PUBLICS OF DRESS:

RETHINKING REPRESENTATIONS AND EXPRESSIONS OF WOMEN THROUGH
FASHION IN AN URBANIZING NEIGHBORHOOD IN NEPAL

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Abstract

Women’s clothing is an integral, yet under-theorized part of everyday life bound up with body image, sexuality, and gender, and rooted in struggles for power and privilege. This thesis presents an interpretive ethnographic and historical analysis of women’s fashion in Nepal, the Kathmandu Valley and the rapidly urbanizing neighborhood of Gatthaghar in order to highlight the layered meanings of dress for women, existing local and global socio-economic and political hierarchies and their larger historical and cultural contexts. Based on fieldwork conducted in 2014 and through the tangible medium of dress, this research traces shifts in conventions and materiality and salient intersections between clothes, subjectivities, and physical and ideological constructs since the late 18th century. I found that women in Gatthaghar utilize the media of dress in the co-production of specific, sartorially defined and culturally agentive publics, which I refer to as publics of dress. Such publics of dress in Gatthaghar today include those of high-caste, middle-class, married Hindu women who wear kurta suruwal, and globally-inspired, formally educated and consumer culture driven youth who wear “short clothes.” I argue that these publics are imagined, performed and mediated around clothing as material, discourse and culture-in-practice and that they affect bodies, communities and society at large.
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For the people of Gatthaghar, Nepal.
Chapter One: Introducing Questions of Dress

Dress is an integral part of everyday life bound up with body image, sexuality, and gender and rooted in specificities of class, religion, ethnic and regional identity, and struggles for power and privilege. Clothing takes up enormous physical and mental space in our lives as we variously participate in a multitude of daily practices – from getting dressed, to shopping, producing, washing, and many more. Normalized and naturalized, these actions take place in the context of our surrounding social and physical environments, evolving cultural narratives, and complex political and economic associations. Yet, we rarely stop to think critically about the relevant connections between the media of dress, our subjectivities, and the physical and ideological spaces that we inhabit and coproduce.

This ethnographic and historical study explores women’s fashion in one urbanizing neighborhood in Nepal, in its larger historical and cultural context, in order to highlight the affective space of sartorially articulated publics. In this thesis, I examine the ways in which women’s decisions about clothing and perceptions and embodiments of fashion are tied to larger projects including those of nationalism, globalization, and ethnic and consumer identities. Specifically, I am interested in publics, or “ongoing space(s) of encounter” (Warner 2002: 90) in which interacting individuals are brought together through acts of assembly and dialogue (Habermas 1962). I argue that such publics form around media, including the tangible media of clothing, and I have thus developed the theory of publics of dress. This theory utilizes clothing as a medium of study within the theoretical framework of publics. The idea of communities linked through clothing-
related material, discourse, and practice, allows for an understanding of structural transformations of society while recognizing its many fragmented, subjective parts. In other words, the theory of publics of dress is a way to conceptualize clothing’s intersections with art and politics beyond the one-to-one correspondence of demographics (age, class, caste, gender) and identity.

Publics of dress are multiple, overlapping and fragmented communities (Warner 2002) bound by shared yet shifting and porous concepts and practices of selfhood and world. They are imagined (Anderson 1991), performed (Butler 2011), and mediated around clothing as material (Latour 2005), discourse (Tarlo) and culture-in-practice (Liechty 2003, Parkins 2010), and I contend that they represent and express people’s broader associations. Similarly to literary publics, publics of dress form as individual people interact in shared spaces with various medias – in this case women’s clothing - which are reflexive and communicative, and thus closely tied to ongoing negotiations of nation-states, ethnicities, religions, genders and sexualities.

This study illustrates how variously situated individuals in Nepal, the Kathmandu Valley, and Gatthagar have participated through repeated iterations of dress, gesture, and presence in different social spaces (Butler 1993) in the normalization of various constructs over time. For married women in the Gatthagar neighborhood of the Kathmandu Valley, for example, the outfit known as the kurta suruwal, made up of a tunic, trousers, and a shawl, has largely replaced the sari for everyday use in recent years. Today, wearing a kurta suruwal in Gatthagar means something very different to married woman than it did in the 1970s, when it was considered taboo. Kurta suruwal as well as women’s pants and t-shirts are now widely available for sale and consumption in the
rapidly urbanizing landscape of shops and public social places. Likewise, “short clothes,” meaning clothing that exposes legs above the knees, are also gaining popularity among some young women in the neighborhood. But what do these different styles mean to the women who wear them and participate in their publics? And how do the multiple, overlapping, competing and conflicting publics of dress in Gatthaghar relate to existing local and global hierarchies of convention and materiality?

In order to answer these questions, this study explores the ways in which variously situated individuals co-productively engage with publics of dress at different times and different places throughout their days and lives, and over generations. For instance, I discuss the high-caste, middle-to-lower-class, rural-to-urban migrants who have settled in Gatthaghar and have claimed a privileged status in the dominantly Hindu neighborhood through their religiously significant sartorial performances. At the same time, a young, middle-class woman in Gatthaghar today is likely to wear pants and a t-shirt while working out in the early morning, a uniform composed of a skirt and sweater at school, a kurta suruwal while doing work in the afternoon, and a sari or gown for an evening event. By wearing these different outfits, she joins variously self-producing/consuming publics of women who work out, publics of women who go to school in uniforms and do housework in kurta suruwal, and publics of women who wear sari and gowns at parties and festivals.

Women today in the urbanizing neighborhood of Gatthaghar wear a variety of clothing styles from around the world, which shift depending on location and context, yet largely conform to norms of existing publics such as those of suitably modern (Liechty 2003), Hindu Nepali women. The variously constrained and enabled performances of
identity and self-fashioning (Butler 1988, 1993) that constitute publics of dress in Gatthagar differ from family to family, and between individuals, and women switch clothing regularly depending on their location and context. However, by examining the seemingly mundane, gendered discourses and practices of clothing in one community over time, what has emerged is a more nuanced and textured account of women’s globally and historically inspired and locally and temporally articulated negotiations and co-production of logics and material conditions.

1.1 Definition of Key Terms, Theories and Frameworks

In thinking through the multiple, unevenly visible and operating socio-moral and economic logics/ideologies and resources that constitute shifting lifeworlds in urbanizing Nepal, a fitting metaphor of cloth and its interwoven layered-ness is helpful. It allows for an understanding of the dimensions of embedded inequalities that 1) recognizes that these relationships between people and material cultures are mutually constituted in complex ways in which they cannot be easily disentangled (Ferree 2011: 55); 2) allows for the precise studies of the phenomenon at hand, such as specific process(es) and agents by which embedded inequalities became so constituted and by which they may change; and 3) leads me to question what is exposed and what remains invisible, hidden, obscured, silenced, normalized or naturalized through practices and discourses of dress, including my own.

In this work, I have found it most useful to conceptualize clothing as its intersections; as representative and expressive of “traditions (that) migrate through time, ideas and places,” (Goeman 2013: 131) as “material circumstances” (Goeman 2013: 128) from which human ways of understanding and being in the world emerge, and as systems
of “meaning-making…ordered by relations of power.” (Goeman 2013: 127) Along this line of reasoning, women’s clothing is discernable as the continuous result of multiple, uneven and disjunctive interactions and co-productions between variously positioned actors including states, multinational corporations and governing bodies, communities and individuals, as well as clothing’s plant, animal, and built sources.

Fashion, likewise, is the popular culture of dress, and is composed of material culture, shared practices and discourses (Parkins 2008: 501). I use the terms fashion, clothing and dress interchangeably in this thesis, because they similarly serve as analytical tools for thinking through complex sets of relations and connections, as the communicate group belongings and beliefs, various micro and macro power structures, and the disjunctive connections between actors across different spheres. What people wear in Gatthaghar today, for example, both communicates and produces the discourses and practices of the dominant, local modern middle-class culture (Liechty 2003), which has emerged through the continuing processes of globalization and capitalism in Nepal. The making of meaning and staking of claims in Gatthaghar takes place within the scope of the general sartorial culture, with its assumptions of what constitutes normalcy including of genders, classes, and ethnicities, as well as national and modern society. These communicative and self-productive/reflexive segments of society, bound by shared concepts and practices in particular times and places, are what I call publics.

Publics as evolving forms of consciousness, social spaces and practices, are both imagined (Anderson 2006, Sarkar 2008) and performed (Butler 1993, Stirr 2015) through repeated and stylized acts of engagement. Nations and genders are contestable concepts and categories with material forms that are negotiated through, for example, addressing
the nation-state and dressing the body in different ways. Engagement with publics also requires the employment and/or reception of mediated texts including, but is not limited to publications and broadcasts (Warner 2005, Habermas 1994, Anderson 2006), as well as modes and mediums of artistic expression (Parkins 2008, Saraswati 2013). In this way, cultural texts both discursively and materially are defined by and defining of individual and collective experience.

My research is in also dialogue with the scholarship of a number of academics including social theorists and ethnographers across multiple disciplines and regional areas of focus. In my work, I seek to critically engage with theories of globalization (Appadurai 2005, Chong 2008), publics (Latour 2005, Stirr 2015, Berlant 2008, Warner 2002), gendered performativity (Parkins 2008, Butler 1993, Saraswati 2013) and feminist frameworks of intersectionality (Lutz et. al 2011).

In order to understand the impacts of globalization I look to accounts of the economic, political, and social changes that have taken place in Nepal, and specifically in the Kathmandu Valley, over the modern historical period (since the 1700s). This includes national unification (Burghart 1984, Onta 1996), Nepal’s integration into the global chains of supply and demand (Adhikari 2004, WTO Report 2011, Liechty 2003), and the more recent cultural politics of economic liberalization and social change in the Kathmandu Valley (Basyal 2004, Rankin 2004). Tracing international events and national legislations that have influenced flows of people and ideas, as well as of capital, media and industry helps to situate today’s “material organization of time-sharing social practices” (Chong 2008), including those related to textiles (Shakya 2004, 2010, 2011) and dress (Brunson 2014, Hindman and Oppenheim 2014). Outlining evolving systems of
socio-economic relations in the Kathmandu Valley also highlights the various ways in which certain networks have been enabled and restricted over time (Tamang 2009) such as through existing hierarchies of gender, caste and through emerging socio-moral logics and cultural practices of class (Liechty 1998, 2003, 2010, 2012).

Unpacking the interwoven and layered meanings of contemporary, globally inspired and locally articulated women’s fashion, while done to some extent in 1990s Kathmandu (Liechty 2003), has been more systematically explored in the context of emerging and embodied publics in India. While much of the literature on clothing in Nepal has documented specific sartorial practices of remote communities (Bennett 1983), in India there has been significant scholarship produced that discusses clothing as a public marker of belonging, for example to a specific ethnic, caste or religious community (Tarlo, 1996, Sarkar 2008), to traditional or modern ideology (Ganti 2012, Sandhu 2015) and to national narratives (Tarlo 1996, Gupta 2002). Additionally, these works are useful in their discussion of significant symbolic aspects of dress in a predominantly Hindu public, including colors and accessories that are associated with different parts of a woman's life-cycle including childhood, marriage, old age and widowhood. Furthermore, contemporary cultures of dress in the urban Indian public, similarly to publics of dress in urbanizing Nepal, engender modes of consciousness and temporal structures around a novel type of cosmopolitanism (Saraswati 2011) and consumer citizenship (Lukose 2009).

As ideas and practices of consumption (Rankin 2004, Liechty 1998 2003, 2012) and citizenship (Tamang 2009, Pigg 1992) are continually recast in Nepal, the ideals of the modern woman are reimagined, contested and negotiated through the discourse and
performance of clothing. Thus, women’s fashion is an important site of debate whose shifting borders have “remained central to ways of imagining a particular Nepali public sphere.” (Stirr 2014: 7)

Theories of performativity and gender are also important to an intersectional analysis of women’s clothing, as the communicative and active presentation by women through dress expresses identity as well as “sociality at the present historical moment” (Mankekar and Schein 2012: 2). As a site of intimate encounters between “consuming subject…and material thing” (Parkins 2008), the everyday performance of women through fashion can be understood to exert a “reiterative power of discourse (that continually reproduces) the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (Butler 1993: 2). Gender performance theory frames women’s fashion as part of the co-construction of physical and ideological structures and spaces (Jones and Lechkowich 2003, Ahmed 2004). These include the “hegemonic social conventions and ideologies” (Felluga 2006) observable in the quickly developing neighborhoods and growing middle-class communities of Gatthaghar today. However, as middle-class desires and anxieties around socio-economic mobility (Liechty 2003), and moral panic of female sexuality (Lukose, 2009) coalesce into specific publics of dress based on community understandings of modesty, respectability and progress, they become visible and visibly contested through various clothing regimes.

1.2 Methodology

The site of my research is Gatthaghar, which comprises the 15th ward of Madhyapur Thimi municipality of Bhaktapur District in the Kathmandu Valley. The
municipality was formed in 1997 through consolidating a handful of existing village
development committees (VDCs) (Weise & Boyd 2001: 28) and is now one of the five
official municipalities in the Kathmandu Valley (Muzzini 2013: 34). Due to its central
location, this area has for millennia been an important hub for trade and multiple waves
of settlement (Regmi 1969, Pant and Funo 2007), yet it is over the last fifty years that this
area has experienced particularly dramatic historical shifts including rapid urban
developments and population growth. Since the 1960s, the Gatthaghar neighborhood has
gone from being composed of just over a dozen households and having only footpaths
run through it to being the host to the country’s first modern, six-lane international
highway with hundreds of homes and businesses and thousands of residents. While this
municipality was historically composed of a predominantly Newar community, their
cultural predominance has significantly declined as their marginalization has increased,
and settlers have progressively dominated economically and culturally since the second
half of the 21st century.

Women’s publics of dress speaks to the many changing aspects of Gatthaghar;
from the changes in land use patterns from agriculture to boutiques, to switches from
handspun woven fabrics to sari to kurta suruwal to pants and t-shirts to miniskirts.
Discourses and practices in Gatthaghar around women’s dress relate to the significance of
caste, class, ethnicity, education, respectability and nation, ideas of progress, forwardness
and backwardness, beauty and tradition, and the influence of the media and global and
local trends.

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1 Along with Bhaktapur, Kathmandu, Kirtipur and Lalitpur
In Gatthaghar, clothing is a primary medium through which people assert and engage with their belonging to different publics. It is both through forms of mass communication (such as through advertisements and school curricula), and through the utilization of material culture (the wearing of certain styles of clothes in particular times and places) that new kinds of media gain currency and effect change over time. As new medias gain acceptance and more widespread use, people increasingly identify with their associated recast values and systems of meanings. Such is the case in the neighborhood of Gatthaghar, for example, where the *kurta suruwal* has supplanted the *sari* in recent years as the most appropriate dress for the everyday attire of married women. The values and virtues of simple and easy lifestyles and subjectivities have become conflated with the value and virtue of the clothing itself, despite whatever contradictions this may imply.

Publics of dress, as I hope to show, are multiple, shifting and overlapping. They are actively imagined and performed communities of belonging that exist in historically and culturally situated social spaces and that do work as an agentive force in the co-production of contemporary physical and ideological place and space.

For this research, I used a mixed methods approach including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and media analysis, conducted in Gatthaghar and the archives of Martin Chautari, a media organization in Kathmandu, during the summer of 2014. This allowed me to engage with the specificities of lived experience of women I know, as I explored shifting categorical, systemic, spatial-temporal assemblages of meaning and power in Gatthaghar.

I observed how women in the Gatthaghar neighborhood dressed and how they and their wider communities spoke about and engaged with clothes as producers and
consumers. To do so, I spent time in various places and social spaces within the neighborhood - from homes to shops to temples to public walkways to local events. I participated, furthermore, through performance of and self-reflection on my own mediated identity within these various contexts. I paid close attention to the meanings people gave to clothing, as well as to my own feelings about and negotiations with self and community through dress. Using critical, reflexive frameworks for feminist intersectional thinking (Lutz et. al 2011) I focused on analyzing specific details of women’s publics of dress in the Gatthaghar neighborhood and sought to locate them in their extralocal and historical contexts (Burawoy 1998).

I conducted fourteen semi-structured interviews in the Nepali language, with women who were diverse in terms of age, education and class, but with limited diversity in terms of caste (the majority of the women I interviewed came from upper-caste Hindu families). I transcribed and translated the interviews from Nepali into English myself, and in order to validate the accuracy of the translations and to build a narrative that centralized member meanings and I conducted member checking, as well as triangulation of data sources and practiced continual reflexivity (Creswell 2003: 179-206).

Following the guidelines for systematic analysis outlined in Emerson et.al (2011) I proceeded with open coding, memo writing and theme selection for both my field notes and interviews. For this inductive process of theory building, I utilized focused and integrative coding and memos to identify patterns, concepts and themes across my data sets that I then further developed into concepts and put into conversation with the existing social theories outlined above. This grounding method helped to answer my central
research questions while allowing for interpretive analysis to guide the research outcomes.

I also read and analyzed Nepali fashion magazines and government economic reports, with attention to evolving trends in representations of women in the media and policies that affected what clothes were available for consumption in Gatthaghar. These sources helped to contextualize socio-economic and political changes and the influences of co-existing, often conflicting publics of dress.

1.3 Positionality

My exploration of women’s fashion extends out from my marital home in Gatthaghar, where my role as a family and community member affects my role and work as a researcher and hopeful advocate. In this communal, complexly hierarchical community I occupy a relatively privileged status for a variety of reasons including my American citizenship, light skin, education and membership in a propertied family with relative prestige and wealth. By engaging with and taking responsibility for the shifting terrain of my own status, I seek to recognize and acknowledge the ways in which my positionality may inadvertently create gaps in understanding or silence certain perspectives. There are ways in which caste, class and gender, are variously exposed or made invisible to me through my own shifting, intersectional relationship with hegemony (Zarkov 2011: 107). For example, I was unable to include low-caste, rural, or non-gender conforming perspectives in my study, which speaks not to their non-existence, but to the limitations and non-representativeness of my study.
From a gendered perspective, my socialization as a married-in daughter-in-law in a patrilocal, joint family household and wider patriarchal society also means that I must contend with issues such as my own variously privileged/restricted movement within this community. Although I have considerable liberties, I am not free to walk around whenever and with whomever I please. Broadly speaking, I am intricately bound to many members of my extended married family and their clan, as well as their caste, class and religion. Similarly to many other women in this way, my own ‘fashions’, in dress and in lifestyle, are related to the representation and expression of my family’s claims in the local *ijjat* (honor) economy (Liechty 2003).

Furthermore, seeking out the guidance and intimate place-based knowledge of my elders and peers, especially my mother and father-in-law and sisters and brother-in-laws, has becomes a strategy in research as in life and impacts my work. And while this is helpful in terms of the memories, perspectives and stories of recent developments in the neighborhood that are accessible to me, it can also be tricky in terms of confronting expectations, understandings and definitions of womanhood and the status/role of women within the normative family structure. In such cases, I often respect culture and protocols but make the choice not to defer to it (Tiapula 2014).

Indeed, participation in this research required that I continually reflect on the partial connections and privileges of my own situated position (Haraway 1990) and be flexible and adaptive in revising my discursive and material practices and projects. In order to decrease any potential harm and increase the emancipatory potentials of that with which, and with those with whom, I am engaged (and with whom I am not), I approach my research and work as a co-production of knowledge and practice that continues to
evolve as I move toward a more intersectional understanding of the material needs and concerns of my communities.

1.4 Purposes and Significance

Situated in existing theories of globalization, publics, gendered performativity and the middle-class, this is a critical interpretation of the changing practices and narratives of women’s dress in one area over time, which adds to the ongoing work in this geographic region, and also to the growing body of research in critical intersectional, interdisciplinary and interregional feminist and fashion studies.

An analysis of the changing processes of production, exchange and consumption of clothing explicates the historical and cultural consequences of globalization and the multifarious and polyvalent nature of identity and shifting publics as engaged with temporal material culture and systems of signification. Women’s fashion, as material culture, as practice, and as ideology remains a salient site for contestation, negotiation and debate around issues of power and privilege, and normative logics of class, sexuality, progress, and other cultural frameworks as women engage in different, yet connected spaces including their homes, workplaces, school, at various social and religious functions and in the virtual online world. In this framing of women’s fashion, there is a suggestion of not just various forms and meanings, but of multiple modernities (Parkins 2010) and multiple truths (Smith 2012). This study begins to examine how these multiple modernities and truths come together in Gatthaghar’s publics of dress.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis
This thesis is anchored in theories of publics and performance as well as an intersectional understanding of the primarily middle-class spaces in which I conducted my fieldwork. Each chapter interweaves concepts of publics of dress with ethnographic detail in order to examine historically and culturally specific phenomenon of women’s dress in a new way that exposes connections between social actors.

Chapter two begins with a thematic narrative from my field notes that introduces the reader to the physical and social landscape of Gatthaghar and provides a historical and cultural overview of the neighborhood. Through the opening narrative, I also highlight some of the salient gendered publics of dress that coexist and overlap in the context of Gatthaghar’s major socio-religious and political/economic structures including the family and other community units, the marketplace and national legislation. Following the account is a discussion that further explores how women express various aspects of their identities and societies through fashion as they engage with different publics. I also explore in this section the changing publics of dress of women in Gatthaghar over time, in order to highlight how dress as media functions in the local and transnational public sphere to reconfigure meanings and “incite desires, shape identities, fashion emotions” (Mankekar and Schein 2012: 26) and so on. Through the discussion of my ethnographic fieldwork, I also introduce more explicitly various axis of differences and connections to be examined through sartorial culture including, but is not limited to, gender, class, caste, age and ethnicity.

Chapter three further examines the shifting set of socio-political and economic factors that mediate and influence women’s fashion in Gatthaghar today, both in terms of what is materially available and in terms of what meanings people attach to different
clothes. This chapter provides a historically deep and culturally broad overview of the
global, national, and local political economy of dress. It illustrates how complex,
embedded geopolitical relationships intersect with competing systems of local values and
indigenized meanings, and material realities, to produce what is normalized and
naturalized in publics of dress today. An overview of the socio-political and economic
dimensions of dress provides necessary background for understanding how clothing
functions today in Gatthaghar as a commodity and as a marker of identity and status.
Moving from a broader analysis to a more specific one, chapter three utilizes historical
and ethnographic data to examine intersecting facets of inquiry, including Nepal’s
integration into global market networks and the increasing access to foreign goods and
ideas, educational and work opportunities and financial capital for people in Gatthaghar.
The Ranabhat family’s narrative provides a textured account of the development and
negotiation of women’s publics of dress in the Gatthaghar neighborhood since the mid
20th century.

Chapter four provides an ethnographic analysis based on my fieldwork that
connects publics of dress to their significations and to the work that they do. I examine
phenomena such as media, education and migration, and use theories of publics and
performance to highlight explicit relationships between places, social spaces and actors,
and material culture in Gatthaghar. In this chapter I discuss recast values of ideal
femininity, youth cultures, women’s progress, urbanity, market logics and socio-
economic statuses, including through a discourse analysis of the images and language of
Naari women’s magazine and through a case study of two women owned clothing shops.
Chapter four builds on the previous chapters by analyzing the meanings that people give
to the clothing that they wear in the contexts of their publics, and by theorizing on the implications of those relationships and associations.

In this thesis I provide an in-depth exploration of publics of dress in Gatthaghar, Nepal centered on intimate spaces of performance and material culture. I have traced some of the salient historical and cultural shifts in women’s dress in one micro locality over time in order to explicate various power structures, the work of group belongings, and disjunctive connections between actors across different spheres. My intention is to show how women in Gatthaghar today creatively participate in “cultural pastiches fostered by globalizations” (Adams 2006: 170) as they negotiate between the expectations and conventions of multiple publics, truths and modernities.
Chapter Two: Narrating Emerging and Embodied Publics of Dress

Although I occupy a relatively privileged status in this complexly hierarchical community, my socialization as a married-in daughter-in-law into my married family’s high-caste, middle-class, propertied, patrilocal, joint family household has also meant that my movement is variously restricted. Through my marriage, I have become intricately bound to many members of my extended family and their social networks in Gatthaghar, and I’m now connected concurrently (and as an insider/outsider) to many sections of the community, and publics, in Gatthaghar. These include the Hindu public, the Chhetri caste public, Gatthaghar’s middle-class public and the public of young married women.

