Playing as if: an ethnographic study of Nepali trail runners

WILL GEORGE LLOYD

Playing as if: an ethnographic study of Nepali trail runners

William George Lloyd

Abstract

What drives dedicated Nepali trail runners? Why do so many hope for elite status in their sport despite systemic obstacles which mean that most will not succeed? Based on fifteen months of participant-observation fieldwork and thirty interviews with trail runners, this dissertation presents an account of the pursuit of the good life through trail running as a relation of 'cruel optimism' (Berlant 2011). The primary subjects of my research were the subset of those runners I met and interviewed whom I call 'dedicated trail runners'—Nepalis who sought podium positions in mountain trail races and aspired to careers as professional athletes. The majority of these runners were from rural, hill backgrounds and *janajati* (Tibeto-Burman) ethnic groups and were now based in Kathmandu. Dedicated trail runners cathected the sport with their dreams of the good life. This relation provided runners with a sense of purpose, agency and identity. Nonetheless, the relation was damaging in that the object of their attachment was largely chimerical, since the stubborn realities of political economy prevented most of them from achieving sustainable livelihoods through trail running. Most dedicated Nepali trail runners were aware of and vocal about the constraints which made realising their dreams so unlikely; this dissertation asks how their optimistic relation to the sport as a means of attaining social and economic empowerment was sustained in the face of this reality. I suggests that the affects experienced in the physical acts of trail running were hitched to the narrative of becoming an elite trail runner, thus reinforcing the salience of this story in their lives. The pleasures and excitements of trail running sustained runners' attachment to the narrative of achieving the good life through hard work despite their recognition of the low likelihood of their success. In this way, my dissertation is an account of motivation beyond rational calculation in which people's orientations to the future are sustained by intense affective forces—in this case, those forces awakened in pleasurable and exciting experiences of mountain trail running.

Playing as if: an ethnographic study of Nepali trail runners

William George Lloyd

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Supervised by Dr Ben Campbell and Dr Iain Lindsey

Department of Anthropology

Durham University

2025

Table of Contents

Abstract i

Title page ii

Table of contents iii

Copyright statement viii

Acknowledgements ix

Funding statement x

Dedication xi

Epigraph xii

Chapter 1: Introduction 1

Research question and summary of argument 4

Outline of chapters 5

Chapter 2: The field, or All that is solid melts into air 11

Introduction 11

Nepali trail running 12

Dedicated Nepali trail runners 14

Stable communities? 17

A loose network of runners 20

Trail races in Nepal 21

The physical settings of trail running 22

Runners' migrations and changing environments 23

Coaching 25

Smaller sponsorships and gifts 26

Runners' changing relationships and commitments 27

The internet 27

Conclusion 27

Chapter 3: Methods 29

Introduction 29

Observant participation 30

Lyrical sociology? 32

Interviews 35

Language 40

Participation and observation online 41

Changed research plans 43

Positionality 44

Gender 48

Ethics 51

Conclusion 52

Chapter 4: Cruel optimism 53

Introduction 53

What is cruel optimism? 53

Situating cruel optimism 57

Cruel optimism abroad 60

Cruel optimism in Nepal 63

Conclusion 67

Chapter 5: '#gurkhaonthetrail': masculinity, militarism and mountain running in Nepal 69

Introduction 71

Running and the origins of Nepal 72

The Gurkha trials 72

Gurkha hill racing 74

Nepali masculinities 76

Gurkha dreams 79

Gurkha money 81

Gurkha fame 82

Gurkha suffering 84

The name of an athlete 87

The Gurkha on the trail 88

Martial races 89

Gurkha girls 91

Conclusion 92

PART ONE: EXTRINSIC REWARDS 95

Chapter 6: Hopes 96

Introduction 96

'It's my dream-focus': Kalpana Sunuwar 97

'There aren't any hills here. Ke garne': Manoj Lama 100

'It's not only for myself': Sarita Rai 102

Dreams in practice 105

Optimism online 106

Fatalism? 108

Playing as if 112

Conclusion 113

Chapter 7: Constraints 114

Introduction 114

'I don't have a future': Rupesh Tamang 115

'If I wear those, I won't have confident level': Tashi Tamang 119

'No option': Sumnima Sunuwar 121

Running is cruel 123

The prize is the price 124

Inequity 126

Money as a sport negotiator 128

Inequality 129

Conclusion 130

PART TWO: RUNNING EXPERIENCES 131

Chapter 8: From village to city 132

Introduction 132

'Due to compulsion only': Kamala Rai 132

'It gave me stamina': Dinesh Tamang 135

'Don't go to village areas': Nabina Rai 138

Perceptions of the environment in practice 140

Aversion in practice 141

Social change 142

A liberating mobility? 146

Rural-to-urban ambivalence 147

Ghar ideal and basai reality 148

Conclusion 151

Chapter 9: Running in the web of life 152

Introduction 154

'Running in nature is like next-level': Sarita Rai 155

'I run from the heart': Bhola Tharu 157

'Here there's no tension': Sabin Kulung Rai 160

Pleasures in practice 162

Running with Kamala and Rita 164

The Paddy Day Mud Run 166

Sanskritik Karyakrams 167

Running in the web of life 168

Transcendent trail running 169

Conclusion 173

Chapter 10: Conclusion 175

Introduction 175

Extrinsic and intrinsic motivating factors 175

The cruel optimism of dedicated trail runners 177

Embodied experience sustained cruel optimism 179

A cluster of promises 181

Suggestions for future research 183

Conclusion 188

Bibliography 189

Acknowledgements

It is a lesson of social anthropology since Mauss that human beings are constituted by open-ended debts. Only the narcissism of modern markets pretends that such ties can be terminated by the quid pro quo of exchange relations. I am therefore scarcely secure in even calling myself the 'author' of what follows, but conventions must. The warm-hearted Nepalis who led me through their running world will not be thanked by name here, for the sake of preserving their anonymity. I hope to see them all again, running in the web of life. I should express gratitude to my patient and dedicated supervisors who at times must have felt like they were engaged in an endurance sport of their own. Professor Sagar Raj Sharma was my supervisor during my time as an affiliated research student at Kathmandu University. My parents have supported me through my awkward stumbling on the steps to Parnassus, employability be damned. Thank you to my language teacher Barsha Basnet and my running guru Kim Collison. Neither can my strength coach Ed Lloyd go unmentioned. To the participants and organisers of the International Network of Sport Anthropologists and the Britain-Nepal Academic Council, thank you for providing me with fora in which to discuss my research. Additionally, my profound gratitude goes to the Economic and Social Research Council without whose financial support none of this would have been possible. I am grateful to the members of the running club known as the Cheviot Trail Runners and others in their orbit for donating running kit to dedicated Nepali trail runners. Numberless others helped to make this thesis happen, and there is hardly time to mention everyone. I should mention Sugat who paid for my tourist visa after my wallet got stolen on the plane into Nepal and Jagan who helped me to get a helicopter to hospital when I was too sick to walk. Thank you to Rita who rescued me when I broke my femur. Teachers who have helped me include Nick Long, Matt Davies and the late Alan Currie. How can I repay my debts? Like Indra's web, we are bound to each other by infinite threads. If I zoom out and rewind the tape, there are more people to thank, more acknowledgements to make. And stories upon stories. Where should I begin, and where should I stop? I can hardly say.

Ah… the net is vast…

Research funding:

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/P000762/1].

To my parents

Like a townsman let loose in the mountains, I made myself drunk with the open spaces, and my astonished eye could hardly take in the wealth and variety of the scene.

—Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*

Chapter 1: Introduction

I like trail running a lot. With trail running, what can I do…? I can earn my name, I can give my family happiness, I can make my country known around the world. If I get a good sponsor I can make my future. That is my hope.

—Kalpana Sunuwar, interview with the author, 2023

It was dark in the village of Jalbire. We were far from the *dulo* and *halla* of Kathmandu (the dust and the chaos) and were preparing for tomorrow's event, the Sindhupalchok International Trail Race. As I looked around at the other runners in the half-light emanating from the building where locals had just fed us our *dal bhat*,[1] I saw the expressions—some grinning, some nervous, some bored—of what my friend Kamala Rai called the 'new generation'. Tomorrow they would do something which, in most cases, their parents would have never imagined doing. But this was the *naya yug,* the new age (another of Kamala's expressions), of which I was now a part. I had navigated my way into this social world, and I was excited to be participating in my first Nepali race. This was also my first trip beyond the big city and, unlike in Kathmandu, I could see the stars. This village was more familiar to the runners I was with, many of whom had been here for previous editions of the event. For them too, being in Jalbire was a break from the intense bustle and pollution of the capital, where most of these athletes lived and from whence we had just travelled by bus.

One such athlete, Sanjay Gurung, was eyeing my tube of electrolyte tablets with interest and asked to have a look. I passed it over to him. The others asked me if these so-called 'Zero tablets' were food, so I explained, 'you mix them in water.' 'They're for energy?' Sarina Rai asked. 'No, they're salt,' I said. As far as I knew, you couldn't find electrolyte tablets like these in Nepal, but Oral Rehydration Salts (ORS) were pretty much ubiquitous, and performed the same function. Tomorrow ORS sachets would be available at the race checkpoints along with bananas and

[1] *Dal bhat* literally refers to rice and lentils, Nepal's national dish.

biscuits, but the Zero tablets still seemed to exert Sanjay's curiosity. He tried to take one, but I dissuaded him: 'I need them for tomorrow.'

Whether an athlete like Sanjay—who had finished in third place[2] the previous year in a time of 2 hours and 57 minutes—would benefit from using electrolyte tablets marketed for use in sports rather than ORS marketed for the treatment of infants with diarrhoea, I don't know. But his interest in the tablets was just another example of the attraction the material components of the modernised sporting world held for many such runners, who were often vocal about the non-availability of these items in their country. This was a theme which arose often in interviews—the frustration that '*Nepalma paudaina*' (you can't get it in Nepal), whether it was trail running shoes, energy gels, hydration vests, running poles or another valued item. And it made for a noticeable contrast in our 'race strategy', so to speak. The next day Sanjay would win the 28-kilometre race in 2 hours and 47 minutes carrying nothing at all, while I finished in four hours with my inov-8[3] ultra bag, which would have been stuffed with energy gels had I not given them to Pemba Tamang, a Nepali runner undertaking the 60-kilometre Sindhupalchok trail race held on the same day. Sanjay's method of carrying a checkpoint banana in each hand while he ran looked funny to me in the photographs but was his short-term solution to an economic problem.

Many trail runners complained about the lack of resources for Nepali athletes. In most cases their solution was not political contestation or organising to change the situation, but simply to take part as much as possible. The answer was to run the race anyway and see how far they could get. The next morning I saw Sanjay and a contingent of young Nepali men all warming up together, none of them carrying any of the apparently mandatory kit.[4] If there had been a kit check, how many would have been disqualified? Surely many of these younger, faster Nepali runners would have been prevented from starting. At the races which I attended in Nepal, I often

---

[2] Throughout and unless otherwise stated, when I refer to a runner's position in a race (first, second, third, et cetera), I am referring to their position in their gender category rather than their overall position.

[3] Inov-8 is a UK company which makes equipment for fell running.

[4] These requirements varied depending on the distance, terrain, weather conditions and discretion of the race organiser. At the Sindhupalchok International Trail Race—which involved two races, one of 28 kilometres and another of 60 kilometres—the mandatory kit list included water bottles, snacks, a raincoat and a mobile phone. For those taking on the 60-kilometre distance, the kit list also included a torch.

noted that the majority of runners would not have been able to run if a kit inspection had taken place. The leniency in organisation allowed them to play the game anyway—a short-term fix to a long-term problem.

So the game went on, not only the game of a 28-kilometre mountain race, but the bigger game of *being* a trail runner, whether or not they had all the right kit. But what was so attractive about this game? What encouraged some runners to dedicate themselves to competition, some even hoping to become professionals and compete in races overseas? It is this question to which my thesis responds. In the text that follows I explore what was at stake in the sport of trail running for these dedicated Nepali athletes. Such athletes expressed simultaneous optimism and cynicism: informants frequently described the structural obstacles facing Nepali runners, particularly citing their country's marginal economic position, its lack of *bikas* ('development') and expressing their perception of a relative lack of facilities and support from the government as compared with competitors in other countries.[5] A common complaint was that equipment as simple as trail running shoes were mostly unavailable in Nepal: if they could be found, they were usually considered too expensive by most of those I call 'dedicated Nepali trail runners' (a category I explain below). Informants often blamed the Nepali government for such problems and even highlighted aspects of Nepali culture which they considered backward and inimical to the development of the sport. And yet despite the runners' perceptions of the systemic obstacles to achieving sporting careers or even just sustaining their practice as amateur runners, many continued to evince hope for the future and to strive towards grand sporting goals, including the ambition of becoming professional athletes.

The interpretation which follows builds on fifteen months of participant-observation fieldwork in the social world of Nepali trail running and sixty semi-structured interviews with Nepali trail runners, race organisers, athlete managers and agents. In this introductory chapter I begin by stating my thesis's central question and explaining how I will address it in the ensuing chapters.

---

[5] The term my informants most often used to refer to other countries was '*bidesh*', which literally means 'foreign country' but which in this context seemed to refer mostly to the Global North but also to more economically developed Southern countries with larger trail running markets, such as China.

Research question and summary of argument

This thesis asks what motivated a subset of Nepal's trail running community, those I call dedicated trail runners, not only to engage in the sport but to imagine that it would lead to a future condition characterised by a dramatically improved social and economic status. This good-life dream, which looked like a life of transnational mobility, making one's family and nation proud and earning enough money to support the self and family in Nepal, was cleaved to by a subgroup of mostly young Nepali trail runners who came from the country's hill villages and the historically marginal Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups known as *janajati* (literally, 'people's caste'). A relatively new sport in Nepal which has been growing since the early 2010s, trail running appeared to dedicated runners as something unmistakably global, success on its terrain entailing transnational travel, with the apex of the pyramidal structure of the game being the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc races held in Chamonix, France.

In the chapters that follow I try to understand how this good-life fantasy was sustained despite runners' recognition of systemic obstacles preventing its realisation. Trail runners so often marked out the specific constraints facing Nepali athletes such as the expense of traveling for competitions which award insufficient prize money, the high cost of adequate trail running shoes and other sought-after equipment, or the struggle of wading through bureaucratic thickets to get a visa for an international race. Given this recognition of the structural obstacles to realising their ambitions, how was the attachment to a future vision of life as an elite runner sustained?

The concept of cruel optimism, with which Lauren Berlant's 2011 work of the same name describes a structure of feeling they[6] diagnose in myriad spheres of social life including love, work and politics, aptly characterises the relation dedicated runners had to the future they desired. Cruel optimism is a double-bind relation, profoundly confirming and damaging at the same time. Sensing the disjuncture between runners' attachment to their hopes for a much better life at some point in the future and their recognition of the systemic barriers which were frustrating their efforts, I wanted to understand how the relation of cruel optimism could be sustained if it was not

[6] Berlant used gender-neutral they, them and their pronouns in professional life.

simply a product of ignorance. As I interviewed trail runners, trained alongside them and participated in the same mountain races as them, I developed a picture of their motivation for engaging with the sport that saw it as more than a rational, means-to-ends calculation. Rather, their attachment to a vision of the future in which their lives could be improved by becoming elite runners was sustained in large part by the experiential side of trail running—that is, by the way running *felt*.

Sensorily rich, affectively charged experiences of trail running sustained the cruelly optimistic story of attaining elite status through hard work, despite the structural limitations on runners' agency of which they were highly aware and critical. My account of dedicated runners' relation of cruel optimism to the idea of achieving elite status suggests that affects generated through running became attached to elements of this achievement story so as to sustain its importance in runners' lives.

By describing how affects became magnetised to a normative story of the pursuit of the good life through hard work, the account I present in this thesis contributes to the growing anthropology of cruel optimism within which scholars are charting the diverse instances where this structure of feeling can be observed, taking the concept beyond its origins in the United States to the rest of the world (see Anderson et al. 2022 and Chisholm and Ketola 2020). I develop the anthropology of cruel optimism by demonstrating how a theoretical construct initially formulated to explain structures of feeling encountered in Euro-America during the neoliberal period can also illuminate proliferating forms of attachment in Global South contexts, such as in Nepal. Having summarised the argument that I make in this thesis I will now outline the course this account takes through the proceeding chapters.

Outline of chapters

Chapter 2: The field, or All that is solid melts into air

In this chapter I explain the complex and changing nature of my research setting. Rather than a stable, bounded community, the social world of dedicated Nepali trail runners was a loose

network of people that was constantly in flux, heterogeneous and border-crossing. My research setting was thus more complex and 'messy' (Law 2004) than the relatively pindownable field sites of much influential early social anthropology. For this reason my research required a careful methodological approach, which chapter 3 explores.

Chapter 3: Methods

In the methods chapter, I explain the 'how' of my research, exploring the benefits and limitations of my combined approach of participant-observation fieldwork, including online fieldwork, and semi-structured ethnographic interviewing. I also describe the benefits and limitations which my subject-position as a white, male, British PhD student created during the research process. The major areas of consideration here are perceptions of whiteness, which meant runners often saw me as a potential benefactor, and historically sedimented ideas about gender, which created an obstacle to my attempts at researching female trail runners. I also outline how my own sporting background in UK fell and trail running shaped my research practice.

Chapter 4: Cruel optimism

In chapter four I establish the theoretical resources which I will draw on in the subsequent empirical chapters. I describe how Berlant's concept of cruel optimism works, emphasising that the relation should be understood as ambivalent, simultaneously affirming and damaging. I also explore the related concepts of 'impasse' and 'crisis ordinariness' with which Berlant defines the historical present in the neoliberal period in the Global North. Additionally, I argue for the applicability of cruel optimism beyond its academic 'birthplace' in the United States. While Berlant's cruel optimism describes a structure of feeling which characterises proliferating forms of attachment in the Global North, there is a growing scholarship which encounters cruel optimism in the Global South. I explain how cruel optimism can be illuminating in these other contexts before considering the applicability of the concept within Nepal. This prepares the ground for the following chapter, a consideration of the subjectivities of dedicated Nepali trail runners who also aspired to become soldiers in foreign militaries or, to use the Nepali term, *lahure*.

Chapter 5: #gurkhaonthetrail: masculinity, militarism and mountain running in Nepal

Chapter five, the first empirical chapter of the thesis, is prompted by Amanda Chisholm and Hanna Ketola's use of Berlant's concept of cruel optimism in their analysis of the subjectivities of Nepali men employed in the private military and security sector (2020). Having met young Nepali men during my fieldwork who were both aspiring Gurkhas or *lahure* and ambitious trail runners, I am provoked by Chisholm and Ketola's study to think about whether the attachment to trail running as a means of achieving a better life, like the aspiration to become a Gurkha or a *lahure,* should be interpreted as a variety of cruel optimism. This chapter constitutes a prelude to the main body of work in parts one and two in that it connects historical patterns of migration and traditions of physical culture to the contemporary phenomenon of trail running through the particular case of young men who were both aspiring *lahure* and trail runners. The parallels between young men's hopes for a better life through becoming *lahure* and their trail running ambitions bridge a relation of cruel optimism which long precedes the arrival of the sport of trail running in Nepal to the contemporary phenomenon which is the object of study in this thesis. Taking the lead from this chapter's consideration of lahure dreams and trail running as related forms of cruel optimism, the following four, empirical chapters of the thesis are divided into two parts, addressing the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards sought through trail running, respectively.

Part one: extrinsic rewards

In part one, 'extrinsic rewards', I first look at the genre of hope dedicated athletes drew upon to frame their attachment to trail running as a means of bettering their conditions of existence, before following this with an examination of how they recognised and spoke about the structural constraints on their agency. Through interpreting ethnographic data, these two chapters together place the kinds of hope articulated by dedicated trail runners in the context of these runners' own apprehensions of structural obstacles to their success.

Chapter 6: Hopes

What did this genre of hope look like? I explore this question through the particular stories of trail runners who I got to know and interviewed during my fieldwork, revealing that the status of professional trail runner was understood to be consequent on securing a corporate sponsorship and to entail an increase in wealth, prestige and transnational mobility. Success was seen to be partly the result of hard work, evidencing a belief in the power of personal agency.

Chapter 7: Constraints

Despite the senses of hope and agency described in the preceding chapter, runners nonetheless acknowledged strong constraints on their capacity to realise their ambitions. Research participants pointed to the expense of sustaining a trail running life, including the cost of equipment and travel for faraway races as well as struggles with bureaucracy to obtain a visa for an overseas competition. Key to these criticisms was the sense that Nepal was distant from the important sites where the global sport of trail running took place, where one could ‘make a name’, earn significant prize money and attract corporate sponsors, and that Nepali runners therefore faced greater challenges than athletes from other countries. Runners also pointed to perceived political and bureaucratic corruption and neglect of athletes in Nepal as obstacles to furthering their development as sportspeople. This chapter describes these constraints as they were reflected upon in interviews and conversations and as they were practically dealt with in runners’ day-to-day struggles to train and compete in the sport.

Part two: running experiences

In part two, ‘running experiences’, I seek to understand the experiential side of trail running by focusing on what it felt like to run in the mountains for those who grew up in hill environments but who had, in most cases, since migrated to cities. I combine my findings from my participant-observation practice of training alongside and participating in the same races as the dedicated runners with observations from online fieldwork and data from interviews in order to understand

the affective draw of running in the mountains for athletes with a rural to urban trajectory.

Chapter 8: From village to city

To ground my understanding of how trail running was experienced by the dedicated runners, this chapter examines the environmental perspectives of Nepali athletes who had relocated from rural to urban areas. I describe the stark contrasts the runners drew between what they saw as the clean, 'organic',[7] and aesthetically beautiful world of their natal villages and the polluted, crowded, unfriendly space of Kathmandu. I explore how their sense of these contrasts affected their perceptions and experiences of trail running. Aversion to the chaotic, polluted and rubbish-strewn city combined with a nostalgic valorisation of the rural shaped the affectively charged experience of running in the mountains. These findings are discussed in conversation with anthropological scholarship on shifting relations between communities and environments in the context of increasing rural-to-urban migration in Nepal.

Chapter 9: Running in the web of life

While chapter eight explored some of the ways in which urban-rural contrasts were practically experienced in the act of trail running, chapter nine examines some of the positive, intrinsically rewarding features of the sport for dedicated runners. Dedicated trail runners' near-universally responded to the question 'why do you like trail running?' by making references to the intrinsic rewards available through running in mountain environments, including experiences of '*ramailo*' (fun), encounters with aesthetic beauty, forms of collective effervescence and even varieties of spiritual transcendence made possible through trail running. These responses in many cases came with an appeal to the concept of 'nature'. In this chapter, therefore, I follow my informants' leads by describing the affective features of trail running in the context of the distinct environments in which the sport takes place—spaces considered to be somehow 'natural' or closer to 'nature'.

---

[7] As will be discussed later in this thesis, the word 'organic' did not just refer to food untreated by pesticides or herbicides but also referred to environments, climates and people considered 'natural' or pure.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

My conclusion draws together the strands of the preceding empirical chapters to explain how dedicated trail runners' motivations were built from the fusion of intrinsically rewarding experiences of running in the mountains with desires for long-term improvements in social and economic status. Trail running pleasures on the one hand and ambitions for professional success on the other combined dynamically to produce the motivational matrix sustaining dedicated runners' involvement in the sport. Immanent experiences of pleasure and excitement in trail running reinforced an ideologically saturated achievement story—a narrative of the undaunted individual overcoming both their own weaknesses and the obstacles presented by larger social forces. I thus argue that the affects generated through trail running kept cruel optimism alive even when, in the face of structural constraints, achieving personal status advancement through the sport seemed relatively unviable.

Chapter 2: The field, or All That is Solid Melts into Air

As groups migrate, regroup in new locations, reconstruct their histories, and reconfigure their ethnic "projects," the ethno in ethnography takes on a slippery, nonlocalized quality, to which the descriptive practices of anthropology will have to respond. The landscapes of group identity—the ethnoscapes—around the world are no longer familiar anthropological objects, insofar as groups are no longer tightly territorialized, spatially bounded, historically self-conscious, or culturally homogeneous. . . . The task of ethnography now becomes the unravelling of a conundrum: what is the nature of locality, as a lived experience, in a globalized, deterritorialized world?

—Arjun Appadurai, 'Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology', 1990.

Introduction

This chapter describes the social world which was the setting for this study—the 'field' of my research. It maps the terrain, so to speak, of Nepali trail running, so that the reader can better navigate the material in the subsequent chapters. The quotation marks around 'field' already suggest some of the difficulty in defining my research setting. Indeed, there was not a stable, bounded field site which I entered such as one can read about in the classics of early ethnography—rather, the dedicated runners who were the object of my investigation were a group of people from various different places and with different routines who came together temporarily in varying combinations for training runs and trail races, before dispersing again.

My study, therefore, was not an investigation of a bounded community, rooted in place, with shared, routine practices. Unlike groups of runners who have been the subject of other ethnographic studies, such as the Ethiopian distance runners studied by anthropologists Michael Crawley (2019, 2020) and Hannah Borenstein (2022), most of the dedicated Nepali trail runners were not related to each other by thick social ties. They did not live, eat and train together on a daily basis as Ethiopian and Kenyan marathon runners do. In fact, as I describe below, most of

the dedicated trail runners did not even relate to each other through a club or association. Rather, their social network, which I describe in this chapter, was relatively informal, ad hoc, and loose. Some runners, even, largely trained on their own. The internet was a space for runners to interact and coordinate activities, but the online world of the dedicated runners was a much looser, more fragmented type of 'field' than the more rooted and relatively bounded social settings presented in early ethnography—the village archetype of modern anthropology's founders which, however real or mythic, still haunts the discipline. While trail races brought large numbers of runners together, albeit briefly, and were therefore one of the most important kinds of event which I observed and participated in during my fieldwork, outside of these races there were few formal ways in which runners were related socially.

Because of the non-straightforward nature of my research 'field', then, I devote this chapter to setting out its broad outlines. In conversation with the following chapter on methods (3), this chapter provides an outline of the complex type of social field which was the object of my research. However, before describing in more detail the loosely structured ways in which Nepali trail runners associated with each other, it is first of all necessary to say what Nepali trail running *was* as I observed it during my fieldwork between mid-2022 and late 2023.

