept in mind while interpreting any urban data in Nepal.
2. As with the urban data, it should be noted that the absence or precision and consistency in many of these figures complicates an analysis of the housing situation in the Kathmandu valley. To elaborate, in some studies housing was simply defined in terms of adequate floor space; in other studies "housing" included basic amenities like water and even electricity. Even where objective parameters exist, they may not necessarily agree; for instance the minimum floor space per person was sometimes defined as six square meters, at other times as 5.25 square meters. While definitional discrepancies abound, all the relevant research cited in this text agreed on one point: there is a shortage of adequate housing in Kathmandu.

References

- Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS). 1987. *Population Monograph of Nepal*. Kathmandu: HMG of Nepal.

- Gurung, Harka B. 1990. "Squatter Settlements in Urban Kathmandu." In Hisila Yemi and Stephen Mikesell (eds.), *The Issues of Squatter Settlements in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Concerned Citizen Group of Nepal, PP. 16-19.
- Hasrat, Bikrama Jit. 1970. *History of Nepal*. Punjab: V.V. Research Institute Press.
- Kansakar, Vidya Bir Singh. 1988. "Housing Conditions of the Urban Poor in Kathmandu and Pokhara: A study of Squatter Settlements."
- Malla, Umesh B. 1990. "Nepal's Basic Needs Strategy: The Housing Dimension (A Focus on the Critical Issues for Shelter Needs Fulfillment)." *Vikas*, 10:21.
- Ministry of Housing and Physical Planning. 1988. *Basic Shelter Policy of His Majesty's Government*. Kathmandu: HMG of Nepal.
- Norwegian Institute of Technology and Oslo School of Agriculture. 1985. *A Base Study of Squatter Settlements*. Norway: University of Trondheim and Oslo School of Agriculture.
- Oldfield, Henry A [1880] 1974. *Sketches from Nepal*. London: W.H. Allen, New Delhi: Cosmos Publications.
- Regmi, Mahesh C. 1978. *Thatched Huts and stucco Palaces*. Calcutta: Vikas Publications.
- Rowe, William L. 1974. "Caste, Kinship and Association in Urban India." *Urban Anthropology*, pp. 230-35.
- Sharma, Pitambar. 1989. "Urbanization in Nepal." (Papers of the East-West Population Institute, No. 110).
- Shrestha, Savitri and Anne M.K. Lunde. 1990. "Female Headed Households in Squatter Areas." Kathmandu: Task Project.
- Sinha, V.N.P. 1980. "Migration: An Interdisciplinary Topic." *Geography Review of India*, 42-78.
- Thronsen, Jannicken. 1989. *Kankeswori Urban Structure and Housing Upgrading for the Poor*. Norway: The Norwegian Institute of Technology.
- UNICEF. 1987. *Children and Women of Nepal*. Kathmandu: UNICEF. "University of Trondheim and Norwegian Institute of Technology. 1988. *Project Kathmandu*. Norway: The University of Trondheim".