Similarly to many other women in Gatthaghar in this way, my own fashions, in dress and in lifestyle, are intimately related to my family’s and publics’ claims in the local *ijjat* (honor) economy, in which there are competing, overlapping value regimes at work, including those related to ideas of female propriety, national progress and relations and exchanges in a globalizing world.

The following extended narrative comes out of my field notes. It follows my father-in-law Kumar (Buaji) and me, as I accompany him on one of his typical morning walks around the neighborhood. This account introduces the social and physical landscape of Gatthaghar, and provides examples of salient publics of dress that exist here, which are discussed in more detail in the following analysis.

2.1 Morning Walk Through the Neighborhood

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2 For an in-depth discussion of the meaning and importance of the *ijjat* economy in Nepal, see Liechty 2003: 83
Sunday, June 29th, 2014 - It is 5:00am. The alarm on my iPhone wakes me and I quickly rise and get dressed. The sky is still dark and the neighborhood is quiet. I know Buaji’s father in Nepali, and Ji is an honorific suffix. This is how I have become accustomed to referring to my father-in-law (Sasura), in order to connote both closeness and respect. Similarly, I refer to my mother-in-law as Ammaji.

Buaji is eager to head out quickly for our morning walk, before the cars start to kick up the valley’s dust and the sun starts beating down. I choose something to wear that I think will be appropriate and comfortable, settling on my loose blue, paisley-patterned cotton pants, paired with a V-neck, short-sleeved black shirt and a blue chiffon scarf, from my tailored kurta suruwal set.

Hearing movement in the kitchen above, I make my way upstairs, where I find Buaji standing over an array of delicious-smelling/looking foods and two steaming hot cups of green tea. This tea, which I have become accustomed to receiving as the first of three cups of tea each morning, is of excellent-quality from the tea-growing district of Illam. It was gifted to our family by our downstairs tenant’s sister, Devina. Her married home is in Illam but she and her sisters often come to stay here in Gatthaghar with their brother, who works in a government library in Kathmandu. The siblings, who are soft-spoken and scholarly and have beautiful green eyes, are Brahmins from the remote district of Okhaldhunga, in Eastern Nepal. Devina and her sisters appear graceful and modest to me in their South Asian fashions; they almost always wear bright and beautiful new-looking kurta suruwal and, on special occasions, delicate-looking sari. By dressing this way they express, for example, their respect for their families’ conservative values, and the relative financial wealth of their families who are able to afford to send them to Kathmandu with new sets of reputable South-Asian fashions.

\footnote{Bua mean’s father in Nepali, and Ji is an honorific suffix. This is how I have become accustomed to referring to my father-in-law (Sasura), in order to connote both closeness and respect. Similarly, I refer to my mother-in-law as Ammaji.}
Each other two downstairs rooms in our family’s house, as well as the converted farmhouse in the yard, have mothers and their children living in them. All three families have come to the city from various parts of rural Nepal, have school-aged children and receive remittances from husband’s who are working abroad and sending back earnings from the Persian Gulf and ASEAN countries. The mothers of these families tend to dress in more conservative, South Asian styles, although the younger, unmarried daughters prefer *kurta suruwal*, long dresses worn over leggings, or loose pants and t-shirts.

Although the families come from different parts of the country - from the Terai plains to the western and eastern hills, and speak various first languages, they share certain characteristics; they are all upper-caste Hindus, from relatively lower-middle class socio-economic backgrounds, who have migrated to Gatthaghar with their nuclear families, speak Nepali, and are pursuing educational and economic opportunities. In these ways, they are variously connected and disconnected from other women living in the Ranabhat compound, and in the Gatthaghar neighborhood at large. They variously belong to and don’t belong to overlapping publics of dress with other woman who live in the area, such as publics of the religiously significant dresses of Hindus or Buddhists, or of ethnically specific dresses of the Indigenous Newar community.

In addition to these three families, there are five men and three women staying in our family’s unfinished house next door. They have come to Gatthaghar to work as temporary construction laborers from the Terai plains of Nepal, as well as from the neighboring Indian states of Bihar and Jharkhand. These women wear colorful but worn *kurta suruwal* sets that are marked with dirt, cement and plaster and usually worn without an accompanying shawl or much jewelry. They pull their hair back and keep it covered.
most of the time, and I notice they always wear open toed sandals, despite the hard physical labor they are engaged in. Their work clothes communicate to others their employment as construction laborers, and thus relative poverty and low status, as well as outsider and transient relationship to the local community. However, they change into faded yet well-cleaned *kurta suruwal* sets before heading to the bazaar at the highway intersection, expressing a different, less marked aspect of their identities. Through the act of changing their attire, they are able to conform to shared sartorial norms of a modern, South Asian Hindu women’s public of dress and thus negotiate, however peripherally and/or fleetingly, their incorporation into the general middle-class and migrant publics of Gatthaghar.

As Buaji and I sip our tea, he tells me about how he has been up and working since 1:30am, when the municipal water was scheduled to come. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, the water didn’t come. I’m annoyed because I haven’t been able to shower or wash my clothes in over a week, but Buaji shrugs and says he’ll try again for water on Tuesday, during the next scheduled release. He goes on to remind me that when the construction on the new house is finished, an underground reserve tank will enable us to store large quantities of privately purchased water. “If you have money and a reserve tank, its no problem,” he says. According to him, money will be the answer to our family’s water problems, which have been exacerbated this year as the well in the yard has run dry. I’m skeptical of his assumptions, however, and although I choose not to raise my concerns at this time, I wonder to myself how our new eight-bathroom home will function to serve our family and how, in the run long, these changing patterns and practices of consumption will affect the area and the people here.
Instead of going back to sleep after the failed attempt to fill the water tanks, Buaji has spent these early morning hours preparing the household’s daily meals. He has cooked mixed veggie curry, lentil soup, Nepali salad, mustard greens and two kinds of fresh chutneys (tomato and bitter melon), and everything is ready except for the uncooked rice, which sits soaking in the pink and white Chinese-made rice cooker, waiting for the municipal electricity to come on. Although gender roles in the home are changing with more and more women going to school for longer and working outside, it is still quite uncommon for men to take on the bulk of the household cooking responsibilities as Buaji often does. In fact, he takes great pride in his work in the kitchen, as well as in his ability in general to negotiate between upholding traditions and promoting social reform. He delights in the retelling of the story, for example, of how in the 1970s he insisted that his young bride Bhawani, my Ammaji, go against neighborhood conventions and to wear a kurta suruwal instead of a sari. As married women in this community were expected to wear sari everyday, such a move was a clear socio-political statement of a “progressive” subjectivity – not just for my mother-in-law who wore it but also for her husband and his family. Ammaji, on the other hand, recalls that it was a terrifying and isolating experience for her at the time.

After Buaji finishes describing the food he labored over, we quickly head out for our morning walk. At the door, he exchanges his ‘inside shoes’ for a pair of black, knock-off Nike rubber sandals, which he puts on over his socks. He is wearing blue slacks, a gray and blue-checkered button-up shirt, and his auspicious gold ring with the red-coral inset. I see it is quickly becoming light outside and I notice the pretty pink and blue hues in the sky as we walk through our garden and onto the small dirt road that runs in front of
the family’s property. We continue toward the Arniko highway, and upon reaching it we turn northeast toward Bhaktapur city. Along the way, we pass half a dozen other people who are out for their morning walks, including two pairs of women, and a man with his dog and a large stick, presumably to fight off the roaming packs of street dogs. I’ve noticed this man before because, like us and another neighbor on our block, he has a German Shepherd - a dog breed that I have since found out has been a favorite pet of Nepali royalty since at least the early 20th century (Leuchtag 1958: 117). Buaji exchanges greetings with the second pair of women we pass, who ask him first about his health and then inquire about my presence. Buaji explains to them that I am his daughter-in-law from America - the wife of his eldest son. The two women, who look me up and down approvingly, seem to be about the same age, perhaps in their mid 30s. One woman is wearing a brightly colored green and red kurta suruwal set, red vermilion powder and a bindi on her forehead and pote (a beaded necklace) around her neck, signaling her married status and Hindu religion. Her long, dark hair has been washed and is drying freely in the air. The other woman has her hair in a braid and is wearing a loose, dark colored shirt and a pair of rangi-changi (multi-colored), synthetic, loose patterned pants – the kind that is being imported from places like China and Thailand, is sold at stalls and stores throughout the neighborhood and is so incredibly popular this summer.

After parting ways with the women, Buaji and I continue to walk alongside the still quiet highway, crossing to the other side at the Chardobatto chowk (four way intersection), just past the landmark tuberculosis hospital. We turn onto a small, paved street leading up through the New Gatthaghar neighborhood, toward the agricultural belt that separates Gatthaghar and Thimi townships. As we walk, Buaji tells me, upon my
request, about how this area has changed over his lifetime. When he was child, he says, there were only fourteen houses in all of Gatthaghar. According to him at that time there was one Newar family, one Tamang family, and twelve Brahmin and Chhetri families living here. “Only one Newar family?” I ask, surprised, as the Newar people are the Indigenous people of the Kathmandu Valley. He affirms, that yes, while many of the landowners were Newar, they tended to live elsewhere, in nearby communities such as Thimi and Bhaktapur.

The passage of key land reform legislation and infrastructure construction in Gatthaghar in the 1960s contributed to the area’s ongoing legacy of Chhetri-Brahmin and urban middle-class cultural domination, in the otherwise agricultural Newar-dominated district. The 1964 Land Act, for example, most prominently benefitted upper-caste families, such as Buaji’s family, who had migrated to the area from the middle hills and had been preferentially employed as farm laborers by high-caste Newar landowners during the late 19th and early 20th century. It was Buaji’s grandfather who had migrated in the 1920s as a youth from the central district of Dhading to Balkot, the village across the Hanumante River from Gatthaghar. He came to live with his with maternal uncle who had borne only girl children, and in 1934 he and his young wife, who also came from the Ranabhat clan (in Dhulikhel), moved with their children across the river from Balkot to Gatthaghar to pursue an opportunity to be tenant farmers. Thirty years later, in 1964, Buaji’s father and the sons of other upper-caste migrant farm laborers who had settled and labored on the lands, gained ownership rights to those properties.

Completed in 1966 with the support of the Chinese government, the Arniko highway was the first road built in the area, which served as an overland link to China-
controlled Tibet and has since its inception been a primary catalyst for new construction and development in the area (Weise & Boyd 2001: 29). With the support of the Japanese government, the road was recently expanded into a six-lane highway (completed in 2011), thus continuing to contribute significantly to the changing physical and social landscape of the neighborhood. The newly propertied status and proximity to a major thoroughfare provided an abundance of opportunities and privileges to families in the area, including several Ranabhat families, who greatly benefitted from such developments.

At this point, Buaji and I turn down past the community water tap, making our way into the green agricultural belt that runs throughout the Madhyapur Thimi municipality. At the tap, a handful of women are gathered with empty buckets and pails, and piles of dishes and laundry. The youngest of them, perhaps in her late teens or early twenties, is pumping water and has on a red, patterned kurta suruwal. Another middle age woman has on a yellow, blue and green kurta suruwal. Of the two other women who are middle aged as well, one is wearing a cotton guniyo choli with a dhaka fabric top, and the other has on a red dhoti. One young girl, maybe four or five years old, stands next to the woman in red. She has on black pants and a long-sleeved white shirt with Minnie Mouse on it. Another young girl, who appears slightly older and is sitting nearby, has on a pink dress over blue pants. There are also two men standing on the other side of the path who are wearing Western style pants and t-shirts and smoking cigarettes. The scene is representative of the multiple operating publics of dress in Gatthaghar. At this juncture, the married woman wearing a red dhoti belongs to a strict Hindu public of dress, while the girl in the Minnie Mouse shirt and pants belongs to a globally inspired girl’s public of
dress. In this matrix of lifeworlds, popular culture and long standing beliefs are expressed and continually reworked through fashion.

As we pass the water tap and come around a bend in the path, three half-built houses come into view - producing an immediate visceral affect in Buaji. He shakes his head and points angrily to the houses, exclaiming that this is a perfect example of how the monarchy was a superior system of governance to that of the flailing democracy that replaced it. According to him, it was the Maoists who, during the civil war (1996-2006) and the following period of their democratically elected political rule in 2008 and 2009, allowed construction to occur on this supposedly protected land. I empathize, cautiously, agreeing that it is sad to see the agricultural lands disappear. Before heading up the hill that leads to Thimi, we come to a Kali goddess temple, at the base of the Southwest slope of the ravine. There is a bustling scene here, with dozens of people, mostly middle aged and elderly Newar men and women, engaging in their daily morning worship rituals. Around half a dozen musicians, men and women, play religious bhajan songs under the eaves of a raised earthen platform while patrons circle clockwise through the temple grounds. The patrons are bringing flowers, incense, and other offerings to the deities before stopping at the main alter to receive blessings from a middle-aged Brahmin priest dressed, who is dressed in all orange. Many of the men are wearing bhadgaule and dhaka topis (pointed Nepali hats), as well as daura suruwal and other types of more traditional clothing, as well as various combinations of more ‘Western’ style pants and tops. Most of the women are wearing South Asian styles of clothing as well, such as the typical Nepali chaubandi choli, dhotis and sari. Several women have on kurta suruwal, at least two with “Western” style jackets or sweaters as top layers, and one younger woman has on
leggings under a long dress-shirt. The temple community’s public of dress is influenced by their beliefs and their location, incorporating national, regional and global publics of dress with local contemporary Newar aesthetics and sensibilities.

Buaji makes one full round around the temple grounds, and I follow suit. He touches his head-heart-head, then each idol with the ring fingers of his right hand, before putting his hands together, each time, in the gesture of Namaste. As we leave, he leans in and expresses to me his fascination with the “unwavering devotion” of this Newar community, who remains dedicated to both Hinduism and Buddhism.

From here, we head up the hill into Thimi, and Buaji points out the densely built neighborhood composed of older traditional Newar style homes to the right, and then the newly constructed neighborhood on the left. He tells me that the “old” people live on the right, and the “new” people live on the left. The differences of the adjoining neighborhoods are striking, and compared to the buildings on the right, those on our left appear as hodgepodge - each house constructed with its own design, shape, size, materials and color scheme. The neighborhoods, divided by the road between them, seems symbolic of the influx of new residents throughout the municipality and the continuing transformation of the area’s publics. Driven, in part, by the violence of the civil war that ravaged much of the countryside between 1996-2006, as well as by the general pursuit of educational and economic opportunities in the nation’s capital, there has been massive rural to urban migration to the municipality, especially since the 1990s and the population has more than doubled since the year 2000, skyrocketing from below 48,000 residents to more than an estimated 100,000 today (Central Bureau of Statistics 2001, 2011). As people move to the area, they bring with them their own ideas and
practices and, as exemplified by the changing physical landscape, new publics of dress form as old ones take new shape.

As we walk, we soon pass a handful of open building fronts, wherein women are weaving carpets on large standing looms. Buaji explains to me that many Tibetan carpet businesses like these have moved their operations to the area in the last few years due to rising rents in Kathmandu. The women who are working in the dimly lit rooms, who do not appear to be Tibetan, sit cross-legged on raised platforms in their faded kurta suruwal – blue, yellow, orange, etc. They weave with precision across the looms at lightening speed, using wooden blocks to press down each new layer of wool. It is likely that many of these women are rural-to-urban migrants, either illiterate or marginally literate, whose families rely on the wages they earn producing these ethnic handicrafts destined for export. While the women themselves are marginally positioned within the social landscape of the neighborhood, the businesses in which they are employed are central to ongoing government efforts to increase the nation’s exports (Dahal 2004: 4-5) as well as to the functioning of local corporatist projects based on existing caste, class and ethnic hierarchies (Shakya 2010: 50).

After another minute of walking, we reach a fork in the road, and veer to the left onto a larger street leading up to the army barracks from where the Chinese got the name Gatthagar, which literally means “house of bullets”. Buaji tells me that this place was called Lagantaar before the Chinese renamed it during the construction of the highway, and longingly adds that nobody will remember the old name now. The military grounds here are no longer used as a storage place for ammunition, he assures me, but rather serve as a training location and kennel for the military’s German Shepherds.
At the top of the hill, next to the barracks, there is a open field where a couple dozen people are engaged in exercises – running, push ups, etc. I notice three women, among approximately twenty to twenty-five men. These women, in contrast to all of the other women we’ve come across so far this morning, are wearing pants or capris, t-shirts with sleeves, and running shoes. One of the women, perhaps in her early to mid 20’s, is wearing a particularly bright-pink pair of sweatpants with a sleeveless, form-fitting shirt and matching pink shoes. This sport public of dress illustrates the changing conventions in Gatthaghar around women’s participation and physicality in the public sphere, as well as to changing expectations of bodily discipline and display. It also exemplifies the spatial dimensions of publics of dress, as these women’s outfits were relatively appropriate within the context of the physical/social space of this particular public of dress. The same outfits, however, would likely be less well received in nearby contexts of, for example, the Kali temple or the Ranabhat home.

Between the field and the road known colloquially as Pepsi-Cola road, there is a holy peepal tree. I follow Buaji in making a clockwise circle around and offering a quick prayer to before continuing on. Looking at his watch, the one that Sanjeev and I proudly brought for him from the US last year, Buaji tells me it’s getting late and we should head home. We turn left down a path that takes us past the barbed-wired military grounds and through rice paddies, a few of which have been planted already and have small, bright green stalks sticking up in uniform rows. We pass an older couple along the path that is trying, unsuccessfully, to divert water from a tap along on the path into their drying rice fields. The woman is wearing a guniya choli with a green blouse and a red patuki waistband, and her husband has on green canvas pants with a tan shirt and black vest.
They are part of a local farming public of dress, which is becoming less and less prominent here as agriculture is abandoned for housing and commercial development.

It’s past 6:00 am now, and the neighborhood is bustling with activity as we make our way back to the main Gathaghar chowk (intersection), crossing back over to the other side of the highway using one of the newly constructed pedestrian bridges. There are many more vehicles and people on the road now and the sound of musical horns, revving engines and the calls of bus boys fill the air. Men, women and children of all ages and walks of life are now walking around, socializing, and engaging in various errands and tasks. I see schoolgirls walking in their ironed uniforms, with polished black shoes and ribbons in their hair. I see women heading to the bus stop wearing different types of professional business attire, from fancily embroidered net sari and western three-piece suits, to cotton dhoti like that of the barber’s wife who is opening the parlor’s front shutters. I see women walking with offerings, headed to and from the nearby Durga and Shiva temples – the younger ones, mostly in pants or leggings with long shirts or dresses over them, the middle-age women mostly in kurta suruwal, and the older women in mix of synthetic and cotton sari and dhotis, and kurta suruwal. Shopkeepers are busily sweeping dirt outside and off from their porches, while others sip tea on door stoops and balconies. As we walk the final blocks back to the unpaved side street that leads to the house, we pass wholesalers, retailers, the barber, the juice shop, the newspaper stand, the fish seller, the beauty supply store, and several teashops and small cafes before turning right between the community hospital and the Hyundai motorcycle dealer.

As we re-enter the family compound, we pass the construction workers who are hard at work carrying loads of building materials in doko baskets strapped to their
foreheads from the northeast side of the property. I wonder which one it is who sings such hauntingly beautiful songs in the night. When we arrive in front of the house, several of the tenants are there to greet us. Outside in the courtyard is Mina, who rents the small, unattached room in the yard and is wearing her dark red and black kurta suruwal, with a faded pink bath towel wrapped around her waist. Raju, her thirteen-year-old son, with his slicked back hair and his starched green and gray school uniform, sits on a nearby stoop tying up his shiny black shoes. Sangita and Samjhana, the teenage sisters who live with their mother and older brother in one of the downstairs rooms, are sitting in the shade of the porch and are wearing a blue and pink kurta suruwal and a long patterned dress/shirt over red leggings, respectively. Their mom, in her signature red sari, which she wears daily, watches us approach from beside the well. Her hands are on her hips and there is an empty bucket beside her on the ground. Buaji stops to talk to them, and I can’t make out exactly what is being said, although it is clear that the women are upset regarding the lack of water at the house. After a few minutes of standing by and watching Buaji deal with the two angry moms/tenants from beside the two sisters on the porch, I decide to sneak inside.

Feeling quite thirsty from our morning walk, and with a tinge of guilt, I continue up the stairs toward the kitchen, hoping to find boiled and filtered drinking water there. My sister-in-law Rajeesha has already finished sweeping and mopping the stairwell and hallway, and is coming down from the kitchen with spiced black tea and biscuits for Ammaji, our mother-in-law, and for her husband Sachin, my husband’s younger brother. “Good morning,” she says, with a smile, and inquires if I have had my tea. She is wearing
her light orange and green cotton kurta suruwal with the embroidered flower design, with the matching chiffon orange shawl tied as a sash over her shoulder.

At that moment, she looks down at my pants, and I self-consciously wonder if she is disapproving of my having gone outside in these worn, old pants – the ones I have asked her mother Shova to sew the crotch of several times already. I’m relieved she doesn’t say anything. Just then, Ammaji calls me into her room, and I offer to Rajeesha to bring Ammaji’s tea and biscuits to her. Rajeesha hands me the cup and saucer, and before heading down the hallway and disappearing into the master bedroom she now shares with her husband, she reminds me that I cannot shower or wash my clothes today since there isn’t enough water. I agree.

Ammaji is not feeling well, as is sometimes the case, and she is lying in bed with the curtains drawn shut. “Darshan, Ammaji!” I say enthusiastically as I enter the room to which she replies, as always, “Darshan! Darshan!” She asks me, in English, “How are you?” which is one of the few English phrases she knows. I answer her in Nepali, saying that all is well and that Buaji and I have enjoyed our morning walk.

I have heard Ammaji many times blame the ailments of her body on the hard work she did and childbirths she endured during her younger years. Yet throughout the years, many things have changed for Ammaji, as her matriarchal status accumulates and she observes and participates in the changing world she lives in. Her requests, for example, for the installation of an aquarium with tropical fish in the new house, as well as a Jacuzzi, signal to me her changing sense of self, world, and webs of relation.

Today, although her body is weakening, Ammaji remains active in the community, and can often be found joking, singing and dancing in her home and around
the neighborhood - often at her friends’ and extended families’ tailoring and beauty shops. She has also recently gone back to school to learn basic reading, writing and arithmetic skills, and she participates in various women’s groups and saving cooperatives, one of which I will accompany her to later this afternoon. As these thoughts, and the significance they hold for my research on the interwoven and layered meaning of women’s publics of dress in Gatthaghar run through my mind, Ammaji sighs and turns away from her tea and biscuits, and me. And at that I excuse myself to go to my room to write in my journal.

2.2 Situating Gatthaghar’s Publics of Dress

I offer these examples from my own experience and from those around me in order to illustrate some of the salient publics of dress that exist for women in Gatthaghar today. These publics of dress include publics of school uniforms, publics of sports attire, publics of Newar temple goers, publics of farmers, publics of professional salaried workers, publics of migrant manual laborers, publics of young girl children, publics of students and publics of young unmarried and married women. While women in Gatthaghar wear the clothes that they do for a variety of reasons including autonomous desire and expressive creativity, hegemonic expectations and conventions exist that mediate and engage with, and to a large extent govern gendered publics of dress here.

In Gatthaghar, established high-caste/class urban-based conventions of dress dictate the cultural borders within with people largely conform. What is considered appropriate for women to wear, while actively negotiated, is not open for free interpretation. Yet, this hegemonic public is not all encompassing, but rather porous and
fluid, intersecting and overlapping with other publics. The younger generations, for example, increasingly engage with western styles of clothing such as pants and shirts, that are considered more “easy,” “comfortable,” and often more “forward,” while older women continue to dress mostly in Nepali or South Asian styles of clothing.