Nepali trail running

The term 'trail running' refers to off-road distance running. Trail races span every distance from 5K to ultra (meaning any distance longer than a marathon), even including very long distances which take multiple days to complete. Trail races in Nepal were held over a variety of distances up to 100 miles, though the only races longer than this were stage races—meaning that the full distance was split up into separate segments over the course of several days. Trail races are run over marked courses which, in Nepal, generally took place in the hills. As a modern sport its origins are in the Global North; the first trail races in Nepal were established in the early part of this century and have been growing in popularity ever since, though during the period of my fieldwork it was a small sport not officially recognised by the Nepali government. The sport attracted a mixture of Nepali participants from various class strata and ethnic groups, but those I describe in this thesis as 'dedicated trail runners', who tended to be the fastest, were almost entirely derived from hill

janajati ethnic groups (a term I explain in more detail below). Foreigners mostly from the Global North, both tourists and migrant workers, also participated in trail running. Nepal was not a major tourist destination for trail running, however, nor were major international trail races held in Nepal, with the one exception being the Annapurna Trail Marathon—the final in the 2019 Salomon-sponsored Golden Trail World Series. Due to the limited size of the market, specialised trail running equipment, including trail running shoes (even of the counterfeit kind), were generally not sold in Nepal.[8] In the global trail running scene, Nepal was known by many as the home country of Salomon-sponsored professional ultra trail runner Mira Rai, though she was not the only Nepali trail runner with a corporate sponsorship. Dawa Sherpa, from Solukhumbu, for example, had been sponsored by Quechua after winning the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc in 2003. Moreover, a number of younger athletes have, in recent years, secured small contracts from less major companies, including Kailas, Asia Pacific Adventure and Mude. Many talented Nepali trail runners aspired to careers as elite trail runners but very few have succeeded in this endeavour.

This lack of success at the international level relates to structural conditions—namely, the economics of the global sport of trail running. Indeed, even in the Global North, the vast majority of so-called 'professional' trail runners do not earn a living wage from running (Stern 2023). The financial costs of training and competition are such that sponsorship money is rarely enough to live on. As one quantitative analysis of sponsored runners concludes,

[8] There is some debate about this. The Nepali company Goldstar manufactures shoes which they claim are suitable for all terrains; they are used by some of the dedicated Nepali trail runners and even some foreigners based in the country. Nonetheless, the majority of the dedicated runners I spoke to cited a lack of trail running shoes from famous brands such as Hoka, Salomon and LaSportiva as an economic constraint on their progress in the sport. As of this writing (early 2025) there are indications of an emerging industry in comparatively affordable Nepali-made trail running equipment, including trail shoes manufactured by the Kathmandu-based company Caliber Shoes and a limited edition trail running bag by the race organising company and trail running guide group Trailmandu. With regards to trail running bags, the question of whether an affordable trekking backpack is a suitable alternative was also debated. I rarely saw the faster runners using trekking bags and was told by one such athlete that he considered them heavy and unwieldy by comparison with packs manufactured specifically for trail running. Another participant, a back-of-the-field runner, insisted that a trekking bag was a cheap, suitable alternative to a trail running pack and that these faster runners chose not to carry anything because they believed it would slow them down. The reality thus seemed to be quite complex and not amenable to easy generalisations. Nonetheless, there was a perception among most of the dedicated trail runners that equipment which they considered to be of the best quality was economically out of reach for them.

> Looking at our more generous estimate… only 34.9% of these sponsored runners would have sponsor dollars left over to pay some of their daily bills like groceries and housing.
> …
> The ascetic lifestyle of an elite trail runner can sound appealing for its simplicity… And yet, we are struck by how often these elite athletes who are living out our daydreams are facing immense logistical and financial challenges, on top of the performance challenges they are best known for.
> …
> These estimates also raise concerns that current sponsorship levels are insufficient to cover training and racing costs for most professional athletes. This presents a challenge to the continued professionalization of trail running. (Richard 2024)

Nonetheless, a subset of Nepali trail runners, who I describe as 'dedicated Nepali trail runners', continued to cathect the global sport of trail running with their hopes for the good life. A vision of becoming a professional trail runner, often somewhat vague but nonetheless tantalising, was a common feature of the genre of aspiration which motivated their continued engagement in the sport.

Dedicated Nepali trail runners

The dedicated trail runners who were the primary subjects of my research were Nepalis who ran competitively in mountain trail races, seeking podium positions, and in many cases aspiring—though in different ways and to different degrees—to professional careers as elite athletes. They were mostly between 18 and 40 years of age. The majority of these dedicated trail runners were originally from rural, hilly backgrounds and were derived from *janajati* ethnic groups. The Nepali word *janajati* can be translated as 'people's caste'; making up a third or slightly more of the population, these ethnic groups are often characterised as 'indigenous', though the term is a contested one. Indeed, Nepal's ethnic makeup is complex and contested, so that any summary is

necessarily the introduction to a debate rather than a definitive outline.[9] Hill *janajati* come from the country's middle hills, traditionally practice subsistence and semi-subsistence farming—though this has changed substantially since the 1980s due to labour outmigration—and continue to bear the effects of historic and ongoing marginalisation relative to the dominant high-caste Brahmins and Chhetris.

The vast majority of those I describe in this thesis as 'dedicated trail runners' were hill *janajati.* Though many of these runners strove for elite, professional status in the sport of (usually ultra-) trail running, the stark reality of political economic conditions meant that most would not succeed in achieving sustainable livelihoods from the sport. Nonetheless, the image-world of trail running, though largely created as advertising for Western consumers, projected the fantasy of becoming a full-time athlete. Such a fantasy was enticing to aspiring Nepali trail runners who consequently

---

[9] Gellner sorts Nepal's ethnic complexity into five 'macro-categories: 'Dalits, Janajatis, Madheshis, Khas-Aryas (formerly 'Bahun-Chhetris', 'Chhetri-Bahuns' or 'Parbatiyas') and Others (among whom Muslims are the single biggest group).' (2024) The table below uses data primarily from the 2011 census and is taken from Gellner's 2024 article.

Table 1. Major Castes, Ethnic Groups and Macro-Categories of Nepal.

Parbatiyas ('Hill People'), Now 'Khas-Arya'	Hill Janajatis	Language Loss Among Hill Janajatis	Taraians/Madheshis ('Plains People')	Others
Bahun 12.2%	Magar 7.1%	68%	Tharu 6.6%	Muslim 4.4%
Chhetri 19%	Tamang 5.8%	11%	Yadav 4%	
Dalit (hill) 8.1%	Newar 5%	34%	Dalit (plains) 4.4%	
	Rai 2.3%	16%	(+many small groups)	
	Gurung 1.9%	50%		
	Limbu 1.4%	14.5%		
Totals 39.3%	+c.27.2%		+c. 28%	+5% = 100%

invested time and energy and in the pursuit of becoming elite.

Defining Nepal's dedicated runners in terms of hill *janajati* status, however, is not so easy. As discussed above, Nepal's ethnic makeup is subject to contestation and can be difficult to pin down. One such complex and contested element of ethnicity in Nepal which impinges specifically on the account presented in this thesis is the question of the 'correct' ethnic designation for the Khas people from Jumla District. While regarded by many to be Chhetri, the degree of social, political and economic marginalisation among the Khas of Jumla, as well as their consumption and brewing of alcohol and continued practice of non-Hindu, shamanic religion, make this group far more similar in sociological terms to hill Janajati than upper-caste, Chhetri people. And it so happens that the Khas of Jumla constitute a good portion of the athletes of the Jumla-based Karnali Sports Club, an association which is producing some of the highest performing trail runners in Nepal.

None other than Nepal's most famous anthropologist, Dor Bahadur Bista, wrote of the Jumli Khas in an article for Himal Magazine in 1995:

> In northwest Nepal lives a group that is economically backward, socially oppressed, and psychologically pressured. …The irony is that many Nepalis and most western scholars think that all Khas are Chhetri and that therefore they are not one of the so-called janajati, or ethnic, communities of the country. To be qualified as janajati, is the understanding, one has to have Mongoloid racial background and must speak a Tibeto-Burman mother tongue.
>
> The fact is that a vast majority of the Khas have never been Hinduised, let alone 'Chhetri-ised'. Thus, while it may be true that today's Chhetri of Nepal branched off from the Khas, what has happened is that the descendants of the original Khas remained distinct, remote and deprived like other janajati groups of the country.
>
> …The bulk of Jumla's Khas continue to live with their shamanic ritual practices, make alcohol at home, offering it to their deities, and drinking themselves. Nevertheless, due to historical and political reasons, their racial background disqualifies them from being called 'janajati'. All this has left the Khas with an identity crisis unique even in Nepal…

Consequently, some scholars have argued that the Khas of Jumla should not be characterised as Chhetri. Bista himself argued that they should be regarded as *janajati* (Bista 2014).

Thus ethnicity and caste in Nepal are contested, changing and complex, eluding simple definitions and easy narratives. Such scholarly and political debate over ethnic categorisation will

no doubt persist for some time, with broader cultural ramifications. What can be said, tentatively, is that at the time of my research the vast majority of dedicated Nepali trail runners were those who had been born in hilly areas and were from non-upper-caste backgrounds, marginal relative to the country's traditional Bahun-Chhetri elite, with the caveat that the Khas of Jumla are still considered by some to be Chhetri. The fact, moreover, that some of the dedicated runners were not hill *janajati* in *any* sense is also worth noting. I do not shy away from describing exceptions to the 'rule', and there are good reasons for including and discussing such findings within an ethnographic account. One of my interviewees, for example, was a Tharu man from Nepal's Terai (the southern plains), and I nonetheless include discussion of our interview in this thesis (see chapter 9). As Phoenix and Orr argue,

> Exceptional stories are not the result of unfortunate anomalies in our design decisions, nor poor interviewing technique… Rather, they represent plausible manifestations of important human diversities that differ from the dominant narratives within the data and contradict our more immediate theoretical and thematic interpretations. [Without exploring] exceptions in our own data, our confidence in the explanatory value of our research, specifically in relation to the central themes… [is] undermined.

In other words, the inclusion of such exceptions is important not only because they are part of the social reality being investigated, but because they shed light on the general themes of the research argument. For that reason, while this chapter provides some background to the ethnography to follow by setting up the general outlines of the social world of Nepali trail running, the reader should expect to find 'outliers' in the concrete discussion of my findings in later chapters.

Having described what Nepali trail running was and described the category of 'dedicated trail runners'—the *what* and *who* of my research—the next sections explore how these runners associated with one another—the *how* of their social network.

Stable communities?

As alluded to above, most of the dedicated Nepali trail runners were not part of a running club. Indeed, there were very few running clubs in Kathmandu. There were some clubs in existence, but

the dedicated trail runners were not involved in them. These included the Nepal Dynamic Running Club based in Bhaktapur and a group in Kathmandu known as the Himalayan Hash House Harriers. None of the dedicated trail runners seemed to be substantially involved in these groups.

There were two exceptions to this non-involvement in clubs by the dedicated runners—namely, the Mira Rai Initiative (MRI), a non-governmental organisation (NGO) supporting young women trail runners, and the Tribhuvan Army Club (TAC), the Nepal Army's official running club.[10] The Mira Rai Initiative was a Kathmandu-based NGO led by the Salomon-sponsored professional trail runner Mira Rai. The NGO's Exchange and Empower Programme was a nine-month scholarship programme for aspiring Nepali female trail runners which provided structured running training, English language lessons, trekking guide training and various other fitness-related and confidence-building activities. The Tribhuvan Army Club was the sporting arm of the military which paid salaries to support full-time athletes who then represented the army in competitions, similar to the German 'sportsoldaten' (sports soldier) system. The Nepal Army employed road and trail runners as mostly full-time athletes, training different groups with distinct plans according to their specialised distance and terrain. By contrast, the Mira Rai Initiative was only for trail runners. While the Nepal Army employed both male and female athletes, the Mira Rai Initiative was an all-female group. Despite their manifold differences, however, what the MRI and the TAC shared was a commitment to training together in groups and following a weekly schedule written by a coach. Of all the runners I met, those training under the aegis of these two clubs came the closest to having a 'collective training environment'—Michael Crawley's term to describe the 'self-sacrifice and the assumption of "responsibility" towards the team' (2019:45) and the 'moral economy of shared energy and duty' (59) of the Ethiopian marathon runners he researched.

Among the Mira Rai Initiative runners—the 'MRI team', as they called themselves—this 'collective training environment' was evidenced in an ethos of responsibility towards the group and the coach. A set of rules on the wall of the training centre, for example, reminded the runners that there were very few acceptable excuses other than illness for not taking part in the scheduled training sessions. So long as they were part of the programme, the MRI runners were committed to patterns of training, eating and sleeping which were determined by the authority structure of

[10] The club is named after the king of 1911–1950.

the group. Similarly, the TAC runners were also bound to the structured training schedule set by the group's coach and were constrained with regards to decisions about participating in races. In an interview for the website Trail Running Nepal, Tribhuvan Army Club runner Samir Tamang explained the situation as follows: 'there is a lack of space for independant [sic] decisionmaking [in the Tribhuvan Army Club]. As far as running is concerned, decisions related to races need to be ratified by authorities way up the chain of command.' (2021)

Samir described this condition as a 'negative' feature of being an Army runner, but cited the collective nature of training as a 'positive' feature, as it meant being around 'professional and hardworking people.' (2021) Similarly, Dinesh Tamang, a Tribhuvan Army Club runner who I interviewed, told me that he liked training with the club because it encouraged him to work hard, and otherwise he might be '*alchi*', meaning 'lazy' or 'bored'. Thus, training as part of an organised group had different implications, some of which were viewed positively and others negatively, though most trail runners were not a part of any organised group and, if they did have a training plan, this was of a more informal kind.

The structured, collective training practices of the Tribhuvan Army Club and Mira Rai Initiative runners contrasted with the activities of the majority of dedicated trail runners. Most of these runners did not train in a collective and scheduled fashion but individually determined when, where, how long, in what way and with whom they trained, in the context of the pressures which the rest of their social life imposed on them such as work, education and family responsibilities.

Outside of Kathmandu there were some other running clubs. Probably the most significant of these with regards to trail running was the Karnali Sports Club, based in Khalanga Bazaar in Jumla in the country's remote far West, which along with coaching road and track athletes, trained groups of runners specifically for trail racing. While I had some interactions with the runners of the Karnali Sports Club, I stayed in Kathmandu for most of my fieldwork period and focused on building relationships with the runners I could meet in the city. The Karnali Sports Club has trained several high performing Nepali trail runners, one of whom—Sunmaya Budha—is now a professional athlete[11] who has won and set course records at several trail races of international

[11] Sunmaya Budha is sponsored by the Chinese outdoor clothing company Kailas.

significance (including at the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc, the French race starting in Chamonix which most Nepali trail runners considered to be the apex of the global sport). However, time and financial constraints meant that I had to base myself in Kathmandu and could not conduct extensive fieldwork in Jumla. Hence when I write about dedicated trail runners I am making reference to those I was able to meet in Kathmandu and my findings should be understood with that in mind. The majority of those I met and interviewed were based in Kathmandu for much of the year, though many also returned to their natal villages for periods of varying durations. Unlike the runners of the Karnali Sports Club, who trained collectively under coach Hari Rokaya, the vast majority of the runners I met in Kathmandu associated with each other in much more loosely structured ways.

A loose network of runners

When dedicated runners ran together, they tended to organise their training through Facebook and mobile phone communication. This was done in an ad hoc way at relatively short notice rather than according to a regular schedule. Meeting times were rarely firm and plans could be changed at short notice. Moreover, by contrast with dedicated runners in other contexts, such as the Ethiopian distance runners researched by Crawley (2019, 2020) and Borenstein (2022), the dedicated trail runners of Nepal did not habitually train in groups. Many of the most dedicated athletes did much of their training alone. It was not unusual for a dedicated trail runner to be interested primarily in conducting their own training and they did not necessarily think of running as a social activity. On the fairly frequent occasions when I serendipitously met a trail runner while I was running in Shivapuri National Park, it was not always appropriate to accompany them for the rest of their run. Running for these dedicated athletes was only sometimes a social activity. This seems to contrast with other running contexts in which serious athletes are organised into teams who do most of their training together—a difference which partly explains my strong reliance on interviews as a research method, which the following chapter explores. Unlike training runs, however, races were scheduled events which did bring together large numbers of actors from the Nepali trail running world.

Trail races in Nepal

The occasions for the largest gatherings of the dedicated Nepali trail runners were trail races, which occurred both in the hills of the Kathmandu Valley and in a variety of locations further afield. To take part in these races I traveled to these different locations, often sharing the journey with my informants. Racing took me took a variety of locations, from Nepal's second-largest city of Pokhara, to Jumla in the remote far west, Bhojpur in the remote far east, the districts of Ramechhap and Okhaldhunga, and the so-called 'Everest region' of Solukhumbu. Runners from Kathmandu traveled to these events generally by bus and/or jeep.

These trail races were major events during which dedicated runners came together in large numbers in an organised way. During my fieldwork period, between mid-2022 and late 2023, Nepal had a healthy calendar of trail races, taking place all year round apart from during the monsoon season. They were held in a variety of locations including in the trails around the major cities of Kathmandu and Pokhara as well as in more remote areas. In all I attended around sixteen trail races of varying distances, five of which were ultra-distance.

The slippery nature of the field was also evident in regards to trail races. Indeed, it is not that easy to pin down what a 'trail race' is in Nepal. Some such races featured significant sections of road. Others were almost entirely on road, but still defined themselves as 'trail races' because they were in the hills and contained a large amount of ascent and descent. Reflecting the emic usage, I do not quibble with local definitions and when a race is described by organisers and runners as a trail race, I follow their lead. It is worth noting, nonetheless, that in other running cultures, such races might be thought of in different terms. Running on a jeep track, on a tarmac road, up and down steps, on an uneven foot trail or hacking through a jungle are all different experiences—in Nepal, all were encapsulated in the term 'trail race'. Likewise, different runners preferred different kinds of terrain based on their distinct abilities, but all called themselves 'trail runners'.

The organisers of some of these events supplied runners with a GPX or KML file so that they could navigate using a map application on their phone or using a GPS watch. Others did not.

In all cases, races were marked with ribbons and spray paint, though the ribbons were sometimes removed by local children or runners themselves, creating confusion. Runners were generally not asked to carry a map of the route and one was rarely supplied, other than the aforementioned GPX or KML files. Navigation was not considered to be a part of the sport of trail running in Nepal, as races took place on marked courses. This differs from mountain running traditions in other countries such as that of English fell running in which runners navigate their way between checkpoints by their own chosen routes without the assistance of course markings.

The physical settings of trail running

Trail runners in Kathmandu usually trained in the Shivapuri Nagarjuna National park, though occasionally they went to the Dasarath Rangasala, Kathmandu's public athletics track. Tribhuvan Army Club runners also made use of the exclusive army athletics track, located nearby. Most runners did not train in a gym although a few did, generally on the recommendation of foreign coaches and with the financial support of sponsors—such as Sabin Kulung Rai, Sunmaya Budha and Santosh Kulung Rai.

Unlike many other sports, trail running in Nepal did not have a fixed location in which training took place. While other sports have fixed sites such as the boxing ring, the gym or the pool, to which athletes repeatedly return for training, trail running makes the task of participant-observation trickier, all other things being equal, because its primary site of training is mountain trails. This, combined with the fact that the dedicated runners generally were not associated through clubs or communal living, meant that there was a limit placed on the development of a shared culture among runners, thereby making generalisations about commonalities in attitude and practice particularly difficult to generate.

Runners' migrations and changing environments

Moreover, while the focus of my research was the dedicated trail runners of Nepal, some of these runners moved abroad during my fieldwork. Manoj Lama, for example, who joined me on one of

my first training runs in the Kathmandu Valley, later moved to Dubai where he worked in the service industry. Similarly, Niraj Tamang had been a very active trail runner in Nepal involved in organising the Gosainkunda to Helambu Trail Race. He later moved to Abu Dhabi where he then worked as a security guard. Neither Manoj nor Niraj were able in their new places of residence to continue the kind of training they had been doing in Nepal, but both nonetheless still held onto aspirations related to trail running. Manoj told me that he aspired to move to Switzerland, to become a professional trail runner and race at the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc. Niraj wanted to return to Nepal and become a professional race organiser. Another runner, Tek Bahadur Rai, had migrated to the United Kingdom where he worked at a KFC. He had little time to train, he told me, and was not involved with any running communities in the UK. Thus the degree to which trail runners kept their running practice and aspirations alive across borders was varied. During my fieldwork, Santosh Kulung Rai made connections with the Sigrid Schwartzenbacher Foundation in Austria and subsequently went to work for them at their hotel in the Alps. A female runner, Sarita Rai, soon followed him. Both Santosh and Sarita worked for a few months of the year at the hotel and then returned to Nepal, in a process of circular migration. I maintained contact with both of them while they were in Austria and interviewed the hotelier Petra Nocker as well as Santosh's Austrian coach, assigned to him by the foundation. So, while I was mostly based in Kathmandu for my fieldwork, my field site was more than a single physical setting. Since Nepali trail running is transnational, my research practice took this into account, using online communication and phone calls to conduct interviews and conversations with runners who had moved overseas.

Coaching

Though the Mira Rai Initiative and Tribhuvan Army Club runners trained with a coach, most of the dedicated Nepali trail runners did not. The few who were sponsored had coaches assigned to them by the company they represented. Others, who were neither sponsored nor part of any club, received training plans from coaches on a more informal basis—for example, Pemba Tamang followed a training plan written by the veteran Nepal Army runner Bijay Tamang. (Pemba did not have a sports watch and used a notebook to write down Bijay's plan and record his training.) Bijay provided coaching services for free to younger Nepali runners. Since Pemba was not part of a team and was not being paid to run, this relationship with Bijay and the commitment to the

training plan he had written was looser than that between employed Tribhuvan Army Club runners and their coach. Pemba could opt out of this training if his priorities shifted, as they indeed did when he decided to devote more time to his training as a Muay Thai athlete.

Most of the dedicated trail runners who were the object of this study were not coached at all, but of those who were, many were coached remotely, through an app such as Final Surge or Training Peaks. Bimala Tamang, a trail runner based in Kathmandu, followed a training plan written by Norwegian coach Lars Hagen. Hagen had informal relationships with Nepali runners, hosting different groups of athletes at his home in Norway for three months each year. When these athletes lived at his home in Norway he coached them in person, including accompanying them to strength training sessions at a local gym, but when they were in Nepal he sent his plans to them through the Final Surge app. Runners with sports watches could use this technology to record specific data about their training and share it online with their coach.

Sponsored runners were usually assigned foreign coaches. These coaches used the internet to communicate with the Nepali runners they trained, usually through an app. These runners were required to follow this training plan—they recorded and logged this training using a sports watch so that they could share it with their coaches. Their training plans were individualised, designed with them in mind specifically, however, rather than being written for a group. These sponsored runners may have considered themselves part of a team—such as the Mude[12] team or the North Face Adventure Team—but these teams were based abroad and therefore, while they were in Nepal, being in such a team did not entail running together with others in training. Sunmaya Budha and Sabin Rai, for example, had the same Australia-based coach because they were both part of the Hong Kong-based North Face Adventure Team. The training plans this coach sent them, however, were separate and distinctive, and often written up in preparation for different races. Similarly, Priya Rai was sponsored by the Vietnamese company Mude and was assigned a coach based in Spain. The relationships in which these trail runners were enmeshed, then, were variously online and offline, local and transnational, and entangled with (digital) technology.

[12] Mude is a Vietnamese sports apparel company.

As stated above, many runners were not coached at all. When I asked these runners about how they made training decisions, they sometimes referred to the internet, as well as other trail runners, as a source of training tips. Some coached runners, like Ramesh Gurung, shared their training plans with other Nepali runners. Thus runners could work from those plans to organise their own training, though without a two-way coaching relationship. As to how runners trained, there was quite a large range of styles among the dedicated Nepali trail runners. I could not identify shared features of training practices in un-coached runners other than the emphasis on running on mountain trails. One runner, Manoj Lama, told me that his training runs were mostly at an easy pace. By contrast, Santosh Kulung Rai—before he began training with a coach, anyway—completed relatively short training sessions in the hills but at a high intensity. Thus, unlike Manoj, who preferred to run at an easy pace, Santosh ran at a tempo pace or above for relatively short durations—an hour here or thirty minutes there. Other runners chose instead to run for many hours on the trails but at an easier intensity. There thus seemed to be no 'Nepali style' of training, so to speak. There was, rather, a mixture of approaches, depending on different runners' personalities and life commitments.

Smaller sponsorships and gifts

The distinction between sponsored and unsponsored runners is complicated to some extent by the fact that there was a large range of different ways that runners could be financially supported by companies and individuals. Kalpana Sunuwar, for example, had received some sponsorship from a Hong Kong sports company, T8, with which her coach, Bijay Tamang, was connected, though this sponsorship only amounted to ten thousand Nepalese rupees (roughly £60). T8 also sponsored a few other Nepali trail runners, though not to a degree that would allow them to make a living as full-time athletes in the way that Salomon's sponsorship of Mira Rai or Kailas's sponsorship of Sunmaya Budha did. Additionally, some of the alumni of Exchange and Empower, such as Kalpana Sunuwar, continued to receive small amounts of financial support from the Mira Rai Initiative after they had graduated from the programme. There were even more informal sorts of sponsorship given by individuals rather than companies or organisations, ranging from small grants for training, payments for travel to races or gifts of shoes, watches and other equipment.

Indeed, dedicated trail runners' engagement with the sport was in many cases sustained by gifts bestowed by others involved in the sport—often Westerners. For example, British entrepreneur and race director Richard Bull had been influential in helping Mira Rai to establish her career as a professional ultra trail runner, noticing her ability at a race he organised in Kathmandu, her debut competition. He subsequently led a crowdfunding campaign which, according to the website Trail Running Nepal, raised money for Mira to 'afford to stay in Kathmandu, improve her English… develop a training program to help prepare her for races later in the year, and also [receive] some mentoring to help her progress with her education while training.' (2014) Similarly, the race organiser Erik Janssen, a Dutch UNESCO worker based in Kathmandu, has sponsored several Nepali trail runners to race overseas, as well as in Nepal, while also giving free entry to Nepali athletes to participate in his own events. Bhola Tharu, a recipient of such sponsorship, referred to Jimi in terms of the divine. 'He is Bhagwan [God],' Bhola told me. Dedicated trail runners were thus helped to engage in the sport by forms of patronage, often made by Western enthusiasts of the sport.