Until recently in this community, married Hindu women were expected to wear *sari* everyday, and jewelry that denoted their married status and family wealth, life cycle stages and social relations. While some married women, such as our downstairs neighbor, still follow the practice of wearing a *dhoti* daily, most women do not. It is still common for young brides in some families to wear red *sari* during the first several weeks of marriage upon arrival to their new married homes, such as my sister-in-law Rajeesha did in 2012. Yet, Rajeesha does not put red vermillion powder in the part of her hair when she leaves the house, as was previously expected of married Hindu women.

Whether a woman is married or Hindu or not, if she lives in Gatthaghar her publics of dress continue to be mediated, variously, by legacies of recent capitalistic developments as well as high-caste/class and male domination. This is due in part to uneven land and resource distribution in this area, and the larger history of widespread marginalization of women, lower castes, and many Indigenous and ethnic communities in Nepal (Hangen 2007). There are also vast differences in the ways in which women dress in Gatthaghar, as seen for example between the workout clothes worn by the younger women at the field and the more customary and conservative clothes worn by the women at the Kali temple. Furthermore, each day women in Gatthaghar move between their homes, workplaces, schools, as well as temples, marketplaces and other public and
private spaces\textsuperscript{4} in which they must negotiate their identities and relations in part through performances of belonging to various publics of dress.

A walk through the neighborhood highlights how modern transnational realities intersect with various legacies of socio-religious, political and economic relations and coalesce into various discourses, practices and materialities of dress. The girl in the Minnie Mouse shirt and pants sat next to the older women in traditional dhaka fabric choli and sari at the community water tap. The woman in hot pink sweatpants and shoes exercised in a co-ed, public space between rice paddies, army barracks, a holy tree and the Pepsi Cola road. There were no women exercising in the field wearing South Asian clothes, nor were there any women in suited business attire at the Kali temple. Yet, these publics are mutually dependent and act upon one another, as women through their engagements, however direct or nominal, help to define what each public is, as well as what it is not. Within Buaji’s lifetime, Gatthaghar has transformed from a sleepy Newar agricultural community with only footpaths running through it, into an internationally connected, commercially driven hotspot with diverse people and publics of dress.

In the past, homespun Newar clothes dominated the area. According to local folklore, there was a traditional tan handloom in every household of both potters and farmers\textsuperscript{5}, the two most previously prominent occupational (lower) Newar castes of the area. Women would spin cotton and wool, as well as allo and hemp plant fibers (Bomjan

\textsuperscript{4} While distinctions exist between the home and workplace, for example, I do not mean to dichotomize between the domestic or familial spheres with the more public spheres of the shared roadway, market and economy. Rather, I understand the public and the private to be interrelated and interconnected, as personal circumstances are structured by public factors and visa versa.

2010), creating fabrics such as puntika (thicker weave) and mathema (thinner weave) using warp-weaving techniques. The patterns of the fabrics represented important symbols of local life, including medicinal plants and precious metals. This included the halah goh pattern, which represented the chebula fruit, the malay goh pattern, which represented the black pepper spice, the lawaang phoh, which represented the clove spice and sikhah loogu pattern that represented gold chains (Pradhan 2015). Much has changed, however, and it is no longer common to see the tan handloom or any of the aforementioned fabrics or patterns being worn in Gatthaghar, although they are still being produced on a small scale in Thimi. As recently as twenty to thirty years ago, the haku patasi was one of the common women’s dresses in this area, which represented the lower to middle caste Newar farming communities. The haku patasi is a black cotton sari with red borders that covers the legs up to the calves, leaving the ankles (often tattooed) exposed, and was most often worn with a full-sleeved blouse that ties at four corners (chaubandi cholo), a shawl (haku gacha), a cloth belt (patuki), and a variety of jewelry and accessories (Manandhar 2012: 1). These days it is rarely worn on a regular basis, except among a few older women around the more prominently Newar areas of the Madhyapur Thimi municipality such as in Thimi and Bhaktapur Durbar. In recent years, however, as identity politics has become central to national politics and the national imagination, the haku patasi has become recast as a sartorial symbol of pan-Newar identity. Once the dress of a relatively low

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6 Shamsher Pradhan, e-mail message to author, March 31st, 2015. I would like to heartily thank Shamsher Bahadur Nhuchhen Pradhan, who was kind enough to travel from Bhaktapur to Thimi to consult with Ganesh Ram Lachhi, and send me explanations and photographs of these patterns and of kokaa net warp looms.
status community, it is now an important symbol of Newar identity, and is often worn
during festivals and at various public events by Newar people of all castes and classes.
Overall, however, Newar public of dress has become extremely marginalized in
Gatthaghar. It is very rare to see women wearing the haku patasi or other Newar dresses,
except during festival days such as Gai Jatra and Mha Puja.

As conceptions of beauty and style shift across an urbanizing Kathmandu Valley
and beyond, fashion designers have also reimagined the haku patasi into new styles. New
York-based Nepali designer Prabal Gurung, for example, featured haku patasi inspired
designs in his Fall/Winter 2014 collection at New York Fashion Week. His “genius in
modifying and modernizing the overlapping construction and drape of the haku patasi”
(Gordon 2014) in the collection was widely acclaimed. Other fashion designers like IEC
college of Art and Fashion student Amyma Rai, have created haku patasi inspired short
dresses, which have gone viral online. Gurung and Rai (neither of whom are of Newar
origin) have produced and promoted innovative new haku patasi styles, sending
reworked elements of the local Newar publics of dress into transnational and virtual
circulation for further cultural exchange and construction (Novak 2013).

Publics of dress are processual, fluid, and constructed by active agents through
expressive practices. At the same time, they are often constrained and contained by
governing institutions, procedures and concepts. So far, I have shown that publics of
dress exist in Gatthaghar, and that they are shaped by both general trends and by the
different contexts that people move through/create with what they wear. In order to
further my argument that publics of dress in Gatthaghar serve as both as indices of
society and as agents of change, I now turn to look at the political economy of dress.
Chapter Three: The Political Economy of Women’s Fashion

Women’s clothing represents and expresses the agency of variously positioned actors over time, as well as shifting conceptions and practices of selfhood and world. Thus, this chapter explores the interplay between larger socio-economic and political changes and people’s lives and bodies by situating Gatthaghar’s publics of dress within a longer history of global policies, Nepali nation-building efforts and liberalizing socio economic frameworks. Moving from a broader to a more specific account of women’s fashion in Nepal, the Kathmandu Valley and the urbanizing Gatthaghar neighborhood, I trace changing patterns of production, exchange and consumption of materials, as well as shifting ideas and ideologies of women’s dress.


My interpretive analysis expands upon existing works on women’s clothing (Liechty 2003, 2010, Shakya 2010) and prevailing prestige economies (Hindman and Oppenheim 2014, Brunson 2014) in the Kathmandu Valley, and fills a gap on women’s fashion left in the academic literature since the mid 2000s. Observational and
documentary evidence collected in Gatthaghar allows me to further illustrate complex ongoing socio-political and economic relations and highlight the lived experience of negotiating, experiencing, engaging and embodying global processes and local forces (Watkins 1996: 19).

Table A. Chronology of Important Events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1760s-90s Prithvi Narayan Shah (King of Gorkha) conquers and unites the Kingdom of Nepal; forges political relationship with Chinese emperors, Tibetan rulers and British colonizers in South Asia</td>
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<td>1814-1816 Anglo-Nepalese War, ends with Sugauli Treaty (March 4, 1816) – reestablishes British residence in Kathmandu and binding trade agreements between Nepal and Britain</td>
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<td>1846 Rana oligarchy overthrows the ruling Shah monarchy and rules country until1950; Nepal enters an era of isolationist, oppressive domestic policies, wherein the ruling elite undertakes opulent consumption of foreign goods</td>
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<td>1854 Muluki Ain (civil code) enacted; imposes overarching caste-based system that circumscribes movement and interactions between people and includes dictates on clothing, occupation and business arrangements</td>
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<td>1920s Small, government controlled foreign market opened for cheap Japanese goods in Kathmandu to appease growing demands for consumer goods by citizens in the capital, due to increasing resources among a diversifying populace</td>
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<td>1950 Rana regime overthrown, Shah monarchs regain power; new era of “modernization” ensues, includes open door economic and political policies and vigorous development planning</td>
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<td>1950-1960 Decade of democratic parliamentary politics, wherein political and ideological assertions often made through the use of dress, such as nationalist and ethnic minority assertions made through local homespun fabrics and cultural dresses; in 1960, King Mahendra declares Emergency State and dissolves parliament amidst political instability</td>
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<td>1962-1990 Panchayat Era; “partyless democracy” system of direct rule by reinstated Shah monarchy; state unification promoted through cultural politics of a singular (Hindu) national identity and dress, intensified through educational and development programs, and focus on physical and social infrastructure; urban middle-class continues to grow</td>
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1980s Political dissent leads to modification of the Panchayat system and, ultimately to economic liberalization, starting with the financial sector; era of multilateral loans and agreements with International Financial Institutions (IFI) and global governance cooperation programs such as the 1974 Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA), which opened US market to Nepali textiles.

1990 People’s Movement I; popular urban uprising forces political system to change to Constitutional Monarchy; legal re-emergence of multiparty politics and growing movements for Indigenous, minority and oppressed community political representation; leads to increasing standardization of ethnic dresses in the public sphere; age of mass media with the Internet (1995), FM radio, (1996), and rising TV consumption in Kathmandu; vigorous trade liberalization.

1996-2006 Civil War; Maoist insurgents wage war against government forces, using cultural programs to promote their cause and certain forms of dress to signify their alliances, engaging in complex relationships with Indigenous and ethnic movements, who also continue to gain visibility; prompted by an urban-based coalition effort dubbed the People's Movement II, war ends with peace accord and an agreement to abolish the monarchy and establish absolute democracy; meanwhile, Nepal joins WTO (2004) and other “free trade” multilateral (and bilateral) agreements that strip protectionist subsidies and concessions, opening domestic market to foreign business.

2008 Interim government (the Constitutional Assembly) elected and parliamentary system restored, Nepal declared a Federal Democratic Republic.

3.2 Making Modern Nepal: The Birth of a Nation

During the time of Nepal’s unification in the eighteenth century, the British sought aggressively to establish political and economic control in the region, and utilized trade as a strategy for achieving their objectives. To control regional markets and trade routes was considered essential to the colonial empire for achieving maximum profitability and governing political power. In lieu of the British’s ability to establish a direct colonial government in Nepal, the colonial government was determined to create a market-based interdependency that would essentially make Nepal a self-perpetuating dependent state.
At the same time, early Nepali nationalists were intent on securing the physical and cultural borders of their sovereignty and on gaining acceptance as rulers in the new global milieu. The need to belong to a league of globalizing political and economic powers yet remain distinctive has led the Nepali rulers to acts of resistance to, and consumption of, colonial (and neocolonial) systems, meanings and products. Over time, the productive effects and responses to colonial and nationalist projects have manifested in clearly visible ways that I read through the media of gendered dress; from late 18th century military publics of dress, to the exclusive foreign-fabric-laden publics of dress in Kathmandu during the 19th and 20th centuries, to contemporary youth culture publics of dress in Gaththaghar today.

The specific events that led to the unification of the country of Nepal and subsequent trade policies are directly related to the 18th century British colonization of much of the South Asian continent. Before this time, dozens of princely states and kinship systems with socio-religious and political patronages existed throughout the region (Burghart 1984: 101-125, Ortner 1989). Furthermore, trade routes to the Tibetan plateau and Indian subcontinent had served as channels of connection between people, goods and ideas over millennia of migration, travel and exchange (Regmi 1969: 13).

By 1764, however, the British had gained control of Bengal. Concerned with the British colonial advances, king Prithvi Narayan Shah an ambitious young leader from the Gorkha principality in what is now the central-western region of Nepal, set forth to unify and expand his dominion through military conquest. By the end of 1769, he overthrew the three ruling Malla kings in the Kathmandu Valley and declared the metropolitan center the capital city of his empire. Importantly, Prithvi Narayan Shah used both the
Hindu religion and a decisively pro-domestic (anti-foreign) materialist stance on clothing and other goods to legitimate his sovereign rule. In the Dibya Upadesh, a manuscript written on his deathbed, Prithvi Narayan Shah declared Nepal *asal Hindustan* (a pure Hindu Kingdom) and left extensive instructions of statecraft. These included the promotion of locally made cloths and warned of pending poverty for the nation should outside traders gain control of the economy:

> Do not let the merchants of India come up from the border. If the merchants of India come to our country, they will leave the people poor. We have won for homespun the three cities of Nepal (the Kathmandu Valley)...Forbid the use of cloth made in India. Show samples to those who know how to make our cloth. Teach them and begin to make clothing. If this is done, our money will not go abroad...If the citizens are wealthy, the country is strong. (Shah 1959 [1774], as quoted in Stiller 1968: 43)

Prithvi Narayan Shah and other early rulers understood the power and politics embedded in the trade of clothing. They actively sought to curb the influx into Nepal of clothing manufactured in Britain and sold through Indian business intermediaries, as well as the cloth manufactured in India now controlled by the British East India Company.

Despite the early ruler’s clear dispositions toward domestic textile production and consumption, the British colonial regime exerted enormous pressure on Nepal’s political leadership to conform and compromise to colonial agendas. In order to avoid annexation and maintain reigning authority during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Shah dynastical rulers forged a complex set of political and economic relationships with the British. Trade and military treaties, for example, obligated the Nepali government to fulfill quotas of human labor (military personnel) and resources to the British army (Onta 1996: 43), to receive resident British government agents, and to accept material goods
from the British-India market in a regulated system of international commerce (Chaudhuri 1960: 20).

The Commercial Treaty of 1792 was the first ratified agreement between the Nepal and the East-India Company. The treaty secured a market and trade route for British-controlled goods in Nepal and Tibet, removing existing trade restraints and setting standards for custom duties (Kirkpatrick 1969 [1811]: 204). The policy shift led to a sharp increase in imported textiles to Nepal from England and its Indian colonies, including “significant quantities of English woolen broadcloth for use in military uniforms” (Kirkpatrick 1969 [1811]: 212-213) by the following year.

Women’s fashion at this time was also mediated by anxiety-ridden relationships between competing regimes and interests. Principal imports brought to Nepal for domestic consumption, and destined for the Tibet market, included a significant number of women’s clothing items such as scarfs and veils (dupatta and odne), sari, silks and fine cottons. These items were brought mostly from Benares, Bengal, and other North Indian locales (Kirkpatrick 1969 [1811]: 207-209) and while trade had existed previously between locales such as Bengal and Nepal (Amatya 1969: 3), the embedded reciprocal relationships were altered through new forms of governance and regulations.

The ensuing period of extensive boundary disputes between the East-India Company and Nepal culminated in the Anglo-Nepalese War, fought from 1814-1816. At the end of the war, both sides signed the Sugauli Treaty “of perpetual peace and friendship,” in which Nepal ceded approximately one third of its territory to the Company and reestablished a colonial administration in Kathmandu. The British Residency post had previously been agreed upon in the 1792 Treaty, although in actuality
it had been occupied only from 1802-1803. Expansion of commerce remained central to British colonial diplomatic efforts, but Nepal continued to promote domestic production through systematic violation of agreements. Custom duties were regularly levied, for example, far above the agreed upon 2 ½ percent ad valorem rate (Pradhan 2001: 48), much to British chagrin. Despite attempts to undermine British-controlled goods in Nepal, imports were quickly increasing, estimated to have tripled between 1816 and 1831 (Liechty 2003: 42, footnotes).

British Residents such as Sir Brian Hodgson (1825-1843) aggressively pursued the implementation of economic systems that further bound the populace and rulers of Nepal to classical market logics. Hodgson, for example, described the “natural course” of commerce, whose very soul he considered “liberty” from the constraints of a weary government (Hodgson 1834, as quoted in Pradhan 2001: 45):

The higher ranks in Nepal have (been) dependent on (trade) for their luxuri(es) and conveniences; the dependence is daily spreading downwards and if th(is) Government… can rid commerce of the absurd clogs…Nepal (will) soon become bound to us by so many beneficial ties that severance of the connections will no longer be subjected to the caprices, animosities or ambitions (of Nepal’s governments) (Hodgson 1834, as quoted in Pradhan 2001: 45).

For Hodgson and his contemporaries in the colonial regime, the achievement of enacting compulsory, regulating trade policies was to affect domestic material life so thoroughly as to surreptitiously uphold the colonial project. Textiles and the eventual publics that formed around new clothing medias were mediums for the creation and maintenance of self-perpetuating systems of interdependence upheld by naturalized categories and particular institutions, procedures, and concepts (Latour 2005:11).
3.3 Laws, Migration and Prestige

In addition to the external forces that affected the changing trends in material production, exchange and consumption, Nepal’s ruling nobility’s own growing taste for foreign goods quickly became an important element in the local language of status. Clothing helped to mark the ruling elite’s wealth, modernity and legitimacy among the global ruling classes influenced by British imperial fashion (Liechty 2003: 43), as well as their distinction from commoners in Nepal. The Shah rulers, who saw themselves as analogous to other imperialists yet distinctively South Asian and Hindu, performed an elite identity, in part through dress.

While the coarser, locally made cloths of Nepal remained ideologically important as a domestic trope of locality, it was increasingly the finer cloths from around the world that draped the bodies of the successive royalty and their patrons throughout the 19th century (Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya 2013). The fashions worn by the royal women, too, were increasingly elaborate and extravagant, yet constrained by dominant socio-religious conventions regarding length, style, etc.

During the first part of the 19th century, the Shah monarchs continued to curb foreign consumption and strictly regulated trade, operating under a set of governing ideas and practices based on high-caste Hindu norms, fears of colonial powers and preoccupations with chaotic court affairs (Sharma 1990). At the same time as the royal family discouraged the consumption of foreign consumer goods through isolationist politics and sumptuary laws, their own growing public display of consumption led to the popularity of foreign clothes and accessories, including European fabrics such as velvets and chintzes (Hodgson 1972 [1874]ii: 106-7), among a wider public of spectators.
In 1846, The Rana clan, who previously had served as the Shah dynasty’s prime ministers, overthrew the kingdom in a bloody coup. The Ranas reduced the Shah king to a figurehead position and maintained oppressive rule over the citizens for the next 104 years of hereditary rule. Under the rule of the Ranas, for example, the people of Nepal were forbidden to learn to read and write or to wear European styles of clothing (Leuchtag 1958: 66). While the Rana dictators retained oppressive and isolationist policies throughout their oligarchic reign, their own use of foreign goods and ideas greatly affected the imagination and practice of cosmopolitan identity in Nepal.

In a major political landmark, in 1850 leader Jung Bahadur (Rana) took an unprecedented trip to Europe as South Asia's first nation-state dignitary. He brought and spent enormous amounts of money on his trip (what today would amount to at least hundreds of millions). He also gained, according to the journals kept by his assistants, a fondness for the “looks and styles” of the European women he encountered, and for Europe’s modern legal code (Dixit 1964: 25, 38).

Upon Jung Bahadur’s return to Nepal, he brought back a plethora of new European goods and merchandise, as well as the idea of enacting a civil legal code similar to those of Napoleon. Subsequently, in a move to further consolidate the Ranas’ power and regulate the socio-political and economic lifeworld of Nepal, Jung Bahadur enacted the 1854 Muluki Ain; a unifying civil code. The Muluki Ain was the first book printed in Nepal and it was a text influenced by Western, Islamic and Hindu legal codes (Michaels 2009: 1). It incorporated multiple existing caste and clan hierarchies into an overarching caste-based system of legally binding mandates (Hofer 1979, Levine 1987) that covered many aspects of people’s lives and had far-reaching effects. Under the new
dictates, for example, commoners were forbidden to travel abroad, or to adopt European styles of clothing, architecture or transportation (Hodgson 1971 [1874], Leuchtag 1958: 66, Rankin 2004: 196, Liechty 2003: 62). Ultimately, the *Muluki Ain* produced a particular imagined community (Anderson 1996) bound by social, legal, political and religious elements, thus asserting control and mediating emerging publics in the region.

The newly established legal code also led to particular, hierarchical publics of dress in the Kathmandu Valley, because although the Rana dictators actively prevented outside influences from entering the country, they themselves participated in progressively opulent and public consumption of western goods. The Rana women, for example, were glamorously dressed and adorned, often in European inspired fashions and jewelry. In photographs taken in the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, Rana women are pictured in Victorian silk dresses covered in pearls and sequins, with diamond tiaras and pearls and gems (Madan Puraskar Pustakalaya 2010). The Rana family also subscribed to mail order catalogues from Europe, from where they bought designer clothing fashions and accessories such as watches, diamond clips, bracelets, underwear and silk stockings, which wore around the Kathmandu Valley to various events and gatherings (Leuchtag 1958: 78, 86, 150). The royal elite women wore glorious, richly embroidered *sari*, *kurta suruwal* and Victorian style dresses embroidered with gold strings, pearls and precious stones (Rana 2003: 222). Women like Ganesh Kumari, Rani Mohun Shumshere, Bada Rani Baid Bhakt Laxmi Rana and Maharani Balkumari Devi Rana were heavily clad with glittering jewels that were confiscated from fleeing Mughal royalty, and bought from the great jewelers in Europe including Harry Winston of London, Van Clieef, Arpels, and Cartier (Rana 2003: 214-230). Yet, while the Rana women enjoyed great wealth and
lived in palaces filled with European household items, “their people were serfs, forbidden to wear Western clothes.” (Leuchtag 1958: 66)

This history of Nepal’s ruling elite’s clothing practices and imposition of restrictive sumptuary laws on the general public, points to the particular affects and effects of publics of dress, including the perception and achievement of prestige. The Ranas’ decision to impose an overarching caste system and keep everything foreign for themselves created a situation where the Hindu equaled Nepali and foreign equaled the prestigious and rare, and this created a lasting aura of prestige around suitable foreign goods and fashions. This was especially true in the Kathmandu Valley where people had more opportunities to participate as spectators with the public of dress of the Rana ruling elite (Liechty 2003, Onta 1998).

The local *ijjat*-based (honor or prestige) moral economy continually evolved as people incorporated the values of modernity and new understandings of what constitutes respectability with South Asian Hindu ideologies, such as gendered propriety. People’s management of available material and ideological resources in today’s *ijjat* economies takes place in accordance with shared yet fluctuating and permeable beliefs and policies, drawing in part from the Rana era practices. With lasting effects on the national culture, the new laws, buildings and clothing styles innovatively integrated and elaborated upon fashionable European and Asian aesthetics and styles, especially neo-classical Victorian and Baroque, as well as Mughal and local Newar designs.

Although the Ranas attempted to curtail foreign influences on the Nepali people, expanding networks of people, products and ideologies continued to develop. One of the major consequences of the Ranas’ oppressive socio-political system that included the
prohibition of education and limited prospects for industrialist endeavors was that people left. A growing Nepali diaspora in India emerged, and produced new forms of medias including printed publications, musical recordings, and new publics of dress. The Nepali diaspora during the late 19th and early 20th century gained expanding world views and utilized newfound access to cash and material items to contribute significantly to the transformation of Nepali economy, politics, and culture.

To pursue scholastic and business opportunities, many families of some means migrated (especially) to the North Indian cities of Banaras and Kolkata and to the tea growing areas of Darjeeling, Assam and Sikkim. Nepali vernacular print capitalism flourished in these expatriate communities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, spreading popular nationalist folk culture (Chalmers 2002: 35-84). Additionally, hundreds of thousands of men left Nepal during the first and second world wars to serve as soldiers in the Gorkha regiments of the British Indian Army. Upon their return from service, these men brought back with them cash, keepsakes, and personal experiences from distant locations around the world, including Europe, Africa, Oceania, the Middle East and Southeast Asia (Onta 1996).

Popular culture at the time included a wealth of folk songs that circulated throughout the Nepali speaking public sphere and discussed contemporary issues, including emerging publics of dress. For example, the song Lahureko Relimai Fashion Nai Ramro (Gorkha Soldiers’ High Fashion), composed by Mitrasen Thapa Magar (known as Master Mitrasen) and recorded in 1936 in Calcutta, discusses how the Nepali military men in the British Army would “earn money abroad in order to buy nice clothing and fashionable gifts for their women.” (Thapa Magar 1936) Master Mitrasen, born in
1895 to a middle-class family in the military cantonment in Dharamsala, India, had himself served in Europe and Africa with the Gorkha Rifles battalion during World War I (Magar 1999: 7). He became a well-known musician, a staunch Hindu, and a committed Nepali nationalist. He advocated for spiritual enlightenment as well as social and political reform, including against British imperialism in India and Rana autocratic rule in Nepal (Adhikari 2006: 54), adopting the Nepali daura suruwal dress by the mid 1930s as a socio-political statement (Mani 2012). The men’s daura suruwal dress was made of locally sourced and spun cottons, and represented the Hindu-dominated middle hill region of Nepal. It was symbolic of the Nepali nation itself, as well as for political aspirations for Nepali economic self-reliance.

Master Mitrasen, like other educated, middle-class activist expatriates of Nepal, experimented with “practices of empowerment” (Liechty 2003: 46) that utilized dress to inscribe markers of ideologies in the wider publics in which he participated. He engaged with class-based, occupational and socio-political publics of dress through his fashion and music, and in doing so he was able to link various projects such as for self-consciousness and patriotic nationalism. It is likely that he was influenced by the Indian Swadeshi movement, which was heavily promoted among the Nepali population in India beginning in the late 1920s, and sought major political and economic reforms through the boycott of foreign goods including textiles and clothing from England (Mojumdar 1975: 145-152). However, Master Mitrasen’s music also spoke to growing desires for consumer modernity among the Nepali people. While the Ranas had “monopolized both the representation of foreignness inside Nepal, and the social access to it” (Onta 1998: 196), people like Master Mitrasen, who lived abroad, were contributing through their
performances of art and identity to the popular nationalist publics within the Nepali-speaking world of the early 20th century.

The return of students, soldiers and workers to Nepal with cash, foreign goods and new ideas about modernity (Liechty 2003: 45), especially after the end of WWI, greatly impacted the growing consumer culture in the Kathmandu Valley. By the 1920s, a small but growing sector of non-Rana civil servants and palace functionaries in the capital were also beginning to engage with newly available consumer technologies, such as photography, wherein they employed “dress and habits of the body... [as] markers of class” (Onta 1998: 200). Ultimately, the growing purchasing power and aspirations of urban residents led to increasing interest in consumer products in general, and different clothing items in particular, in the Kathmandu Valley.

The growing urban demand for a more vibrant consumer culture was further boosted in the 1920s with low taxes (Stiller 1993: 159) and the a shifting of the Jagir land tenure system to more capitalist modes of production favoring wage labor and private property rights (Stiller 1993: 159-161). Aware of the changing contexts, Rana ruler Chandra Shumsher Jung Bahadur Rana collaborated with Japanese industrialists who were in search for new markets. Seizing the opportunity to increase the Rana clan’s private assets, the government administration opened up a tightly controlled domestic market for Japanese goods. Additionally, in 1923 Chandra Shumsher Bahadur signed into effect the India and Nepal Treaty of Friendship, enabling Nepal to import goods from third parties without paying duties to the Indian middlemen. Cheaply manufactured items from Japan, such as shoes, accessories and cotton cloth, sold well to the new cash-rich non-Rana social groups (Liechty 2003: 46), and consequently imported textiles flooded
the market. This led to the collapse of the remaining small, domestic cloth production
cottage industry that existed and resulted in a continuing feedback loop of local market
growth and demand for imported textiles around the country (Stiller 1993: 159-16).
While Nepal had previously been largely self-sufficient in their clothing production, this
was no longer true.

By the end of the first half of the 20th century, a new urban-based, upper-
caste/class, male-dominated business class had begun to emerge (Shakya 2004: 269-270)
and the general population of Nepal was increasingly being integrated into a newfangled
dependency cycle of earning and spending. In the growing international wage labor
economy, the people of Nepal increasing had to rely on money and goods from abroad to
sustain. As Nepal became increasingly integrated into the global cultural economy and its
economy was restructured, a bourgeois class emerged. In this context, gendered publics
of dress in the Kathmandu Valley and its individual neighborhoods were continually
reworked, engaged with and departed from.

3.4 Post War Politics of Nationalism and Modernization

During the post WWII nationalist period, global geopolitics supported Nepal’s
further economic integration, globalization and democratization. Concurrently, domestic
political and economic developments led to social mobilization and evolving nationalist
agendas for cultural unity and (later) for women’s empowerment. These shifts affected
the form and trajectory of women’s publics of dress in places like Gatthaghar. Located in
the center of the Kathmandu Valley, people here engaged with ever-expanding webs of
meaning and relations and newly available resources as the community quickly shifted
from being rural and agriculturally-based to being urban and commercially-driven during the second half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century.

In the context of post WWII global geopolitics, a decade of democratic politics in the 1950s, and post Rana era open door economic polices, an increasing supply of consumer goods became available - especially in the political and economic center of the Kathmandu Valley (Liechty 2003, 2012). Education (Savada 1991: 94), medias such as film and the radio (Liechty 1998, Stirr 2015), and a growing wage-labor economy (Whelpton 2005: 75) also became more commonplace and influential.

The formation of the Bretton Woods system, and the enactment of global governance (i.e. United Nations), monetary management (i.e. International Monetary Fund, World Bank Group) and competing aid regimes (i.e. USAID, Chinese and Soviet Union aid), also affected publics of dress in Gatthaghar, as new professional classes emerged and people engaged with variously materially and ideologically positioned publics. As growing numbers of Kathmandu Valley residents became involved in the expanding government bureaucracy and development, tourism and education sectors, they also entered into new Nepali publics of dress.

Albeit dominated by upper caste/class urban men, rife with foreign influences (Adhikari and Mellemvik 2009: 113) and plagued with internal controversies (Thapa 2005: 94-102), the 1950s was also a time of democratic politics. As the culmination of a movement influenced by India’s struggle for independence and supported by the Nehru government, a revolutionary group led by the Nepali Congress party overthrew the Rana oligarchy in 1950 in a military coup and the Shah monarchs were reinstated as the country’s heads of state, within a multiparty parliamentary system. The India-Nepal
Treaty of Peace and Friendship was signed thereafter, and the proliferating movement of people, products and capital between the neighboring countries continued to rise. Prominent ethnic activism was influenced by the success of India’s independence movement, Nepal’s overthrow of the oppressive Rana regime, and returning pro-democracy activists, and “promoted social cohesion within single ethnic groups and the preservation of a group’s cultural practices” (Hangen 2007: 15).

In the new global geo-political context of post WWII and the cold wars (in which Nepal found itself both geographically and ideologically in the middle) and with the new constitutional monarchy in place, Nepal was swiftly integrated into the global chains of supply and demand. India still accounted for approximately ninety-five percent of trade with Nepal (Osmani and Bajracharya 2007: 11) and agriculture was the primary source of livelihood in the country’s predominantly rural landscape, but international aid soon represented a significant percent of the country’s GDP (Savada, xxix). Starting with the Colombo Plan in 1952 money for development projects quickly began pouring into the nation, mostly from Western donors (Pigg 1992: 491-513) and through a complicated matrix of syphoning funds that left most of the money in the country’s capital (Tamang 2002: 324). Driven by modernization ideology, the Nepal government drew up large-scale national development projects and devised standardized school curricula.

In Gatthaghar (known as Lagantaar at the time), women’s lives were still largely constrained by their caste and gender, among other factors, at the beginning of the second half of the 20th century. I was told by two of my husbands great aunts, who are now both in their eighties, that almost all clothing worn by women in Gatthaghar in the 1950s had consisted of locally sourced, hand-spun or woven cottons and wools. Some fabrics, they
said, also came from India, Tibet or other parts of Nepal, and were primarily brought by hereditary traders. Items of other foreign origin, from places like England or Japan, were rare, and functioned as status symbols. Foreign fabrics and items represented the status of going abroad or of a close family member with money and/or experience abroad.

For women in Gatthaghar, different colors, designs and accessories denoted various stages of the life cycle (daughter, wife, widow) and membership to specific castes, ethnic groups, religious communities and family clans (Tarlo 1996, Bennett 1983). Women’s clothing was a way to distinguish their belongings, for example, to a particular part of the life cycle, to specific Newar or hill Hindu sub-castes, or to specific ethnic heritages such as Magar or Tamang. At the time, strong expectations of women’s seclusion from public spaces existed, especially among the high-caste community in the area. Formal education and rights, for instance to inheritance and property, were generally not available to women at this time. Indira Basnet, a great grandmother in her early sixties who comes from a prominent propertied upper-caste family recollected, “In the past in Gatthaghar, clothing supported our identities in a big way. Newar women wore Newar clothes, we wore our Chhetri dress – it was like this.”

But as international, national, and area specific socio-cultural, political and economic developments continued impact the lives of people in Gatthaghar, particular gendered publics of dress were variously constrained and enabled by state regulations, and negotiated in the home, family, and wider community.

Amidst political instability in 1960, after a decade of tumultuous democratic

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7 Maya Kumari, personal communication with author, July 20th, 2014

8 Indira Basnet, interview by Sadie Green, July 20th, 2014, interview 2, transcript.
policies and King Tribhuvan Shah’s death, the throne’s successor King Mahendra Shah declared a state of emergency. He dismissed the elected government, dissolved parliament and established the partyless Panchayat system. With roots in the ideas of freedom and independence that lay behind the Indian nationalist movement, global socialist movements, and the movement against the Rana regime, the “one-party democracy” was in practice the autocratic rule of the King. Developments initiated during this time, such as modernization of the legal code in 1962, land reforms in 1964, and the building of the Arniko highway, had huge impacts in the community of Gatthaghar. The male progeny of high-caste, farmer tenants such as Chandra Ranabhat, for example, gained government concessions and ownership rights to the lands their families worked as laborers, as well as access to schooling for their children and opportunities for work in the nearby urban centers of commerce. This led to further prospects for these families, who participated in and produced the local ijjat economy, to define the conventional norms and dominant cultural borders of the area’s evolving publics of dress. This is true both in terms of what was considered acceptable and fashionable in Gatthaghar, as well as what physical and social spaces, such as shopping districts and clothing shops, people built and patronized.

Under the direction of the king during the Panchayat era (1960-1990) the cultivation of national unity among Nepal’s diverse population took a central role. In contrast to the Rana’s view on education, schooling was viewed by the new regime as a tool for bringing as many Nepali people as possible under the purview of the national agenda of harmonizing diverse traditions (Hangen 2007: 12). Starting in the 1950s and authored by high-caste Hindu men (Hangen 2007: 12), standardized curricula was
devised that offered a small but growing number of schoolchildren (mostly male) a glorified narrative of a male-dominated Hindu national past. The new school curricula promoted a particular Hindu, national cultural identity through articulations, such as through drawings depicting the social evolution of Nepal with high-caste, hill and urban-based Hindu men and women at the helm (Pigg 1992: 502).

In the same vein of promoting a particular Hindu, national cultural identity, state ministries of education and culture declared “Ek bhasa, ek bhash, ek desh” (One language one dress, one country). The status of Nepal as a patriarchal Hindu domain was thus continually reaffirmed, in part through the promotion of sartorial norms and conventions of the hill dwelling, high-caste Hindu communities. The religiously and nationally symbolic daura suruwal dress suit and topi hat (for men), and the sari (for women) were declared the country’s national dress. These outfits were required uniforms for government employees, and for all residents of Nepal who partook in government processes such as acquiring citizenship cards⁹, effectively forcing citizens to participate, conform and comply with the standardized, sartorially-defined Hindu national identity.

The community of Gatthaghar, where the central government was strong and could easily exert control, fell squarely within the sphere of influence of the national government. Cultural policies of singular national unity, including through the promotion of dress and associated gendered social norms, created a context in which the high-caste settlers from the hilly region in Gatthaghar gained social authority. At the same time, these families were the primary recipients of redistributed local property rights, and the men (especially) gained opportunities for nearby schooling and employment. Women’s

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⁹ Anna Stirr, e-mail message to author, May 17th, 2014
clothing was a prime media source linking people to the local prestige economy, and as policy shifted the overall trajectory of symbolic meanings of women’s fashion in the neighborhood was affected. The dominant high-caste Hindu settler’s norms of dress and gender roles were privileged in Gatthaghar during the Panchayat era through homogenizing discourse and cultural policies, as well as uneven local resource distribution.

Perpetual self-construction of the high-caste Hindu publics of Gatthaghar and their networked relations with governing institutions and procedures led to the public’s increasing durability and prominence over time. While minority cultures and dresses of Nepal, such as the hill guniyo choli (subsumed under sari) and Sherpa/Tibetan dress were increasingly flaunted as visually representative of the great wealth of diversity of the country, they were largely relegated to de-politicized spaces and socially marginalized. This is true of the clothing of the farming Newar community, most closely associated with the Gatthaghar area. Fashions such as the haku patasi became connoted with rurality, low-prestige work, and a middle to low Newar caste – all things juxtaposed with modernity, progress, development, and the prestige of their associations. The persistence of these different publics of dress within the context of one urbanizing neighborhood in Nepal reflects the simultaneous presence of multiple, overlapping socio-political systems within a hegemonic yet porous cultural economic formation (Ferguson 1999: 94).

New opportunities and hierarchies within the interconnected socio-cultural and political/economic realms of Gatthaghar emerged during the 1960s and 1970s, with the construction of roads, the connection of households to municipal sources of water and electricity, and the opening of the area’s first schools. These developments were bolstered
by the introduction of International Financial Institutions (IFI) and the passage of policies such as the 1974 Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA), which contributed to the growth (and later decline) of Nepal’s export-oriented textile industry (Shakya 2004: 264). Residents in Gatthaghar, like elsewhere in the urbanizing, economically active and increasingly competitive Kathmandu Valley, were engaged in new projects of carving out respectable middle-class livelihoods (Liechty 2013, 2012). This included projects of cultivating a local middle class, wherein sons, and increasingly daughters, were educated throughout the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. The school became an especially important site and mode of cultural transmission; an institution where cultural practices could be taught, national citizens inculcated and social boundaries, including those of ethnicity and gender, defined and solidified. In the Panchayat-era education system, the standardized curricula exalted not only a Hindu national past and cultural identity, but also ideals of modernity and womanhood.

The emergence of Women in Development (WID) discourse can be traced to the 1970s, at a time when Nepal found itself firmly situated in dominant global politics concerning the integration of women into formal educational and economic institutions. The United Nations had included in its agenda the status of women, specifically their protection against discrimination, since it’s founding after WWII. The focus on women in developing countries intensified in the 1970s, when researchers such as Esther Boserup, who published *Women’s Role in Economic Development* in 1970, concluded that women’s work contributed extensively to the economy. At this time, USAID-funded research teams began collecting comprehensive information on women in Nepal, firmly grounded in WID goals of “increasing economic potential/contribution and in the need
for education and civil rights to overcome the irrationality of prejudice and superstition.”
(Tamang 2002: 169)

The prospect of education for women was utilized by the Panchayat regime, which depended heavily on foreign aid, to form an overarching national culture on one hand, and sell a vision of a developing nation on the other. As the bedrock of many programs was the image of a Nepali woman assumed to be Hindu, universally oppressed and uniformly underdeveloped (Tamang 2002: 163) and policies promoting female literacy, education and trainings were “formulated to enhance women’s efficiency and productivity” (Bhadra 2001: 96). Women’s education and development in Nepal is therefore a consequence of the unequal relationships of power, not just between women and men, but inter- and intra-nationally.

By the early 1970s the state had realized the potential of schools for propagating its homogenizing, nationalizing projects. In 1975, primary education was offered for free and made compulsory throughout the country, although the economic, cultural, topographical and gender-related constraints meant actual enrollment remained low by contemporary standards. Yet the changing policies indicated that education was a powerful tool in the promotion of practices aligned with larger development projects utilized by the Nepali and global elite alike to promote ideas of progress and modernity, and gendered cultural practices that often contradicted. Sites of contention existed, for example, in the context of marriageability, wherein a woman’s ability to marry was often adversely affected by her education and earning power.

Nonetheless, as primary institutions of gender and development ideologies (Pigg 1992: 500), school’s authoritative and highly influential status assisted to normalize the
assumptions of the Panchayat regime by presenting an essentialized image of villagers as backwards (Pigg 1992) the Nepali women as “patriarchally oppressed, uniformly disadvantaged and Hindu” (Tamang 2002: 163). Furthermore, school curriculums attempted to define the woman’s place in the “home economy”, despite the fact that dissimilar gender norms and gender specific cultural practices existed among the various heterogeneous communities in Nepal. Training Centers established for women by the Ministry of Panchayat and Local Development, for example, conducted courses in “home economics/sciences such as nutrition, childcare, family planning, knitting, sewing, kitchen gardening, and poultry raising.” (Bhadra 2001: 100) The training course syllabi, manuals and reports “actively feminized” Nepali women and emphasized their domestic roles, discursively creating strict divisions of public (male) and private (feminine) spaces (Tamang 2009: 70).

Education was also used in the overarching development project that sought to maximize economic efficiency of the nation and gain international funding for development projects. The new Nepali woman was constructed in a way that ignored “the heterogeneous forms of community, social relations, and gendered realities of the various peoples inhabiting Nepal” (Tamang 2002: 163), and was represented as both a non-agent and as the beacon of hope for the construction of a modern nation-state. Purposely erasing vital differences ensured “an easy target population for development and simultaneously legitimized the creation of a single national culture based on Hindu norms” (Tamang 2002: 164) and further normalized the idea that non-Hindu ethnic groups and rural localities were less advanced than their Hindu and urban counterparts (Pigg 1992: 502).
The active Hinduization and feminization of womanhood in the classroom and national processes pigeonholed those who participated, however directly or peripherally, into increasingly precarious spaces of safety (Pettigrew 2012: 100) between competing and conflicting ideologies of community, womanhood and nation. Likewise, education and development contributed to the perception of the need for women in places like Gatthaghar to “modernize” to maintain the elevated status of the urban elite, as juxtaposed to underdevelopment of others.

3.5 The Rise of an Urban Middle Class: The Case of the Ranabhat Family

The following section discusses the Ranabhat family, a high-caste, middle-class household in Gatthaghar, and their changing practices and discourses of gender and dress during the post Rana and WWII era. I bring in these examples in order to illustrate salient connections between social and economic realms, dress, and sensibilities driving the local prestige economy.

Chandra Bahadur Ranabhat and his eight siblings grew up in the 1930s and 1940s working the land above the Hanumante River, which later became his property with the passage of the 1964 Land Act. His seven sisters continued to farm, cultivating land owned or labored on by their husband’s families after their marriages as teenagers in the 1940s and 1950s. Chandra and his brother both entered into national military service, where they received basic educations as part of their training in the 1950s. After retiring from the Nepal Army, Chandra moved back to his joint family home in Gatthaghar, married a young woman from the Ranabhat clan in Dhulikhel Hill, and started a family. He later gained employment at the four-star Himalaya Hotel in Lalitpur, adopted Western
dress, learned the English language and interacted with many foreigners. In his home, he upheld dominant Hindu conventions of propriety, including the maintenance of strict gender roles. His wife and two daughters (and later his two daughters-in-law) were responsible for farming, animal husbandry and the bulk of household duties, while only his two sons went to school. His wife was expected to wear sari and dhotis daily and to maintain local customs of seclusion, as were his daughters-in-law at first\textsuperscript{10}. Before marrying his daughters off in their early teens, he expected his unmarried daughters to dress conservatively in guniyo choli and other traditional middle hill style dresses and jewelry that covered up their bodies and reflected their unmarried status, and thus assumed their virginity. This was an important element for the Ranabhats in terms of publicly presenting their family’s ritual purity and high-caste and class status\textsuperscript{11}, and thus their claim to status in the local ijjat economy.

In the late 1970s, when Chandra’s son Kumar was 16 years old, he and his wife arranged Kumar’s marriage to 14 year-old Bhawani Aryal, the youngest daughter of an equally affluent and connected Chhetri family from the Sitapaila community, across the Kathmandu Valley. Bhawani had been pulled out of school by her grandmother after completing the 2\textsuperscript{nd} grade, who told Bhawani her education would be a waste of the family’s resources, since she would be married off to another household. And although Bhawani worked diligently in her youth, she found life as a young daughter-in-law difficult, especially as the years went by and she continually gave birth to female (and not male) children\textsuperscript{12}.

\textsuperscript{10} Bhawani Ranabhat, personal communication, August 5\textsuperscript{th}, 2014
\textsuperscript{11} Rupa Khadka, personal communication, August 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2014
\textsuperscript{12} Bhawani Ranabhat, personal communication, June 15\textsuperscript{th}, 2015
Kumar, on the other hand, continued his schooling through the university level and went into business for himself. He considered himself to be forward thinking, and as a sign of his progressiveness, he asked Bhawani to change from her daily dress of a sari, to a kurta suruwal. Bhawani was the first married woman in Gatthaghar to make the switch from sari to kurta suruwal, and this time she has been influential in the fashion choices made by many women around her, including family members, neighbors and friends. To the surprise of many, several years ago Chandra’s second wife, who as a widow would have traditionally been bound to wear white and/or plain colored sari for the rest of her life, began to wear kurta suruwal in addition to her regular dress of dhoti\textsuperscript{13}. Bhawani recalls that being the first married woman from a respectable family to wear kurta suruwal in Gatthaghar was a horrifying and isolating experience that caused her much discomfort for years as she was stigmatized and ridiculed in her home and throughout the neighborhood. Departing from the mores that governed appropriate gender performance and sexuality, Bhawani’s adoption of this new form of dress caused her honor as a married woman and daughter-in-law to come under scrutiny. Accused of being promiscuous and immoral, family members and neighbors spoke ill of her and spread rumors behind her back, strangers would shout insults at her on the street, and she even had stones thrown at her on several occasions\textsuperscript{14}.

Today, however, Bhawani wears kurta suruwal almost exclusively, as many women her age and younger do. When she goes to parties and special functions, she’ll wear, brightly colored high-quality sari, with tailored blouses, but as she is no longer practiced at wearing sari and requires assistance with putting them on. She laughs at the

\textsuperscript{13} Kumar Ranabhat, interview by Sadie Green, July 23\textsuperscript{rd}, 2014, interview 8, transcript.
\textsuperscript{14} Bhawani Ranabhat, personal communication with author, July 20\textsuperscript{th}, 2014
idea of wearing pants and a t-shirt, although she jokes that she will wear jeans I bring her to America. Chandra’s surviving sisters, who are widowed and come often to visit and collect money and other resources from their natal home, continue to wear plain colored sari almost exclusively, although they say they own appropriate (plain colored) kurta suruwal as well\(^\text{15}\). They continue to receive clothing mostly through ongoing relations of familial exchange, such as during the festival season of Dasain (from their husbands/sons), and as part of the wedding dowries received by the brides’ families in the weddings of their natal home’s patriarchal lineage. Chandra’s sisters, who are from but no longer reside in Gatthaghar, continue to visit and thus participate as performers, as well as spectators and commenters on the publics of dress of Gatthaghar youth, for instance. Through their own performances of dress and relations, and the discourse in which they engage regarding the markers of female respectability today, they maintain the relevance of their socio-religious associations in the wider Gatthaghar public sphere.

Covering of the female body and the presence of recognized markers indicating life-stages and community belongings, have been important elements in the constitution of respectable publics of dress for women in Gatthaghar. These publics have been negotiated as part of individual and group claims to power and resources, and as part of larger projects of finding a modern, Nepali middle ground (Liechty 2003). Influenced by globalization and increasing access to material resources and social capital, people like Kumar and Bhawani Ranabhat have been persuaded and changed by circulating ideas about development and modernity. And by changing their dress, they have initiated actions that have worked to solidify the sensibilities of a growing local middle-class.