Runners' changing relationships and commitments

Moreover, relationships with a coach, a sports company or a club were subject to varying degrees of change. Mira Rai Initiative runners, for example, were involved with the Exchange and Empower Programme for a period of nine months while Tribhuvan Army Club runners were in most cases employed by the Army until their late thirties or early forties, at which time they retired and were paid a pension. By contrast with the stable career of an Army runner, sponsorship contracts for professional and semi-professional runners did not constitute careers for life nor could such athletes hope to be paid a pension. During the period of my research, Sunmaya Budha moved from the North Face Adventure Team to be sponsored by Chinese outdoor apparel and equipment company Kailas, while Santosh Kulung Rai became sponsored by the Austrian Sigrid Schwartzenbacher Foundation before gaining additional sponsorship from French sports equipment company Salomon. Sabin Rai was supported by Hong Kong-based Asia Pacific Adventure briefly, but after his contract ended he returned to being an unsponsored runner. Thus, opportunities to earn money through running could be relatively precarious and only that minority of Nepali runners in the Nepal Army club had stable, predictable careers built around sport.

The internet

My research field was also virtual since so much interaction between trail runners took place online, and the internet was also the way I kept in touch with runners who might be abroad or in their natal village while I was in Kathmandu. The internet was not only a way of communicating but a field of action in which people valorised identities and new ways of relating to each other. The main online platforms dedicated Nepali runners used were Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Strava. These platforms allowed for the expression of both the qualitative, experiential aspects of trail running and the display of the quantitative aspects of the sport through the online publishing of data such as the distance of a run, the elevation and pace. For the former, experiential aspects, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok were used, while for the latter, quantitative elements, Strava was used. Among all of these platforms, Facebook and TikTok were the most popular. Almost all the trail runners I knew in Kathmandu were present in the online world of TikTok. The media they posted on the platform were a mixture of videos of running (often in slow motion), singing, dancing, and lip-syncing to film and TV clips. Strava was less popular, since most of the dedicated runners did not have sports watches and did not record data from their training. The internet was a vibrant and vital part of dedicated Nepali runners' social world and therefore unavoidably had to be considered part of my research field, requiring me to adopt online ethnographic methods (which the next chapter describes).

Conclusion

The 'field', then, such that I can speak of one, was a loose network of dedicated Nepali trail runners, many of whom were regionally mobile and some of whom were transnationally mobile, who met each other for training runs and trail races, but were not, in most cases, organised in any structured way, instead associating in an ad hoc fashion using the internet and mobile phone communication. The social ties connecting these individuals to each other were loose, which raises difficulties both for research methods as well as the interpretation of social life. Can such runners be thought of as part of a shared 'scene', 'group' or social 'world'? Did they have shared

‘norms’? Was there ‘solidarity’ among them? The looseness of this social network and the heterogeneity of the social actors who constituted it was necessary to take into account when producing interpretations of Nepali trail running.

The detail in this chapter is presented in order to show how my research ‘field’, so-called, was difficult to pin down. The conclusions presented in this thesis have to be understood in the context of a perspective on the research field as something complex and to some extent fragmentary rather than unitary or stable. I was not studying a particular club, workplace, political party, neighbourhood or village. I have constructed a category which I term ‘dedicated trail runners’ to specify *which* Nepali trail runners I am talking about in this thesis, but this is a necessarily fuzzy category. Some were more dedicated than others, while for some runners the degree of this commitment changed during my research period. Pemba Tamang, for example, shifted his emphasis away from trail running to Muay Thai while I was doing my fieldwork. Kamala Rai, the older sister of a professional trail runner who was only a casual runner during my stay in Nepal, later became an avid ultra runner, achieving podium positions in trail races. Such heterogeneity and transformation was necessary to take into account in writing this thesis.

The chapter on methods which follows explains how I explored this complex social field using participant-observation, unstructured interviews and online ethnography. It explains how my methods helped to illuminate the complex and changing social world which dedicated Nepali trail runners moved through, and, moreover, how my own social positionality afforded insights while, at times, making aspects of the research more challenging.

Chapter 3: Methods

There is no royal road to science, and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits.

—Karl Marx, 1872

Introduction

This chapter explains the methods I used and the methodological challenges I faced during my field research. I describe and explore the benefits and limitations of these methods, which included in-person participant-observation fieldwork (both on- and offline) as well as semi-structured interviews. I stayed in Nepal between August 2022 and November 2023 and took part in trail races and training sessions with Nepali trail runners. I was based in Kathmandu during this time, where I conducted all of the interviews and much of the participant-observation fieldwork. By combining the methods of observant participation and interviewing I was able to ground the explicit reflections of interviewees within the lived context of the social world of Nepali trail running. Moreover, by conducting interviews I could generate longer term data on life histories which participant-observation was less able to access. Such interview data has given a greater depth to my findings, grounding the data from my participant-observation fieldwork in an understanding of runners' life trajectories. This fieldwork was necessarily both on- and offline, since the dedicated trail runners' social world was both an ensemble of fleshy experiences of mountain adventure as well as a networked, spectral hyperreality (Baudrillard 1994) of internet images. Leaving out either side of this duality would have produced a too limited picture of Nepali trail running, which was a social world substantially defined by online as well as in-person activities.

Connected to the consideration of my methods, I reflect on positionality in this chapter—how my own gendered, class-based and racialised positioning in relation to my Nepali interlocutors shaped how my research played out. Because an anthropologist uses their own person as research instrument, this issue of positionality is highly relevant to a discussion of methods.

Through discussing methods and positionality, moreover, this chapter contributes to the thesis's main theoretical argument. My own research challenges, when reflected upon analytically, shed light on the central research problem—the question of why Nepali trail runners continued to aspire to professional athletic careers despite profound structural constraints. A discussion of methods, therefore, also entails a discussion of many of the substantive issues which this thesis explores.

Observant participation

My use of 'observant participation' (Wacquant 2015:1)[13] involved running with informants during races and training sessions as well as socialising with runners through other activities such as commensality, strength training and walking. I recorded my experiences through typed-up field notes and also took photographs as aide mémoires. My use of observant participation enabled me not only to build rapport with informants but also to uncover aspects of social life which were less likely to be reflected upon during interviews. While my running capacity was not comparable to that of the dedicated Nepali trail runners who were the main focus of my study, my fitness was enough to enable me to take part in some training runs with them and complete many of the races on the calendar of Nepali trail running. Joining Nepali runners for training sometimes meant my informants graciously slowing their pace to accommodate me. In some instances this put me in an apprentice-like role which usefully counterbalanced the sense of being a potential benefactor or patron—an aspect of my relationships with Nepali runners which I explore later in this chapter.

Like most of the dedicated Nepali trail runners based in Kathmandu, I trained regularly in the Shivapuri Nagarjuna National Park. The effect of this training was to help me complete roughly twenty races during my fifteen-month fieldwork period; these were mostly trail races, though I also competed in a few road and track events. Attending road and track races was a useful way

[13] Wacquant reverses the terms in 'participant observation' to emphasise his own purported methodological innovation in which a greater stress is placed on participation. This is somewhat unfair to ethnographers before him. Nonetheless, I use the term to indicate how my own method was influenced by Wacquant's practice of becoming a boxer for his monograph *Body and Soul* (2004). Like Wacquant I attempted to '[act] out (elements of) the phenomenon' (2015:5) I was researching by becoming a trail runner myself rather than observing events in a more detached capacity.

to gain a broader perspective on the sporting lives of my informants since not all of the dedicated trail runners were exclusively hill runners. I was thus able to contrast the world of trail running with more traditional forms of athletics in Nepal. The races I participated in spanned distances from 5 kilometres up to 55 kilometres; five of the events I entered were ultra-distance, meaning further than a marathon.

These races varied in their degree of difficulty not only according to the distance but also to the elevation gained and lost, the nature of the terrain, the weather challenges and the altitude. By running these races I was able not only to observe how participants tackled the challenge of a trail race but also to gain a first-hand sensory and emotional experience of the varied forms of running in Nepal's hills. I was thus able to experience what Wacquant calls the 'taste and ache of action' (2004: vii). I am careful, however, not to assume that my embodied experiences were identical to those of my interlocutors.

Indeed, substantial differences between my own background and that of my interlocutors means that the virtue of the participant-observation method has to be understood quite carefully, with its limitations taken fully into account. While my experience of trail running in Nepal—and especially trail racing—was sensorily and emotionally rich, it was one substantially filtered through my own subjectivity and thus strongly influenced by my distinct life history. If I could run the same races as they did, that didn't make my experiences the same. Indeed, as Sarah Pink notes (2010), sense itself is culturally mediated.

For that reason, in seeking to describe something of the experience of running for Nepali trail runners, as I do in chapters 8 and 9 of this thesis, I stay close to my interlocutors' words as reports of these experiences. I used participation in trail running as a research method largely because it helped me to establish rapport and build social connections with research participants. By turning up at trail races, I 'got my face around', so to speak. I also could develop some common reference points so that I understood better what my interlocutors were talking about when they talked about running. Nevertheless, such running experiences did not bridge the gap created by our very different life histories even if, as I now explore, there were some ways in which

the method of physical participation allowed me to discover notable features of the social world of trail running.

Lyrical sociology?

In her ethnographic study of Lake District fell runners, Sarah Nettleton (2013) argues that through a 'lyrical sociology', the distinct logic of what she calls a 'sporting field' (2013:198–9) can be uncovered through embodied participant-observation. For Nettleton, such a sociology would understand the organisation of fields such as that of fell or trail running 'as joyful, intense and passionate'. (202) In commending Wacquant's aforementioned ethnography of boxing, *Body & Soul* (2004), Nettleton claims that the French sociologist 'went native' (201). Wacquant, she claims, 'comes to inhabit and be inhabited by boxing' (201). While I am very reticent to make claims about sharing sporting passions with Nepali trail runners, there was nonetheless an epistemic value in, like Wacquant, my trying to 'inhabit and be inhabited by' trail running. I therefore employed the approach of 'enactive ethnography' (2015:1) advocated by Loic Wacquant, by which the researcher '[performs] the phenomenon' (1). In my case, this meant training and racing alongside the dedicated Nepali runners. In doing so, I hoped I could thereby develop the faculty which anthropologist Unni Wikan calls 'resonance' (1992), a kind of empathetic connection with actors in the social world one is studying—a tacit, shared understanding of the spoken or unspoken rules of the game which constitute a particular social context. Like Nettleton in her research on fell runners, I felt the need to 'understand the physical passions of the sporting activity' rather than 'reducing it to an instrumental or calculative game' (2013:202).

Thus, as in Nettleton's 'lyrical sociology' of English fell running, I came to see trail running as 'joyful, intense and passionate' (2013:202) through my enactment of it. It was my own trail running experience that moved me to ask what trail running *felt* like, beyond considerations of the economic and social strategies of self-advancement involved in many runners' engagements with the sport. Participant-observation thus provoked an attention to this affective side of running, which could then be understood *in relation to* the strategic aspect. If I had not been a runner

myself, I would perhaps have put too much weight on the instrumentalisation of the sport for social and economic advancement and paid insufficient attention to its rich experiential elements. For this reason, while I have a strong skepticism about how similar to my informants' my own experiential engagements with trail running were, there were nonetheless substantial rewards to be gained from employing such a lyrical ethnographic approach—both in the data it allowed me to gather and the questions it provoked me to ask.

Wikan's notion of 'resonance' (1992) refers to features of cultural life which are not necessarily vocalised but reside rather in shared embodied experience. She describes resonance as a way of uncovering 'meanings that reside neither in words, "facts," nor text but are evoked in the meeting of one experiencing subject with another' (1992:463). The attempt to uncover such meanings, however, is inevitably complicated by the fact that I and the dedicated Nepali runners have rather different life histories and subject-positions. While we might in some measure share experiences of trail running, the way these experiences were interpreted emotionally and intellectually inevitably differed. Like Wikan, I had to contend with the real risk that 'in trying to practice… interpretive charity across cultures, we may come to impute to people a commonality with our own experience' (1992:465).

Indeed, there are many factors which separate me from my informants, including the way my upbringing differed substantially from theirs. As will be explored in more detail in the ensuing chapters,[14] most of my interlocutors attributed their running fitness in part to their childhood and adolescent experiences—including those of agricultural work and running to school over hilly terrain. By contrast, as a child I was relatively uninterested in sport and mostly became involved in endurance activities once I was an adult. It seems reasonable to imagine, therefore, that their mental tolerance for difficulty was greater than mine, making their affective experience of trail running significantly different.

The purposes which drive different people to engage in trail running must shape their experience of the activity, moreover. The most obvious way in which this pertained was in the matter of prize

[14] Especially in chapter 8, 'From village to city'

money.[15] For me, prize money was of only ethnographic interest. This was not just because I was unlikely to win anything—the fact that Nepali runners who were unlikely to win were still interested in prize money suggested to me there was a broader difference in outlooks structuring the motivations to race. Broadly speaking, prizes were more important to my informants than they were to me. Thus, because our motivations for participating in the sport differed to some extent, even if our running experiences had some shared features, our interpretation of our running was likely to diverge. For this reason, it was necessary to combine my sense of the embodied qualities of mountain trail running with what runners said and wrote about their running lives.

Moreover, my up-close engagement with the everyday life of Nepali trail runners was limited by the fact that the runners were not, as the previous chapter has discussed, a unitary or stable community in which I could reliably 'situate' myself. While I did conduct participant-observation fieldwork, I did not live in close proximity to my informants on a daily basis. This differs from other running ethnographies such as Michael Crawley's (2019, 2020) and Hannah Borenstein's (2022) studies of Ethiopian runners, which involved researching athletes who regularly trained in groups. Indeed, mine was not a 'classical' ethnography, so to speak, a fact which at times produced feelings of inadequacy and anxiety. It would not be too dramatic to say that I was somewhat haunted during my fieldwork by the ghost of Malinowski. Was I doing anthropology right? Perhaps it would have helped to read education researcher Martin Forsey's article, 'Ethnography as Participant Listening' (2010), in which he persuasively argues against the equation of anthropology with a certain, maybe mythical, conception of participant-observation fieldwork.

Forsey's argument helps to underline my reasoning for using interviews in addition to participant-observation—he contends that ethnography, participant observation and anthropology are not synonyms and that much of anthropological research is about *listening*. Interviews, Forsey claims, have been unfairly relegated to the lower level of a hierarchy of methods within anthropology due to the 'rhetorical commitment to moving beyond what people say they do to seeing what they actually do' (2010:563). A 'hierarchy of the senses' (563), privileging vision over hearing, has meant that interviews have been seen as non-ethnographic in some sense. In the following

[15] I discuss the topic of prize money at greater length in chapter 7, 'Constraint'.

section, therefore, I consider in some more depth the particular benefits of interviews and my rationale for using the method, reflecting on their value as an ethnographic tool.

Interviews

I conducted sixty semi-structured interviews with trail runners as well as race organisers, agents and athlete managers. Most of the interviews with athletes were conducted in Nepali—though a variant of Nepali which came liberally sprinkled with many English words, especially in speaking with Kathmandu-based informants. (I consider some of the implications of this in the section below on language.) Most of these interviews were conducted in person though some, with Nepali runners who were now based overseas, were done by phone or Facebook call.

My interviews built on already established rapport with informants. Interviewees were people I had already met through trail running and who usually knew something about why I was living in Nepal before the interview was arranged. Since the social world of Nepali trail running was relatively free of 'gate-keepers', I contacted runners directly to ask for interviews, usually through Facebook.

The value of conducting interviews was partly related to the issue of positionality mentioned above and discussed in more detail below. Relying merely on participant-observation would have risked assuming commonalities of experience between myself as a runner and those I was researching, commonalities which might have been more imagined than real. Participant-observation alone, I feared, could have led to my imputing my own feelings about trail running to others. On the other hand, an interview is not a neutral aperture through which the verities of life are made transparent. It is also a sociocultural phenomenon, a kind of 'serious game' (Ortner 1999:21–25) in which players present *sides* of themselves to more or less impressionable others, seeking to achieve certain ends. To put it simply, as social anthropologists have long repeated, what people say and what people do are not the same. The interview is not the setting—not always, anyway—for the confession of a deep truth.

There are, then, a few contextual factors which have to be taken into account when reading the interview material presented in this thesis. These can be organised around the question of

whether or not my interlocutors were living in what David Silverman calls an 'interview society' (1997:1). Forsey describes the 'interview society' in the following terms:

> 'Not only are we bombarded with various forms of 'the interview' as part of our news and entertainment, employment is contingent upon our successful negotiation of interview processes, we are interviewed for bank loans or welfare payments and our conversations can sometimes take the form of an interview in our spatially dislocated, time challenged lives. In this world 'of consultants and confessional chat shows', of indefinite employment, of personal coaching and online chat-rooms, interviews begin to resemble forms of participant observation.' (2010:568)

Therefore, an important question is: what pre-existing cultural kit were the trail runners carrying with them when they came along to an interview? Though I explained that I was a PhD student with funding from the UK government, there were other preconceptions which likely informed how interlocutors approached the interview process. High-performing Nepali trail runners were increasingly being interviewed by the Nepali press and television media, and were also being invited onto podcasts, a growing medium in Nepal. Thus, runners' prior awareness of the 'athletic interview' to some degree helped my research. Having listened to many of these interviews, I have found that there is a substantial crossover between the kinds of questions I asked as an ethnographer and those which journalists tend to ask, particularly with regards to runners' life histories and their ambitions and hopes for the future. Runners having this pre-existing 'toolkit', therefore, seemed to be more of a help to my research than a hindrance. Because Nepali runners were, then, coming from an 'interview society' or interview setting, they were less likely to see our interviews for my thesis as something strange, or to regard the practice with suspicion or hostility (though see my discussion on gender below). However, they were also more likely to be 'savvy' about self-presentation, in such a way that the interview might have been seen as a means of presenting a particular *version* of their athletic selves, one which could be shorn of troubling ambiguities and complexities.

Indeed, it is possible that my perceived status as someone who could potentially be a benefactor for Nepali trail runners may have influenced the kinds of answers runners gave. While I was in no powerful position within the sport, I was able to bring some good-condition donated equipment to Nepal from the UK. Still, I found that runners frequently assumed I was capable of providing more material help than I actually was. Could this perception have made runners present less complex

accounts of themselves, emphasising their dedication to the sport over other factors such as their uncertainty or ambivalence? While it is hardly possible to make any definitive judgement on this question, it seems worth keeping in mind when runners' interview responses are considered.

Further considerations influenced my decision to conduct interviews and, in four of the empirical chapters which follow (6–9), to present 'profiles' or 'portraits' of individual runners. These included my disinclination to subsume runners' personalities within a general ethnographic third-person plural, an ethnographic 'they'. As James Clifford wrote in an influential critique, 'On Ethnographic Authority',

> '[The] translation of the research experience into a textual corpus separate from its discursive occasions of production has important consequences for ethnographic authority. The data thus reformulated need no longer be understood as the communication of specific persons. An informant's explanation or description of custom need not be cast in a form that includes the message "so and so said this." A textualized ritual or event is no longer closely linked to the production of that event by specific actors. Instead, these texts become evidences of an englobing context, a "cultural" reality. Moreover, as specific authors and actors are severed from their productions, a generalized "author" must be invented to account for the world or context within which the texts are fictionally relocated. This generalized author goes under a variety of names: the native point of view, "the Trobrianders," "the Nuer," "the Dogon," as these and similar phrases appear in ethnographies.' (1983:131–132)

Not least because, as the preceding chapter has described, Nepali trail runners did not live and act in anything like a homogeneous way and also because, as Clifford's critique articulates, sets of people never really are homogeneous, I wanted to preserve difference through my writing and my methods. Difference, nonetheless, does not mean only difference between *individuals.* Indeed, methodological individualism would be just as much a mistake as the opposite extreme. Difference also means that, at different times, the same people had different judgements and ideals as well as different affective responses. Still, however inconsistent and fragmentary the self turns out to be, trail runners, it seems worth acknowledging, were particular historical actors, agents making history (though not under conditions of their own choosing). They did not constitute a structurally determined, homogeneous mass, an 'ethnographic they'. In more eloquent terms, the late David Graeber described his own approach to treating his Malagasy interlocutors as historical actors. He explains,

> I… wanted to write a particular, somewhat experimental, sort of ethnography… treating [research participants] not as exemplars of something other than themselves—or at least, not

> primarily so—but rather as actors, human beings actively shaping the world in which they exist, even if they are (like any of us) not entirely aware of the degree to which they are doing so. People who have the capacity of acting in ways that no prior model would have been able to predict. Social science, after all, is very good at describing things that have already occurred in such a way as to imply they could have been predicted beforehand; it is rarely able to actually predict anything. I wanted to write in such a way as to keep an awareness of this alive in the account itself: to retain a sense that one can never be completely sure what these people are about to do. It's not that I am trying to deny the degree to which their lives are shaped and constrained by larger forces; I just don't want that to be the only point. In a way, what I'm trying to do is perhaps not that different from what I've said so many Malagasy themselves were doing: carving out a small, somewhat tenuous space of autonomy and freedom within social theory itself. (2007:31)

Moreover, I was struck very early on in my research by the sense that Nepali trail runners were crafting 'selves' in a characteristically modern way. As philosopher Charles Taylor argues, the modern idea of the self is that of an autonomous, self-defining subject which is no longer simply discovered, but created. (1989) My presentations of runners' 'personalities', then, are not so much portraits of *how they really were* but evidence of the production of idiosyncratic selves in the cultural crucible of trail running.

The interviews I conducted were around forty-five to ninety minutes long. While my main concern was to uncover what motivated dedicated trail runners to engage in the sport, interviews did not follow a formal structure. Instead, I allowed the direction of the conversation to be affected by the particular interests of my interviewees. Some interviewees placed more emphasis on certain issues, such as the intrinsically rewarding aspects of trail running, while other runners focused on other topics, such as the economic constraints to participation. In the case of participants I interviewed more than once, the same interviewee might focus on different topics on different interview occasions. By allowing conversations to be moved in different directions according to each runners' particular interests and distinct trains of thought, all the while being guided by my overriding research focus, I was able to uncover the idiosyncrasies of different actors while still addressing my overarching research aim, which was to understand the motivational matrix that sustained dedicated runners' participation in the sport of trail running. In doing so, I discovered some broad commonalities of perspective with regards to trail running, which I have described in this thesis through the use of Berlant's concept of cruel optimism.

Thus, while I had a general idea of what I was trying to find out, I did not stick rigidly to a set of research questions. Instead I conducted interviews in a semi-structured fashion, employing what

Forsey calls an ‘ethnographic imaginary’. ‘To conduct interviews with an ethnographic imaginary,’ Forsey explains, means ‘to ask questions beyond the immediate concerns of the research question… [probing] biography, seeking to locate the cultural influences on a person's life, looking later to link this to the pursued question, or, in the inductive spirit of ethnography, to even change the question.’ (2010:568)

In this way, the life-history approach I applied—trying to understand the longer term influences on individual running lives—yielded data which participant observation by itself would not. While participant-observation was a useful method for learning about the everyday practical realities of training and the social practice of racing, interviews allowed me to uncover important life-history data with which I could contextualise those activities.

These interviews were conducted in either Nepali, English or a mixture of the two, depending upon the preferences of the participant. Most of the dedicated runners were not fluent English speakers, so the interviews were usually conducted in Nepali, though the variety spoken in Kathmandu at that time, especially by young people, featured a large component of English vocabulary—leading some call it ‘Neplish’ (Sharma, Joshi and Teijlingen 2015). My grasp of the language had reached a level such that it was possible for me to conduct conversations about running with my interlocutors, which was aided by the fact that much of the runners’ sport-specific vocabulary was composed of English words, though at times with slightly different valences than they had in Anglophone settings. I reflect further on the implications of this in the subsection on language below.

Though the interview data featured in this thesis is mostly taken from interviews with dedicated trail runners, they were not the only subjects I spoke to. Of the sixty interviews I conducted, around thirty were with those I call dedicated Nepali trail runners. The other interviews were with different kinds of runners, including foreigners and more casual, less competitive Nepalis. I also interviewed race organisers, athlete agents and managers.

The data from these other interviews are largely not presented in this thesis, but they helped to develop my own understanding of the social world of Nepali trail running within which the

dedicated trail runners were acting. The reason this data does not figure more strongly within this text, other than limitations of space, is that my research argument concerns how trail running was cathected with hopes for personal and social transformation by a subset of highly dedicated Nepali trail runners. The motivations of more casual runners and foreign runners are less relevant to this question and much of the material generated through interviews with those involved in the organisational side of the sport does not directly pertain to that argument.

Language

As noted above, moreover, my research practice was shaped not only by differences of subject-position but also by differences of language. Most of the dedicated Nepali trail runners who were the focus of my study had attended rural schools where the primary language of instruction was Nepali and where there was not a large emphasis on teaching English. These schools contrasted with the more expensive city schools where English was the primarily medium of instruction. Most of my dedicated runner interlocutors, therefore, were not English speakers to a level that would have made interviewing in my first language practicable at the time of my research (though many were in the process of learning and some have since become very good English speakers). My learning Nepali, therefore, was simply a practical necessity for the conduct of the research. However, having no previous familiarity with the language and due to the limited time available for learning Nepali during the PhD,[16] some degree of a linguistic barrier was inevitable.

Even if I had been a fluent Nepali speaker, however, any translation of cultural data from one language to another necessarily misses something. This 'something' is well expressed by Leavitt in an article for *Hau*, titled 'Words and worlds: Ethnography and theories of translation'. Delving into the history of translation theory, Leavitt explains that

> 'The most famous phrasing of this distinctive quality [of language] was in Joachim du Bellay's 1549 Deffense et illustration de la langue françoyse. Most of this text is a translation from Speroni's Dialogo, but it is du Bellay who specifies that each language possesses a certain *je ne scais quoy propre*—and he makes this point as part of a discussion of the difficulties of translation, as indeed do a number of Italian authors. Each language has its own force and

[16] I applied for and was given an extra 3 months of funding from the ESRC to accommodate some extra language learning.