\(^\text{15}\) Maya Kumari, personal communication with author, July 20\(^\text{th}\), 2014
In the second half of the 20th century, Gatthaghar was a place located both physically and figuratively between the realms of imagined communities of morally corrupt Nepali urban elites, and backward, underdeveloped and impoverished Nepali villagers (Liechty 2003, Pigg 1993, Tamang 2009). The people of Gatthaghar were likewise defining and claiming a modern middle ground in which publics of femininity were continually and variously re-imagined and embodied. Significantly, Bhawani wore a kurta suruwal not because she wanted to, but because her husband was influenced by circulating ideas about development and being modern. She had to wear the kurta suruwal at first as part of a man’s project of producing modernity within his family, with women’s fashion as the signifier of being forward-thinking. She wasn’t being a feminist, she was being a dutiful wife, and got scorned for it in society. Over time, however, she became habituated to wearing the kurta suruwal and eventually embraced it for its relative ease, comfort and simplicity as compared to the sari. Bhawani, like many others, now considers the kurta suruwal to be the most fitting fashion for her and for other middle aged and older women in Gatthaghar and in Nepal in general. Perhaps Bhawani is proud of having been the first married woman in Gatthaghar to abandon the sari, in that she helped paved the way for other women to pursue their own desires, yet she in her telling of the story she seems to remain resentful regarding the fact that she was forced to do so by her husband and his family.

The preceding example is a fragmented story that highlights the complexity of one family’s attempt to carve out a suitably modern space in Gatthaghar using dress as a medium. The ethnographic detail also provides insight into a real setting with many

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intersectional pressures coming to bear on what was worn by women like Bhawani and Chandra’s sisters.

In sum, the postcolonial period of nationalism after WWII was driven by ideas of modernization, often along the lines of the new foreign aid apparatus and industries that funded it and the agendas of nation-building programs. The particular developments undertaken in Nepal, the Kathmandu Valley, and Gatthaghar, including the promotion of a singular, rather than multicultural, national identity and the accompanying prestige of high-caste/class urban culture contributed to changing aesthetic logics and value systems. And as the political system once again shifted from an autocratic to multi-party rule, and the economy leaned progressively toward free-market ideology, globalization and identity politics coalesced into new formations of publics.

3.6 The Era of ‘Free Trade’

As domestic manufacturing became less and less viable in an increasingly regulated free-market apparatus, increasingly publics of dress in Gatthaghar were affected by the importation of larger volumes and more diverse collections of clothing. By the mid 1980s, Nepal’s reliance on foreign aid had led to major macroeconomic imbalances, and conditional lending by multilateral institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank obligated the government to implement increasingly “free trade friendly” economic policies. These included structural adjustment programs initiated in 1987 that required the reorganization of Nepal’s financial, social service, banking and trade sectors (Basyal 2004: 58-80). Although contradictory to these agreements, the government in Nepali attempted to strengthen domestic industry by
enacting protectionist measures such as through revisions of the 1974 National Industrial Policy and industry-wide coordination with the formation of the Garment Association of Nepal (GAN) in 1988 (Shakya 2004: 270). These attempts, however, were largely undermined by the IMF and other supra national agencies, through the demands attached to the repayment of multilateral loans. Ultimately, Nepal was pressured into abandoning protectionist subsides and tariffs for liberalizing policies that included enabling easy access to Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) (Dahal and Aryal 2004: 165-196).

Such liberalizing reforms accelerated throughout the 1990s and 2000s, and with a general consensus among the economists and policymakers that sustainable high economic growth via globalization would help reduce poverty (Bajracharya 2004: 92-94), Nepal accelerated its reform plan through neoliberal measures of monetarism, deregulation, privatization and banking and financial reform. Government frameworks such as the Ninth and Tenth Five Year Plans (1997-2002, 2002-2007) focused on broad based economic growth and included measures of enhanced cooperation with multilateral financial institutions and regional and bilateral economic agreements. This included Nepal’s accession to the World Trade Organization in 2004, membership in the BIMSTEC and SAFTA regional agreements, and renewed and revised bilateral trade agreements with seventeen countries (US Department of Commerce 2013: 44).

The result of increasing international commerce through the restructuring of business and labor practices at the global level was manifold, and included major changes in land use patterns in Gatthaghar, as well as rapid diversification of locally available consumer goods such as women’s clothing items. While no clothing stores existed in the Gatthaghar neighborhood in the early 1980s, for example, by the mid 1990s there were
several stores that featured fabrics, and by the early 2000s there were as many as a dozen stores that carried women’s clothing, most prominently from India and China. The transition from tailor-made to ready-made clothing signaled shifts in local socio-economic systems of patron-client relations, and changing ideas about gendered, cosmopolitan identities and lifestyles. Shova Khadka, grandmother and lifetime Gatthaghar resident in her late thirties, says “Now, pretty much everything can be found here, so mostly we buy our clothes here close by because it is convenient and easy.”

For many in the younger generation who have grown up in Gatthaghar, however, although ready-made clothing is now available for sale nearby, there is still a desire to go to buy their clothes in more urban shopping complexes. “I mostly like to buy my clothes at Kathmandu mall and Bhat Bhateni [supermarket]” says Alina, 18. Dress codes there, she continues, are “less strict,” and “people don’t stare at us for wearing shorts, like they do in Gatthaghar and Thimi.” She and her friends enjoy hanging out and being fashionable in the shopping complexes, away from the judgment of her neighbors and older relatives in Gatthaghar, therefore contributing to the demand for such middle-class, urban, consumer-driven spaces.

Overall, the growing importance of the wage-labor economy, increasing rural to urban and international labor migration, and the accompanying remittance economy (Graner and Seddon 2004, Shrestha 2004, WTO Report 2011) has changed the contours of Gatthaghar’s publics, and boosted the demands of the local fashion market in Gatthaghar. By 2001, there were nearly 8000 people living in Gatthaghar, of which an

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17 Sanjeev Ranabhat, personal communication, March 3rd, 2015
18 Shova Khadka, interview by Sadie Green, July 20th, interview 3, transcript.
19 Alina Khadka, interview by Sadie Green, July 19th, interview 1, transcript.
estimated 2000 men and 1000 women were employed in the wage-labor economy with the largest percentage employed in the wholesale and retail trade industry (Tako 2002: 4). Over the next decade, the population again doubled, as agricultural land use and local cottage industries such as pottery and textile crafts steadily declined (Central Bureau of Statistics 2011). By 2011, remittances accounted for over 20 percent of Nepal’s national GDP by 2011 (WTO Report 2011: 7), and grew in importance in Gatthaghar as increasing numbers of families relied, at least in part, on someone abroad sending them money.

With no substantial textile cottage industry to support strong and growing domestic market demands, Nepali clothing imports increased substantially, tripling between 2003 and 2010 (WTO Report 2011: vii). Cutthroat competition and liberalizing trade agreements, such as the WTO Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC), led to obligatory tariff binding (reduced import item duties). Such developments created further profit margin drops in domestic manufacturing, which by the late 1990s was almost entirely geared toward export (Shakya 2004: 273).

With the new global system of free trade in place, it was both the volume of clothing imported that steadily increased and the materials’ countries of origin that was rapidly diversified. Until the 1990s, the vast majority of foreign garments in Nepal had come from India. This pattern changed, however, with the implementation of economic reforms. By 2000, 58.3% of garment imports came from India, 30.5% came from China and 11.2% came from elsewhere (Shakya 2004: 276). By 2011, India held 43.6% of the market share of clothing imports to Nepal, while China had increased its share to 37.97%. The remaining nearly 19% in import shares was distributed among
different nations including Thailand (5.17%), New Zealand (3.17%), Bangladesh (2.82%), Vietnam (1.31%) and Indonesia (1.1%) (World Bank 2011).

Nepal’s institutionalization of neoliberal market-led growth policies in the 1980s and 1990s affected the formation new kinds of socio-political and economic networks in Gatthaghar as cultural and commercial publics of dress formed around the newly available media. Concurrent social and political movement throughout the country also affected regimes of prestige and meaning attributed by area residents to different styles and origins of clothing. Especially since the 1990s, movements led by civil society groups, radical revolutionaries, and various marginalized communities have demanded fundamental, systemic changes and in doing so have greatly influenced identity politics in the public sphere.

3.7 Social and Political Change

In 1990, a popular multiparty democracy movement, known as Jana Andolan I, took to the streets. Organizers were successful in their appeal for a constitutional monarchy, the drafting of a new democratic constitution and an end to the autocratic Panchayat system of rule. However, many people remained unsatisfied with the outcome, including indigenous Janajati and other marginalized and disadvantaged communities. The Hindu monarchy, and thus the nation’s unitary model of nationalism and its exclusionary state structure were kept intact. Subsequently, identity-based movements became more organized in taking active steps to disrupt the homogenizing rhetoric of the state.

Redefining Nepal’s national identity to reflect the diversity of the population was
attempted in part, through the performances of culture through clothing (Hangen 2007: 16). With the use of sartorial symbols in the new ethnic minority and Janajati movements, by the mid-1990s a trend of increasingly standardized forms of dress was visible. The haku patasi, for example, reemerged at this time as a symbol for pan-Newar identity, although it had previously been worn exclusively by lower farming Newar castes. As activists used dress to assert their desires for political representation and recognition, they created new publics of dress and prestige economies. “Now, we only wear Newar dress for special cultural programs like Bisket Jatra and Gai Jatra. Otherwise, nobody wears haku patasi now,” explains Sabitri, a property-owning Newar woman in her mid fifties. Pointing to the recasting of values of, and relationship between clothing, ethnic identity and consumer identities, she continues, “before, everybody here used to wear haku patasi but now everyone here is rich and they wear expensive, nice clothes. Even haku patasi itself is expensive now.”

On another, more explicit political front, in 1996 the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), who wanted control of the state, declared war. Over the next ten years, the Maoists fought the state security forces across the country, disrupting previously existing dominant publics and contributing to the formation of new ones via their cultural and military campaigns. Although many gaps existed between Maoist rhetoric and practice, for instance on the issue of gender equality (Pettigrew 2012: 106), in the fight for state control issues of campaigns around caste, ethnicity and gender were prominent (Hangen 2007, Pettigrew 2012). For example, in the rural hill areas the clothing styles worn by women soldiers and Maoist sympathizers stated their ideological stance of utilitarian

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20 Sabitri Shrestha, interview by Sadie Green, July 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2014, interview 6, transcript.
modernity - at once suitable and South Asian. Instead of wearing a lungi and t-shirts, or a sari/dhoti, Maoist women wore simple cotton or synthetic kurta suruwal because, they said, it was easier to walk fast in\textsuperscript{21}. Such instances exemplify how publics of dress are temporal and location specific, since wearing a kurta suruwal in the Terai or in urban areas wouldn’t have carried the same meaning. Since many women in these latter mentioned areas were already wearing kurta suruwal at this time, publics of dress of women wearing kurta suruwal already existed among a diverse population. By dressing in kurta suruwal the rural hills, however, Maoist women were actively identifying their political agendas and “creating space for themselves in the political process.” (Routledge 2010: 1290) Maoists, in part through the performance of divergent gendered publics in the rural hills, helped to engender a more mainstream culture of contentious identities and counter-hegemonic claim-staking (Routledge 2010: 1296).

During the conflict, the economy of Nepal as a whole suffered due to “loss of infrastructure, worsening of the investment climate, diversion of scarce resources for internal security, reduction in tourism, and a general disruption in development activities.” (Osmani and Bajracharya 2007: 33) For the most part, Gatthaghar was removed from the direct violence of the war, yet the reverberations affected the community in a multitude of interconnected ways. For example, threats to the established order came to exist in Gatthaghar and personal disputes frequently escalated into instances of “class warfare,” such as when the Ranabhats received violent threats of imminent Maoist attacks from disgruntled tenants\textsuperscript{22}. During the war, Gatthaghar also received many internal migrants fleeing the violence. With increasing numbers of rural-

\textsuperscript{21} Anna Stirr, email message to author, March 19\textsuperscript{th} 2015.
\textsuperscript{22} Ramila Ranabhat, personal communication, November 2012
to-urban migrants taking up residence in the neighborhood, propertied families built more houses, and entrepreneurs opened more businesses. Building houses and going into business served the demands of a growing population and represented new commercial opportunities, especially for more resourced and wealthier individuals.

Following a popular uprising in the Kathmandu Valley in April 2006, named the People’s Movement II (Jana Andolan II), the Civil War came to an end. A ceasefire was declared and King Gyanendra Shah agreed to reinstate parliament. The Maoists joined the new democratic government, and in 2008 the newly elected Constituent Assembly officially declared Nepal a Federal Democratic Republic.

3.8 Changes in Gatthaghar Since the 1990s

The Gatthaghar neighborhood is located in Ward 15 of the Madhyapur Thimi Municipality in the Bhaktapur District, and lies at the physical center of the Kathmandu Valley. Several kilometers East of the Tribhuvan International Airport, along the Arniko Highway in between the Kathmandu, Lalitpur, and Bhaktapur city centers, the neighborhood’s central location represents an interesting and relevant case study as a cultural contact zone (Whelpton 2005: 3).

Major historical shifts are taking place here, including rapid urban development over the last fifty years, and massive demographic shifts over the last twenty-five years, resulting from factors such as rural to urban as well as international labor migration. Significant growth of a prominent middle-class also continues to rise as the wage labor economy expands and more people gain access to financial capital, educational resources, consumer goods, and various medias. The Arniko Highway has also been a major catalyst
for “sustained population growth… (and) urban spread.” (Muzzini 2013: 184), cutting directly through Gatthaghar’s center. The major thoroughfare has enabled the proliferation of residential and commercial activities in the area, as real estate prices steadily increase and progressively larger and more elaborate homes and businesses continue to be built.

Madhyapur Thimi was declared a municipality in 1997 through a process of consolidating five existing village development committees (VDC) (Weise & Boyd 2001: 28). Now considered one of the Kathmandu Valley’s five urban settlements, the Gatthaghar neighborhood is still peripherally situated within the semi-urban landscape and imagination of the Kathmandu Valley. Legacies of local hierarchies and traditions, and recent memories of village-like life clash with newer, progressively dominant cosmopolitan ideologies and structures. With a high average population growth rate of 5.7% and rising, the municipality has more than doubled in population since the turn of the century, skyrocketing from below 48,000 in 2001 to nearly 84,000 in the 2011, to a projected estimate of more than 100,000 inhabitants today (Central Bureau of Statistics 2001, 2011; Tako 2002: 3).

In addition to the increasing density of the residential population in Gatthaghar, an especially high concentration of commercial activity exists, with an estimated 40-51% of buildings being used as “offices, institutions… and (for) business activity” (Tako 2002: 3). Education, increasingly privatized, has also become an important site of socialization and status accumulation, and almost all children in Gatthaghar attend school today (Tako 2001). Schools in the neighborhood serve as important class-demarcated spaces, wherein a growing “teenager” culture now flourishes (Liechty 2003: 234). The
rapid transition from an agriculturally based community to a market based society has greatly affected women’s lived realities, and their publics of dress have also changed dramatically over a short time. Indira Basnet explained:

“We used to have to wear sari and dhoti, even though they were uncomfortable and difficult to manage as we worked. We didn’t used to be able to wear kurta suruwal but now we do. Modern clothes used to be very uncommon here, but now it is very common. Now, so many people wear modern dress. While going outside, women like to wear what is easy, comfortable and quick. Now, women go to the office and they go to work, so they must dress up. And when girls are in school they are obliged to wear uniforms. Girls didn’t used to get to study, but now everyone goes to school and women can do a lot more fashion, when before this wasn’t possible.”

As this quote identifies, over the last few decades certain new publics of women’s dress have become prominent in Gathamgar, such as those of uniformed schoolgirls, married women in kurta suruwal, and women who move around outside in “easy, comfortable and quick” ready-made styles. However, the assumption being made in this statement is that these new freedoms apply universally to “everyone”, which obscures a more nuanced understanding of which women in Gathamgar enjoy what privileges, and functions to keep in place the dominant, unmarked normative of Hindu and market-based logics and conventions. Indira’s daughter, Shova, further illustrated this point of the dominant and unmarked normative, as she remarked on the ways in which she understood her and her mother’s fashions to change as they moved through different social spaces throughout the neighborhood. “If we go to the temple, we don’t do fashion. But if we go to the bazar, picnic, to a party, to travel, then we do fashion. But now, we are wearing normal clothes, and this is not fashion. We have to see first what we are doing: are we cleaning the

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23 Indira Basnet, interview by Sadie Green, July 20th, 2014, interview 2, transcript.
house? Well, we can’t wear short clothes because it’s not proper, so we must wear long
clothes. However, its also about our desires now.”

Indeed, for the desirous consumer in Gathamghar today, many different kinds of
clothing shops exist. These stores offer an array of imported styles and fabrics that are
cheaper and considered more desirable than domestic products. Although I was unable to
conduct a thorough survey during my 2014 fieldwork, I did observe what kinds of stores
and clothing items were in existence. I counted more than twenty wholesale fabric shops
and tailoring centers offering a large variety of block color and patterned fabrics, mostly
from India and China, as well as some popular dhaka fabrics from the Palpa region of
Nepal. More than one dozen local stores also featured ready-made clothing, whose labels
indicated Indian and Chinese origins, but also Bangladeshi, Thai, Indonesian and
Vietnamese origins. Specialized clothing stores, with growing selections of new styles
and accessories, were also in existence by 2014, including a women’s boutique and
children’s’ clothing shop that had opened that year. Dozens of street vendors also set up
shop each day in the bazaar, offering limited selections of items such as Chinese-made
rubber sandals, leggings from Bangladesh, many varieties of the popular ‘I ♥ Nepal’ t-
shirts (available for as little as $1.80USD), and loose and colorfully patterned synthetic
pants from Thailand and China.

Except for one store specializing in sunglasses, I did not see American and
European brand names for sale in Gathamghar’s stores, although such products remained
important as status markers in the neighborhood. “Brands are very special,” Menuka, 25,
told me. “They are supposed to be the best products, but they are found very less here, as

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they are very expensive.”

Similarly, Jamuna, 23, told me, “people in Kathmandu and here also know that brands are important because if you pay more you get better and more durable products.” For many people in Gatthaghar, such as Menuka and Jamuna, brand names are associated with a distinctive status that comes from an understanding of “branded” items as being of superior quality yet scarcely available, and associated with large amounts of money and importance.

Additionally, wearing western “branded” clothing and accessories such as Ray-ban glasses or Levi jeans, and having foreign gadgets and accessories such as IPhones, watches, and cosmetic items, was particularly associated with the identity of someone who had gone abroad. “The people here who care about brands are the ones who have access to much money. Those who go abroad and come, they care.”

Wearing such items on one’s body connoted one’s access to financial and social capital - either from having been abroad oneself or being in close relation to others who had gone abroad. Embedded in such sartorial performance, it seemed, was the suggestion of possibility of going such places and buying such things. “Fashion in Gatthaghar today is totally being influenced by the western culture. Women here are wearing modern dresses, and their habits of speaking, eating, and talking are also influenced by the fashions of western culture.”

Yet, the variety of shops and available items in Gatthaghar is a recent phenomenon. In fact, no stores existed here until Indira Basnet opened the first permanent supply shop in the mid 1970s. Before stores gained the vast majority of

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25 Menuka Luital, interview by Sadie Green, August 1st, 2014, interview 14, transcript.
26 Jamuna Thapa, interview by Sadie Green, July 20th, 2014, interview 4, transcript.
28 Alina Khadka, interview by Sadie Green, July 19th, interview 1, transcript.
29 Indira Basnet, personal communication, June 18th, 2014.
market shares in the early to mid 2000s, multiple caste-based patronage systems prevailed. Within the Newar community, the Nakarmi caste was responsible for tailoring clothing occupationally, but Newar women in the community regularly sewed their families’ own clothing as well. The high-caste Hindus most often relied on the Damai community for their tailoring needs, a low Dalit caste who are also hereditary musicians. The Damai traditionally worked in exchange for grains and extra fabric, and in more recent years cash, living in separate enclaves around the communities they served. In this system, patrons would normally provide the fabric themselves, purchasing or bartering for it in nearby centers of commerce such as Thimi, Ason, and other places in Bhaktapur, Kathmandu and Patan city centers.

By the 1980s, however, stores began to open along the highway in Gatthaghar to take advantage of the growing demands in the local marketplace. The first stores to open, such as Indira’s, specialized in daily goods like grains, legumes, oil, sugar, salt, spices, soaps and basics cosmetics\(^30\). By the mid 1990s, two or three shops in Gatthaghar had opened and were carrying fabrics and specializing in dressmaking. As ready-made clothing options became increasingly available in Gatthaghar during the final years of the 20\(^{th}\) century, the caste-based tailoring patronage system slowly began to decline, although it persisted popularly in Gatthaghar well into the 2000s. Newly available ready-made clothing styles, available first in the cosmopolitan centers and increasingly in Gatthaghar itself, were popular especially among the neighborhood’s youth in the 1990s\(^31\). These ready-made clothing items differed from tailored clothing both in design and symbolic

\(^{30}\) Indira Basnet, personal communication, June 18\(^{th}\), 2014
\(^{31}\) Sanjeev Ranabhat, personal communication, March 2\(^{nd}\) 2015
meaning, and the “quality” of being foreign as opposed to local or handmade was important (Hindman and Oppenheim 2014: 466).

The people who opened new businesses in Gatthaghar were necessarily equipped with specialized skill sets, capital to invest, and sufficient family and community support. Thus the majority of newly opened clothing shops have owners who are high-caste and middle-class. With increasing access to educational training programs and families’ changing ideas about the respectability of women working outside of the home, many women from Gatthaghar pursued clothing-related entrepreneurial endeavors, contributing to new publics of dress in the process. Women’s participation as producers, consumers, business owners and spectators in these new publics of dress then underwrote the decreasing relevance of previously prominent publics and social economic relations.

Over the last quarter of a century, sartorial expectations for women in Gatthaghar have greatly shifted. Changing expectations are due both to the growing availability of different kinds of clothing and other medias from “outside” and to ideas from within the community that have been steadily gaining prominence such as of youth hood and cosmopolitanism. Until twenty years ago or so, most married women here were expected to wear sari with long sleeve blouses, and large scarves in public, per high-caste Hindu religious and social norms. Today, however, the kurta suruwal is considered by most (but not all) as a sign of modesty and modernity, and therefore as the most suitable dress for daily wear by respectable married women. While a few older women continue to wear sari daily, and many middle-age women choose kurta suruwal primarily, and among younger women it is common to wear various kinds of “easy” and “comfortable” ready-made clothes such as pants/capris or leggings, with long dress-shirts or t-shirts. In the last
couple of years, some young (mostly unmarried) women in Gatthaghar have begun to wear short skirts and shorts, and other more revealing fashions.

For younger and middle-aged generations of women in Gatthaghar, more longstanding women’s fashions such as sari, haku patasis, and guniyo choli are primarily worn now, if ever, only for special events. Each type of celebration, cultural gathering and religious event, has its own set of shifting conventions for women’s dress in Gatthaghar. While haku patasi are worn on Newari festival days and guniyo choli are prominent in school dance performances, for example. Likewise, sari and kurta suruwal are preferred fashions for puja programs, while the preference for fancy sari and gowns dominates fashion at wedding function. While hanging out with friends, many teenage girls prefer to wear styles inspired by the popular cultures of America, Europe, and S. Korea.

Within these separate, but interconnected publics, women’s fashion serve as markers of belonging and status. Although caste, class, ethnic and cultural community belonging as well as lifestyle stages and statuses such as childhood, marriage, and widowhood are still distinguishable through dress, it is increasingly true within the confined context of ritual performance. Young married women, for instance, now often wear red sari for the first several days/weeks after marriage only, afterwards shifting to other, more modern styles of dress. Widows, previously required to wear white clothing for the remainder of their lives after the death of their husbands, often no longer follow this tradition, especially after the completion of one year of mourning. Hindu widows in Gatthaghar are even daring to wear the color red, a very transgressive act considering the color’s strict socio-religious associations with marriage. This controversial and still
marginal-in-practice public of dress of widows wearing red, has garnered support from women, such as Bhawani Ranabhat, who believe that “widows, like all women, should dress however makes them most happy.”

Within the last six years, I’ve witnessed the emergence of new youth-oriented public of dress in Gatthaghar, including a quickly growing public of dress of “short clothes” including short dresses, skirts, shorts, tank tops and low cut tops. Just as Bhawani’s kurta suruwal asserted her family’s progressive identity in the 1970s, the teenagers and young women wearing these styles today are perceived by others to reflect the values of their families and social circles. Women’s acts of wearing tight-fitting or more revealing clothes styles remain contentious in Gatthaghar, especially for married women. At the same time, short skirts and dresses are the norm for little girls’ school uniforms, and over time, the school uniform has created associations between short skirts and little girls, as well as westernized clothing and the prestige of education. Relatedly, skirts have become part of the official dress codes for Nepali women working in some international non-profit organizations (INGOs) in Kathmandu. Thus, when young women adopt these clothing fashions, they signify a complex mix of associations, relationships, desires and emotions, including aspirations of freedom from existing neighborhood conventions, conformity with the conventions of popular global consumer culture, and associations with privileged sectors of education, urbanism and professionalism.

Despite the continuing biases against short clothes, such fashions have begun to gain popularity among some women in Gatthaghar, and clothing items such as short

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skirts, sundresses, shorts and tank tops can now be found in several neighborhood stores. Shop owners in Gatthaghar buy these clothes from wholesales in Kathmandu who purchase the clothing items primarily from China\textsuperscript{34}, although the styles are considered “western”. Today, increasing numbers of women are wearing these short clothes both inside their homes and outside in the neighborhood.

The evolving, intersecting webs of meaning and mediated formulations of women’s publics of dress outlined in this chapter highlight the ways in which imagined and performed communities of belonging affect the intimate, interpersonal and structural connections of society over time. Particular publics form around the media of specific women’s clothing items and styles, and can be traced to particular individuals and groups of people with their various embedded interests and histories.

Indeed, women’s fashions in Gatthaghar today are the tangible effects of genealogies of power and desire, with legacies that are constantly being reworked and negotiated by women as well as their families and larger communities. Through their actions, including opening local textile businesses and wearing new styles of clothing, women in Gatthaghar continue to expand upon existing trajectories, for example of dominant high-caste Hindu Nepali cultural tenets, and contribute to new local formations of cultural and market-based logics and arrangements. As I have attempted to articulate in this article, women’s sartorial choices are driven by a complex number of competing and contradicting factors in a “matrix of intelligibility” (Butler 1993: 23). At the same time,

\footnote{Anu Uprety, personal communication, July 31\textsuperscript{st} 2014}
clothing-related actions made by women throughout their days and lives, and over
generations - help to define and produce physical spaces and social life.

In the following chapter, I continue with an ethnographic analysis that explores
how publics of dress index and invite senses and sentiments, as well as physical
structures of self and world in the Gatthaghar neighborhood today.
Chapter Four: The Physical and Social Life of Media, Ideals, and Education

In Chapter Four, I further analyze the gendered publics of dress in Gatthaghar in order to better understand the normative and transgressive work that they do in/on people, and in the manifold communities to which people belong. In this chapter, I use my own experiences and the meanings that women in Gatthaghar give to the clothing they wear as the starting point to theorize on the work of publics of dress today. In doing so, I utilize theories of publics and performance, which are useful for examining the explicit relationships between individual agency, expressed in part through sartorially performative actions, and the publics that form around the powerful and politically imbued media of dress. I argue along the lines of Michael Warner (2002) and Bruno Latour (2005) that publics of dress themselves are culturally agentive in that they affect other co-existing, overlapping publics and their associated institutions (families and governments), processes (such as trade and migration) and ideologies (including of gender and female propriety) (cf. Latour 2005: 11).

During my fieldwork, I observed many interconnected phenomena of dress that this chapter seeks to make sense of. I observed, for example, that the Anu and Renu, the owners of the new fancy women’s boutique down the street that carried shorts and sun dresses had posted pictures of Korean models in their store, and blonde mannequins standing in their doorway. Deepa, the tailor downstairs kept books full of Bollywood dress styles in her shop for costumers to look through and choose from. I saw the Naari

35 “Member meanings” is a reference to a process of analysis that allows me as a researcher to consider and present what experiences and activities mean to the women in Gatthaghar with whom I do research as I select themes, and contextualize, infer, and interpret data. See Emerson et. al 2011.
fashion lifestyle magazines lying around my home and the homes of my husband’s sisters and my sister-in-law’s mother’s clothing shop. I noticed the glossy pictures of Caucasian women and East Asian women inside that advertised whitening creams and fancy clothes and lifestyles. I address these phenomena in the following section in order to highlight the work of publics of dress in Gatthaghar today, drawing links between the media and other salient facets of life today in the Gatthaghar neighborhood including education and migration.

4.1 Emerging Social Spaces, Media and Education

In Gatthaghar, newly emerged public spaces, and their private sphere counterparts such as private nuclear and multi-family homes, have become central to residents’ everyday lives and ways of understanding and constructing self and world. These new social spaces include public roadways, clothing shops and schools, which have only come into existence locally since the 1960s. As discussed in Chapter Three, these spaces have emerged as manifestations of specific and traceable developments including capitalist modes of production and changing political power structures. Mass media and education, while relatively new to the social landscape in Gatthaghar, are nonetheless rather mundane and under-theorized aspects of everyday life. Yet, as catalysts for socialization and perpetual engagement they remain central to the ways in which ideal femininity and other dominant constructs get continually constructed, negotiated, contested and performed (Butler 1993).

Take, for example, Alina, a witty and vivacious local high school student in Gatthaghar from a high-caste, lower-middle class nuclear family. She and her friends flip through the newspaper’s celebrity tabloid sections and fashion magazines before class
starts, eager to see and discuss the latest wedding dresses and red-carpet gowns of Selena Gomez and other starlets. After the school day finishes, she walks home through the neighborhood in her school uniform. Once in the private sphere of the small home her family rents, she changes not into Nepali clothes, but into the newly available and coolest styles of pants and t-shirts, jeans and skirts, and shorts and dresses – the type of clothing she finds most comfortable and buys at supermarkets and shopping malls in Kathmandu.

In the early evening, she likes to go outside to visit with her friends in the bazaar, before she gets called back inside for dinner. On her days off, she enjoys going with friends into Bhaktapur and Kathmandu to shop, to roam around the temples or to go on rides and play games at amusement parks. She still likes to dress up in kurta suruwal on the occasion of fancy parties and on festival days, and is proud of her national and caste cultural dresses, which she wears on occasion as a costume for her school dance performances. “I want to be popular and fashionable, and I also want to respect my grandmothers and grandfathers. So, I change my fashions as necessary,” she explained to me.

“When I go to some parties, like weddings, I wear kurta, from the Indian culture. But when I go to other parties that are just with my friends, like birthday parties, I like to wear shorts. When I travel outside, I can wear western style clothing like pants and t-shirt, but when I’m at my father’s family’s house, I have to make sure to cover up and wear long clothes. And, of course, at school I wear my uniform.”

While this narrative is neither extraordinary nor representative, it speaks to several important elements of social practices, different social spaces, and publics of dress in Gatthaghar today.

36 Alina Khadka, interview by Sadie Green, July 19\textsuperscript{th}, 2014, interview 1, transcript.
37 Alina Khadka, interview by Sadie Green, July 19\textsuperscript{th}, 2014, interview 1, transcript.
Alina attends a small, private English-medium school in Gatthaghar that functions as a privileged site of socialization, serving like other schools in the area to produce subjectivities built around nationalist and consumerist socio-moral logics and ideologies (Liechty 2012: 279). It does so, for example, through its standardized curricula (Pigg 1992: 497), commodification (Liechty 2003: 212) and its relationship to the development apparatus (Escobar 1995) as a recipient of international donor-funded student sponsorships. While at school, Alina and her peers are expected to be disciplined including in terms of their uniformed dress, and they are taught certain ways of being and doing, for example, that it is essential to wear “attractive dress” that will appeal to their (presumably male) perspective bosses. Alina and her friends’ regular consumption of fashion tabloids and magazines at school in the morning is also a form of productive claim staking of a modern, educated teenage status and participation in the contemporary globally inspired and locally articulated middle-class consumer culture.

As she walks home from school, Alina’s uniform functions as a culturally valued sartorial symbol to communicate to the wider community her belonging to and participation in a specific, privileged site and it’s associated publics. Hand stitched with needle and thread, she and several of her friends from school have shortened their uniform skirts, modifying their already-above-the-knee hemlines slightly, just enough so that teachers and parents “won’t say anything.”

The teenagers’ alterations to their school uniforms serve to reconfigure articulations of “boundaries and exclusions marked by th(e) practices” (Barad 2001: 93) of their present-day material-discursive reality of local gendered/classed/casted norms

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38 Alina Khadka, interview by Sadie Green, July 19th, 2014, interview 1, transcript.
39 Alina Khadka, personal communication, August 9th, 2014
and global fashions. The interpretive meaning-making Alina pursues through altering her hemline is undertaken in the context of naturalized/naturalizing performances of self (Butler 1993) such as of female, student, teenager, etc. The borderline provocative move also occurs in the context of mutually supported “intertextual” media assemblages (Liechty 2003: 30-31) from magazines, TV and film to real bodies in schools, houses and public roadways. These images and ideas circulate cross-culturally (Novak 2013) and contribute to a complex imagination of multi-sited nexuses (Hindman and Oppenheim 2014: 471).

Alina may have lived in Gatthaghar her whole life, but she lives in a global world. She watches Korean, American, Indian and European popular cultural productions on the TV and in films. She also regularly downloads photos of dresses she likes off of the Internet onto her tablet, which I brought back for her from the US on a previous visit. Alina also knows and keeps in touch with people from around the world such as myself, the volunteers from Spain who have come to visit her schools over the years, and her cousins who migrated to Australia. She is also active on social media sites like Facebook, which she says, is “all about making yourself attractive to others.” On Facebook, the pages she likes to regularly visit include those that feature attractive people and dresses, “like ‘handsome boys and girls of Nepal,’ where the girls and boys dress up and show off with their attitudes.”

Alina also reads the blogs of Nepali youth living in the UK and Australia, and hears stories of people in her family and social network who are (or previously were) employed in places such as the Arabian Peninsula and central Africa. She surely sees and

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40 Alina Khadka, interview by Sadie Green, July 19th, 2014, interview 1, transcript.
considers the signs on the street advertising for “study abroad” in Europe, Korea and the USA, and the Gatthaghar area billboards with Bollywood stars and starlets selling whitening creams and boxed juices. In this context, her moderately altered hemline nearly seamlessly blends in with and unassumingly alters the existing media assemblages and publics of dress.

Like many other young women in Gatthaghar, Alina is experimenting with fresh, hip and youthful identities with an increasing degree of freedom of movement. She moves throughout emerging social spaces inside and outside the neighborhood, often beyond the gaze of extended familial networks and neighbors. The publics of dress with which she engages and identities is illustrative of her own personal feelings and developing politics, as well as those of her parents who have deviated from conventions significantly in their own ways, including being previously divorced and living as a nuclear family. Alina’s dress, on the border of self and society, exhibits the competing and often contradictory socio-cultural, political and economic realities of her lifeworld. “Being a student and a modern girl, I am affected by teenage culture, and I want to be attractive in front of others.”

She went on to explain that this meant being able to adapt to the expectations she felt were placed on her in various situations, such in the contexts of being with “educated people,” “older women” in the neighborhood, or popular teenage peers. To her, possessing “modern style” was related to her ability to self-fashion fragmented segments of her identity that “passed” as what others wanted to see of her.

To some degree or another, all women in Gatthaghar are socialized to self-censor, including in terms of dress, as assumptions of sexual purity/promiscuity, as well as of the

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41 Alina Khadka, interview by Sadie Green, July 19th, 2014, interview 1, transcript.
respectability of families, are considered as closely tied to women’s public presentations. Media and education have served to naturalize a particular portrayal of Nepali gendered modernity in which women are educated, up-to-date and respectable, “well-behaved and sexually contained female(s)” (Shreshtova 2011: 24). Much like other ethnographers in the Kathmandu Valley (see Shresthova 2011, Liechty 2003, Brunson 2014), I observed that women who “did too much fashion” in Gatthaghar quickly gained a reputation. “No mom, so no traditions. And no respect for others” was what was whispered about the fashionable young woman who worked as a model and rented a room by herself above a medical clinic by the intersection. At least one young woman in the neighborhood I knew of was rumored to be a prostitute due to her involvement in the modeling industry, for example, and other women had admitted to me that they had not pursued their passions, such as dance, for fear of damage to their reputations and thus marriageability. In this way, the dominant publics of high-caste/class, urban-based Hinduism, continues to dominant the gendered sartorial culture here.

The Hindu public is not the only salient public operating, however. Women in Gatthaghar, whether they were Indigenous, from distant villages, or from locally established high or low-caste families, avoided dressing too traditionally or “ethnically” as they feared being perceived as antediluvian and in opposition to the idyllic “modern” Nepali woman. But what was this ideal that women in Gatthaghar were striving for? And how was it achieved? In the following section, I discuss women’s clothing as an intra-active textual and material system “both at the level of individual negotiations and the

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42 Alina Khadka, interview by Sadie Green, July 19th, 2014, interview 1, transcript.
fashion industry as a site of mass consumption” (Parkins 2008: 510) in order to make possible a more nuanced discussion of agency.

The following section provides a discourse analysis of the most popular women’s magazine in Nepal, *Naari*. By highlighting and thinking through some of the shifting linguistic and visual choices made in the magazine over its seventeen-year existence, I illustrate the productive work of popular media in general, and this literary public in specific, on the publics of dress in Gatthaghar. I continue to address these publics and the work that they in the following sections through further ethnographic analysis.

4.2 Study of Modernity In Naari Women’s Fashion Magazine

*Sarovtom Naari*, known simply by most as *Naari*, is Nepal’s most popular women’s publication, a fashion and lifestyle magazine with an estimated readership of 200,000 and a monthly circulation of 36,000 (of which 31,000 are bought and sold in the Kathmandu Valley (Koirala 2010: 45-51). Established in 1998, as Sarvottom magazine, and then rebranded with an all color and glossy papered interior as *Naari* in 2003, the monthly Nepali language publication is owned by Kantipur Publications Pvt. Ltd., a Kathmandu based for-profit media firm that also owns leading newspapers and television and radio channels. *Naari* is popular amongst women in Gatthaghar, especially those in their late thirties or younger. It is sold at newspaper and magazine stalls throughout the neighborhood, and regularly bought and read/viewed by women who thus form the text’s public. My concern here lies in the ways in which the text is “intimately imbricated with cultural struggle, the politics of the popular and the public, and the everyday lives of ordinary [Nepali] women.” (Mankekar and Schein 2013: 24)
The editors of *Naari* have, since the very first issue of its rebranding, claimed that the purpose of the magazine has been to “represent” and “empower women” of various sectors of society (Deuba 2003: 8-9). However, when these claims are compared to the magazine’s actual content, they appear to be more of a clever rhetorical device drawing on a privileged history of gendered development discourse rather than a realistic portrayal of the intentions of the writers, advertisers, editors, distributors and readers (Bista 2013: 65). After sifting through seventeen years of *Naari* issues at the Martin Chautari media archives in Kathmandu, I concluded, along the same lines as media researcher Tirtha Bista, that the magazine’s content has served primarily to present and promote an elite, cosmopolitan and consumption-oriented version of Nepali feminine modernity.

Bista’s systematic survey of *Naari* content from 2003 to 2013 revealed that only five to six percent of *Naari*’s articles were actually concerned with addressing serious issues such as gender discrimination, human trafficking or women’s physical or emotional abuse, while the majority of articles focused on the subject of fashion and makeup (Bista 2013: 168). The plethora of commercial advertisements for products and services from skin whitening cream to plastic surgery, and columns by elite women about city life (such as those of politician and Rana family member, Arzu Deuba) provides further evidence that *Naari* does not, in fact, represent the lived experiences of different women in Nepal. Rather, it represents a media source that is business and entertainment oriented and targeted to a public of middle-class, urban women. *Naari’s* promotion of a particular type of gendered modernity, and women’s consumption of the magazine (and the products it advertises) functions, both figuratively and literally, to shape Nepali women and their publics in Gatthaghar.
The models used in Naari magazine’s cover photos have always portrayed an extremely privileged status within society. Although such an extravagant existence continues to be out of reach for most women in Nepal, aspects of such status, such as the ability to consume and utilize new technologies, have become more available for a growing number of (mostly) urban, middle-class women. All of the magazine’s covers pictures from 1998 through March 2003, with the exception of the Dec-Jan 1998/1999 (Poush 2055) issue (see below), depict graciously poised, Nepali models well dressed and accessorized in fancy South Asian styles, namely sari. Women are never pictured doing work or wearing work clothes. Rather, the women who appear in Naari are generally decked out with jewelry - from gold to pearls to gemstones. The cover model’s gaze often meets the camera (yet coyly), conveying a feminine ideal of a demure sexuality, and all of the models are fair-skinned, illustrative and perpetuating of the widespread preference for light-skin. The body shapes of the female cover models also shift over time, indexing the changing predilections from more curvy to more petite/toned physiques within this time period (Shresthova 2011: 49).

The single cover photo from the 1998-2003 period that did feature Nepali women in non South Asian dress is worth considering as well. The cover page of the December-January 1998/1999 was a collage of three separate scenes. The most central photograph, which spanned the width of the page, showed five women, standing arm-in-arm on a stage, wearing platform high-heels and different colored dresses (purple, blue, black, grey and red) all of which fell above the knee. Above their pursed -lipped smiles and sideways gazes is a photo box of a beauty contest winner, wearing a white spaghetti-strap gown, sash, and tiara, smiling broadly. Her eyes are also directed slightly off to the right of the
page. Down below on the bottom right third of the page is a young woman wearing blue jeans and a long sleeved dark green turtleneck sweater, posing on a yellow scooter with her hands on the control levers. Her hair is short, her lips puckered, and her sunglasses obscure her stare, all of which indicative of changing trends in “acceptable dress and in young women’s ability to travel independently” (Brunson 2014: 618) in the Kathmandu Valley.

The women on the December-January 1998/1999 issue cover page not only portray a new public of modern, middle to upper-class urban Nepali women, they represent a new demographic for the sales and focused marketing of beauty-related products, “Westernized” clothing, and scooters, all “designed specifically for her ‘feminine needs’” (Brunson 2014: 610). The main title on the page reads: Aghi baDdaichan mahilaaharu (Women are moving forward), which together with the images, functions to link notions of beauty and attractiveness, independence and mobility, and affluence and consumption with modernity. This fashion magazine (as media around which communities of women in Nepal identify) has played an essential part in helping to redefine the ideal characteristics of women and their appropriate modes of behavior in places in Gatthaghar.

At the same time, the magazine has supported the notion of Nepali women as a public and as “carriers of cultural authenticity and integrity” (Gupta 2002: 48), by juxtaposing their representations with those of “other,” dissimilar women. Specifically, the pictures depicting Caucasian women in the magazine between the early 1990s and early 2000s are in striking contrast to both the concurrent representations of Nepali women, as well as to magazine’s more recent portrayals of white women. During the first
five years of the magazine’s publication, white women appeared in advertisements for international products, they were more often included as illustrations of a Nepali imagined Western world - full of licentiousness, explicit female sexuality, and bizarre behavior.

Throughout the magazine, Caucasian women are displayed in various awkward and/or revealing poses, such as in skimpy lingerie or naked (either covering up their own private parts or with applied censor blackouts). There were scenes of women at spring break parties and wild rock concerts, as well as depictions of (mostly American) subcultures - from nudists to fat fetishists. Other examples included gothic women wearing s & m lingerie, a naked woman with glittery sequined marijuana leaves covering her privates and standing with a black man wearing a stereotypical “pimp suit” (a purple double breasted jacket suit with a matching top hat, cane and copious bling), and so on and so on.

These photos appeared in contrast to the typically soft-lit images of Nepali women delicately posed in sari and kurta suruwal, and the less prominent but occasional appearance of nostalgic images of women in the village, often pictures smiling while planting rice or celebrating festivals. Taken in total, these images helped to construct a picture of the “Western woman” as corrupt, immodest, and immoral (as well as white-skinned) and the “Nepali woman”, in contrast, as cultured, virtuous, and ultimately superior. Nepali women, the images seemed to convey, were most highly respected if they presented themselves as demurely modern in a Hindu, South Asian framework.

The text’s public was thus defined, in part, by what it was not – Western, and immoral. The magazine’s representation of Western women during the early years of its
publication simultaneously privileged Nepali women’s moral high ground \(^{43}\) and promoted goods by which they could mark their status as modern, moral and middle-class (Liechty 2003: 84).

The kinds of images and words that appear in *Naari*, however, started to shift as a whole, starting around the year 2003. The April 2003 (*Baisakh 2060*) edition’s front page, for the first time, depicted a Nepali model wearing a seductive pant/shirt\(^ {44}\) outfit. The model’s low-rise blue jeans are unbuttoned, and with one arm behind her, she is pulling down with the other on the middle-top of her midriff shirt. Five illustrated red hearts are coming out from beneath her shirt, signifying love and forming an arch that frame the bottom left side of her face. She is looking squarely into the camera, with pouty lips, and has on large silver hoop earrings. The issue’s title: *Naari ra mūTu* (*Women and Heart*) conflates messages of feminine romantic love with desires for modernity, transcendence of existing socio-economic constraints and global commonality (Ferguson 1999: 98, Hindman and Oppenhein 2014: 487).

From this point in time onward, *Naari* increasingly shows Nepali women in different kinds of dress and activities: “doing” Western fashion and partaking in subcultures such as by getting fashion tattoos and wearing provocative or little to no clothing. This suggests that the realm of acceptable behavior was expanding for Nepali woman, especially in the urban centers and among the Nepali diaspora, although a stark contrast remained between the images of this “new” Nepali woman and the lived realities.

\(^{43}\) The representation of Nepali women as culturally and morally superior is reminiscent of the tropes of the “New” Indian woman constructed and deployed in the nationalist Indian project. For more on this topic, see: Gupta 2002, Sarkar 2008.

\(^{44}\) I use the expression pant/shirt because this is how people in Kathmandu themselves refer to the wearing of pants and a shirt as a specific style, with its connotations of being both “western” and “modern”
of the majority of Nepali women in Nepal. Whereas earlier articles about exercise and work out routines had featured white models exclusively, for example, by the mid 2000s models of South Asian descent were being pictured in workout clothes and on exercise machines. The pictures of Nepali women wearing locally available fashions, such as in the monthly photo-shoot/article layouts advertising various Kathmandu boutiques presented increasingly cutesy, sexy, and sassy styles. This is true both in terms of the more open body language used by the models (i.e. hands on hips, sensual facial expressions) and in terms of the shorter and more revealing clothing they are pictured wearing. As portrayed in these advertisement/articles, desirable fashions for the ideal modern Nepali woman increased in their Westernized associations and became equated with a particular idea of modernity associated with women’s greater “openness” to liberalized notions of feminism, sexual freedom and global fashion trends.

Through pictures and writings of Nepali women being empowered by fashion and freed through technology, “openness”-as-modernity was being increasingly portrayed in Naari as a positive status through which happiness, recognition and personal and professional advancement were achieved. Furthermore, this status was shown as being achievable through the individual consumption of products – many of which were foreign – as well as through self-regulated discipline (diet, exercise, beauty regimens, and buying and wearing the “right” clothes). As articulated in this 2011 Naari article, “The women who are wearing rough-tough dress, holding a cellphone with a laptops strapped on their shoulders and who are riding a scooter, are the ones who are amazing everyone and changing the map of Nepal.” (Naharki 2011: 24-25)
Rapid changes in women’s fashion and mobility in Kathmandu during the first decade of the 2000s in many ways reflected these texts and their effects and affects on women and the publics\(^45\) they belonged to. In 2000, a woman in Kathmandu riding a motor vehicle or wearing a tank top that revealed her shoulders and upper arms would have “caused a disapproving reaction in viewers\(^46\),” (Brunson 2014: 620). Yet, by 2008 young women were gathered at shopping malls in Kathmandu, with their pink and purple scooters, wearing “large, gold hoop earrings, skirts with hemlines above the knee, and considerable makeup.” (Brunson 2014: 618) While female propriety remained a major site of contestation in the Kathmandu Valley, women’s (and especially young women’s) engagement with “Westernized” dress and technology was quickly becoming more widely acceptable overall and desirable within contemporary youth cultures, but importantly, within limits that heavily depended on context.