> beauty (forze e bellezza) which cannot be carried over into another tongue. Gelli ([1551] 1976: 201) writes: "They say that discourses (cose) that are translated from one language into another never have the same force or beauty that they had in their own. . . . To say things in one language in the style of another has no grace at all." (2014:199)

Indeed, long before the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (1956) was proposed, many scholars and thinkers recognised that languages are not culturally neutral representational modes but have distinctive qualities which make translation in a sense 'impossible', though unavoidable. I mitigate this problem by, at times, providing what Leavitt calls an 'ugly translation' (2014:193). An ugly translation is a translation which, while aesthetically clunky and inelegant, more accurately expresses a research participant's meaning than would a prettier rendering. Leavitt defends the use of ugly translations in ethnography, arguing that 'anthropologists need not fear monsters… They are free to experiment with forms of "experience-close" transcription, so as to include aspects of orality and the particular circumstances of a performance, and translation, to try to bring worlds together.' (2014:215)

Therefore, there are points where, while a more elegant translation might have been possible, I have opted for an 'ugly' one, so as to preserve as much as possible a respondent's original meaning. In other instances such an ugly translation would be almost incomprehensible to most English readers. In those cases I have had to use English turns of phrase to render my interlocutors' words.

Participation and observation online

I also undertook *online* participant-observation, engaging in the social world of Nepali trail runners through Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and TikTok. This online ethnographic research began before my fieldwork stay in Nepal and continued afterwards—essentially for the duration of the period of study. As well as talking to runners on these online platforms, I participated in an English language conversation practice group with Kalpana Sunuwar of the Mira Rai Initiative for ten weeks and took part in some of the Mira Rai Initiative's yoga and breathwork sessions. These online activities with the Mira Rai Initiative took place before my fieldwork stay, many of them during the period of Covid restrictions.

Online interaction is notably different from offline socialising, in various ways which must be carefully taken account of. Ethnographer Miriam Jaehn notes that '[o]ffline intimacy is built not only through the words we use but also through our intonation, body language, and a shared sensuous environment. These important aspects of communication can be replaced by sending emoticons, voice messages, or having video calls. But they possess other textualities and constitute different "languages" for expressing intimacies.' (2021)

Most importantly, online communication has to be understood not as a 'digitised' version of offline interactions but as a specific field in its own right. As Jaehn puts it, 'Rather than replicating previous intimacies, [online worlds] instead produce new forms of rapport.' (2021)

My attentiveness to these new forms of rapport is such that I make clear in this thesis when I am using material generated through an online medium. Additionally, in recording informants' responses I have retained as far as possible the distinct communicative quirks of the internet, such as emojis.

While online fieldwork was, to some extent, mere expediency—it meant I could communicate with people who were too far away for me to meet up with, it meant I could ask follow-up questions which emerged once I had begun the write-up process in the UK, it meant I could still have some conversations with people who might be too hesitant to attend an interview, and more benefits besides—it was also a vital part of the research process, since the social world of Nepali trail running was also an online world. To miss out the online dimension of Nepali trail running would be to generate an incomplete picture. Online communication, moreover, helped to overcome some of the language difficulties I faced. In the thick of everyday conversation using a language one is still learning, much can be lost. Online, however, text is preserved and can be returned to until it is made sense of. Additionally, I found some informants to be more comfortable talking at length online than in person. As Jaehn notes (2021), online spaces can produce a sense of 'privacy' distinct from offline spaces, which can lead to people being less inhibited. This reality to some extent mitigated the lack of interviews I conducted with female informants (which the below section on gender explores further).

Moving between online and offline modes was not the only mode of improvisation I had to adopt during my fieldwork. More significantly, the very nature of my research project shifted underneath my feet due to the changing priorities of research participants. These unexpected changes in the 'field situation' are described in the next section.

Changed plans

My original research plan as proposed to the ESRC's NINE-DTP in 2019 had to be altered. The original plan was to research the Mira Rai Initiative's Exchange and Empower Programme—by studying the organisation's activities I intended to yield insights on how trail running may or may not contribute to processes of women's empowerment in Nepal. The Exchange and Empower Programme began in 2018 and ran until late 2022, taking on a new cohort of around four athletes every year. After this—a few months into my stay in Nepal—the organisation stopped the Programme in order to focus on fundraising efforts towards the building of a new training centre in Kathmandu, a move which I had not been informed about beforehand.

Before my fieldwork began and as part of the process of producing a research proposal for the ESRC, I had been in contact with the organisation's co-founder and chief fundraiser, Hong Kong-based Keilem Ng, who wrote a letter of recommendation supporting my plan to research the activities of the Exchange and Empower Programme during its fourth iteration in 2023. I also had the support of the programme's director and the group's coach, Mira Rai. The unexpected circumstance of the Programme being stopped, however, meant that I could not proceed with this research plan. As a result, the orientation of my research had to change.

I therefore widened my aperture to pay attention to the social scene of Nepali trail running in general, including male and female runners. I was able to conduct some research with the Programme's 2023 cohort at the tail end of its operation and some of this material contributes to the analysis presented in the thesis. The bulk of my research, however, was within the general trail running scene, with a research focus on the hopeful motivations of dedicated Nepali trail runners, male and female, rather than on questions of women's empowerment. Issues of changing gender

relations are explored in the thesis—though not to the degree that I originally had intended. As well as informants' priorities shifting, their perceptions of me as a white, male, British PhD student influenced the course of the research, which I explore in the next section.

Positionality

Reflecting on positionality entails thinking about what kind of social world dedicated Nepali trail runners were moving through. The character of the dedicated runners' relations with me—a white, male, British PhD student—reflected their perceptions of the sport, which was seen as a transnational social form constituted in part by relations of patronage. My presence in the dedicated runners' social world seemed to these athletes to be a hopeful sign that they were moving in circles which extended beyond Nepal to the so-called 'big countries',[17] where they hoped to earn both money and 'a name'. As a researcher I became a potential vector of such hopes and ambitions, which entangled me within the very process I was attempting to understand. In this way, reflecting on positionality is not a tangential issue but entails reflecting on the very issues under examination in this thesis.

Additionally, the field was not something I could easily constitute as an object external to myself and submit to analysis, since I was involved in it. I was not only a fellow runner but—at times—a bestower of gifts to runners in the form of equipment for trail running which had been donated by UK runners. There were also more intangible ways in which I influenced the field. For example, it was my recommendation of Sarita Rai to the Sigrid Schwartzenbacher Foundation, whose representative Petra Nocker informed me that they were looking for a female Nepali runner to support, which secured her their sponsorship and employment in Austria. Thus not only is it hard to 'pin down' the field site, but neither could I extricate myself from it and objectify it. I was enmeshed within its networks and my actions caused reverberations within it, however small they might have been.

With regards to runners' perceptions of me, it seemed to be the case that I was frequently seen as someone with money, connections, and, especially, access to much valued items such as running

[17] A colloquial Nepali term for the Global North.

shoes, specialist bags and sports gels. Dedicated runners' perceptions of my role in Nepal as that of a benefactor is hardly unique in relations between Nepalis and white foreigners and has a historical precedent. The relations of gift-giving and patronage between Nepali runners and Western enthusiasts of the sport was discussed briefly in chapter 2 ('The field'), but there is a more general historical context to these relations than the specific history of trail running which is explored in that chapter. This history can be framed in terms of what Mark Liechty calls the 'development complex' (2002:49). He uses this term to describe the way foreign aid is filtered through the intermediaries of development organisations such as NGOs in Kathmandu. This 'development complex' has come to shape relationships between anthropologists conducting research in Nepal and their local research participants, a fact which a number of researchers have reflected upon. For example, in considering his relationships with informants during his PhD fieldwork in Lubhu, a town in the Kathmandu Valley, Mikkel Vindegg points to a presumed association 'between whiteness and aid' (2021:36). He explains:

> 'my "whiteness" was likely the most important criteria for marking me as different'. … Nepalis (at least many of those in Lubhu) presumed a connection between whiteness (or white people) and the development sector, if not "development" (bikaas) more generally. … In practice, this assumed that I had the ability to procure money from organisations (sansthaa) to give to projects and/or individuals in order to help them. The fact that I did not was at times a source of consternation, since some would interpret my stated inability as a refusal to help.' (2021:47–48)

Like Vindegg, as a white person I was often cast in the role of potential benefactor. Being cast in this role had precedents within the specific context of Nepali trail running since many of those Nepali runners who had been able to race overseas had been supported to do so by individuals from the Global North—either race organisers or enthusiasts of the sport who wanted to help burgeoning Nepali talent.

The fact of the matter is that I was in some small ways able to help the dedicated Nepali runners, and that is worth taking into account when reading my findings. I brought some equipment with me on my first flight to Nepal to donate to runners. I made two return trips to the UK during the fieldwork and each time I brought back more equipment, this time donated by other UK trail runners, almost all of which I was able to distribute to Nepali runners. I did feel some ambivalence about my being involved in gift relations with Nepali runners. On the one hand, gifting equipment

to Nepali runners most likely helped to build some rapport with athletes which may have made it easier for me to set up interviews and fieldwork situations.[18] On the other hand, perhaps it affected the kinds of responses to questions which runners gave—if they were hoping to receive a gift or a sponsorship from me, they might have told me what they thought I wanted to hear, perhaps over-emphasising their commitment to the sport, their achievements, or their identification with the category of 'trail runner' or 'athlete'. They may have—like Sherpa people as theorised by anthropologist Vincanne Adams—played up to a stereotype or idealised image of the Nepali trail runner which they assumed I held. Adams claims that foreigners' representations of Sherpas reflect Western desires for an imagined Other and as a result 'Sherpas find their own identities reflected back to them through such representations' (1996:40) as they seek relationships with the foreigners who have such representations. She terms this process 'mimesis', drawing on Michael Taussig's work *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993).

Indeed, while the Nepali trail runner certainly does not have the global reach or historical depth of the Sherpa as a 'virtual' type, the 'mediascape'[19] (Appadurai 1990:9) of the sport has already established a set of traits which are thought to characterise the ideal elite mountain runner—among which are steadfastness, grit, pain and suffering tolerance, love of 'nature' and aspirations to greatness. Why would a budding Nepali trail runner, interacting with an outsider who through his networks is able to dispense valued items such as trail shoes in good condition, want to disabuse the ethnographer of any romanticism or essentialism about the strengths of the Nepali runner from the hills and their especial fitness for the sport? Why would they downplay their achievements or contradict my sense of their dedication and enthusiasm for the game?

---

[19] Appadurai's 1990 delineation of a 'mediascape' is a highly apt description of the mostly online image world of trail running: mediascapes, he explains,

> tend to be image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places. These scripts can and do get disaggregated into complex sets of metaphors by which people live (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) as they help to constitute narratives of the 'other' and proto-narratives of possible lives, fantasies which could become prologemena [sic] to the desire for acquisition and movement. (1990:9)

For example, Lopsang told me that his 'passion'[20] was trail running and that his engagement with the martial art Muay Thai was simply for money. Lopsang's relative success in the world of Muay Thai, however, particularly since I left Nepal, was impressive. He set up a thriving Muay Thai gym in Gokarna and regularly competed for Nepal in Thailand as a flyweight. As a result of the earnings from his Muay Thai career, Lopsang focused less and less on trail running, using running more as a training tool for Muay Thai than a sport in itself and competing only infrequently. I therefore wonder whether Lopsang emphasised the trail runner aspect of himself in his interactions with me because I am a runner, engaged in researching trail running, and downplayed the Muay Thai part of his life accordingly. I can only speculate. Perhaps Lopsang improvised in response to me, 'playing up' his trail runner identity and playing down his Muay Thai identity.[21]

Thus, dedicated trail runners' commitment to the sport might have been more complex than came out in interviews. For this reason, I felt the importance of, as much as practicable, grounding such interviews within the context of deeper fieldwork relationships and the observation of social life in its complexity. In this way, the two methods of participant-observation fieldwork and interviews worked to counteract each others' limitations. I explored the social world beyond what Malinowski called the 'corpus inscriptionum'—the account that runners might give of themselves in an interview, on a social media platform or to a journalist—to observe the 'imponderabilia of actual life' (1922:24)—the ways an offhand comment, a gesture, an expression or an embodied action might reveal a quality that contradicted the self-presentation which occurs in the 'front' stage (Goffman 1956:8) of social life. Nonetheless, there were sedimented understandings of social difference which my research practice still struggled to overcome. Probably the most significant of these was gender, which I consider in the next section.

---

[20] Lopsang used the English word.

[21] This example underscores how a relation of 'cruel optimism' may shift from one ambition or dream to another depending upon the context of social relations, as an actor responds to a shifting matrix of opportunities. Improvisation is a necessity for precarious subjects in the neoliberal mode of capitalism which is often characterised by 'flexible citizenship' (Ong 1999).

Gender

My research plan involving the Mira Rai Initiative would have meant engaging with women runners under the aegis of an NGO. But without this supportive social context, I found conducting research with female runners significantly more challenging. This difficulty was especially marked with regards to interviews, which women runners were more likely than men to shy away from. As a result I conducted fewer interviews with female than male trail runners. Out of thirty interviews with runners, only six of these were with women, which does not reflect the proportion of women among dedicated trail runners. Roughly, I estimate that around a third of those I call dedicated trail runners were female. In this section I will describe this methodological stumbling block and explain how I have reflected on it anthropologically. Indeed, the silence or resistance of women interlocutors to my research intentions reveals social facts about contemporary gender norms in Nepal. Trail running is, to some degree, challenging such norms. Therefore, when, where and how I was granted access to women's 'worlds' (Abu-Lughod 2008) suggests something about the extent to which trail running may or may not be transforming existing gender relations in Nepal.

Women runners were typically more happy to talk to me online or in informal contexts such as at races and group training runs but were often hesitant about taking part in interviews. While I assumed that my male gender was the reason for this difficulty, and it no doubt played a role, female ethnographers have also faced such setbacks in Nepal. Anthropologist Seika Sato, for example, was met with a similar reluctance from women interlocutors, who often responded to her requests to share their stories with a statement like 'I have nothing special to tell. Ask somebody else who is knowledgeable.' (Sato 2023:1) Likewise, Mary Ann Maslak, in her research on Tharu women, claims that

> 'Women in the southern Nepali community were at first quite fearful of and then puzzled by my interest in their knowledge of their lives and their roles in the educational decision-making process. They believed that they were capable of receiving and even reproducing knowledge from those in their community who they believed possessed superior ideas but that they… were incapable of creating their own knowledge.' (2003:119)

These and other examples from female researchers in Nepal (such as Davis 2014) led me to suspect that while my gender most likely exacerbated the problem, it was not the sole cause of

the difficulty I had in trying to arrange interviews with women trail runners. Due to historically sedimented high-caste Hindu gender norms, there is a widespread sense among Nepali women that their views are not important enough to be listened to. Sato explains that both the wider society and Nepali women themselves presume that their stories are '[not] sufficiently important to be shared widely.' Sato claims that, 'it is rather a rarity' for Nepali women to feel that others care about 'what they feel, think, or experience, even while they get constantly expected to care about others.' She adds that it is 'even more of a rarity that a woman is asked explicitly by somebody beyond her immediate personal circle, or even within that, to express herself, to talk of what she experiences. Consequently, many women become visibly uncomfortable when they are asked to do that.' (Sato 2023:1)

Thus the attitudes produced by historically sedimented high-caste, Hindu gender norms led to a hesitancy about expressing opinions or sharing stories in the context of a research interview. Indeed, rather like Sato's and Maslak's informants, a young runner from Bhojpur whom I asked for an interview insisted that she was not knowledgeable enough to be interviewed. The young athlete, Merina Rai, responded to my request by saying, 'Oh, I really don't know about trail running!'

'You know a lot,' I replied. But she couldn't be persuaded, insisting,

'Sunmaya Budha didi[22], Bimala Tamang, Sarita Rai, Pema Sherpa,'—she listed high-performing female trail runners—'you should ask them. Truly, I don't know.'

'But you're a really good athlete,' I said.

'Maybe,' she replied, 'as for being good… I've just recently started trying to become good.'

By contrast with this evasiveness, shyness or lack of confidence, only a minority of male informants whom I asked for an interview said that they lacked knowledge or experience. Moreover, of those men who were initially reluctant, I was in most cases able to reassure them that I was only seeking their subjective viewpoint rather than expert knowledge, a clarification which secured their consent to an interview. The relative paucity of interviews with women runners, therefore, must be regarded as a limitation of my research. I have decided, however—

[22] *Didi* means older sister. It is generally used in everyday conversation to refer respectfully to a woman older than the speaker, not specifically the speaker's biological sister.

rather than excluding the issue from consideration—to reflect on this hesitancy as an ethnographic fact. I follow Sato's suggestion that women's silence can reveal something about their lived realities. 'Remaining in silence at social peripheries,' she argues, 'is apparently a condition [in] which many women continue to live their lives across contemporary Nepali society.' (2023:1–2)

While most of the women I sought for interview seemed unwilling to take part, they rarely gave an explicit refusal. Rather, informants would tell me they were busy, ill, or make vague suggestions of a future time for an interview which never became concrete. The fact that direct refusal was rarely expressed itself reflects the normative status of women in Nepali society which regards them as having less agency than men. Indeed, Sato reports that a clear 'no' to interviews was exceedingly rare, with women's silence in most cases taking the form of evasion. Even when potential interviewees refused, they often—like Merina—expressed this in terms of their own lack of knowledge rather than any skepticism about my intentions as a researcher. Both this indirect manner of refusing and the seeming lack of self-confidence may conceal a deeper reality, however, in which women's silence is a more deliberate and strategic choice. This strategy is articulated in Adrienne Rich's poem 'Cartographies of Silence'. 'Silence can be a plan/ rigorously executed,' she writes,

> 'the blueprint to a life
>
> It is a presence
> it has a history a form
>
> Do not confuse it
> with any kind of absence'. (1978:23)

Prompted by this notion of silence as a 'plan/ rigorously executed', I am moved to consider what strategic value women trail runners might find in remaining silent rather than readily sharing their experiences. Underneath their seeming evasiveness, women informants might have been acting from a desire to protect their story from manipulation or misuse. Sunmaya Budha, for example, as of this writing Nepal's most successful female trail runner, was hesitant about sharing the details of her personal history, having been misquoted in English language news media. The manager of her Hong Kong-based running team (North Face Adventure Team), Ryan Blair, told me that media reports had overemphasised the influence of Mira Rai and the Exchange and Empower Program

in Sunmaya's journey relative to her other mentors and benefactors. Indeed, given that Mira Rai was already a relatively well known figure within the international trail running scene, journalists were too ready to portray Sunmaya as a 'protege' or 'successor' to the trailblazer and champion Mira Rai. After this initial misconstrual of her personal history, Sunmaya was more careful with how her life history was presented, using a press release in English prepared together with her team manager which presented the matter more clearly. Clues like this suggest to me that avoidance of interviews may be more active than mere shyness. Perhaps, like Sunmaya, female runners were being careful not to deploy information about their lives if they were concerned it could be used against their interests.

Silence, then, is not always a simple. It may reflect gender norms which relegate women's voices to the periphery and it may also be a strategic decision made in the protection of their interests. I can only speculate about what might have lain behind dedicated women runners' 'silence'. I raise this issue, nonetheless, to indicate that such silence need not reinscribe stereotypes of the shyness or passivity of Nepali women. Silence can be chosen, active. Moreover, beyond this silence there may subsist discourses and practices which are creative and resistant, taking place in the 'backstage' (Goffman 1956:69) interactions between women which I was rarely trusted enough to be privy to. For Goffman, this backstage is 'a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course.' (1956:69) Future, (perhaps female) researchers of Nepali trail running might do a better job at gaining acceptance in such backstage 'women's worlds'.[23] (Abu-Lughod 2008)

Ethics

Finally it is necessary to briefly outline the ethics process which was part of my research practice. Throughout this thesis I use pseudonyms for informants and where necessary change any details by which people could be identified. At times, research participants are mentioned by their real names because they are well-known public figures in Nepal (and to a lesser extent internationally). However, I only use these individuals' names—such as professional trail runner Mira Rai or veteran Olympic marathoner Hari Rokaya Magar—when I am discussing what they have said or

done in an unambiguously public capacity or when I had their consent to use their names since they were discussing matters relating to their public roles. Where I am describing their actions or discussing their interview responses which were of relevance to my general investigation but not understood to be in relation to their public roles, I refer to such figures with pseudonyms.

When I use media which has been posted online, these are either publicly available or permission has been sought to use them, and the names of their creators and those included in these media have also been changed to preserve anonymity. Photographs are not included in this thesis for the same reason. Recordings of interviews and field notes which contain data by which individuals can be identified were stored in a password-protected file. This data was shared with no one and has been destroyed upon the completion of this PhD project.

Conclusion

The combination of participant-observation with interview methods allowed me to contextualise the embodied experiences of mountain trail running within runners' verbal reflections on the significance of these acts in their lives—the meanings, purposes and critiques they brought to bear on the practice. While participant-observation by itself could have led to an over-identification of my own running experiences with those of my informants, the use of interviews counteracted this tendency by grounding those findings within an understanding of trail runners' own perspectives. My engagement with 'the imponderabilia of actual life' (Malinowski 1922:24) made possible through participant-observation fieldwork, moreover, worked against the temptation to take dedicated runners' statements about their running at face value, and to see these reflections in the context of what people actually did. Engaging in trail runners' online worlds, furthermore, allowed me to grasp the actuality of this social scene, much of which was organised digitally, and to understand important aspects of the self-construction of the dedicated Nepali runners, who used online platforms to present personal narratives of achievement. Having thus set out the methods I used to gather my data, it is necessary to provide some preliminary background concerning the theoretical tools I used to interpret that material. The next chapter, therefore, 'Cruel optimism', explains the main theoretical concepts I used in interpreting my research data.

Chapter 4: Cruel optimism

Introduction

This chapter establishes the theoretical framework I will draw on in the ethnographic chapters which follow. Firstly, I explain what Berlant's concept of cruel optimism means. Cruel optimism is a concept which is prone to being misconstrued because the words 'cruel' and 'optimism' have meanings which pre-exist Berlant's specific use of them and can become confused with what the concept is supposed to do. It is necessary, therefore, to clearly set out these theoretical tools before I use them in the empirical chapters (5–9). Secondly, I explain Berlant's conception of the historical moment in which cruel optimisms proliferate, delving into the concepts of 'impasse' and 'crisis ordinariness'. Thirdly, I explore how cruel optimism can be used as a concept for understanding social settings beyond the Global North. Indeed, the origins of cruel optimism in the United States do not preclude its application elsewhere. In this chapter I therefore argue, briefly, for cruel optimism's[24] usefulness in other contexts, pointing to the small but growing scholarship which encounters this structure of feeling in settings beyond Euro-America. Finally, I begin to explore how the concept might resonate in contemporary Nepal. This prepares for my application of the concept to the specific study of dedicated Nepali trail runners in the proceeding empirical chapters.

Cruel optimism

In the first sentence of *Cruel Optimism,* Berlant helpfully provides the definition, 'A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.' (2011:1) Cruel optimism is the longing for a future which is unlikely to be realised. This longing has a positive side, in that it anchors people in life who might otherwise give up, and a negative side, insofar as it keeps people locked into attachments which cannot fulfil all that they promise. A couple of the examples Berlant uses will help to clarify the concept's meaning, though it must be noted that the examples Berlant employs in the book are mostly artworks. Berlant uses such

[24] I sometimes use the term 'cruel optimism' to refer to the analytical concept and at other times to refer to the phenomenon it describes. The meaning should be clear from the context.

artworks as what Kelleter calls ‘empathetic windows’ (2022:169) on contemporary structures of affect. Later in this chapter, however, I will point to ethnographic studies which show that the concept has just as much vitality when applied to everyday life.

A key example Berlant considers is Laurent Cantet’s film Time Out (2001). In the film, middle-aged husband and family man Vincent is made redundant from his well-paid job at a consulting firm but feels unable to tell his wife and children, aimlessly driving around during the day to sustain the fantasy of security for them. He does so to avoid, in Berlant’s words, ‘losing face in front of others who would then deny him his defenses, his enabling disavowals—his capacity to maintain cruel optimism.’ (2011:215) Making money in the black economy, Vincent is able to ‘simulate sovereignty’ (216), living out a shadow version of his formerly stable, professional existence.

The example seems exceptional, to some perhaps absurd. However, not only is *Time Out* inspired by real-life cases of similar deceptions, but aspects of Vincent’s condition are shared more widely: many precarious subjects are playing a similar ruse (to themselves, to others) of pursuing the good life despite the fraying of infrastructures for realising it.

Berlant’s tracking of cruel optimism continues with their reading of the Dardenne brothers’ 1999 *Rosetta.* In this film, an unemployed young woman living in a caravan park with her alcoholic mother seeks a way out of destitution through a semi-friendship with Riquet, a worker at a waffle stand. After she gets a job at the waffle stand through her connection to Riquet, her attachment to the hope of stability and normalcy is dramatised in her bedtime incantation, ‘[y]our name is Rosetta. My name is Rosetta. You found a job. I found a job. You have a friend. I’ve got a friend. You have a normal life. I have a normal life. You won’t fall through the cracks. I won’t fall through the cracks. Good night. Good night.’

While her new job is unofficial, having work of any kind nonetheless allows her a moment of optimism in which, as Berlant puts it, ‘the goodness of the good life now *feels* possible to her and thus *feels* already like a confirming reality, calming her even before she lives it as an ongoing practice.’ (2011:163) Berlant claims that such ‘aspirational normativity’ (164) persists among the

lowest social class strata in the contemporary world despite the fact that work is poorly paid and boring: work is ‘nearly utopian’ (164) for Rosetta, retains the power to conjure up a fantasy of the normal life. The power of the good-life dream is such that Rosetta refuses state welfare payments, clinging to the promise of making money in the apparently normal, conventional way.