Over time, the images of white women of European decent in *Naari* have changed as well. While pictures of white women still accompany articles occasionally, they do so less frequently in the magazine’s more recent editions and are far less frequently used to represent debauchery. Rather, when they do appear with articles, they appear to represent ideals of beauty, glamour and modernity, or expressions of theatrical emotion or foreign scenes that relate to the article. Additionally, they also appear throughout the magazine in

\(^{45}\) Although I engage with language that suggests a dichotomy between consuming subject and consumed object, I agree with the work of Illya Parkins, that further studies of fashion, will be helpful in pushing current epistemologies beyond dichotomous understandings that separate humans from the material worlds with which they participate and belong (Parkins 2008: 502).

\(^{46}\) This wasn’t true necessarily, however, in the cities of Pokhara and Dharan, where women were riding scooters earlier than in Kathmandu (Anna Stirr, e-mail message to author, March 29\(^{th}\), 2015) and were known for having forward fashions (Pratima Poudel, personal communication, June 16\(^{th}\), 2014).
advertisements of multinational companies promoting new fashions, beauty products and 
technologies. While more Nepali and South Asian (as well as East Asian) models are 
appearing in both articles and advertisements, white women are still prominently featured 
in advertisements for international companies from India (VLCC Natural Science, 
Blossom Kochhar) to France (L’Oreal Paris, Garnier Fructis) to Germany (Nivea) and the 
US (Maybelline).

Multinational companies used white models in the overwhelming majority of their 
advertisement to promote products and associated concepts of Western fashions and 
beauty ideals such as light, lustrous skin. In the June 2014 issue of Naari, there were 
eleven full page ads for skin lightening products, seven advertisements for sunscreen ads, 
and many more for face beauty regimes such as moisturizers, masks, soaps, etc. Long, 
luscious hair and slim, toned bodies were also emphasized throughout the magazine. 
Through these advertising mechanism, the magazine encouraged a specific, naturalized 
concept of modernity and a more positive outlook on the web of transnational influences, 
equating consumption of foreign fashion and beauty products as a path toward becoming 
more modern47.

Language use in Naari’s print and online articles is also important to discuss in 
terms of Naari’s depiction of modernity. English language has enjoyed special status in 
the publication, and its use has increased significantly over the years, paralleling the rise

47 While not pursued further in this thesis, as suggested by my advisor professor Anna 
Stirr, an economically oriented ethnography of the advertisements that appear in these 
magazine and the international companies behind them would be an additional 
worthwhile study. Such an investigation could yield important insight into the links 
between transnational ideas of beauty and modernity, including examples of what stands 
for modern Indian womanhood and how that is related to the Nepali version of modern 
womanhood.
of emphasis of English-medium education as a socio-economic status marker (Liechty 2003: 212-213). In the magazine, phrases such as “modern women”, “advanced women” “21st century women”, “today’s women” and “developed women” are all used often and synonymously (Bista 2011: 169). Such articulations address an infinite number of members of this public, and assume membership of all readers of the publication to these categories.

The work that these articulations do is to evoke feelings of belonging, and responsibilities of membership to these publics for women, of different backgrounds and status in Gatthaghar, who engage with Naari and other forms of clothing-related media. Fifty-five year old Sabitri Shrestha for example, who favors “simple” kurta suruwal for everyday wear and sari for use on special occasions, believes that media has no influence on her clothing. “I like to watch Indian soap operas, they are interesting to me and the women’s dresses are beautiful. And before TV came here, I would read novels and stories, and go to the cinemas. But these things haven’t influenced my clothes. I like simple clothes. I prefer the sari while going out for a party and kurta suruwal when staying at home.” Sabitri, like many other women here, associate fashion with more than just the naturalized, everyday routine of wearing “normal” clothes. Women’s self-fashioning, however, is also integrally tied-up with regimes of beauty and lifestyle, as Sabitri went to explain. In comparison to earlier times, she says, “it is important for women to look good” by being “moderate,” “appropriate,” and “simple,” and by

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48 Sabitri Shrestha, interview by Sadie Green, July 22nd, 2014, interview 6, transcript.
participating in new regimes of cleanliness and beauty such as “pulling the hairs from our armpits and eyebrows” and “dying our grey hair black.”

Again, we see the salient concepts of simplicity and appropriateness around women’s presentations of self, and although Sabitri says that the media she consumes does not influence her clothing choice, she perpetuates elements of the dominant, Hindu, South-Asian publics of dress found in the Indian soap operas she watches through her own everyday dress in *kurtu suruwal* and *sari*. Furthermore, the positive associations she has of the TV shows, novels and movies that she consumes with aesthetic beauty and interest, connects her to the naturalized conceptions of modernity and femininity they portray. It is likely that the affective spaces of happiness, wealth, technological advancement, cosmopolitanism, individualism and light-skinnedness, and well-disciplined and fashioned bodies that she sees on TV and in the cinema in some way shapes her use of words, and clothing in her construction of self, family and community. In this way, femininity is not just “socially and visually constructed but also affectively, virtually and transnationally constructed” (Saraswati 2013: 85).

4.3 The Ideal, Modern Woman of Gatthaghar

The ideal modern woman in Gatthaghar today, as I have come to understand her, is a free-willed individual, sufficiently educated and self-disciplined in regards to her body and relationships, devoted to and respectful of her family, community and culture. She is well tempered and well dressed. She is liberated as a woman yet demure, confident yet modest and trendy yet impeccably moral. She is definitely and unquestionably

49 Sabitri Shrestha, interview by Sadie Green, July 22nd, 2014, interview 6, transcript.
heterosexual. She is as light-skinned as possible, as light skin is a highly desired quality associated with a person’s good fortune/karma and a privileged modern lifestyle that excludes long hours in the sun doing fieldwork. She is also wealthy enough to afford middle-class comforts and a range of consumer products, including new clothes, and leisure activities such as going out with friends. She is able to meet the demands and expectations of membership of her gender, her family, her caste, her ethnic group, her class, her peer group, her educational and professional associations, the neighborhood, the country, and the global communities to which she subscribes. These expectations hold true whether the ideal modern woman of Gatthaghar is at home, at school or at work, in her various social situations, in other private or public spheres or in transit between or beyond these spaces. In other words, there is a pull on women in multiple directions by various social, political and economic forces, the result of which is a fragmented and relational claim staking of self and communities of belonging. This performance, or some semblance of it, is necessary for maintaining *ijjat*, the meaning of which has itself changed over time, and requires simultaneous negotiations between numerous embodied subjectivities, which often compete, contradict or conflict with one another. Yet, these normative material and ideological constructs of Gatthaghar are not stagnant, but are continually being modified through the ongoing performances of social reality via social agents’ “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1988: 519).

The personal performance of gender through dress in Gatthaghar, while mediated by factors of the global and local political economies and systems of meaning, is agentive in that it co-produces emerging social space and expanding webs of relations (Warner 2002: 61). At the same time, particularly dressed, gendered bodies function in Gatthaghar, as
“politically relevant areas of communication” (Habermas 1962: 245) through which various intersecting interests play out. The distinctions of these interests are often blurred but include the mobilization or destabilization of privileges, such as of caste, class, ethnicity and gender. Although activism carried out by ethnic and minority communities has weakened the construct of a “Hindu Nepali” in recent years, high-caste Brahmin and Chhetri hegemony has continued to define gender roles. It does so, in large part, through self-perpetuating projections of Nepali culture whereby privileged, urban based and mostly upper-class/caste women gain access to positions of power and thus emerge as the authoritative voice (Tamang 2002: 164).

Salient competing and conflicting hegemonies and aspirations exist, however, as is visible in the rising popularity of “short dresses” in Gatthaghar. During my fieldwork in 2014 (June-August), I was surprised to see young (mostly unmarried) women roaming about the neighborhood dressed in short and tight-fitting clothes. During my previous stays in Gatthaghar in 2009 (September-December) and 2012 (August-November) I had not seen any women wear shorts or short skirts or dresses in the neighborhood. With the local hierarchies and ideas of gendered propriety so firmly fixed, these young women were most certainly acting in conscious defiance of the dominant local culture, which up until this point in time has regarded such public display of flesh as indecorous.

Throughout the summer, I sporadically saw young women in Gatthaghar, usually with a friend or small group of peers, walking around the public roadways in shorts, skirts or short dresses. I would pass them as they meandered across the bridge overpasses above the highway, through the bazaar, or on the neighborhood’s side streets. It was almost always in the early evening, or on Saturdays, when they would ghumna jaanu, or
“stroll around to meet friends, gossip, and to see and be seen” (Brunson 2014: 622). Until recently, this was an activity that was reserved almost exclusively for unmarried young males, who unlike “respectable” women had freedom to roam around purposelessly. Although people still attached negative connotations to such behavior for young women, to ghumna jaanu as a young woman in Gatthaghar was becoming more commonplace in Gatthaghar by 2014. These changes can be attributed, in large part, to the effects of mass media and globalization in recent years, including the influx of imported women’s clothing items and related medias.

Women’s fashion in Gatthaghar is ambiguous and ambivalent (Davis 1992). Whether wearing kurta suruwal, pants and a t-shirt or shorts, skirts or sundresses, women variously negotiate and contest, represent, challenge, undermine and reinforce concepts such as gender, social class, ethnicity and nation through sartorial performance. As a form of public discourse and practice, the clothes women wore in these public spaces functioned to give “a general social relevance to (their) private thought(s) and li(ves)” (Warner 2002: 58) and engaged others’ participation with it as people viewed, commented on, adopted and rejected styles. In this way, clothing and their publics do work to change perceptions, interpretations and projections of the people who wear them and those who are more broadly engaged with their media.

Counterpublics, as defined by Michael Warner, are “communities of belonging (that are) in conflictual relations to the dominant public … structured by different dispositions or protocols …(and) making different assumptions” (Warner 2002: 86), in this case about what can be worn. The young women in Gatthaghar who wear revealing, short clothes are part of a global conversation that stretches beyond and distorts the
confines of the physical place and social space in which they perform their identities. Despite the existence of *Naari* and other forms of media that promote these kinds of styles, such dress is in conflict with the norms and context of Gatthaghar’s cultural environment (Warner 2002: 63), which still posits a women’s presentation of gender and sexual purity as central to her quintessentially Nepali modernity, as well as her marriageability and family *ijjat*.

Importantly, although the status of Gatthaghar’s, youth oriented counterpublics are subordinate to other more dominant publics, participation in them does not necessarily reflect subaltern subjectivities or progressive reform programs. Rather, the temporal, performative acts of participation that make up these counterpublics serve to form and transform individual identities as well as collective understandings over time. And it is this normative capacity of clothing, to disrupt earlier social patterns and then normalize different ones over time that can be understood as a form of non-human agency with social impacts (Latour 2005: 10).

Gatthaghar’s public of short dress, while not particularly large in number, was a hot topic of debate in Gatthaghar during the summer of 2014. Everybody had an opinion about what was appropriate for which women to wear when and at what times. Curious about the evolving practices of wearing short dresses and the narratives that were circulating around them, I spoke with people about the neighborhood’s quickly changing women’s fashion trends (and thus became a part of and contributor to the publics themselves). Generally, people with whom I spoke agreed it was mostly young, unmarried women who had both the freedom and will to dress more provocatively than ever before. This was due to the common belief (and reality) that marriage entailed 1) the
imposition of further socio-religious expectations on women by their new married families, with whom they most often went to live with, in their patrilocal joint-family homes\textsuperscript{50} and 2) a drop in a women’s status, as a young daughter-in-law, to the bottom of the family’s hierarchy. It was also true, however, that young married women were experimenting with different fashions although it was much more rare to hear of (let alone see) a married woman teetering on the edge of convention by wearing short clothes. Although there was overlap, transgression and play, there remained a very real normative distinction between the publics of dress of young married and unmarried women.

People I spoke with agreed for the most part that Gatthaghar was a more conservative place then Kathmandu, and less conservative than most villages. Wearing such clothing around the neighborhood was considered somewhat disrespectful\textsuperscript{51} and inappropriate\textsuperscript{52}, and this was especially true, I was told, with regard to one’s older family members\textsuperscript{53} and extended familial networks\textsuperscript{54}. For some, such behavior represented the demise of Nepal’s culture itself\textsuperscript{55}. At the same time, there was a sense that despite the existing conservatism of the society and neighborhood, these young women had the “free will” to make such choices\textsuperscript{56}. Some women spoke of the recent evolving fashion trends of women – from “traditional” (\textit{dhoti, sari and guniyo choli}) to “modern” (\textit{kurta suruwal},

\textsuperscript{50} The patrilocal marriage system was still the most prevalent among the established families of Gatthaghar, but there are also increasing numbers of nuclear households in Gatthaghar today.

\textsuperscript{51} Menuka Luital, interview by Sadie Green, August 1\textsuperscript{st}, 2014, interview 14, transcript.

\textsuperscript{52} Shova Basnet Khadka, interview by Sadie Green, July 20\textsuperscript{th}, 2014, interview 3, transcript.

\textsuperscript{53} Alina Khadka, interview by Sadie Green, July 19\textsuperscript{th}, 2014, interview 1, transcript.

\textsuperscript{54} Sushmita Rai, interview by Sadie Green, July 30\textsuperscript{th}, 2014, interview 9, transcript.

\textsuperscript{55} Subatra Thapa, interview by Sadie Green, July 30\textsuperscript{th}, 2014, interview 10, transcript.

\textsuperscript{56} Bhawani Ranabhat, interview by Sadie Green, July 23\textsuperscript{rd}, 2014, interview 7, transcript.

\textsuperscript{51} Jamuna Thapa, interview by Sadie Green, July 20\textsuperscript{th}, 2014, interview 4, transcript.

\textsuperscript{56} Sabitri Shrestha, interview by Sadie Green, July 22\textsuperscript{nd}, 2014, interview 6, transcript.
*pant/shirt*) to contemporary cosmopolitan (skirts, shorts dresses) styles as part of a natural progression of material culture and gender ideology trajectories⁵⁷.

When asked the question, “What can you tell about a person from the way a woman dresses?” all but one of the women I interviewed answered that you couldn’t tell much about a person based on the superficial aspect of their clothing. While sentiments of the connection of a women’s appearance to her family honor still lingered, answers like Jamuna Thapa’s were more common:

> Well, we can’t say someone is good because she is wearing nice clothes or someone is bad because they are wearing a short dress. It’s people behavior, from their way of talking, that we can find out what type of person they are. We can’t recognize who a person is from the way they dress.⁵⁸

In her answer, Jamuna does several interesting things. First, she assumes the existence of a certain normative public of dress in Gatthaghar. In this public of dress, the parameters of possibilities are contained by an imagined sphere of normalcy around “nice” and “short” and thus doesn’t account for the possibility of a person’s entrance into Gatthaghar from any countless other publics of dress that exist around the world today. Secondly, Jamuna’s answer seeks to separate a person’s “behavior” from their fashion. This is debatable in terms of theories of gender performativity, since a person’s repeated daily performances of self, such as through dress, is considered to be their conduct (Butler 2011). Yet, what is most interesting to me about this discursive move to separate a woman’s style and deportment is its relevance to the historical projection of women’s publics of dress in Gatthaghar. In earlier generations, a women’s dress was her

⁵⁷ Alina Khadka, interview by Sadie Green, July 19th, 2014, interview 1, transcript, Sushmita Rai, interview by Sadie Green, July 30th, 2014, interview 9, transcript.
⁵⁸ Subatra Thapa, interview by Sadie Green, July 30th, 2014, interview 10, transcript.
presentation of self, and thus was her behavior that related and contributed directly to the
ijjat of her family. Thus, these elements of selfhood were previously considered the same,
whereas now there is a cognitive divide that ideologically separates a women’s dress
from her behavior, at least in rhetoric if not in practice.

Although the fourteen-person sample size of my interviews was too small to be
statistically significant, it is interesting to note that it was the younger, married women I
interviewed who were generally the most critical regarding the shorter, more revealing
fashions of other young women, like Menuka, who said, “In the name of the fashion, one
should not do immodestly. It should not cause any negative impacts on others, so in the
name of fashion when one shows their flesh it’s not good because it disturbs other
people.”\(^5^9\) Conversely, it was some of the older women I interviewed who were most
compassionate toward and accepting of the new youth-oriented fashions “What matters is
what is in people’s hearts, not what they wear. If wearing those clothes makes them
happy, that is what they should do. My sons’ wives are welcome to wear shorts if they
want to.”\(^6^0\) Despite such comments, it is very rare to see married women in Gatthaghar
uninhibited in their clothing choices. More commonly, sartorial acceptability is
understood to be contextual, requiring varying degrees of constraint on the part of women
depending on her positionality in complex sets of shifting relationships, kinship ties and
status conscious social spaces. As Alina explained to me:

> When I am at my house I can wear shorts. Also, I wear shorts when I am with my
friends and when we go out together. But in front of my older family members,
like my grandfather and grandmother, I need to wear long clothes… So I change
my clothes…. by seeing the time (and) by seeing the occasion\(^6^1\)

\(^5^9\) Menuka Luital, interview by Sadie Green, August 1\(^{st}\), 2014, interview 14, transcript.
\(^6^0\) Bhawani Ranabhat, interview by Sadie Green, July 23\(^{rd}\), 2014, interview 7, transcript.
\(^6^1\) Alina Khadka, interview by Sadie Green, July 19\(^{th}\), 2014, interview 1, transcript.
Alina, who dreams of being a lawyer, a beauty queen, and an army officer, but is being told by her parents and teachers to become a nurse, admitted to me that she is greatly influenced by Western fashions and desires to appear attractive to her teenage peers. She regularly reads *Naari* and other fashion publications, looks at clothing-related online blogs and websites and participates in Facebook groups, as previously discussed. At the same time, she maintains that although she often feels that she is judged negatively by her grandparents and by older women in the neighborhood, she also tries to communicate her respect to them, in part through the clothes she wears.

Alina, like many young women in Gatthaghar, negotiates her performed identity and addresses her publics of dress through active participation with various fashion-related medias and clothing regimes in different - sometimes more normative and sometimes more unconventional - social spaces. She moves through Gatthaghar’s publics of dress: from publics of short dresses and western clothes to publics of Chhetri cultural dress to publics of “party dresses” of popular Indian *anarkali, patiyala, and umbrella kurta* styles, to virtual publics of beautiful young people in Nepal and around the world. Her embodied communication through dress is multisited, partial, characterized, and fragmentary, affected by a plethora of internalized and projected politics, ideologies, conventions, fears, aspirations and needs. In order to be respectful and cultured yet youthful and popular as a young woman this urbanizing neighborhood, there is an ongoing need for Alina to consistently and intelligently engage with multiple, co-existing, conflicting and often contradictory spheres of sociality. Further articulated by my sister-in-law who had just finished the twelfth grade, “Of course! All my friends from
school are wearing ‘half pants’ and skirts these days.” But are you, I asked? “No, I never have,” was her quick reply.62

Thus, through this discussion of media and expanded webs of gendered and fashion-related discourse and practice in Gatthaghar, I have highlighted some of ways in which publics of dress do work. Women’s clothing, as a mundane, material item with which all people in Gatthaghar engage daily (either as wearers or spectators, or both), simultaneously reifies or deconstructs and reimagines existing hierarchies of power and privilege. Furthermore, publics interact and do work on one other, as I further examine in the following section that further explores education and media, and the publics of dress of young women in Gatthaghar.

4.4 Imagining and Performing Womanhood

In Gatthaghar today, most women dress from day-to-day in ready-made styles, and tailoring rather than spinning and weaving, has become a common skill set that women of all castes and ethnicities pursue. Eschewing the old styles of dress in their respective communities, namely the various kinds of sari that women were expected to wear after marriage, many women in Gatthaghar dress in clothing they value as “simple”, “comfortable,” “easy” and “matching/suitable.” In fact, these guiding narratives were

62 Rajeesha Kadka, personal communication, June 12, 2014. While the visibility and voice of young women through engagements of dress in the public sphere is the subject of this particular inquiry, I do not mean to preclude the possibility of other forms of agency/resistance against uneven power structures that have are “deployed within the ‘private,’ and hence less visible, sphere.” (Sarkar 2008: 18)

63 In agreement with Anna’s Stirr’s comments on an earlier draft of this thesis, I believe that it is important to point out here the difference in the meanings of suhaunu (“to suit”). Although Mark Liechty (2003, 2008, 2010, 2012) usually refers to the sense of suhaunu
central to the discourse and practice of women’s local publics of dress, and reflected the high value placed on simultaneously embodying elements of modernity and modesty, as well as the positive connotations of increasing conveniences associated with an urbanizing life.

Desires for upward socio-economic mobility and status in the local, urbanizing ijjat (honor) economy require women who live in Gatthaghar to present themselves as respectable, educated women who are modest yet up-to-date. This is true in the case of women who are from established communities, as well as women who have migrated here from other areas of the country in recent years. Menuka Luitel, 25, for example, moved from her natal community in Illam in 2012 with her husband, in order to pursue their studies and careers. They rent a small room on the roof of an orange-colored four-story house on the block. The owners of the house live there with their children and their children’s spouses, and they rent out nine rooms in total. The matriarch, who comes from the same community in Sitapaila as Bhawani, operates a small storefront on the street level. Menuka explained to me, as we sat in her room overlooking the urban spread of Gatthaghar, that differences existed between women’s dress in Gatthaghar and in her home village. Older women in the village, she told me, only wore sari and guniyocholi and younger married women wore sari or kurta suruwal but not pants and t-shirts, as she had begun wearing since living in Gatthaghar. She continued:

Comfort is the most important part of my fashion because if I’m comfortable I’m also confident. It’s important to me that my fashion shows that I am a simple,

that means “suitable” as in adhering to a norm, when talking about clothing suhaunu will often be used more in the sense of “it suits you” as in “it looks good on you.” Of course, this can still be informed by ideas of what’s suitable as in proper (Anna Stirr, e-mail to author, March 30th, 2015)

64 Menuka Luital, interview by Sadie Green, August 1st, 2014, interview 14, transcript.
standard, educated girl who deserves to be highly respected by every person…
‘Simple living, high thinking’ this is the motto I go by, so my dress is simple and I wear standard styles of clothing that are well-matched.\(^{65}\)

Through her words and her dress, Menuka expresses a concern for the perception that other people have of her – she dresses “simple” because she wants to be respected, and has adopted new, acceptable urban styles of clothing since moving here in order to appear modern. The fashion choices that Menuka makes highlights tensions that play out between competing regimes of interpretation through publics of dress that are locational, as well as temporal.

Other narratives that came up frequently in discussions of women’s fashion in Gatthaghar related to the intrusion upon and erosion of tradition, which are also intricately related to the tenuousness of local socio-economic positioning. “What clothing we wear is important because we need to look good, smart and respectful…even while walking on the road people notice what kind of dress we wear, so it is important to dress in a way that shows our personality and honor.”\(^{66}\) says Jamuna Thapa, 23. A high-caste, Chhetri woman from a property owning family in Gatthaghar, Jamuna was married with two small children at the time of our meeting.

I met Jamuna at her friend Nikita’s newly opened children’s clothing shop\(^{67}\), where she often goes to visit when she comes to the vegetable market. Each of the half dozen times I saw her, she was dressed in brightly colored sari and kurta suruwal, mostly green, yellow and red, as well as with gold jewelry and pote Pakistani glass bead

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\(^{65}\) Menuka Luital, interview by Sadie Green, August 1\(^{st}\), 2014, interview 14, transcript.
\(^{66}\) Jamuna Thapa, interview by Sadie Green, July 20\(^{th}\), 2014, interview 4, transcript.
\(^{67}\) My informal survey of clothing tags and subsequent conversations with owner Nikita Ranabhat revealed that the vast majority of items available in her store were manufactured in Thailand and Indonesia.
necklaces. The color and designs of her clothes and jewelry are conventionally associated with Hindu women’s married status, as well as with abundance and fertility (Bennett 1983). Moreover, the vividly bright colors of her clothing, as well as the gold she wears, are representative of the substantial wealth required to attain them. Her clothing is a clear signal to others regarding her upper-caste Hindu religious and upper-class belonging.

When I asked her what she thought about women’s contemporary fashion in Gatthaghar today, she replied, “It is really a shame that interest in wearing our traditional Nepali dresses is declining in popularity.”

Yet, Jamuna’s distinctive perspective on the role that women’s clothing should play in the community, which she felt should be to promote the status of Nepal, is largely based on her privileged position within the socio-economic structure of Gatthaghar. Her answers elude to the potential loss of status for women through their involvement in unsuitable fashions, yet interestingly also focuses on rejecting the oft-articulated idea of national underdevelopment or lack or inadequacy:

The trend of wearing Nepali clothing is disappearing day by day. Fashion here should be about designing and wearing new styles of Nepali dress. When I leave my home to go outside, I just like to wear kurta suruwal, and at home I wear pants and shirts. I don’t wear half pants or skirts because it is not part of our culture. I think we should dress according to our culture and give importance to developing Nepali dress, not only copying Western styles.

Jamuna suggests that innovations through clothing can be a catalyst for the advancement of status for a public of dress, which she is interested in protecting. As she dresses for “outside” Jamuna expresses this desire to engage with women’s clothing

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68 Jamuna Thapa, interview by Sadie Green, July 20th, 2014, interview 4, transcript.
69 Jamuna Thapa, interview by Sadie Green, July 20th, 2014, interview 4, transcript.
70 In Gatthaghar, there is an clear distinction between “inside” and “outside” clothing, or what clothing is appropriate for use inside of the house vs. outside of the house, and thus
styles that draw from the religious and class-based publics to which she belongs. In this way, her active decision-making process and performance of dress outside of her home in is a socio-political strategy and a visual assertion of an identity-based agenda in the public domain. Her friend Nikita, 24, who is also from a upper-caste, propertied family and is married with one small child, says she enjoys wearing “kurta suruwal, pants, and t-shirts.” Referencing the children’s clothing shop she recently opened in the downstairs of her home, she continued, “to me, fashion is about changing designs and styles of clothing. That is why I am offering something new.71” Thus, as recast values and changing interests intersect with lived realities, publics of dress co-emerge and co-exist, coalesce and dissipate and are written into people’s lives and communities through clothing as material, discourse, and performed cultural text.

Publics do work in that people identify with them, or not, and the concepts they represent and that become associated with them, such as those of the ideal modern Nepali women or a “backward” villager. The publics of Newar weavers have become high marginalized, for example, while the publics of western clothes is gaining currency. As people are variously situated and socialized, they are influenced by the norms of specific publics to wear and promote particular things in particular places, such as through Nikita’s business endeavours or Jamuna’s employment of symbols of religion and wealth in public and her use of comfortable western styles of clothing at home. In this way, clothing can and is used to assert particular identities and ideologies, such those embedded in Jamuna’s presentation of a proud Nepali Hindu middle-class, traditional and

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modern womanhood in the local marketplace. During our conversation, Nikita and Jamuna agreed that, in Gatthaghar today “we [women] can wear what we want, within limits… So we wear clothes that suit our bodies and seem good but that are not to revealing. Now, even [women from] good families wear pants and t-shirts.” Indeed, as pants and t-shirts become normalized and more popular in Gatthaghar, people here learn to identify with them and increasingly choose to wear them as simple, easy, convenient and comfortable alternatives in ways that they find appropriate to the urbanizing environments in which they live.

The choices that women make about what to wear also have effects on wider society. For example, over time the increasing consumption of worn ready-made outfits in Gatthaghar has contributed to shifting concepts of respectable femininity, and the relationship between *ijjat*, behavior and dress. The changing modes of production and exchange of these fashions, furthermore, have contributed to unstable social and political conditions of its consumption.

Today, 70% of women in Gatthaghar are literate (Tako 2001: 21) and have at least some disposable cash to spend, as well as increased access to various sorts of medias and public spaces. While education and money in the Kathmandu Valley were once restricted to only the uppermost echelons of society and represented a highly male-dominated space, in recent years opportunities for formal schooling, entering the urban wage-labor economy and participating in newly formed social spaces and as consumers and citizens have increased for many. Exposure to mass media, prospects and opportunities for schooling and for traveling and moving about, and the ability to form

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new social networks are also major factors contributing to change in women’s everyday lives. Most (but not all) girls in Gatthaghar today go to school (and stay in school for longer), and many young and middle age women work as part-time laborers, in salaried positions or as small business owners. With the massive historical shifts that have been occurring here over the past generation, older women in the community are well positioned to speak to the changes they have experienced over their lives here, as well as to the generational differences that exist today.

“It used to be the old system,” Sabitri Shrestha, 55, told me one evening in late July 2014 as we sipped chai tea in the dark in the kitchen of her house. It was another evening of unscheduled municipal load shedding, an almost daily phenomenon along with water shortages throughout the year, due in great part to the large-scale development in the area that existing infrastructure cannot support. Sabitri continued:

Now it has been 19 years since I moved here and everything has changed. Now, nobody wears haku patasi. Before, everybody wore haku patasi. Everything has changed now. Now, everyone’s rich, they wear expensive nice clothes, even the haku patasi is expensive. Compared to our time it is very free now. Everyone has boyfriends and girlfriends. How could this happen in our time? Without seeing a boy we used to get married. Isn’t it free now? It’s free. We’ve also given our daughters freedom; we asked them if they liked the boys before we sent them off in marriage. It didn’t used to be like that in our days. Now, it’s free for both boys and girls. Not like before. In Gatthaghar, things have changed. So much has changed. So much comes and goes from the outside, outside of Gatthaghar…you know, at that time it was the old culture. Daughter-in-laws were not allowed to walk around without odne (a shawl)... but now daughter-in-laws wear skirts, dresses. It has changed, but not so much for older women.73

Sabitri’s words point to the huge generational differences in Gatthaghar, as well as to the strong associations here of tradition and class to marriage and sexuality. Just as an older woman in shorts in Gatthaghar is difficult to imagine, so is young bride who

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73 Sabitri Shrestha, interview by Sadie Green, July 22nd, 2014, interview 6, transcript.
would wear a sari everyday. Similarly, it is difficult to imagine a respectable older woman in Gatthaghar with a boyfriend, and although she insists within the younger generation, “everyone has boyfriends and girlfriends”, I have personally not known anyone in Gatthaghar to casually date, at least not openly. The young couples that I do know who have fallen in love have been of similar castes, and have married and have often stayed within their joint family homes, thus incorporating their elopements into acceptable parameters of sociality.

Sabitri’s words demonstrate how aspects of traditional conceptual lenses, competing state and commercial ideologies, and particular idiosyncrasies of communities and individuals function in Gatthaghar’s publics of dress. She specifies in her story, for example, that her daughters were both arranged in traditional marriages, noting that they had some choice in the arrangement. The narrative of relative sartorial freedoms enjoyed by herself and her daughters, therefore, rests in uneasy, disjunctive tension with competing discourses and practices of *ijjat*, for example, and its associations with gender, caste, class, etc. Ultimately, the freedom Sabitri and her daughters have in regards to dress and lifestyle today continues to be constrained by the trajectories of developmental discourse and practices promoting the values of westernized versions of progress and women’s liberation, as well as the patriarchal *ijjat* economy that continues to operate with particularly gendered, casted and classed norms of behavior around clothing and marriage.

Her daughters’ freedom, like the freedom of many daughters of Gatthaghar from high-caste, middle-class families, are necessarily limited and arranged, part of larger projects of maintaining privilege and power with their families, as well as the larger
ethnic and caste communities to which they belong. In this way, Sabitri’s words, similarly to Jamuna’s, echo salient desires, tensions and fears around maintaining family status and ideals of development and modernity. Similarly, they speak to tensions relating to the erosion of tradition and status via the influence of outside publics of dress, whether in the form of western media or, perhaps, to rural-to-urban migration.

The preceding section sketched some common trends and patterns of women’s publics of dress in Gatthaghar today. Women’s discursive and performative practices illustrate important aspects of how hegemonic high-caste/class religio-social expectations, diversified transnational realities and more dominant and dissident ideologies continue to effect people’s engagement with and management of material culture and life on a day-to-day basis. Ideas and practices differ from family to family and between individuals, and many people switch styles regularly depending on their location and context, but the choices people make have real effects on their ontologies and build environments. In the following penultimate section of this thesis I build on my theory of the tangible work of publics of dress by examining the physical and ideological spaces of two women-owned clothing shops in Gatthaghar.

4.5 Case Study of Two Shops

Perhaps newest to the dressscape74 of Gatthaghar are specialized women’s boutiques, which have only just begun to appear, offering such items as women’s one-

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74 This term is in reference to Arjun Appadurai’s globalization theory, which seeks to define the intertwining social and physical dimensions of global exchange through the neologism of “scapes.” In this case, “dressscape” refers to a “landscape of group identity” (Appadurai 1991: 48) built around the “situational cultural politics” and the “material organization of time-sharing social practices” (Chong 2008: 7) of clothing in Gatthaghar.
piece suits, dresses, skirts, shorts, nightgowns, high-healed shoes, handbags, and other fashion accessories. While there have been small stores selling fancy sari here since at least the mid 1990s\footnote{Bhawani Ranabhat, personally communication, August 11\textsuperscript{th}, 2014} engendering a sense of high-class commerce, this new kind of store is unique both in terms of the controversial fashion wares it offers and the specialized youth-oriented clientele it caters to. Furthermore, the chic and modern interior design creates an atmosphere of cosmopolitan sophistication, comparable to stores one could previously only find in fancy shopping malls in Kathmandu. While such stores are still marginal as a whole in terms of the clothing market in Gatthaghar, they represent an interesting case study at the intersection of commerce, bodies and subjectivities.

The owners of Jasmin Fashion Collection are two sisters, Anu and Renu, who were born and raised in Gatthaghar and both live in their husband’s joint families homes nearby. The store, which opened in fall of 2013, is centrally located along the main road of Gatthaghar, on the first block leading in from the Arniko highway intersection. Over the summer I was there, the boutique carried a variety of women’s clothing items, which the sisters purchased regularly from wholesalers in Kathmandu such as shirts, blouses, pants and shorts, nightgowns, high-heal shoes, belts, hats and other clothing accessories. At the time of my fieldwork, none of the store’s merchandise reflected ‘traditional’ South Asian styles or was manufactured in the region. Everything inside was carefully hung up and displayed in the modernly designed and well-kept interior showroom, and my own informal survey of the clothing tags revealed that the vast majority of clothes items were from China. The two sisters always looked polished and appeared well put together, with
their makeup flawlessly applied and their hair styled, wearing clothing and accessory combinations that matched and accentuated the cool, youthful attitude of the store itself.

From the first time I noticed their store, walking through the neighborhood with my sister-in-law Rajeesha early on during my fieldwork in 2014, it had immediately stood out to me as something different from the rest of the shops that existed here. Three thin, blonde and fair-eyed mannequins stood in the doorway- they wore skinny jeans and a blouse, a short black ruffled skirt combined with a sequined V-neck tank top, and a form fitting and sleeveless red dress that came above the knees. When I pointed the storefront out to Rajeesha, she made a comment about the dresses displayed being “nice fashion”. But when we entered the store upon my request she hesitated by the door after sifting through a few items in the front. She didn’t appear interested in the clothes, and after we left she noted both the high price tags and the inappropriateness of some of the styles for married women “like us.”

The next time I wandered in to the store a few days later, there was a man at the counter, who I later found out was the husband of one of the owners, but which surprised me. I suspected this arrangement might deter otherwise curious or interested women in the fairly conservative neighborhood from shopping here. As I introduced myself and chatted with him for a couple of minutes, I noticed that beneath the glass on the countertop at the register were a dozen or so cut-out magazine pictures of pale-skinned Korean models, some in pairs or groups, all looking happy and carefree, dressed in cutesy, pastel colored dresses, shorts, skirts and blouses, and wearing high-heel shoes.

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76 Rajeesha Kadka, personal communication, June 29th, 2014
Despite the central location on the main road and sophisticated, youthful appeal of the fashion items and their presentation in the store, business was slow. During the several hours I spent in total at this store over the summer months - talking story, eating buff momo dumplings and hanging out with the sisters and their young children, I only ever saw two customers come in. They were teenage girls, one of whom is an aspiring model and someone I know quite well from previous visits in 2009 and 2012. She had come in with her friend to look for a “one-piece” (dress) for an upcoming photo shoot, but after trying on several dresses, the two girls had eventually left without making a purchase. Anu admitted that business was too slow to be sustainable. In her opinion, Gatthaghar just wasn’t ready for such forward women’s fashion, although the tide was surely coming. On the other hand, she told me she felt that her and her sister and their families were paving the way for other women through their own forward fashion statements and entrepreneurial endeavors, and that she was happy to be able to offer unique fashion merchandise for women in the area. She also mentioned how she enjoyed running the shop with her sister while their husbands shared in the childcare/household duties at home\textsuperscript{77}.

Clothing shops like those of Rajeesha’s mom, Shova, however, are still much more common in Gatthaghar. The small storefront is located on the same side of the highway as Jasmin’s Fashion Collection, in the main bazaar on the side street parallel to the highway near to the main intersection. Inside, merchandise is folded and piled from floor to ceiling on the walled shelves, organized by type or style, but not immediately visible or accessible to browsing customers. Shova, like Anu and Renu, purchases her

\textsuperscript{77} Anu Uprety, personal communication, July 31\textsuperscript{st}, 2014
products from wholesalers in Kathmandu, and is often accompanied by other women to do so, usually by family members such as her mother, aunts or daughters.

The shelves that lined the three inner walls of Shova’s shop were full of folded, readymade women’s clothing items, including long tops and leggings, as well as pants and blouses. In addition, Shova had some cloth available for sale, including three-piece kurta suruwal fabric sets ready to be sewn, as well as dhaka fabrics and a small selection of sari. She also carried a small stock of costume jewelry, scarves, and miscellaneous items such as bags, umbrellas, buttons and fake gems for decorating sari blouses. Most of the clothing in her store came from India, except for the jeans, leggings and some of the blouses, which came mostly from China, and the dhaka fabric, which was woven in Palpa, Nepal. The prices were reasonable, starting at about $4-5 USD for a blouse and $7-8 for a kurta suruwal fabric set, compared to the pricing of $8-30 per item at Jasmin’s Fashion Collection.

In addition to the difference in merchandise and pricing, the bustling, congenial atmosphere was another distinguishing factor of this store from the boutique. Although Shova’s shop is less than half of the size of the boutique, there were usually at least two or three people, and at times as many as five or six, sitting and hanging out inside the shop. A dozen or more customers would come and go throughout each day, either popping in, in search of some particular items, or coming in specifically to see Shova who had been running the store for over fifteen years.

In fact, Shova was one of the first women to open a clothing store in the area. As a pioneer, she took after her maternal aunt, Indira, who had opened the first store in the community, where from the mid 1980s through the early 1990s the only phone in
Gatthaghar had resided. Shova had broken conventions, not just by going into business at a time when this was highly unusual, but also because she had opted at a young age to have a “love marriage,” and the young couple had chosen to settle in her natal community\textsuperscript{78}. As Shova opened and maintained her small shop over the times, she simultaneously raised four children.

People were constantly gathered in Shova’s shop, in fluctuating constellations inside on the bench and side stools. Women sipped tea and ate snacks and talked about life and current events and neighborhood gossip. They discussed fashion, read the women’s magazine Naari together, and tried on newly arrived items in the store. They folded and refolded and mended clothes, and collectively helped customer when they came in. Sometimes they sang and danced, and sometimes they would just sit there in silence for some time. Shova’s younger children would come to the shop after they finished with school and sports, wearing their uniforms, and would often join in with whatever the adults were doing. It seemed to me that in comparison to the boutique, the items offered and the general environment of this store were based much more on long-standing local social networks, styles and sensibilities, as well as on new ideas of commerce and fashions.

These stores both present examples of the evolving consumer culture and subjectivity of women in Gatthaghar. Both shops are owned and operated by women who have grown up and stayed in Gatthaghar. While there are important similarities between their background stories, such as that they are both from high-caste, propertied families, 

\textsuperscript{78} Shova Basnet Khadka, personal communication, July 25\textsuperscript{th} 2014
in their lives and stores they have negotiated expectations of gender and class, for example, very differently from one another.

“It’s not okay to wear short clothes because it is disrespectful and inappropriate,” Shova told me. Yet, while Shova felt that wearing short clothing such as skirts and shorts was not acceptable for women in Gatthaghar, she also expressed that women’s fashion now was about each person’s desires, and that women in Gatthaghar had more freedom today to fulfill their aspirations through self-fashioning then ever before\(^79\). Anu and Renu, on the other hand, actively promoted the transgression of these conventional norms through the sale of new kinds of fashions in Gatthaghar, presenting a new set of market-based norms to the area’s youth-oriented publics. Neither of these shops dealt in “traditional” women’s dresses, although Shova’s store did carry a handful of *sari* and *dhaka* fabrics. Rather, the shops represent and express emergent phenomena in the area; of clothing stores in general, of women’s clothing stores in particular, of women owned and operated businesses, and of the increasingly diverse subjectivities and materials that make up publics of dress in Gatthaghar today.

Women in Gatthaghar make choices, however mediated, between what combinations of material and ideological underpinnings they attach to their bodies and to their lives through the consumption of dress. From reading Nepali women’s magazines to trying on and purchasing different kinds of clothing at different shops, to dressing up for special occasions, women engage with ongoing conversations and implementations. In consideration of longstanding and emerging social networks and market logics, the

\(^{79}\) Shova Basnet Khadka, interview by Sadie Green, July 20\(^{th}\), 2014, interview 2, transcript.
women of Gatthaghar participate in continual experimentation with and fluid repetition of identities and relationships.

4.6 Chapter Conclusions

Whether they were old or young, educated or not, married or unmarried, local or migrant, all of the women in Gatthaghar were part of Gatthaghar’s publics. They all participated in the self-defining discursive and material constructs of Gatthaghar’s publics of dress. The women of Gatthaghar agreed on certain assumptions and parameters of conventions, for example, that women needed to wear clothes, but of which the preferred or appropriate lengths and styles were hotly debated. The underlying force of this central, place-based public of Gatthaghar women was central to all other publics of dress in Gatthaghar – from the publics of youthful urban countercultures of dissent, to the disparate publics of rural-to-urban migrants with dreams of better lives, to the publics of young married daughters of established families who competed for status through association with this or that ideology. These communities of belonging existed and persisted within the realms of imagination and performance, and among and in relation to other publics of dress. When a woman changes her dress and moves into different spaces, or an idea or image or material item travels transnational or virtually into distant communities, publics intersect. As people interact with the mediated texts of publics (pieces of clothing, fashion related magazines) in the contexts of their existing interpersonal relationships and networks, they feel. People may feel curiosity, or excitement, or repulsion, or indifference, when faced with new publics, but the point is that they feel, and that through these feelings they are brought into new moments of
“affective attachment” in which they developed new fashions, in clothing and in life, in order to “adjust to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on.” (Berlant 2011: 8)

Women in Gatthaghar constantly negotiate their needs and relate their emotions and feelings through their performances of identities through dress. They do so in order to meet their needs, for example, for security, belonging, independence and status, with varying degrees of conscious compliance of underlying patterns of dominance and privilege. On the other hand, women’s dress-related actions are agentive in co-creating publics, such as the public of widows who wear red or the public of schoolgirls who wear skirts, which contribute to alternatively deconstructing and reconstructing physical and ideological boundaries of Gatthaghar.
Concluding Thoughts and Implications

In Nepal, publics of dress have been integral to multiple, unevenly resourced projects around engendering contemporary subjectivities and political, economic and socio-cultural formations. In Gatthaghar, the legacies of variously positioned and articulated publics of dress have been (and continue to be) multifarious and polymorphic in nature, yet they have paralleled and contributed to the rise of numerous tangible structures from nation-states, to nuclear family homes and shopping districts, to commercially mediated self-disciplined bodies.

In the not so distant past, Gatthaghar was an area known for its agriculture and handicrafts. As it became incorporated into globalized political and economic systems and drawn into the expanding urban landscape of the Kathmandu Valley, the cultural politics of its marketplace have been continually reassembled. People have actively participated in these political projects through their clothing in the co-production of disjointed peculiarities and repeated patterns. Through the clothes people wore, they engaged with states, the markets, their communities, and their families and together worked to transform the past into the present in specific ways.

Ultimately, new hegemonic yet porous governing norms of dress and life in Gatthaghar have manifested out of older ones through dynamic relationships between people and co-emergent facets of material life. The publics of dress of high-caste settlers from the middle hills who came to Gatthaghar in the 19th and 20th century, for example, gained substantial status and authority in the local nexus as the Ranabhats and others
benefited from their relationships with high-caste Newar landowners and Nepal’s national rulers.

Rapid economic liberalization and social change in Gatthaghar since the second half of the 20th century included such phenomena as the introduction of formal schooling, mass media and transportation, a widespread wage labor economy and a growing marketplace of available goods. This continued to alter the material circumstances of people’s lives and their subjective understandings of ways of being and doing. Women, as part of communities, have chosen different forms of dress - from homespun fabrics, to sari to kurta suruwal to pants and t-shirts to shorts, to workout clothes and back to the haku patasi - in order to take advantage of newly available medias and systems of signification. By putting into circulation newly available language and newly organized and addressed spaces for encounter (Warner 2002: 54), the media of clothing have contributed significantly to the reworked normative paradigms of Gatthaghar.

Since the 1990s, Gatthaghar has become home to many people from diverse communities in Nepal. Variously positioned, each person, family and community has complexly situated needs for sustenance and recognition and brings to the neighborhood historicized ideas and practices of gendered sartorial culture. The publics of dress to which people belong are complexly interconnected with emotions, such as fear and desire, around issues including socio-economic and trans locational mobility and ijjat, as well as evolving commercial market logics and material constructs.

Today in Gatthaghar, dominant high class/caste socio-religious gendered conventions of dress are often in uneasy tension with other related community or market-based concordat. For example, the influx of intertextual assemblages of media via the
initiatives and implementation of school curricula, TV, Internet, print medias and clothing imports greatly changed the ways in which people communicate through dress. Construction of an imagined and performed idyllic womanhood and ideal living that is respectable, modern and middle-class has provided legitimacy to the structures that are in place today while simultaneously reworking them. Likewise, predominately high-caste middle-class entrepreneurial property and business owners in Gatthaghar have constructed new buildings and opened new stores that simultaneously meet and create the changing demands and patronage systems of the local marketplace.

Over time, women in Gatthaghar have engaged with a variety of new clothing medias and created and sustained new publics of dress, each with their own histories and trajectories of embedded ideologies and social/material hierarchies. What is important is that it is through their actions of participation, such as the initiatives of growing publics of young women who wore kurta suruwal starting in the 1970s, or who wear shorts today, certain mediated texts and their associated significations become more widely available for engagement in the expanding local marketplace and social spaces.

Publics of dress, as intimately arranged sites and markers of cultural struggle wherein people consent to and resist hegemonies and index their changing worlds, are utilized in the affective mapping and remapping of our relationships. These relationships are bound up in violent power structures of competing socio-political, religious and economic systems and with the land, with each other and with our own bodies. In Gatthaghar, for example, people with money and status continue to pave over fields to construct more buildings for residential and commercial use. The government continues to build more roads to transport goods to new markets, which carry mass-produced goods
made with polluting chemicals in urbanized manufacturing locations throughout the region. Yet, these obscured dimensions of dress are naturalized and normalized in the context of specific modes of consciousness and temporal structures that are mutually constituent, dialogic, and built up and broken down over time.

Ultimately, publics of dress in Gatthaghar are multifaceted, symbolic and materially grounded. They are composed of people making daily decisions and taking actions that create and maintain the associations and network of relationships that in turn co-produce their lives and their worlds. Thus, to engender critical thinking and empower consciousness around embedded systems of power and knowledge and forms of agency that connect with communities of belonging and material culture in everyday life is part of an emancipatory politics.
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