Thus from two very different class strata come stories of cruel attachments to normality and stability, good-life dreams without an economic base. In both cases the situation is defined by ambivalence, as subjects are drawn to hopeful attachments which harm them while providing affirmation in the present. This ambivalence is a crucial aspect of Berlant’s concept. Cruel though it is, the optimistic attachments Berlant points to are also means by which people keep on living in a way that is oriented to more than just survival. Within the precarious present, a historical situation Berlant calls an ‘impasse’ (2011:191), cruel optimism is reassuring because it points to the possibility of flourishing. Insofar as the objects of people’s attachments are chimerical, however, this optimism is cruel. While cruel optimism provides a stable orientation for life, it fails to deliver on its ultimate promise. The fact that cruel optimism is an ‘obstacle’ (2011:1) to real flourishing, however, does not necessarily make it an object of ‘suspicion’, in the sense meant by Ricœur (1965). Berlant doesn’t charge subjects with false consciousness, or portray them as hapless dupes conned by what Adorno and Horkheimer called the ‘culture industry’ (1944:94), a pop culture which deceives the masses and makes them passive (not explicitly, at least). Rather, Berlant’s concept describes an ambivalent condition, one not easy to subject to moral or political evaluation. For this reason Berlant asks ‘whether cruel optimism is better than none at all.’ (2011:16)

The ambivalence of cruel optimism can produce misunderstandings; it can make the idea appear, at times, self-contradictory. Its dialectical character, however, is precisely what makes it helpful in understanding real people. What makes it more than a cartoon portrayal of everyday life is its inherent tension, since the phenomena it helps us to understand are themselves internally contradictory. As will become clear in the empirical chapters which follow, among the dedicated Nepali trail runners there was a tension between desiring elite status as a way of staying attached to life and the way this dream impeded people’s flourishing—both because it was unlikely to be realised and could thus draw subjects towards disappointment and because, relatedly, it entailed

devotion and hard work driven partly by a fragile promise. The relation of attachment to a desired future condition in which the runner could 'make a name' for herself made life bearable in the present while it projected flourishing over the horizon, in the future, such that there was a repeated return to the 'scene of fantasy' in the hope that, as Berlant puts it, '*this* time, nearness to *this* thing [would] help [them] or a world to become different in just the right way.' (2011:2)[25]

Related to this ambivalence is Berlant's reticence to deliver moral condemnations about cruel optimism. They point to the damaging aspects of the relation while at the same time recognising how subjects are confirmed by it in the present. The attitude is not unlike the critical posture that a materialist might take towards religion if (s)he wants to be sympathetic and sociologically smart. Such an analyst would argue that, while a religious attachment might seem irrational in its non-correspondence with a naturalistic account of the world, faith is pragmatically rational insofar as it makes sense of things and gives believers a structure for living in ways science can't. Like cruel optimism, its 'promise of the promise' (Berlant 2011:41) keeps people hanging on. There is an element of this sympathetic attitude in Marx's interpretation of religion as 'the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering…the soul of soulless conditions' ([1843] 1970). In Marxism we find an elegant synthesis, the sloughing off of superstitions by the workers who then discover a better object of desire, the communist future. When it comes to cruel optimism, however, Berlant avoids this resolution and, in my use of the concept, so do I. Whether or not structural change might create the conditions for the people who I researched to experience a non-cruel form of optimism—one which would allow for genuine flourishing—is a question for a different venue.

Before looking at the application of Berlant's concept in ethnographic research, it is worth considering why they use artworks as key evidence of contemporary affect structures, since it indicates something about the ambivalence both of the concept of cruel optimism and Berlant's theoretical stance. Berlant's preference for reading affect worlds through art reflects a 'literary humanism' (Kelleter 2022:169) which regards novels, films, music and other expressive media as

[25] I am writing in ideal-typical terms here to prepare for my use of the concept in the subsequent chapters: these remarks should not be taken as definitive statements about the dedicated Nepali trail runners but as a way of showing how cruel optimism works.

windows onto contemporary forms of subjectivity. As richly realised portrayals of particular streams of affect, novels, films and other artworks are conducive to readings which do not dispel subjectivity as false or duped but which empathetically engage with it. The fact that ethnography can do the same—indeed, I hope to do so in this dissertation[26]—does not take away from the usefulness of artworks that can be just as valuable grists to a theorist's mill as ethnographic material. In some cases, they are better.

Even so, Berlant tends to follow her analyses of artworks with a sociological attention to their conditions of production, history of reception and institutional bases. This movement back and forth between an empathetic attention to the lifeworld of a piece of art and a sociology of its production and reception is a writing strategy which reflects both cruel optimism's and Berlant's own ambivalence. On the one hand, there is sympathetic understanding of popular attachments and on the other, critical contextualising. It is a two-sidedness that is reflected in my own study of dedicated Nepali trail runners, as I try both to be on the side of immanent pleasures and to interrogate their ideological structuring.

Situating cruel optimism

So, is cruel optimism just a North American or European phenomenon? The examples Berlant uses are drawn from 'the contemporary world' (2011:18) in which 'neoliberal restructuring' (16) has been taking place since, broadly speaking, the 1980s and with a renewed vigour since the 2008 financial crash. Rather than cover the entire neoliberal period, though, Berlant takes her examples from 1990 onward. Why they make this demarcation is not very clear, but it seems to be non-arbitrary, and based on the notion that 'the historical sensorium…has developed belatedly' (2011:3). In other words, there has been a lag between the beginning of neoliberal restructuring, however cataclysmic, and the emergence of the structure of feeling known as cruel optimism. For a while, they suggest, the 'fantasmatic part of the optimism about structural transformation' (3) lingered on — the sense that the state could steadily expand access to economic opportunities, legal rights and social empowerment, although unevenly, persisted. That

[26] Moreover, Berlant has produced their own kind of ethnography in collaboration with anthropologist Kathleen Stewart: *The Hundreds* (2019).

is to say, social democratic hope remained in currency for a while even as the infrastructure for it was stagnant or crumbling. Berlant's Marxist influences are evident here, with structures of feeling understood to emerge in response to political economic shifts. As for those shifts, neoliberalism has been global, but its effects in the Global South have been markedly different from those in Berlant's 'contemporary world', which seems to mean Europe and North America. This raises the question of whether Berlant's theory applies in the Global South or has to be adapted in some way. To deal with this, I will first look at how Berlant understands the contemporary period. While they use the term neoliberalism, their approach is to detect structures of feeling — that is, how the present is felt. Their project of 'conceiving of a contemporary moment from within that moment' (2011:4) entails developing concepts that refer to the affective experience of the present rather than referencing a set of objective social conditions or a discursive framework. '[T]he present is perceived, first, affectively', Berlant argues (4). Cruel Optimism wagers that the 'aesthetically mediated affective responses' (3) they analyse, such as the films discussed above, 'exemplify a shared *historical* sense' (3): the examples reflect, in other words, their historical moment, one which Berlant defines as impasse.

The term impasse describes a structure of feeling encountered under growing precariousness as a result of neoliberal restructuring in North America and Europe. The impasse is an affect world characterised by a sense of stuckness as once (relatively) reliable strategies of upward social mobility have become unviable and the infrastructures supporting stable livelihoods have withered (2011:191–222). Berlant uses the image of 'dogpaddling' (199) to describe the anxieties of people living in this impasse. But why does Berlant use 'impasse' when there are plenty of available terms for describing spreading conditions of precarity such as neoliberalism, post-Fordism or 'flexible citizenship' (Ong 1999)? Not only does impasse capture the *affective* features of the present moment rather than only its objective conditions or dominant discursive structures, the term also describes a particular orientation to temporality. Where post-Fordism is an objectivising descriptor of political economic reality referring to a mode of regulation that comes *after* Fordism, and neoliberalism similarly describes a revanchist return to laissez-faire economics post-the welfare statist, social democratic period, the concept impasse indicates an affective orientation to time defined by the hope that what feels like an aimless stuckness, a 'thick present' (Berlant 2011:68), is merely a temporary delay. The term thus describes a structure of feeling which points

hopefully towards a future while anxiously treading water in the thick present. Rather than describing a particular form of historical capitalism, the concept of impasse points to subjects' orientations to time, suffused with expectation.

Another way to conceive of the present might be in terms of crisis. Berlant's concept of impasse as an 'ongoingness' (2011:48), however, provides an alternative to interpretations of the historical present in terms of states of exception. Berlant encourages us to think of the present not in terms of crisis but in terms of ongoing, simmering, unsolved social contradictions. We are called to consider 'ritualistic abuses, which are so normalized and part of the social fabric, [that] they are hidden in plain sight' (Berlant 2018). Walter Benjamin's terse judgement in 1940 that '[t]he tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "emergency situation" in which we live is the rule' and his programmatic call to 'arrive at a concept of history which corresponds to this' (1940) point in the same direction. In a 2018 interview titled 'Without Exception: On the Ordinariness of Violence', Berlant cites Benjamin while critiquing 'exceptionality as a genre'. 'People are so powerfully attached to an image of the ordinary world as offering potentially a smooth life that they have to classify radical disturbance as exception', Berlant explains. They continue, 'critical theorists tend to cite Walter Benjamin's "state of exception" as though this is what he meant. There are lots of problems with this model of interruption, but to me the strongest problem is that to exceptionalize trauma presumes too much about the scale of the event, as though the first moment of intensity reveals an ontology of the event's significance.'

Thus, Berlant calls attention to how crisis becomes embedded in the everyday, beyond the initial shock of a cataclysmic event. In Cruel Optimism Berlant expresses this idea with the concept of 'crisis ordinariness' (2011:10). They explicate this concept through a reading of *South of Ten,* Liza Johnson's 2006 film which portrays a present in which '[c]risis turns out not to be fast, but stretched and slow' (Berlant 2011:258). The film depicts everyday life in Mississippi in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Without speech and mostly silent save for the muted, ambient sounds of everyday life, *South of Ten* portrays quotidian activities of Mississippians tending to damaged objects, scavenging for goods, and trying to relax and to socialise amid a 'crisis-shaped ordinary' (2011:255). The film aestheticises the condition of crisis ordinariness which Berlant describes. Through Berlant's concept of impasse, crisis is seen as embedded in the everyday,

rather than as a cataclysm or shock. Berlant discusses the concept of crisis ordinariness in the following terms:

> 'Often when scholars and activists apprehend the phenomenon of slow death…they misrepresent the duration and scale of the situation by calling a *crisis* that which is a fact of life and has been a defining fact of life for a given population that lives that crisis in ordinary time. Of course this deployment of crisis is often explicitly and intentionally a redefinitional tactic, an inflationary, distorting, or misdirecting gesture that aspires to make an environmental phenomenon appear suddenly as an event, because as a structural or predictable condition it has not engendered the kinds of historic action we associate with the heroic agency a crisis implicitly calls for.' (2011:101)

While Berlant acknowledges shocks—there are, of course, natural disasters, sudden hyperinflations, pandemics and other disturbances—they argue that 'to stay clear-eyed' (2018) we have to acknowledge the long simmering sources of these jolts in the life of capitalism, the deeper-going forces which are their real causes. The style of thought Berlant calls 'exceptionality' (2018) obscures these deeper forces. Instead, Berlant argues, we should pay attention to the ways a cataclysmic event spreads through the lifeworld in the time after the initial convulsion—how people subsequently muddle through, trying to make sense of things, 'scavenging' (2011:262).

Impasse, like cruel optimism, indicates an ambivalent situation of being stuck but hoping, optimistically, that this stuckness will have been only a lag—perhaps that one will have been hustling, in the trenches or 'on the come up' (Thomas 2019, 2022). The impasse is static and produces feelings of anxiety—in my runner interlocutors, it produced a hardworking restlessness combined with a constantly scanning hyperawareness of opportunities to improve their chances. Thus cruel optimism is a way of adapting to an historical condition of impasse.

Cruel optimism abroad

So is this historical sense of 'impasse', and the related 'crisis ordinariness', unique to the Global North? Have the impacts of neoliberalism in the Global South created situations of impasse? If so, forms of cruel optimism might be found there too. It is worth looking at existing research on this question to approach an answer. Ben Anderson's collection (2023) of ethnographic engagements

with cruel optimism demonstrates how the concept is being tested out in novel situations. While Berlant's 2011 book is much cited, Anderson's 2023 collection, 'Encountering Berlant part two: Cruel and other optimisms', is a direct and deliberate engagement by scholars with the concept which presents ethnographic material speaking to its nuances and ambivalence.[27]

In that collection, Mónica Salas Landa describes the attachment of retired workers to the oil industry in Poza Rica in Northern Mexico despite the bodily harms incurred through their work and the damage wrought by oil on the surrounding environment. She understands this relation in terms of Berlant's cruel optimism, arguing that the concept aptly characterises how, 'despite the industry's moral and technical failure, [some] workers… cling to it so tenaciously.' (2023:10) Those most hurt by the industry still saw in it a way to realise values of camaraderie, justice, solidarity and duty—an 'injurious attachment' (10). Salas Landa indicates that the situation of impasse producing the conditions for this form of cruel optimism was created by neoliberal transformations beginning in the 1990s, including the replacement of the existing bosses by technocratic managers lacking any social ties with the employees. Despite changes in the industry, however, the retired workers continued to cathect oil with their hopes for flourishing. Salas Landa thus describes a situation in which the fraying of an infrastructure for realising good-life aspirations does not lead to the abandonment of optimism. '[P]eople never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them', Freud wrote (1917:244), which Berlant was fond of citing. In her examination of cruel optimism among retired

---

[27] As a direct engagement with Berlant's ideas, Anderson's collection lacks some of the flaws in much of the other social science scholarship citing Berlant. As a turn of phrase, 'cruel optimism' is intriguing and memorable, something which accounts to some degree for how widely cited the book has become. Unfortunately, Berlant's text is often cited in a somewhat superficial way, obliquely or very briefly. By contrast, the reflections in Anderson's collection are a direct response to Berlant's ideas which therefore have to consider them in some depth, making their ethnographic data speak to the concept's nuances and ambivalence, and showing a reading of Berlant's work beyond a cursory look. Scholarship which briefly makes reference to Berlant but does not evidence a deep engagement with their ideas is less helpful in explicating the value of cruel optimism as a concept. For example, Lord and Rest's make reference to Berlant in their study of Nepali hydropolitics and suggest that, '[d]epending on your perspective, [politicians'] constant renewal of hydropower dreams deferred could be interpreted as hopeful resilience or as a kind of 'cruel optimism'.' (Lord and Rest 2021:102) *Contra* Lord and Rest's implication here, Berlant's concept of cruel optimism does not exclude 'hopeful resilience': rather, cruel optimism is *a form of* hopeful resilience which, nonetheless, also has a negative side. Lord and Rest's reference, however, implies that cruel optimism is a wholly damaging relation. I have drawn from Anderson's collection, then, rather than surveying the literature more broadly, because of the more faithful interpretation of the concept we find in Anderson's selection of essays by contrast with much of the other scholarship in social science which cites *Cruel Optimism*.

oil workers, Salas Landa shows how the concept can travel. Where there is impasse, cruel optimisms proliferate.

From the same collection, another example—a situation of impasse and a form of cruel optimism—will further demonstrate the usefulness of the concept beyond the Global North. Harry Pettit's research on Egyptian twenty-something men with attachments to 'self-help quotes, Islamic proverbs, Hollywood movies, training courses, [and] employment fairs' (2023:11) explores a shifting, ambivalent relation to fantasies of the good life. These objects of attachment reinforce the notion that success can be achieved through individual hard work. While the men critiqued the precariousness all around them in conditions of nepotism and state neglect, they nonetheless returned to their dreams again and again in the hope that this time, it would be different, as Berlant might have put it. In just a thousand words Pettit's account of cruel optimism among educated but underemployed men in Egypt shows the applicability of the concept to a situation of impasse different from but comparable to that found in Euro-American countries while also highlighting how its ambivalence captures real human responses to such situations. His interlocutors not only 'constantly flip in and out' (Pettit 2023:11) of cruel optimism, sometimes attached like true believers and at other times acutely aware of the barriers to the futures they desired, but also clung to their fantasies while simultaneously denying there was any real hope. Pettit explains, '[m]aintaining the attachment for some became a conscious activity of pretence designed to shift their mood rather than a product of belief. It was a case of 'I know it's useless, but I do it anyway because it feels good'.' (11)

Whether in Belgium, Mexico or Egypt, it is this ambivalence, sometimes serial and sometimes synchronous, which Berlant's concept captures. In the same journal issue, Anurag Mazumdar's short piece describes the 'entrepreneurial optimism' (2023:8) of ride-hailing taxi drivers in Delhi which persists alongside their angry denunciations of the platforms for which they worked. Their 'nuanced' (13) acceptance of a life of economic risk in the insecure economy was not a wholehearted acceptance of the entrepreneurial individualism voiced by Modi's neoliberal state, but an adaptation to a situation of impasse, a 'thick present' (Berlant 2011:68) or shapeless 'ongoingness' (2011:91) with no guarantees of security. Having gone back on its promises of hedging against their risk-taking activity, the state had left the taxi drivers 'high and

dry' (Mazumdar 2023:13). Despite their anger, however, Mazumdar's research interlocutors continued to pin their hopes on gig economy work, finding in such work the promise of 'freedom' as against 'getting tied down' (13) in a job. Stuck in a situation of impasse, the platform workers dreamed of freedom while recognising the structural barriers to achieving the lives they desired.

Cruel optimism in Nepal

Thus, cruel optimism is an adaptation, an adjustment to the impasse: Mazumdar describes the taxi drivers' entrepreneurial hopes as 'obligatory affective mechanisms that helped them navigate a…brutal informal economy' (2023:13). But does an historical impasse like the one described by Berlant characterise Nepal during the period of my fieldwork? Can life for ordinary Nepalis be understood as a condition in which, as Benjamin would put it, 'the "emergency situation"…is the rule' (1940)? If so, are Nepalis adjusting to this impasse-shaped present with attachments like those described in the preceding examples—attachments which can be understood as forms of cruel optimism?

There have been few direct engagements in the social science of Nepal with Berlant's concepts of cruel optimism, impasse and crisis ordinariness. A few notable examples, however, point to the usefulness of these concepts when applied to the Nepali present. A 2020 intervention in *Antipode* by Ruszczyk and Bhandari, for example, seizes on Berlant's ideas to make sense of shifting popular orientations to the future during the post-earthquake period of political federalisation. Despite popular investments of hope in federalism, the promises of the 2015 constitution, heralded as the institutionalisation of greater caste, ethnic and gendered equality, seemed to have been unfulfilled. The constitution's provisions for greater inclusivity and representation of the country's marginalised groups and women came along with ambitions for more responsive and democratic governance, but have not been supported by necessary changes at the level of practice. Ruszczyk and Bhandari cite Sarah Byrne's (2018) characterisation of this condition, in her study of the everyday practices of local civil servants in Nepal, as a 'permanent transition'. This oxymoronic expression points to a state of affairs in Nepal which can also be aptly described in terms of Berlant's concepts of 'crisis ordinariness' and 'impasse'. As Byrne puts it, Nepal has faced 'a permanent threshold situation recurrently oscillating between a dissolution of order and

political utopia' (2018:972). One of Byrne's informants describes this transition in terms which resonate with Berlant's 'cruel optimism': 'We have faced transition several times. Transition is a major disease. People have expectations.' (972)

Byrne refers to the post-war 'so-called "transition"', indicating its potentially fantasmatic character. She also uses another oxymoronic phrase, 'ordinary extraordinary' (971), to define this moment, as the shocks of events produced by the civil war, the post-war people's movement (j*ana andolan* II), the 2015 earthquake and then the rapid, unanimous passing of a new constitution have given way to a present in which change seems to be frustratingly slow if taking place at all. Along similar lines to Byrne's account, Ruszczyk and Bhandari refer to a 'sense of suspension' (Pettit 2019:1) in Nepali life, borrowing Harry Pettit's phrase to describe contemporary Egypt. This state of suspension, as in Egypt, is defined by a mixture of political upheaval and economic precarity for the majority. The cruelty of the optimisms Ruszczyk and Bhandari delineate, moreover, inheres not only in the chimerical nature of their objects but also in the harms they produce in the present. The authors argue that popular hopes for a better life consequent on the transformations promised by the new federal constitution led to a damaging dependence on political leaders and a concomitant inaction by civil society. While Ruszczyk and Bhandari note that, quoting Solnit, such hopes were a 'commitment to the future' which '[made] the present inhabitable' (2004:5), the belief that the new federal system would entail strong governmental efforts to aid earthquake recovery turned out to be false. They write that, 'citizens were expecting the state to step up and provide a safety net for its citizens (as it should) in a time of crisis. The historically embedded societal response of mutual support was withheld because government was expected to lead.' (2020)

In this way, the optimistic attachment to a better future through good governance meant the weakening of historically embedded patterns of community support. Thus, optimism can be cruel, since not only might its objects fail to materialise, but, Ruszczyk and Bhandari suggest, attachment to an idealised future can foreclose other possibilities for social action in the present. Hence Byrne's informant's disease of expectations. (2018:972)

Cruel optimism's 'double-bind' (Berlant 2011:230) in Nepal is reflected, more broadly, in the generalised sense of 'cautious optimism' (2019:III) which a 2018 research report by the Asia Foundation reported among a majority of Nepalis. Rather than resignation and dejection in response to the contemporary situation or a wholeheartedly critical stance in relation to the direction of Nepali society, a majority of Nepalis remained optimistic that change was on the way, according to the survey. It was believed that economic conditions would improve, governance would become more responsive, responsible and democratic, and society would become more inclusive, even if only 'bistarai, bistarai' ('slowly, slowly') as the popular expression puts it. As the foreword to a 2019 companion analysis to the Asia Foundation's survey expresses it, '[t]he transition to federalism thus far has our eyes watchful with great optimism; alongside, we sense an increasing ambiguity as well.' (Thapa 2019:vii) At that time, the promise of the so-called *Naya Nepal* (New Nepal), the notion of a country moving away from caste hierarchy, patriarchal norms, and ethnic and regional inequality, was still widely believed in, despite ongoing structural problems. Ruszczyk and Bhandari describe this persistent optimism in the following terms:

> 'In Nepal…people are firmly relying on the new federal system of decentralization and the new locally elected government officials to create an environment where progressive change will occur in their daily lives. People are expectant yet patient with their new forms of local government. Residents and government officials have been waiting for two decades for locally elected leaders. Everyone knows change is in the making. Residents plan to hold locally elected officials to account. They are aware change will not happen immediately; the common refrain in the spring of 2018 was "slowly, slowly", change will occur. They are optimistic.' (2020)

For Ruszczyk and Bhandari, this optimism was cruel because it produced a certain popular inaction, a passivity in the face of ongoing structural inequalities. Indeed, widespread optimism and belief in the promises of *Naya Nepal* coexisted with what David Gellner soberly describes as 'the persistence of hierarchy' (2024). In this situation, 'hierarchy as a value persists even when equality is written into numerous constitutional provisions and laws.' (2024:1)

In such a context, optimism can be problematic, Ruszczyk and Bhandari argue. For this reason, they call for an abandoning of a passive optimism and a return to hope characterised by 'activism and mutual support.' (2020) As it happened, the Asia Foundation's follow-up *Survey of the Nepali People* in 2022 discovered a substantial decline in optimism, concluding that the number of Nepalis who felt positive about the country's direction was at its lowest point compared to

previous surveys (2023:v) In this context of declining confidence in the nation's future, forms of optimism focused around personal transformation and, more particularly, leaving Nepal for a better life elsewhere, may well gain a greater emphasis. Indeed, these forms of optimism were more highly pertinent to my own research than those kinds of optimism focused on national politics.

Thus, cruel optimism as a structure of feeling is observable at different scales. With regards to the running subjects of the ethnography to follow, the varied forms of optimism I encountered were rarely directly political. Nonetheless, optimisms found at the level of everyday affects, often articulated in highly personalised terms referring to improvement in the conditions of the self and the family network, were strongly resonant with the more massified forms discussed by Ruszczyk and Bhandari and others. They were, moreover, often produced by the same social conditions and thus have to be understood in the same context. The interpretive tool of cruel optimism can be usefully applied to both kinds of attachment, the so-called 'personal' and the political. In fact, the concept of cruel optimism encourages the unsettling of such binaries.

Indeed, Berlant's cruel optimism describes a relation to objects without specifying the nature of those objects. The objects of attachment can be at the level of state politics, but they can also be formed in many other ways, relating to subcultures, economic strategies, art, consumption or personal relationships. A relation of cruel optimism 'might involve food,' Berlant writes, 'or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being.' (2011:1) The catholicity of the concept enables a theoretical tracking across spheres of social life which might at first seem thoroughly distinct from one another. Thus cruel optimism in Nepal can be found both in regards to public politics, as Ruszczyk and Bhandari demonstrate, and at more intimate scales.

Nepal studies work dealing with optimisms at the level of individual career trajectories which directly cite Berlant's concept of cruel optimism are few. A notable example, however, is provided by Chisholm and Ketola's examination of the subjectivities of Nepali workers in the global private security industry. Chisholm and Ketola (2020) use the concept of 'cruel optimism' to explain why

‘communities located at the periphery of the global security market continue to participate, even when they gain the least economically and politically.’ (2020:1) Additionally, they use Berlant’s concept of ‘crisis ordinary’ (2020:274–6) arguing that such subjects find themselves in a condition of precarity in which social reproduction is continually threatened and unstable. This condition of ‘extended crisis’ (Berlant 2011:7) is the context for Gurkha communities’ affective attachment to militarism.

Chisholm’s 2023 publication *The Gendered and Colonial Lives of Gurkhas in Private Security* argues that the investment of hope in security industry careers is a form of cruel optimism in which, for her research interlocutors, the attachment to militarism has become ‘toxic’ (2023:37) and its fantasised end-point ‘impossible.’ (37) The next chapter will deal at length with the question of whether a similar relation of cruel optimism pertains among the dedicated Nepali trail runners I met who were also aspiring Gurkhas or *lahure*. Chisholm and Ketola’s work thus forms a bridge which allows me to begin to consider whether dedicated Nepali trail runners were, like many in the contemporary world, adjusting to a precarious present through a type of cruel optimism.

Chisholm and Ketola’s work relates to my own in another respect—namely, their work points to a form of cruel optimism which consists in dreaming not of a better Nepal but of a *better life elsewhere,* a theme which will be revealed strongly in the ethnographic chapters on Nepali trail runners which follow. Nonetheless, as will also be seen, desires for a better Nepal through governmental and popular action was also a significant form of optimism engaged in the social world of Nepali trail running.

Conclusion

Having set out in more detail what Berlant means by cruel optimism and having pointed to the applicability of Berlant’s concepts beyond the Global North, I now pursue my interpretation of the motivations of dedicated Nepali trail runners with this in mind, testing the concept against my empirical material. While the growing literature on cruel optimism outside Euro-America indicates

the usefulness of the concept in a variety of different settings, we should guard against the temptation to assume cruel optimism's applicability to *all* those parts of the world affected by neoliberal transformations. We should avoid simply 'reading off' cruel optimism from the historical situation and assuming it applies where it might not. That is why, in the empirical chapters that follow, I am careful to test the concept against the cases I look at, person to person and moment to moment. Like any concept that is trying to grasp the social, however, it matches the actual circumstances more closely at some times and less so at others. In the latter instances, these moments of 'mess' (Law 2004) do not indicate flaws in the concept, but rather the complexity of social life, never fully captured in the nets of social science. The chapter which follows takes the lead from Chisholm and Ketola's just mentioned reading of Nepali men seeking careers in private and military security companies to think about the experiences of young Nepali men who were both aspiring *lahure* and trail runners, a first application of the theoretical tool of cruel optimism to the interpretation of Nepali trail running.

Chapter 5: '#gurkhaonthetrail': masculinity, militarism and mountain running in Nepal

Narrator: Some eccentricities have always been acknowledged, such as a Gurkha's problem about running A via B to C in straight lines.

…

Interviewee: They can operate quite easily on up and down side, but it's very difficult for them to do any sort of running or any sort of physical fitness on the flat area side.

— *The Gurkhas*, BBC documentary, 1995

The name of a Gurkha is great, but the name of an athlete is greatest of all.

— Pemba Tamang, interview with the author, 2023

'Hello boss,' the race organiser greeted me as I sheepishly entered the office of the Pokhara Professional Physical Fitness Centre. It was a small room of about a hundred square feet with a sofa and a desk, at the end of a dimly lit and dusty hallway in a building located not far from Amar Singh Chowk, an intersection named after the Gorkhali military general Amar Singh Thapa (1751–1816). I might have been surprised by the military-themed posters covering every wall and featuring ample Gurkha iconography, including the famous crossed khukri[28] knives. But I had already passed the window to the office which was blocked out by a huge, blown-up reproduction of an article from the British tabloid paper *The Mirror* describing a Gurkha soldier's tussle with the Taliban:

'A one-man army', the headline declared. 'Gurkha used 400 bullets, 17 grenades, a mine and even a tripod to defeat 30 Taliban on his own'. (See Mirror.co.uk 2011)

[28] The *khukri* is a scythe traditionally used in agriculture by Nepali hill farming communities and also in combat.

And I had already been in Nepal for almost a year, so I had seen the *khukri* knife shop in Thamel[29] with the slogan in the window, 'If a man says he has no fear, he is either lying or he is a Gurkha', I had already been gifted a *khukri* knife by a race organiser from Bhojpur—the item a proud symbol of ethnic and national identity—and I had already met a few young Nepali runners who had tried to be selected as Gurkhas, learning about their experiences in the arduous selection process which involves running five kilometres uphill while carrying twenty-five kilograms of rocks on their backs. And I am British, so I had heard about the Gurkhas, including their struggle for equal compensation and the right to settle in the UK, before I had even left my home country. Therefore I was not too shocked by the military paraphernalia and posters crowding this small office.

I was curious, though, about the seemingly strong relationship between sports and the military. A poster advertising the Pokhara Professional Physical Fitness Centre piqued my interest further, its text announcing 'Registration open! Registration open!' The photographs on it showed young trainees doing pull-ups, carrying *doko* baskets, running, and performing drills in rows with their coach. Underneath the photos, devanagari[30] text explained that the centre offered 'pre-army training for British Army, Singapore Police Force, Indian Army, Nepal Army, Armed Police Force and Nepal Police'. By the side there were framed photo albums of those selected for the Indian and Nepal army.

My eyes wandered around the room. Almost dizzy with fascination at these materials of militarism and athletics, I was interrupted by my actual purpose for being there. 'Okay, boss,' the race organiser said, 'add your details to this sheet.' He handed me the form and after I had completed it he gave me my race T-shirt and asked me to stand up for a photo. The presence of a so-called 'international runner' at his upcoming race seemed to be a point of pride for him or at least interest, though I couldn't promise a knockout performance.

When I did turn up at the race two days later, I realised that the 10k was an all-male event. Among those present, many were from the local Gurkha training academies. These academies take young

---

[29] Thamel is an area of Kathmandu known for its many trekking shops and night life, an area popular with tourists.

[30] Devanagari is the script used to write Nepali and other South Asian languages.

men who aspire to be Gurkhas and give them training in preparation for the battery of tests they will face when they attempt to be selected into the British Army. Such participants are not unusual at running events; indeed, this was not my first experience racing with wannabe Gurkhas. Earlier that year, also in Pokhara, I had taken part in a 12 kilometre uphill-only challenge finishing at the hilltop village of Armala Kot which was similarly well attended by Gurkha hopefuls. That race had started from K.I. Singh Pul, a bridge named after the revolutionary Nepali leader Kunwar Indrajit Singh (1906-1982). About this bridge I had heard rumours of young male suicides after rejection by the British Army, necessitating safety nets. Whatever the degree of truth in these rumours, they spoke to the sense that the long history of recruitment by the British, with its associated mythos of the heroic, fearless Gurkha, is one that 'weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living' (Marx [1852] 1963:15).

For this reason, while my thesis's subject matter is young people's aspirations in *trail running* rather than the military, this chapter explores how the powerful, even nightmarish, history of Gurkha recruitment is an influence on that more recent form of striving.

Introduction

Every year thousands of young men from across Nepal take part in a series of physical, intellectual and medical tests in the attempt to be recruited into the British Army's Brigade of Gurkhas. Annually, roughly 3000 young males aged 17–19 compete for between 250 and 400 positions. They are given three chances to apply. Many of the trail runners who I met during the course of my research had been through the Gurkha recruitment process or were still undergoing training for the Gurkha trials. In this chapter I will present some of these young men's stories and consider how my interlocutors thought about trail running in relation to their Gurkha aspirations, including the parallels they constructed between the two. I will conclude by reflecting on how both trail running and attempts to be recruited into the brigade of Gurkhas are forms of what Berlant (2011) calls 'cruel optimism'. Firstly, however, I set up the context for these research findings by describing the history of Gurkha recruitment, its entanglement with hill running, and the complex and changing terrain of Nepali masculinities.

Running and the origins of Nepal

According to legend, the Magar people of Gorkha district used to hold an annual hill race to decide who would be their king for the following year. It is said that in 1559 AD the prince of neighbouring Lamjung district, Drabya Shah, conquered the Magars of Gorkha by winning this race. The founder of modern Nepal, Prithvi Narayan Shah, who from 1743-68 AD conquered numerous independent kingdoms from his base in Gorkha, was a descendant of Drabya Shah. Thus, according to one version of history, Nepal as a modern nation-state can trace its foundation to a legendary hill race. This legend, as taught in school textbooks in Nepal, served to legitimate Brahmin-Chhetri rule over the *janajati* peoples of the country's hills. It did so by invoking sport, with its purportedly meritocratic nature. One textbook put it succinctly: 'he who won a race became king.' (De Sales 1999) As Anne de Sales argues,

> 'By trying his luck in the race, Drabya Shah shows respect for local custom. He fights on equal terms with the people whom he wants to conquer and his victory legitimates his accession to the throne. In a way the legend presents the surrender of the autochthonous populations to the good Thakur as being natural, in accordance with the planets; in a word, in the Order of Things. This neat image is part of the cultural kit, so to speak, that is acquired in the course of a few years at school.' (1999:79)

Since 2018 a 'Liglige Daud' (Liglige race) has been held in Gorkha on the same hill as that of the legendary race, though without the same political consequences. Now the purpose of the event is to promote tourism. It retains the gendered exclusivity of the event of legend, however, with the full race reserved for men while the women run a separate, shorter route of 5 kilometres.

The Gurkha trials

The intertwinement of war and running did not end with Drabya Shah's conquest. After the British began recruiting Nepalis into their armed forces following the 1815 Anglo-Nepal war, sport, including running, came to play a key role within both the recruitment and training process of the new troops. To rationalise their recruitment of Nepali men into its armed forces, a *corpus* of literature was developed which Mary Des Chene describes as a 'military ethnology' (1999), in which the ethnic groups selected for service—initially the Khas, Magar and Gurung—were characterised as especially proficient in warfare, hunting and sport. One example of such 'military

ethnology' will demonstrate the general tenor of such work. In his text *Notes on Goorkhas*, Eden Vansittart, recruiting officer of the 5th Gurkha battalion, writes that 'Gurkhas delight in all manly sports,—shooting, fishing, etc., and are mostly keen sportsmen and possess great skill with gun and rod. They amuse themselves in their leisure hours, either in this way in the field, or in putting the shot, playing quoits or foot-ball, and they are always eager to join in any game with Europeans. This applies equally to Limbus, Rais and Sunwars.' (1890)

For British officers, then, the aptitudes requisite for war and for sport were thought to be comparable. Sports, moreover, like the above mentioned hunting expeditions, were a means of socialisation of Gurkha recruits by British officers. As Mary Des Chene explains, '[e]ngaging the Gurkhas in British sports was a primary means of *naturalizing* them, and the equalizing site of the sports field often emerges in memoirs as the place where differences of status and race dropped away, and Gurkhas and British officers met simply as *men*.' (1991:103)

Thus, just as the legend of the Liglige race was used by the Bahun-Chhetri[31] rulers of Nepal as a means of justifying their hegemony, the British used sport to (temporarily) occlude hierarchical status distinctions and legitimate their authority. Sport for the British empire was, as Mangan puts it, 'moral metaphor, political symbol and cultural bond'. (1992:1) He writes that,

> 'Throughout the Empire sportsmen, and to a far lesser extent sportswomen, and sports fields were acknowledged agents and agencies respectively of this bonding process. Through this process by virtue of domination, control and contact cultural links were established between Great Britain, dominion and colony which affected irrevocably the nature of indigenous cultures, political relationships, and subordinates' perceptions of superiors and vice versa.' (1992:3–4)

As Gurkha recruitment expanded over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a system of physical tests was developed, including the *doko* run—a 5-kilometre uphill race in which participants carry 25 kilograms of rocks in a *doko,* a Nepali woven basket attached to the head by tumpline.[32] Campbell's history of the British Army's use of sport in training its soldiers (2004) gives a clue to why the British might have regarded running ability as a desirable

---

[31] Bahun is the Nepali word for Brahmin. The Brahmin and Chhetri castes are the two upper castes within the fourfold Varna system.

[32] A tumpline is a strap attached to the forehead used to carry loads on the back.

characteristic of Gurkha recruits: after the 1899–1902 Boer War, in which many skirmishes took place over rough, hilly terrain, military writers began to stress the importance of rapid mobility of troops in future wars and recommended the use of cross-country running and running drills as an element in soldiers' training (Campbell 2000:41). As a result, running grew in importance within British military culture, which is reflected in the recruitment and training of Gurkhas. Consequently, as well as running trials being used in the recruitment process, competitions were also held amongst recruited Gurkha soldiers.

Andrew Nelson suggests in his essay 'Towards a History of Nepali Sport' that 'Gurkhas encountered and appropriated ideologies of sport that encouraged 'fitness' and 'discipline' during their experiences in the British and Indian militaries.' (2009:1828) Nelson further argues that 'these ideologies [were] incorporated into Nepali communities when the expatriates and soldiers returned.' (2009:1828) In this way, though the country was never directly colonised, British policy impacted culture and political relationships in Nepal in part through the use of sport in the Gurkha brigades. The involvement of Gurkhas in establishing hill races in Nepal and elsewhere suggests that their induction into the ideology of sport by the British was indeed influential and they did disseminate the culture of modern sport further through such activities. Indeed, the use of running in the Gurkha selection tests and in the training of Gurkha soldiers led to their involvement in hill races in Nepal and other territories in which they were stationed, as I will now describe.

Gurkha hill racing

The first race on record involving Gurkhas was the 'Khud'[33] race established in 1894 by Major Charles Bruce of the 5th Gurkha battalion. The race was thereafter held annually and open to runners from any Gurkha battalion. According to the Gurkha Museum in Winchester, 'the Khud Race… established the reputation of the Gurkha as practically invincible on the hill-side'. It was held in various territories where Gurkha troops were stationed, and was usually a short race with a steep climb and descent. The last ever Khud Race was run in Wales in 1995, though a version of

[33] 'Khud' literally means mountain climbing.

the event open to the public was established in 2019 at Pen-y-Fan in the Brecon Beacons by the Gurkha Wing (Mandalay), part of the infantry Battle School based in Brecon.

Probably the most significant contribution of Gurkhas to the development of trail running, however, was the establishment of an ultra trail race in Hong Kong—the 100-kilometre footrace known as the Trailwalker, Asia's oldest ultra distance trail race. Established in 1981 as a training exercise for the Queen's Gurkha signals who were stationed there, the Trailwalker was first opened to civilians in 1986 when Oxfam became co-organisers of the event. For aspiring professional trail runners from Nepal, the Trailwalker has been an important race, an opportunity to compete in an international field. Trail races in Asian countries which have more established trail running industries remain important platforms for Nepali trail runners seeking to compete at an international level. The Trailwalker is one such race of significance for aspiring Nepali trail runners, which Nepali teams have won on several occasions.

Additionally, Gurkhas have been involved in establishing races in Nepal. In 1995 a retired chief clerk of the Gurkhas, Ramesh Bhattachan, along with British artist Jan Turner, organised one of the country's early trail races, the so-called Gurkha Challenge, which later became the Annapurna 100K. Aside from the Everest Marathon, established in 1985, this race was the first trail race in the country. The original title, despite the race having no formal relationship with the British Army, indicates the cultural fame of the Gurkhas among many Western and especially British observers. Between 1993 and 1996, moreover, the aforementioned Bhattachan was the main organiser of the Pokhara-based Annapurna Triathlon which included a mountain trail race as part of its running segment—another early example of trail racing in Nepal. As well as a race organiser, Bhattachan is a coach who has assisted many Nepali trail runners with their training at his centre in Pokhara as well as taking them overseas to race.

Thus, Gurkha personnel were deeply involved in the early history of Nepali trail racing. The historical involvement of Nepali Gurkhas in the sport of trail running was an unintended effect of the culture of physical fitness developed as part of the process of recruitment and training by the British. Moreover, as this chapter demonstrates, the ties between the Gurkha phenomenon and trail running persist. During my fieldwork I met many young male trail runners who were also

aspiring Gurkha soldiers. In their personal reflections, some of them likened their hoped-for careers as professional athletes competing at an international level to working as a British Gurkha. They made this analogy in the context of the complex terrain of Nepali masculinities, which the next section describes.

Nepali masculinities

At the time of my research, Nepali masculinities were multiple, contested and in flux. To situate the masculinity we are concerned with in this chapter—that of aspiring Gurkha males—within the different forms of masculinity which were circulating in Nepali society, the concept of hegemonic masculinity developed by Raewyn Connell is particularly useful. Hegemonic masculinity, for Connell, 'can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.' (2005:77)

While this 'currently most honored way of being a man' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005:832) may not be practiced by all or even most men in a society, it is nonetheless the normative form of masculinity and all non-hegemonic or subordinated masculinities must position themselves in relation to it.

In Nepal, the hegemonic form of masculinity was the form associated with the highest caste group, the Brahmins. This high-caste form of masculinity is characterised by a disdain for physical work and a preference for scholarly activities, asceticism and ritual purity. Since only eleven per cent of the population of Nepal is Brahmin, however, most Nepali men did not attempt to perform Brahminical masculinity. A different form of masculinity, one which valorises military work and physical courage, was dominant within the hill *janajati* ethnic groups from which the British have historically recruited young men into the Brigade of Gurkhas and from which most of those I call the 'dedicated Nepali trail runners' were drawn. Among these ethnic groups a variety of masculinity was dominant which entails the valorisation of physical strength, endurance and toughness, an ability to exercise power and taking pride in being a breadwinner, particularly through labour migration.

While Gurkha masculinity is distinct from hegemonic Brahminical masculinity, it has many features which identify it with masculine forms embodied by most other men in Nepal, from a wide variety of caste, class and ethnic groups. Moreover, while most masculinities in Nepal position themselves in relation to Brahminical masculinity as hegemonic, the subordination of these non-hegemonic masculinities is not always accepted. Indeed, Brahminical hegemony can be challenged, its norms of masculinity questioned and subordinate forms valorised as superior. Indeed, as Connell's theory of hegemonic masculinity outlines, varied masculinities do not simply coexist but continually interact with and challenge each other.

I will call the model of masculinity dominant in hill janajati communities with a history of military migration 'lahure masculinity'. *Lahure* is the Nepali word referring to a soldier in a foreign army, though it does not mean this exclusively, as will be discussed later. At the level of Nepali society as a whole, Brahminical masculinity remained dominant despite the fact that it was feminised and stigmatised within some local contexts where other forms of masculinity were normative. Therefore, even if men from marginalised ethnic communities successfully embodied the form of masculinity which was locally dominant, they were nonetheless placed lower in the social hierarchy at the level of the society as a whole.

In certain places and social contexts this lower social status had more relevance. Thus, as Turin and Yang note with regards to Nepali men working manual labour jobs in Kathmandu, 'young men from less dominant castes and from historically marginalized communities… are left to negotiate their masculinities filtered through the lens of a caste system in which their physical labour situates them lower in the social hierarchy.' (2021:109) With regards to trail running, caste was seen by many of my interlocutors as a determining factor in a perceived neglect of the sport by the state. In hill janajati village contexts, social relations at a distance from the caste system allowed young men to embody masculinities which are subordinate at the national level. When such young men enter contexts where they interact with other, more structurally powerful men who embody more hegemonic forms of masculinity—while being employed as manual labourers in Kathmandu, for example, or in the case of Gurkhas, when interacting with British Army officers—they more directly experience their masculinity as a subordinate one.

Young men seeking to embody the Gurkha masculine ideal have historically positioned themselves in relation to two other relatively hegemonic forms of masculinity: one, the upper-class masculinity of the British Army officer and two, the warrior masculinity of the Chhetris, the caste positioned one step below the Brahmins. In hegemonic ideology—both that of the British Empire and of the traditional, high-caste rulers of Nepal—Gurkha men have been construed as having a 'young adult' (Uprety 2011:1) masculinity, one which, while defined by toughness and courage, is nonetheless impulsive, lacking in self-discipline and self-restraint, highly emotional and unintellectual. Such a construction of Gurkha masculinity served in the reigning ideology to legitimate their domination by Bahun-Chhetri Nepalis or British officers, both understood to have a more mature and intellectual form of masculinity, one suited to a leadership role.

Within Nepal, the hegemony of the masculinity of high caste groups and the marginalisation of the Gurkha form of masculinity was concomitant with a 'global fame, local absence' (1996:1) of the Gurkhas which, according to Onta, characterised their status in Nepal. Though Gurkhas are famous internationally, within Nepal itself they embodied a form of non-hegemonic masculinity associated with marginalised caste and ethnic groups and have been occluded in the hegemonic discourse of Nepali nationalism. Thus, while Gurkhas are cultural representations of Nepal to the outside world, within Nepal itself they remain non-hegemonic. As Onta has argued (1996), the dominant form of Nepali history, that of Nepal as a 'brave' nation, is built around the warrior personalities of the unification era (1740s-1816), from Prithvi Narayan Shah to Balbhadra Kunwar.

This complex and changing terrain of Nepali masculinities was the context in which male Nepali trail runners with Gurkha aspirations forged a sense of self, one crafted in relation to family and nation. The ways in which a cultural script deriving from the long history of Gurkha recruitment was to some extent applied to processes of masculine self-formation through sport is explored in the following sections, which present my findings on trail runners with Gurkha dreams.

Gurkha dreams

We were sitting by the side of Kathmandu's athletics track when eighteen-year old trail runner Pemba Tamang told me how he had failed to become a British Gurkha. Pemba was a trail runner who had grown up in a village in Ramechhap before moving to Kathmandu at the age of 13. At the time of our meeting he was working in Gokarna, an area on the edge of Kathmandu, as a Muay Thai instructor.

Pemba had performed very well in all the physical tests for the Gurkha regiments, including an 800 meter time trial, pull-ups, a loaded carry, and the infamous *doko* race. He had even been selected by his region; unfortunately, however, he had failed the English language test. Having failed by 'one point', he didn't try again. 'Before, one time, I tried to get selected into the British army,' he explained. 'After getting into the last round I failed. After that I didn't want to go.'
'You won't go back?' I asked.
'Time waste,' he said, using the English phrase.

Pemba described his disappointment emotively and emphasised how hard he had worked in the attempt to be recruited as a Gurkha. 'I wanted to be a Gurkha, British army, because my grandfather also was in the British army, before,' he told me. Of his failure he said, 'very *duhkha* [sad]. I have worked very hard. But that's how it is. Now I'll do trail running.'

Having moved on from his army ambitions, then, Pemba was now focused on sport. In our many conversations online, offline and while running together, Pemba gave me an account of his motivations for first pursuing the Gurkha path and then, in the wake of disappointment, deciding to focus on trail running and Muay Thai. In these conversations he would reel off descriptions of the physical challenges which were part of the 'very hard' Gurkha selection process. Confident that he had done exceptionally well in these trials, he told me that it was only his performance in the English language test which had been found wanting. 'In the selection,' he explained, 'at first, to enter, twelve pull-ups, twelve in one go, then medical checkup, and then after that is done, all documents. You have to fill in forms. Then after six months it's the regional selection, with 800 meter running, and at least twelve pull-ups, after that lift and carry, carrying a twenty kilogram

weight, five meters, nine meters distance. Then after that there's an interview. After that there's a test, maths and English, and after that a medical test. And after that, the last phase is central selection. You have to do two kilometres running, and *doko* carry. 14, 15 kilometres running,[34] carrying 26 kilograms, running uphill.'

Pemba was proud of his achievements in the tests, remembering to the second the records he had set. 'I set a record in the 800 meters,' he recounted. '2 minute, 4 second. In lift and carry I set a record of 1 minute 22 seconds. That was my record. in *doko* carry I did 34 minutes. It was very good. But,' he explained, 'my English language test wasn't successful. It was a very sad situation.' Thus, Pemba told me, it was his insufficient grasp of English which meant that his Gurkha dreams could not come to fruition. Pemba's perspective on the selection process was tinged by this experience of disappointment, one of (cruel) optimism dashed.

To gain a better understanding of what Gurkha dreams felt like when success was still in view, I spoke to younger trail runners who were still looking forward to attempting selection into the Gurkhas. From them I gained an insight into the emotional hold which Gurkha aspirations had for many young *janajati* men. On Facebook, the runner Pasang Tamang from Sindhupalchok told me about his childhood aspiration of working in the British Army: he described the UK as his 'dream country' and explained how he had wanted to be a Gurkha since he was just 8 years old. These aspirations were proudly displayed on his social media profiles. In one picture on Facebook, Pasang is shown doing the rock-on sign over his chest, with the hashtag '#Lauray'[35] in the description. In another photo's description, the hashtag '#Lauray' is written next to a Union Flag emoji, indicating his preferred foreign army, while a meme about the Indian army indicates his second best option: an animation shows two figures, one called 'running' and another called 'me'. The 'running' figure embraces 'me', enabling the latter to join the Indian army.[36] In another photo

---

[34] The *doko* race is around 5k. I presume Pemba misspoke here—he used the English numbers rather than the Nepali.

[35] Lauray is another common spelling of lahure.

[36] When India gained independence in 1947 the Gurkha regiments in the British Raj became part of the new Indian army, hence the title Indian Gurkhas.

he is bending over his *doko* basket in the early morning hours as the sunlight peeks over the hills, presumably readying himself for training.

Pasang had raced the 400 meter relay and the 800 meter race at a 200 meter dirt track in his home of Batase village in Sindhupalchok, but he had ambitions for longer distances and wanted to participate in trail races. He told me he liked trail running and that he ran on the trails in his village as part of his training for the Gurkha trials. Thus, for Pasang, fitness for trail running emerged out of the desire to become a *lahure*—just as, for Pemba, the fitness he developed in training for the Gurkha trials was ultimately transferred to the sport of trail running. Since Pasang was only seventeen, he wasn't yet old enough for the Gurkha tests, but was already preparing. Pasang told me that, if he could not become a Gurkha, he would continue to work hard in sport, learn French and try to be recruited by the French police—another popular option for wannabe *lahure* youth, though a less prestigious one than becoming a British Gurkha.

Gurkha money

For such young men pursuing a Gurkha career, motivation was in large part economic. In Pemba's case, for example, pressure arising from what he called the 'economic condition'[37] of his family was a primary influence. His parents were potato farmers in Ramechhap. They believed, Pemba told me, that their situation would improve radically if their son became a British Gurkha. 'There is *duhkha* there,' Pemba said, both he and his sister having left the village where his parents were now struggling to keep up with labour requirements and to make ends meet. 'There is so much work to do for farmers,' he explained, 'and so much *duhkha*.' This situation is common in contemporary Nepal: the 2011 census figures present a picture in which almost half of rural households in Nepal have at least one person who is abroad or who has recently returned from being abroad, with this trend likely having advanced since then. And since the vast majority of those leaving the villages are young people, elders are left with a higher workload. In this context, becoming a Gurkha would have transformed not only Pemba's life but that of his parents as well.

[37] Pemba used these English words.

Similarly, nineteen-year-old ultra trail runner Rajan Kumar Magar aspired to become a Gurkha or, failing this, to be an athlete, seeing both careers as ways of supporting his family financially through remittance payments. Rajan had already made two unsuccessful attempts at joining the Brigade of Gurkhas and had one remaining. ‘Since I was a child, being a Gurkha has been my dream,’ he said. When I asked him why, he cited the salary and the better facilities available in the UK as motivating factors. If this dream could not be realised, however, Rajan’s ambition was to become a professional trail runner and race overseas, an objective which he understood in similar terms to his Gurkha aspirations. ‘One of my dreams,’ he explained, ‘after I have done a lot of training and struggled hard, I want to do an ‘out country’ game. How I can help my father and mother—this is my dream. When my family see my running, they are proud.’

Thus, achievement for Rajan—whether as a trail runner or a Gurkha—was bound up with obligation to kin. Not only did he seek to make his parents proud, Rajan hoped to materially provide for them. In this way he aimed to use remittances, whether earned through foreign military service or victories in sport, to support his family. Money in this case was what Zharkevich terms a ‘substance of relatedness’ (2019) used to support the kin network: ’migrant money,’ Zharkevich writes, ‘becomes a substance of relatedness and remitting becomes a practice through which kinship is produced across time and space’. (2019:885)

Gurkha fame

Gurkha dreams as well as trail running aspirations were shaped not only by economics, however, but by the legacy of male forebears. Thus the cultural renown in which Gurkhas were held was another powerful factor driving Gurkha dreams. ‘My grandfather was a British Gurkha,’ Pemba explained. ‘His name is *ucca*. But those who do not become Gurkhas, their names are all forgotten.’

Pemba’s sense that his grandfather’s name was both *ucca* (literally ‘high’), and had been remembered down the generations, seemed to shape how he approached his sporting ambitions. His desire not to be ‘forgotten’ and to establish his name in history reflected a will to transcend

physical impermanence through heroic deeds, if not in war then in sport. Thus, Pemba told me, 'the name of a Gurkha is great, but the name of an athlete is greatest of all.' This desire to enhance one's 'name' was shared by both aspiring Gurkhas and dedicated trail runners—informants often expressed this wish to increase their cultural esteem with the phrase '*nam kam aune*', meaning 'to earn a name'.

Anthropologist Saubhagya Shah (2018) uses the term 'memoreality' to characterise such desires of young Nepali men to accumulate renown in the eyes of subsequent generations. This desire to be remembered is expressed in the common phrases *nam rakne* ('to put a name') and *nam kam aune* ('to earn a name'), both of which were used by the dedicated Nepali runners I met to describe Gurkha aspirations as well as sporting hopes. For those who might otherwise be 'forgotten', to use Pemba's words, trail running was a new field of heroic action in which athletes could 'earn a name'. As will be explored in the subsequent chapters, however, this new form of honour was a shaky construction, dependent above all on the vicissitudes of political economy. Accumulating this honour depended, crucially, on runners earning a living from the sport.

The sense that both a Gurkha career and running professionalism could earn honour among both kin and community was common in the responses of the *lahure*-cum-trail runners I interviewed. Pasang Tamang from Sindhupalchok, for example, told me 'It will change the life of my family if I become a Gurkha. It will earn the name and the *ijjat* [honour] of my family. To become a Gurkha is highly respected in my village.'

While 'changing the life of [his] family' referred to economic change as a consequence of the sending of remittances, Pasang's reference to 'earning a name' and '*ijjat*' referred to cultural shifts in status. Thus, both money and fame drove the desire to become a Gurkha—and the same is true of migration in general for young Nepalis. Hence Sharma (2018) notes that, while economics is a major driver of male labour migration, young Nepali men are also motivated by cultural norms of masculinity. With regards to Gurkha dreams, these cultural norms constitute a form of 'lineal masculinity' (King and Stone 2010). The 'family legacy' (Lamichhane 2022:51) celebrates lahure courage and achievements while economic capital is also accumulated through successive

generations. The desire to reproduce the male lineage was a common factor among the trail runners who sought recruitment as Gurkhas. As Keshav, another trail runner and aspiring Gurkha, put it, 'We want to be in Gurkha because of our grandfathers' bravery.'

Gurkha suffering

Nonetheless, there was at times an ambivalence in the way runners articulated the generational memory of Gurkha careers. Despite Pemba's embrace of the heroic Gurkha image, for example, he acknowledged what he called the '*duhkha*' his grandfather had experienced in the 'Japanese War' (World War II). Pemba's recognition of *duhkha* indicates his apprehension of the cruelly optimistic nature of the hopeful attachment to Gurkha careers. Broadly, the term duhkha means suffering. In the context of war, as the scholar of Gurkha history Hema Kiruppalini explains, the word 'can refer to loss, grief, and having to cope with the death of either family members or fellow comrades.' (2022:686). Of his grandfather, Pemba told me, 'he saw many of his friends die,' adding, 'in this war there was so much *duhkha.'*

Because of this *duhkha*, Pemba's grandfather had discouraged his father from pursuing the Gurkha path, fearing his son would experience the same. Therefore, despite the desire to 'earn a name' and be 'remembered' by subsequent generations, Pemba was also aware of the other side of Gurkha experience, the reality behind the image of the fearless warrior. It is this *duhkha* which has been under-appreciated in popular articulations of Gurkha heroism, as historian Pratyoush Onta notes (1994). In popular representations both in Nepal and abroad, Gurkhas are often represented as stoic and unconcerned by physical pain and even death, loyal to the British Empire till the end (Onta 1994). Yet Pemba's own grandfather's experience was such that he discouraged the next generation from following in his footsteps. As Onta explains,

'This congealed image of the battle-hungry Gurkha – true to his salt, loyal to his commanding officer, *bafadaar*[38] to his country – is the product of the *saheb's*[39] imagination, later identified by

[38] *Bafadaar* means loyal.

[39] 'Saheb' here refers to the British Empire

sychophantic Nepali intellectuals as the embodiment of the most special quality, bravery, of all Nepalis.' (1994)

Nonetheless, this image of the heroic Gurkha has persisted in the minds of many young Nepali men—even those, like Pemba, who were aware of those aspects of reality which contradicted it. Cruel optimism, as Berlant reminds us, is ambivalent—persisting despite subjects already recognising its harms. Thus, despite his awareness of his grandfather's *duhkha,* Pemba still described his estimation of the Gurkhas to me as 'very bafadari [loyal], honest, adventurous soldiers.' He continued, 'Nepali Gurkhas gave their lives and achieved success with honesty.'

These perceptions of Gurkha bravery were shared by family and community members, which shaped male desires to become Gurkhas, or *lahure* more generally. Ultra trail runner Kamala Rai, for example, told me of her love for *lahure*, explaining, 'since I was small I have liked *lahure* because they are perfect in all things. They fight and die for the country and suffer greatly.' Of her desire for a *lahure* husband, she explained her reasoning as follows: 'The brave Gorkhali Nepalis in the whole world are recognised as courageous, having won in many wars. 2) I also like their uniform. 😍[40] 3) They have a lot of money. 😂'

Kamala's desire for a *lahure* husband reflected a general trend among women from rural Nepal to seek such partners. Becoming a Gurkha was thus bound up with becoming a desirable husband. Zharkevitch explains that, for many rural women, 'the main route to acquire respectability and prestige is through a successful marriage to a man embodying hegemonic masculinity, with the figure of a British or Indian Gurkha being at the top of the hierarchy, and the figure of a successful international migrant being only slightly below.' (2019:682)

To be a Gurkha or a *lahure* was seen as an important step on the path to achieving masculine self-realisation through marriage and forming a family. This masculine self-realisation was both gendered and shot through with ideas about the nation, in particular the sense that Gurkhas and

[40] I have reproduced the emojis Kamala used.

therefore the men from the ethnic groups who constitute them were representative of Nepal *per se* as a brave nation—what Kamala called 'bir Gorkhali'.[41]

Despite these popular conceptions of Gurkhas as honourable bearers of glory and wealth, however, Pemba used the emotional frame of *duhkha* to describe his grandfather's suffering in war. While *duhkha* was passed on trans-generationally, this suffering was unregistered in the official documents of Gurkha recruitment and service, some of which Pemba had kept—further evidence of the generational renown in which his grandfather was held. Enlisted in 1948 at the age of eighteen, his grandfather is rated in the 'Final Assessments of Military Conduct and Character' as 'exemplary'. The report details that he briefly served in the Indian army before joining the Brigade of Gurkhas and fighting in the theatres of India, Malaya and Hong Kong. It further notes that he is 'leaving the army for personal reasons.' The Commanding Officer writes that Sonam Tamang—Pemba's grandfather—is 'cheerful, energetic and thoroughly reliable', a choice of vocabulary which reflects the British construction of Gurkhas as affable and loyal. As the anthropologist Lionel Caplan explains in his book *Warrior Gentlemen* (1995), the British regarded Gurkhas not only as fit and courageous warriors but also as reliable and at times playful or even childlike (1995:205). The official discharge report also notes that Sonam has a 'scar mark below right angle of mouth', the only trace found in this document of the *duhkha* to which Pemba referred.

Pemba's awareness of this duhkha had not prevented him from trying to become a Gurkha. The potential for suffering in warfare was outweighed by the economic benefits which a Gurkha career could bring him and his family. The fact that Pemba made only one attempt to be recruited, however, is evidence of his ambivalent feelings on the subject, and his reorientation to sport indicates a reworking of the set of values surrounding masculinity and earning power which had been handed down to him—a recasting of the male, migrant breadwinner role in the field of sport instead of war.

[41] 'Bir' is the Nepali word for 'brave' while 'Gorkhali' is an archaic term for Nepal.

Indeed, given the prestige and economic promise of the Gurkha role, I was curious about why Pemba did not make any further attempts to be selected. He told me that his sporting career would be '*thikai*', sufficient, for him and that he now sought a 'name' and an improvement in economic status through a sporting career rather than a military one. He would earn fame, just like a Gurkha, through sport: 'The name of a Gurkha is great, but the name of an athlete is the greatest of all', he assured me. Pemba would turn swords into trail shoes, in other words.

In this way, sport functioned as a viable alternative to military career, not only in the symbolic register of 'name' but also financially, since a career as a professional trail runner was seen as a lucrative possibility. If he could not be a Gurkha, his 'name' could be even more elevated through becoming an international-level athlete. For Pemba, military valour was not necessary for honour. Rather, money was crucial. Among the communities from which they are recruited, while Gurkhas are to some extent celebrated for their perceived heroism, they are also respected, crucially, for bringing home wealth and knowledge from overseas, as Des Chene has argued with regards to Gurung communities (1991:235–245). Indeed, the term *lahure*, while it is often used to refer to work in a foreign military, can also refer more generally to an overseas labour migrant. Migration and remitting are thus important means by which young subaltern Nepali men achieve standards of masculinity. As Zharkevich explains, '[I]n the wake of the war, becoming an international migrant became a cultural script for young men … throughout Nepal—a default option one falls upon, if one has no means of either getting higher education, preferably of the technical kind, or passing exams into the Gurkha regiments of the UK or Indian Armies.' (2019:887)

It is not solely due to heroic deeds in war, then, that the Gurkha is esteemed. It is also through earning wealth abroad and bringing money and commodities home that the Gurkha achieves respect in the community from which he comes. Hence Pemba's belief that if he could succeed as a professional trail runner (or Muay Thai fighter), then he could earn both money and a name, just as he would have done in the British Army. This emphasis on earnings also explains Kamala's reference to Gurkhas having 'a lot of money'.

Pemba's self-narrative suggests, therefore, that it is not any analogy between running and war which predisposes him to think of the soldier and athlete careers as similar, but the dream of migration and earning remittances which leads him to conceive of the two in similar terms. While Pemba continued to have a somewhat patriotic and celebratory view of Gurkhas and the history of this colonial relation with Britain, his reference to his grandfather's *duhkha* and his elevation of the athlete as superior to the soldier suggests a rethinking of militarised norms in the wake of the failure to become a Gurkha. His own preference for an athletic alternative to the Gurkha path, and the way he sometimes presented this option as superior to the Gurkha career, was an attempt to redefine social values.

But might the pursuit of trail running also entail some kind of *duhkha?* Might it be another variety of cruel optimism? The world of trail running was Pemba's arena for an act of recasting value, but such an attempt would fail to be concretised if it could not be monetised. His family would not be persuaded that 'the name of an athlete is greatest of all' if he did not earn equivalent wealth through sport. Nonetheless, for Pemba at least, his athletic career was still in the same tradition as his grandfather's career in the British Army, since he saw both running and military work not only as money-makers but as ways of earning honour in the eyes of kin and community.

The Gurkha on the trail

Pemba was not alone in seeing his athletic life in continuity with his Gurkha aspirations. Like Pemba, trail runner Keshav Thami had also been unsuccessful in his first attempt to become a British Gurkha. Though he continued to try at Gurkha selection, he hoped to become a professional trail runner if he could not be recruited as a *lahure*. When I met Keshav, he was living in Bhaktapur and working at a cafe in Lalitpur.[42]

'So many people apply,' he told me, 'that they have to come up with fake reasons to reject us. They told me my elbow carrying angle was wrong.' Keshav saw himself as a suitable candidate to be a *lahure* but had missed several opportunities to be recruited: the first time was due to the

[42] Lalitpur and Bhaktapur are metropolitan cities located within the Kathmandu Valley.

Covid-19 lockdown, the second for no specified reason—he simply wasn't called up as a finalist—and the third time was for medical reasons, the aforementioned 'fake' elbow issue. Keshav continued to seek the cachet of bravery attached to the Gurkha image, however, despite having failed to be selected—seeing a continuity or a parallel between his Gurkha and sporting aspirations. To this end he invented the slogan 'Gurkha on the trail', which he used as an online hashtag and added to his race bibs when given the option. Additionally, Keshav ran wearing shorts with the crossed *khukri* insignia, the famous symbol of the Gurkhas. I feigned some naïveté about the meaning of his phrase 'Gurkha on the trail' and asked him to explain; in response, he told me 'we all Nepalese are gurkhas. Also,' he added, 'I'm on the trail. So I combined It and made it "gurkhaonthetrail."' While it was intended as a statement about himself, then, the phrase 'Gurkha on the trail' also construed bravery as a general feature of Nepali identity, hence his statement that '*all* Nepalese are gurkhas'. (Emphasis mine.) In this way, the honour that Keshav sought either through becoming a Gurkha or an elite athlete was not only personal, but also drew on his construction of Nepali national identity.

Trail runners were not unique in taking the Gurkha cultural model and seeking to apply it to other forms of work. Amanda Chisholm describes her research with Sameer, for example, a young man who upon the failure to become a Gurkha pursued work in private security in Qatar. (2023:175–181) Though this security work was not military, he nonetheless saw it as being in the same tradition as his father's and grandfather's careers as Gurkhas. In this way, failure provokes a creative response and the imagining of a new kind of life outside of the military, but the symbolic template of the Gurkha or *lahure* career is still applied to the new life pathway. In the same way, my informants saw trail running as a way to represent their country, to earn a name, and to earn remittances through migrant labour for the support of struggling family in Nepal.

Martial races

Another dimension in which informants made associations between Gurkha recruitment and trail running was that of ethnicity. Most high performing Nepali trail runners were from hill *janajati* ethnic groups, and Gurkhas have also primarily been drawn from these groups. To some of my

interlocutors, that was no coincidence: hill *janajati* people, they told me, were distinguished by their toughness.

This conception of Gurkhas and therefore the ethnic groups who constitute them as especially brave reflects the ideology of 'martial races' which was developed by British colonial ethnology. According to this ideology, particular ethnic groups from Nepal's hills were construed as ideally suited to warfare, by contrast with the country's high-caste Hindus. This idea was reflected in the views of some contemporary trail runners who saw hill *janajati* Nepalis as both especially good athletes and particularly suited to warfare. Kamala Rai, for example, claimed that the hill *janajati*, who she called 'Mongols', were the best trail runners as well as the best soldiers. *Lahure* and trail runners alike are all 'Mongols', not Brahmins, she claimed. 'Why?' I asked. 'The Brahmins are scared, they don't have courage.'
'Are all the trail runners Mongols, too?' I asked her.
'Yes,' she said.
'Oh,' I ventured: 'The Brahmins aren't fast?'
'Nope,' she replied, and continued, ilt would be a much better country if Mongols were in charge. Only once we have Mongol leaders can sport advance in Nepal.'

Nelson notes that there has not been a movement for ethnic and caste equality in Nepali sport in the way that there has been in the political realm, but that 'one cannot help but notice the prevalence of Bahun, Chhetri and Newar names in the top committee positions and Olympic selections.' (2009:1830) For Kamala, the dominance of Brahmin and Chhetri people within sport officialdom exacerbated the lack of governmental recognition and support for Nepali trail runners. 'Mongol' leadership, she argued, was necessary to improve the condition of sport in Nepal, especially with regards to trail running. Trail running was not given proper recognition or funding by the government, she claimed, because 'the government are all Brahmin and the trail runners are Mongol.'

For Kamala, then, Brahminical cultural hegemony was holding back Nepali trail running. Like many of the dedicated trail runners, she saw hill *janajati* people as especially suited to trail running

and their fitness and courage as exemplary of what she called ‘bir Gorkhali’, a term referring to Nepal conceived as a nation of brave people.

Gurkha girls[43]

Kamala was not alone among female trail runners in drawing Gurkha-runner parallels. Some female trail runners even identified with the Gurkha mythos at a personal level, finding similarities between their own pursuit of trail running and the *lahure* path. While women still could not apply to be Gurkhas,[44] some female athletes nonetheless drew inspiration from the same Gurkha mythos which attracted male Nepalis.

This emerged in conversations I had with young women trail runners in the Mira Rai Initiative (MRI), a Kathmandu-based NGO which sought to use trail running to ‘empower’ young women from mostly rural backgrounds. When I asked the MRI runners how they motivated themselves through the tough training and competing that made up their sporting lives, they told me about the music they listened to during training, including not only Nepali and Hindi pop songs but also popular Gurkha songs. One such Gurkha song was the famous *Jandaichu Paltanma*.

This sentimental song begins with lyrics announcing the young soldier’s migration far away for military work and asking his mother not to cry for him, assuring her he will remember his family and return. While ‘jandaichu paltanma’ means ‘I am going to join the platoon [army, brigade etc]’, one of the women translated ‘paltan’ for me as meaning simply ‘far away’, so that the song was reinterpreted as referring to migration in general rather than military migration specifically. The young women of the Mira Rai Initiative were themselves recruited mostly from rural hill areas; to participate in the programme, they had left their *ghar* (home village) for Kathmandu, and now aspired to leave Nepal itself for competition overseas on trail running’s world stage. They

---

[43] The title of this section is inspired by the 2021 film *Gurkha Girl* by Bishal Roka Magar, known in Nepali as *Lahureni*.

[44] In 2018, The British announced that they would admit women as Gurkha soldiers from 2020 onwards. Consequently, some pre-training academies in Nepal began preparing young women for the selection tests. However, the recruitment of women has yet to materialise as of this writing (2025), leading to many dashed hopes.

therefore found inspiration for and analogy with their sporting aspirations in the stories of *lahure*. A cultural template which was originally applied to military migration, then, was here used to understand sporting migration. Their familiarity with the Gurkha or *lahure* narrative was drawn from media representations and stories they had been told by family members, some of whom were *lahure* themselves. One of the runners in the Initiative, Sushila, had an older brother who worked for the Singapore Police, a *lahure* pathway not as esteemed as being a Gurkha but one nonetheless honourable. Another runner in the group, Asmita, had a younger brother who was a British Gurkha.

Thus, while women remained ineligible to join the British Gurkhas—though they did serve in the Nepal Army, the Nepal Police and the Armed Police Force—the *lahure* imaginary nonetheless had a purchase on these young women's conceptions of themselves and of their life pathways as athletes and potential migrants. Dedicated female trail runners had not only left their villages for Kathmandu but aspired to migrate overseas as part of an athletic career. The fact that these Nepali women hoped to accumulate wealth and honour through overseas labour migration just like their male counterparts underlines that while norms of masculinity were influential in shaping the kind of optimism cleaved to by aspiring male trail runners, that was only one influence on the genre of hope which characterised dedicated runners' orientations to the future, male or female. That genre of hope, influenced by the Gurkha legacy but also by many more recent trends, is the subject of the next chapter.

Conclusion

The question driving my research was why many of the dedicated Nepali trail runners continued to hope for athletic careers when the likelihood of their making a living as professional athletes was so slim. In this chapter I have described the experiences of male Nepali runners who aspired to be Gurkhas, an aspiration which, like the pursuit of trail running professionalism, is a variety of what Berlant (2011) calls 'cruel optimism'. In their analysis of Nepali Gurkhas, Chisholm and Ketola use Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism' to theorise the affective attachment to militarism. They write that,

> ‘optimisms become cruel when the investment in militarism as the necessary pathway to achieving the good life becomes impossible or toxic, and yet the optimistic attachment to militarism is sustained. What we draw from Berlant is the idea that the very pleasure of being inside this relation to militarism can become sustaining, regardless of the content of that relation, in such a way that a person becomes bound to a situation that is at the same time harmful and affirming.’ (2020:275)

Similarly, among the dedicated Nepali athletes who were my interlocutors, there was an attachment to professional sport which provided actors with a valorised identity, that of the ‘trail runner’, despite the slim likelihood of a sustainable career in running ever being achieved. This trail runner identity was reproduced not only through performances in trail races but through the ‘paratexts’ (Genette 1997) of the trail running culture—the social media content created to publicise training and racing achievements.[45] For these runners, like the Ghanaian boxers studied by anthropologist Leo Hopkinson, the ‘pursuit of gendered sporting dreams [provided] a sense of meaningful striving for young people faced with the reality of elongated youth and exclusion from global flows.’ (2022:726) Despite the fact that most aspiring Nepali trail runners would not actualise their dreams of global sporting success, their ambitious pursuit of sporting careers nonetheless provided meaning, an anchoring in the here-and now through an optimistic relation to the future which was appealing to precarious Nepali youth. The trail running vocation was, in Berlant’s words, ‘a stuckness within a relation to futurity’ that constituted ‘a problematic defense against the contingencies of the present.’ (2011:13)

As these young men improvised by first trying to become Gurkhas and then, in the wake of this failure, trying to become professional trail runners, they were moving from one state of cruel optimism to another. They applied a similar template to both pursuits, in which becoming a man who earns a ‘name’ both for himself and Nepal as well as providing remittances for struggling kin at home was their gendered aspiration. In pursuing these goals, they were freighted by pressures from their families—pressures with origins both in their present economic conditions and in a long colonial history. This colonial experience of recruitment by Britain has sedimented cultural hard-to-resist expectations for young men from hill *janajati* groups subject to Gurkha recruitment.

Trail runners who attempted to become Gurkhas and then, in the wake of their disappointment, sought to pursue professional sports careers, took parts of the 'serious game' (Ortner 1999:21-25) of the aspiring Gurkha and applied these elements to the field of trail running. So long as professionalism was determinedly sought after by participants whilst being very unlikely to be realised for most, their engagement with the sport could be characterised as a relation of cruel optimism. With the prospect of creating a sustainable livelihood from trail running being so slim, the sport generated a cruel hope which ultimately could not satisfy male trail runners' longings for masculine self-realisation. Yet, as this chapter has already begun to discuss, this condition was not unique to male trail runners. Building on this chapter's examination of the similarities between Gurkha aspirations and trail running hopes, the next chapter explores the main features of the aspiration for professional sport success—what I call the 'genre of hope'—shared by dedicated trail runners, male and female.

Chapter 6: Hopes

Introduction

What did the genre of hope articulated by dedicated Nepali trail runners look like? Among most of those I met and interviewed, elite status in trail running was seen as consequent on attaining corporate sponsorship and was understood to entail a dramatic increase in prestige and earnings. Becoming a professional trail runner meant, for many, earning a 'name' abroad in international trail races, making their family proud and bolstering the reputation of Nepal at a global level. In this chapter I will set out the contours of this genre of hope, characterising dedicated Nepali trail runners' dreams of elite status in the global sport of trail running as a form of optimism. While the next chapter will focus on runners' perceptions of structural constraints on their pursuit of the good life through sport, an aspect of their complex attachment to trail running which makes such dreams undeniably ambivalent and their optimisms often cruel, this chapter focuses on the hopeful side of the relation—their sense that a better life was possible through hard work and determination. The features of the genre of hope articulated by the dedicated runners are evidenced in the ethnographic data I interpret here, though there is also a good deal of individual variation shown in the cases discussed. As will continue to be seen throughout the chapters of this dissertation, the kind of cruel optimism which is generalised among dedicated Nepali trail runners had distinct features according to the person and, moreover, varied in its intensity.

The genre of hope articulated by the dedicated runners was in many ways a subspecies of a broader style of aspiration prevalent in Nepal which focused on improving lives through labour outmigration. Roughly a quarter of Nepali households report having at least one member working abroad. At the time of my research, Nepal's growing working age population continued to look overseas for jobs which paid better than those available in their home country. High unemployment, poor wages and a growing pessimism about economic opportunities encouraged labour outmigration and with it forms of optimistic attachment linked to overseas opportunities rather than to the potential for personal or social transformation within Nepal.

In this chapter I will describe the optimistic attachments of dedicated Nepali trail runners first through three portraits of particular athletes, giving an insight into the formation and character of hope in the context of distinct life histories, before zooming out to look at how a shared genre of hope characterised by a belief in the power of personal agency was enacted in practice through the production of discourse online and the resistance to and reworking of existing social norms.

'It's my dream-focus': Kalpana Sunuwar

Runners' hopes often emerged through action rather than being conceived fully in advance. In many of the stories I collected from trail runners I interviewed, the relation of attachment to trail running developed over time through a back-and-forth process of engagement and reflection—engagement, first, in the world of the sport and then reflection on the sport's potential as a way of taking them towards the good life. In the beginning, engagement in trail running might be serendipitous, nearly accidental, as it was for many of the local participants who signed up to races in rural areas on a whim. Out of this pool of participants could emerge a few, usually the faster runners, who might feel encouraged to find out more about the sport and participate again in future. Gradually, such participants could come to define themselves as trail runners and see in the sport something more than an occasional break from everyday stresses, beginning to focus on the practice as an object of hope, perhaps a pathway to making their lives better in the long term.

This circular movement of thought and practice was reflected in the story of Kalpana Sunuwar, a 20-year-old trail runner originally from the village of Khiji Chandeswori in Okhaldhunga, who had been running for two years at the time of our interview. Kalpana's first race, she told me, was the Khiji Demba Ultramarathon. 'At that time I didn't know what kind of training to do, what to eat,' she explained. 'I just worked it out on my own. I was successful in that race. So after that I continued. I was encouraged. It became my dream to be a trail runner.'

She had heard about the race from a friend who had spotted a poster while on a trip to Khiji Phalate, the nearest bazaar, and brought her back a registration form. As a first trail race, the 42-kilometre Khiji Demba Ultra with its 8100 feet of climbing was not a minor challenge. 'I wondered,'

she told me, ‘do I have the courage to complete this? But I thought I would try.’ A hopeful orientation to the event of the trail race led to a broader optimism: her fifth-place finish seemed to light a spark in her mind, which was kindled by her becoming part of the Mira Rai Initiative’s Exchange and Empower Programme in 2022. From a relatively chance beginning, the relation to her object became more concrete, so that now her dream of elite status had colour and form. ‘What do you want to do in the future?’ I asked her. ‘If I can, I want to continue trail running,’ she told me. ‘If I can make a good future, I can make my family happy.’

Making a future, for Kalpana, meant earning both money and prestige. About an upcoming race in Hong Kong, she said, ‘if I win, I’ll make a name for Nepal, make a name for myself. That’s my dream. Athletes come from all over the world to do UTMB races.[46] It’s not easy. Hard work… But my dream is to be the winner.’ She laughed then, as if to suggest the idea was unrealistic. Despite the levity Kalpana tried to inject into her account, however, her words seemed to evidence a genuine attachment to trail running as a means of changing her life. That upcoming race was to be her first overseas competition—in fact, her first time abroad. She appeared excited. The promise of making a good future through going abroad was thus bound up with trail running and she saw this Hong Kong race as the first rung on the ladder. Kalpana reflected on where she hoped running would take her:

> Kalpana: In my family, there’s no jobs. It’s very hard. So I want to earn money. As a trail runner I can go abroad, and make it my job.
> Will: Which country do you want to go to?
> Kalpana: I don’t know about Europe countries. My education is low. I don’t know about Europe countries. No knowledge. Just Dubai, Qatar, Malaysia, Kuwait…

The fact that she named these countries reflected existing trends in Nepali labour migration. Her hope, however, was to make her future in the places associated with trail running success—mostly European countries and the United States. Kalpana called trail running her ‘dream-focus’; she construed the sport as a way of improving her economic standing, making her family proud of

---

[46] ‘UTMB races’ refers to races which are part of the global UTMB race series. These races usually have ‘by UTMB’ appended to their name. A UTMB race in Thailand, for example, is known as ‘Thailand by UTMB’. The acronym UTMB stands for Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc, referring to the famous 100-mile race starting from Chamonix, France, whose organisers later expanded their operation to build a global racing series. Through competing in such ‘UTMB races’, runners can qualify to take part in the UTMB world championship race in Chamonix, now known as Mont Blanc by UTMB.

her and even boosting the status of Nepal internationally. The good life which she thought trail running success could bring was not just personal but was bound up with commitments to the family and the nation. 'With trail running what can I do…' she speculated. 'I can earn my name, I can give my family happiness, I can make my country known around the world. If I get a good sponsor I can make my future. That is my hope.'

Hope, moreover, was not Kalpana's alone. Her family's expectations, like those of the aspiring Gurkhas described in the preceding chapter, shaped her ambitions. 'My family are very proud of my running,' she explained. 'Because like many families we struggle. And I can make a name for myself through running.' Kalpana's attachment to the future was open, nonetheless, not wholly determined: 'What do you want to do after the race in Hong Kong?' I asked her. 'Up to 2024 I want to continue trail running,' she told me. It was then 2023. 'If trail running doesn't work, I'll have to search for another opportunity. I'm thinking about it now. Up to 2024 I'll keep trail running: it's my dream-focus at the moment.'

What does it mean for trail running to 'work'? What keeps a dedicated runner dedicated? The support of benefactors enabling her to participate in international competitions had kept Kalpana encouraged and maintained her attachment to trail running as a means of making a future. At the time of this writing (2024), Kalpana's Facebook profile, on which she marks her identity, 'Ultra Trail Runner, sports and Adventure #lover', displays the flags of the countries she has since visited for races, still seeking to make her name. Next to Nepal's unique double pennant are the flags of Hong Kong and Malaysia, which she hopes are only the beginning of a journey.

'There aren't any hills here. Ke garne'[47]: Manoj Lama

Trail running hopes as dreams of moving elsewhere to make a career were commonplace. In particular, dedicated runners wished to make their careers in the so-called 'agadhi' or 'developed' countries. Manoj Lama was an exemplary case, a Nepali working in the United Arab Emirates but dreaming of Switzerland. I first met Manoj while he was living in Tarebhir, a hill village in the foothills of the Kathmandu Valley. At that time the thirty-year old runner was working in his uncle's resort as a waiter but hoping to find a job overseas to earn remittances and support his family. We first got in touch through Facebook; his profile description announced his intention to become a professional trail runner.

A few months after our first meeting, I met Manoj again by happenstance. He spotted me drinking juice at a Gokarna fruit shop and, smartly dressed in a new suit, came over to tell me his news: 'I'm going to work as a sales attendant in the UAE.' 'For who?' I asked. 'The Al Dhabi oil company,' he said, showing me some of his paperwork. I subsequently interviewed Manoj, seven months into his contract in Dubai. At that time he was equivocal about his running, which he was still practicing in the mornings and evenings: 'I run in the desert nowadays,' he said. 'I'm making some progress, improving a little. But there aren't any hills here. *Ke garne*…'

What to do?, Manoj asked, using the ubiquitous Nepali expression. His optimism persisted despite circumstances and, anyway, in some respects his new location was an improvement: 'compared to Nepal it's very advanced,' he claimed, at least with regards to the organisation of races. Having won two 10 kilometre events in Dubai, Manoj elaborated on how '*agadhi*' or

---

[47] Ke garne is a very common Nepali expression meaning, roughly, 'what can you do?' Ke garne has often been construed as an expression of 'fatalism' indexing a lack of initiative (Chitrakar 2019, Pradhan 2015, Posch et al. 2019). But this is not necessarily the case. The phrase Ke garne? can refer to a willingness to persevere despite objective difficulties. As linguist Lauren Gawne explains,

> 'This question is rhetorical, usually rounding out a story of some hardship. The bus didn't show up in the village for two days, ke garne? Your husband has spent most of your children's lives working overseas to pay for their schooling, ke garne? You village house is small and has no power, ke garne? Although the English translation gives a sense of futility in the face of adversity, it does not quite have this function. Instead, it is about resilience in the face of adversity - you still got to town, your husband is doing the right thing for the family, your house is all you have. There is nothing you can do to prevent these events, but that's not reason to let them stop you.' (2015)

‘advanced’ things were in the UAE: ‘In Nepal, they still can’t do timing chips.[48] They don’t process your result quickly. In Dubai they use an online system, it’s very fast, and your result is published within fifteen minutes.’ Nonetheless, ‘I prefer trail running,’ he admitted. For Manoj, Dubai was a temporary space between Nepal and his ultimate destination, Switzerland, where he aimed to realise his dream of becoming a professional trail runner. Though he lamented the loss of Nepal’s hillscape, his *sapana*[49] was not to return. Instead, he explained, ‘after two years I’ll go to Switzerland. I have applied to go there. Even though I’m here where there aren’t any hills, I can’t quit trail running. So after I’ve finished my work in Dubai, I’ll apply to Switzerland and I’ll train there. That’s my dream.’

‘Why Switzerland in particular?’ I wondered. ‘Because of the weather,’ he told me. ‘It’s a cold place,’ he continued, ‘and for trail running it’s very good, hillside, attractive. I have searched it on Google map. And Salomon Running[50] organise good things there.’ I wasn’t surprised to hear Manoj cite a European country, but, for me, the question remained: why Switzerland specifically? Manoj seemed to want a concrete objective, with information to back it up. Perhaps he was inclined to pick a specific somewhere, if only to give his ambitions detail and substance. While Kalpana referred to ‘Europe country’ as a general category, Manoj’s more definite target was supported by online research, his scoping out the landscape on Google maps. This precision Manoj applied to learning about trail running in general. ‘How did you learn about the sport?’ I asked him. ‘All on Google, Youtube, Facebook,’ he said. ‘I follow others, get a lot of tips. Salomon Running, UTMB, I follow their pages.’

It was through this engagement with trail running as a global form that Manoj developed his attachment to Switzerland and the ‘dream-focus’, to borrow Kalpana’s phrase, of a running career. Manoj’s running practice had begun in Nepal, participating in his first short races there and training on the hillsides of Shivapuri National Park. Trail running as an object of good-life fantasy,

---

[48] Timing chips are RFID (radio-frequency identification) tags attached to runners which are used to record their finishing times.

[49] *Sapana* is the Nepali word for dream, a commonly used term.

[50] The name of the company is Salomon, but ‘Salomon Running’ is the phrase Manoj used.

however, entailed the desire to relocate to '*bidesh*'[51]—Switzerland in particular—where trail running futures were made. That was, at least, the message he had gleaned from online media. As much as he had enjoyed training in the hills of his home country, Manoj, like many of my interlocutors, did not see Nepal as the place to make a career.

He drew hope from the stories of Nepali trail runners who had made or seemed to be building careers in the sport through competing overseas. He named Mira Rai, Sunmaya Budha, Arjun Kulung Rai and Santosh Kulung Rai as inspirations. Of foreign runners, by contrast, Manoj couldn't name more than one as a role model. (Other than Nepali runners, he cited only Arlene Glick, a relatively little known American ultrarunner.) Manoj's optimism was thus encouraged by the stories he had heard of others' successes—specifically the successes of Nepali runners. Hope was built out of the sense that he could achieve something similar. It seemed clear, then, that 'ke garne' was not his expression of resignation but, rather, a statement of resilience. Put next to his plan to move to Switzerland and pursue a running career, 'ke garne' was a recognition of structural limitations combined with a refusal to give up hope.

'It's not only for myself': Sarita Rai

Hope for a trail running career was organised around obligations to others, including family members—as the portraits of Kalpana and Manoj show. But commitment to others could be more abstract, as in Kalpana's wish to put Nepal on the map or, in Sarita Rai's case, the desire to promote social change. Trail running is 'not only for myself,' Sarita told me. Her ambition, she said, was 'to become a super runner52 and empower girls.' She elaborated: 'First I'll empower myself, then, it's not only about running, I'll do other things too. It's not only for myself; we must also think for the sake of society. First from myself I have to start. First change myself then slowly a friend, then one by one, others. What's wrong? Then, what's right?'

About 'society', Sarita reflected that, 'in Nepal it's a little bit better than before. But these days,

---

[51] *Bidesh* means abroad in Nepali.

[52] 'Super runner' was the exact phrase, in English, which Sarita used.

how many women still suffer because of domestic violence?' Sarita sensed that her trail running ambitions could be linked to social transformation, something which resonated with the experiences of other runner interlocutors who used or hoped to use their platforms to organise activist efforts or to foster 'awareness'[53] around important issues. Sarita was concerned about women's status in particular, and thought that trail running success could help her to create change.

'I want to inspire others,' Sarita told me. Her hopeful orientation to the future was influenced by the stories of other runners—Mira Rai in particular. In the early days of her pursuit of trail running, she had followed Mira and other Nepali runners online and had become, she said, 'inspired'. Mira had modelled a trajectory of sporting success followed by attempts to help others (through her running NGO for young women), from which Sarita drew an optimistic sense that perhaps she could do the same.

Nonetheless, while she highlighted social change as an important part of her objectives, Sarita saw this as flowing from personal success. When I asked her what she wanted to achieve in the future, Sarita told me of her dream to run at the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc. Like Kalpana, she saw the UTMB as the apex of trail running and the proper goal for talented trail runners. Also like Kalpana, her running ambitions had become more concrete through early successes which were achieved 'without training'. 'My first races,' she told me, 'were part of school. After my SEE[54] exams, I started running. I competed in the 400 meters, 1000 meters, then the 3K. I won a gold medal without training. How? The school coach was very happy. That day I thought to myself, I can do it. I got courage.' Thus, early successes and encouragement from others fostered a growing sense that running could be a pursuit worth putting time and energy into. From this seed would develop a sapana (dream) in which the sport took on the status of a vocation. She explained:

---

[53] The category of awareness as it is mobilised in 21st century Nepal has been explored in depth by Tatsuro Fujikura in his book Discourses of Awareness (2013). This issue is touched on in chapter 8 of this dissertation in the discussion of runners' environmental activism.

[54] SEE stands for Secondary Educational Examination, an exam taken at the end of tenth grade in Nepal.

‘My first trail race was one organised by Pokhara Trail Race Series [PTRS], a 7 kilometre race. I came second, without training. Just going to and from school in my village, that was my training. That was the beginning. After that I did a 10 kilometre race, part of the Safal marathon.55 I came second again. Then, after that, PTRS [Pokhara Trail Race Series] put on the Panchase 55 and I did the 15 kilometre race.56 I was also second there. Again, I got courage. I was following Mira didi, and her determination inspired me. I followed everyone on social media, I learned about them all. I started to think, “what’s my future?”’

The association between trail running and the sense of a future grew more solid in her mind as she found more success in the sport. What might have been a present-focused ‘hobby’ became something requiring more devotion, absorbing more hope. In such a way, trail running became reified and cathected with desire. This process was encouraged by her engagement with the social world and mediascape of trail running: following Mira Rai and other runners online provided hints and possible models for her own progress. That growing optimism could only be intensified by her admission into the Mira Rai Initiative. ‘How did you join Mira’s programme?’, I asked her. She explained,

I had started running and, after that, I followed Mira and others on Facebook, saw their posts, got inspired. I saw the Mira Rai Initiative was looking for applicants, so I downloaded the form. I applied. I tried two times—first I wasn’t selected. That was very hard for me. But the second time I was selected. I stayed with the Mira Rai Initiative for nine months and, in that time, I got a good understanding for what trail running is. Before that I had never done long races like 50, 60 kilometres. Since then I’ve participated in 60, 40, 30 kilometre races.

In this way, Sarita’s sense of her capacities was cultivated through the new social setting of the Mira Rai Initiative, a training group with a coach and a schedule. ‘My training was good when I ran with the Initiative,’ she explained. ‘I knew what pace to run because I had other people with me. And the coach would explain what to do. Since I left the Initiative my training hasn’t been as good

---

55 Safal is a dairy company which sponsors an annual running event in Pokhara which includes a marathon, a half marathon and 10 kilometre race.

56 Long races in Nepal are often organised alongside shorter events which all happen on the same day.

because I don't know what pace to run, and I don't have a coach.' Sarita also mentioned her short visit to Jumla where she had trained with the Karnali Sports Club under Hari Rokaya Magar, a veteran Olympian and a legendary runner in Nepal. 'If there's a person to guide our training, that's good,' she said. 'Like Hari Guru. That's a big support.'

Sarita's emphasis on the importance of the training collective and the coach-athlete relationship drew out how optimism was often sustained relationally for dedicated runners. While some of my interlocutors were more akin to 'lone wolves', actively preferring to train alone, I met no one whose hopeful orientation to trail running as a way of making a future was sui generis. Hence I use the term 'genre of hope': whatever personal spin any athlete gave it, the optimism that sustained their running was a shared genre, a social form. If this genre of hope did not come from a club or an encouraging coach, or even from relationships with friends, it would still be encountered online. In fact, it was in the online world where that genre of hope was presented with the least ambiguity. The next section will therefore explore in more detail the online discourse of optimism among dedicated Nepali trail runners.

Dreams in practice

How did trail running become understood as more than a hobby or a social activity, and come to absorb athletes' desires for the good life? In other words, how did runners become optimistic? As chapter 2 (background) explained, dedicated runners—in Kathmandu, at least—largely organised their training lives through the internet. The web, however, was much more than a means of arranging running activities. It was a platform for expressing ideas relating to personhood and presenting narratives of achievement. The proliferating sense that a runner could make a name for herself through dedicated hard work was a discourse observable in the online universe of Nepali trail running—an ecology of videos, photos, hashtags and motivational quotes extending across Facebook, Titkok and YouTube. Examining this key means by which runners' optimistic orientation to the sport was generated, then, reveals how the sense of future-oriented agency common to my interlocutors was a shared social form.

Optimism online

The achievement ideology spreading online was evident across the different forms of media runners created. On TikTok, short videos of runners striding up mountain trails (often converted into slow motion) were accompanied by hashtags like '#trailrunner', '#runninggirl', '#myjourney' and '#mystruggle'. On Facebook, status updates like 'I will do anything to be number 1' and 'Life may knock me down, but I will always rise up, I am a fighter' articulated voluntarism and commitment to a vocation, while YouTube afforded runners the chance to express their purposive selfhood in long form, with videos not only documenting running lives but giving advice to viewers on how to 'stay fit' and similarly dedicate themselves to sport.

This theme of dedication in the pursuit of a passion was a common one across Nepali trail runners' social media texts. For example, Sarita Rai frequently used the hashtags '#myjourney', '#mystruggle' and '#fitnessmotivation'. The fact that trail running was seen as a passion was also reflected in her hashtags #naturelovergirl and #MountainSarita. The theme of voluntarism was expressed even more clearly in the phrase (in English) 'I want to live in my own freedom', her description of a TikTok clip. The theme of self-determination and life as a journey towards a goal was reflected in her motto, 'Trust yourself: even a bird doesn't have a map, but it still reaches its destination.' Similarly, Nikki—like Sarita an alumna of the Exchange and Empower Program—articulated an ethos of the dedicated pursuit of the good life through phrases such as 'Only focus on your goals' and 'Proud of my achievements', alongside the hashtags '#inspiration' and '#keepgoingguys'.

These elements of the dedicated trail runners' online discourse reflected an agentive selfhood, which was in contrast with the 'fatalism' Nepali anthropologist Dor Bahadur Bista famously attributed to the nation's high-caste Hindu elites (1991) (to be discussed later in this chapter). The genre of social media content produced by dedicated Nepali trail runners suggested an attitude almost diametrically opposed to that purported fatalistic acceptance of preordained outcomes. Rather, runners projected narratives of achieving their goals through dedicated effort despite obstacles and setbacks. Hashtags like 'hardworking', 'alwayshardworking', and sentiments like

‘Don’t believe in luck, believe in hard work’ indicated a strong emphasis on volition and agency rather than fate. While these expressions must be placed in the context of most dedicated runners’ recognition of constraints on their agency (explored in the next chapter), optimism was nonetheless dominant online.

Such optimism could reach transcendent heights. A clip shared by Asmita Limbu, another Christian convert, indicates how the voluntarist striving towards success could be supra-mundane: ‘God doesn’t give you the people you want,’ the preacher in the video explains. ‘He gives you the people you need, to help you, to hurt you, to leave you, to love you and to make you the person you were meant to be.’ Similarly, trail runner Sarita Rai expressed her newfound Christian[57] faith through TikTok. Since her conversion, almost all of her TikTok videos contained a reference to Jesus or Christianity, often drawing a connection between her pursuit of success in running and this new spiritual identity. Some of these hashtags were, for example, ‘#Jesuslover’, ‘#charistionlover’[58] [sic] and ‘#Jesus’. They were juxtaposed with other hashtags such as ‘#struggle’ and ‘#strugglelife’, attached to videos of her training and competing, and sometimes accompanied by worship music and audio clips of Christian preachers. A few of these videos had text overlaid—motivational, affirming statements with religious inflections such as ‘God says everything comes to you at the right time, just wait’. In this way Christianity was drawn upon as a resource in Sarita’s ‘struggle life’.

That the ‘struggle life’ of striving to become an elite runner could be expressed in a religious register indicates how strongly some runners adhered to this sense of personal agency. As has been discussed with regards to Christianisation among Tamang communities by Ripert and Campbell, moreover, the choice of Christianity itself suggests a reorientation of selfhood connecting to a global imagined community. Newfound adherence to Christianity marks a distancing from parochial, caste-based exclusions rooted in traditional high-caste Hindu hegemony and a way for young hill janajatis bearing the effects of historic and ongoing

---

[57] Christianity is the fastest growing religion in Nepal. According to the 2011 census, 1.4 percent of the Nepali population is Christian (Central Bureau of Statistics 2012), though the Christian Nepali community contests this figure. The religion has seen exponential growth since its official arrival in Nepal in 1951, and has had a growing public presence since the democratic reforms of 1991. (Dalzell 2022:4)

[58] ‘Charistion’ is a misspelling of ‘Christian’ .

marginalisation to access modernity through a new, 'suitably modern' (Campbell 2016) religious affiliation. Thus, conversion to Christianity reflected an agentive understanding of selfhood, tied to optimism rather than fatalism.

The optimism I have characterised as hegemonic online was made possible by the affordances of the internet platforms. Cyberspace allowed users to deliberately curate the presentation of their identity and their personal history. Online, in the public timelines of these platforms, dedicated trail runners presented themselves as if they were relatively unconstrained by social conditions. Indeed, this strong sense of agency evidenced in these online practices starkly contrasts with stereotypes of a Nepali (or broadly South Asian) mentalité (Braudel) characterised by fatalism, the prevalence of which the next section critically questions.

Fatalism?

In Dor Bahadur Bista's controversial thesis, presented in his 1991 work Fatalism and Development, Nepal's ills are blamed on the 'fatalistic' value system of the country's dominant Brahmins. Fatalism, Bista argued,

> generates the view that one's entire life is a continuous present and is fated to be what it is. Instead, if the people could be persuaded to accept only the past as an important educator to provide guidance for future, and treat the so-called present as the flicker of the moment that continuously moves along with the progression of our lives, we could probably have a healthy, future-oriented society led by optimistic political and cultural leaders. (Bista 1995)

Influenced by this argument, Kalyan Bhandari's 2023 article 'Fatalism and Leisure in Nepal' contends that Nepali society is organised around fatalistic ideals which shape popular orientations to time and thus to leisure. My own research with trail runners provides an interesting counterpoint to this view. Fatalism, in Bista's work, means the belief that one's circumstances are the karmic results of one's past lives and that therefore taking the initiative to transform one's situation is unlikely to be worthwhile: rather, actors should diligently follow their religious duty in order to store up merit for their next life. Such an attitude, for Bista, has constrained development in Nepal by discouraging personal agency and hard work.

Drawing on Bista's argument, Bhandari seeks to understand how fatalistic conceptions shape popular Nepali attitudes towards leisure. Briefly, he claims that the Western concept of leisure as the expenditure of 'free time' is largely absent in Nepal, since any time outside of work is supposed to be dedicated to religious duties or work in the service of others such as family and community members. Rather than 'free time', he argues, Nepalis have 'social time', in which activities are carried out as the fulfilment of obligations to other people or to the divine (2023:883). A dominant anti-hedonism regards leisure, in the sense understood by Westerners, as selfish and unproductive. While Bista's argument about fatalism attributes these values to the dominant-caste Brahmins rather than Nepalis in general, he claims nonetheless that such norms have spread throughout Nepali society and have increasingly marginalised alternative value systems. Similarly, Bhandari claims that fatalistic attitudes towards leisure are widespread, not exclusive to high-caste Nepalis. As Bhandari puts it, 'leisure in Nepali society is shaped by social time rather than free time' and 'the degree of volition in leisure choices is strongly conditioned by social structure rather than human agency.' (2023:883–4)

By contrast, I found little evidence of fatalistic attitudes among the dedicated trail runners—rather, the opposite, as the findings above indicate. Dedicated runners had a strong sense of personal agency and were making a choice to spend their time running despite this being a relatively nontraditional pursuit which, in many cases, family and community members were skeptical of. To give an example of such skepticism, I will present a quote from Niraj Tamang, a trail runner and race organiser from Helambu who now lives and works in Abu Dhabi:

> In my village, if I go to run, some people is saying like that, "why are you running? Do some work! If you work, you can get money! If you run, how to get money? Why you running? Come and work!" Like that. [He laughs] Very difficult in village also. When I was in village I tried to go training for morning time and then one older man, my kaka [father's brother], uncle, he said, "Why have you run? One hour, two hours, carry manure. You are training, why are you running? Are you crazy? Why have you been running? You don't have work? Why you running?" Like that. So, we have to change our society and our country. We have to do change ideas about running.

For Niraj, running was chosen, not obligatory. In fact, it was undertaken despite hostility from others, provoking a conflict over values. Even more challenging for Bhandari's argument, Niraj reacted to this values conflict by insisting on the need for social change: 'we have to change our

society… We have to change ideas about running,' he told me. Both the decision to run itself and the (related) will towards social transformation, as with Sarita's desire to 'empower girls', point away from fatalism. There is a strong element of voluntarism in these examples (though tempered by a sense of constraints on agency, which the next chapter examines).

Niraj was far from alone in facing some community hostility for his running. This negative sanction could take on a distinctly gendered tinge for some female informants. Ultra-runner Rita Rai, for example, was treated with some suspicion in her village in Bhojpur when she first started trail running. Rita's friend and social media manager Pallavi Dahal explained that,

> While Rita was in the beginning of her career in trail running, she got up in the morning to get dressed for running, in her running gear, and as soon as she stepped out of her house people scanned her body, top to bottom, stared at her legs for a long time. The stigma is that females aren't supposed to wear short clothes, comfortable clothes. They're supposed to wear full length clothes. So wearing the training shorts and gear was a challenge for women starting their careers.

'After that,' Pallavi continued,

> the other issue was that she had to travel out of the Kathmandu valley for her races, and her training, since Kathmandu doesn't have as much down and up hills. It's not tough compared to Sindhupalchok. It wasn't as good for preparing her for the races at higher elevation like the Manaslu and Mustang stage races. So she had to travel outside of Kathmandu. People would raise questions and point fingers, saying "this woman travels a lot and doesn't stay with her family, so she must be bad character." People in her area would point fingers at her. It's really disgusting and demotivating for females as a whole. If it was a man in her place, it would be seen like, a man is going out of the Kathmandu valley: he is working for his family. He's a hardworking man earning a life for his family. But for Rita doing the same for her family, earning her name, earning a living, people took it in a very negative way. Later they changed, after knowing about her and the news about her participating and winning Bhojpur Trail Race. But it's very difficult due to the stigma prevalent in the society.

Describing these forms of negative sanction underlines how running had to be chosen, thus contradicting Bhandari's claim that leisure time in Nepal means social time and is characterised by obligatory activities. Sunmaya Budha has similarly pointed to her family's initial skepticism about her pursuit of trail running. In the 2024 documentary Conquering Mont-Blanc, Sunmaya explains in English 'My family didn't know… 'you are running?'… I went two times already in Kathmandu. There is no prize money. Small race. My family said like, 'there is no prize money?! No money? You are too skinny! Stop the running! You need to focus only on the reading.'

Similarly, Kamala Rai, when I told her that I had been accused of being too thin by my landlady and also by a shopkeeper, fulminated that,

> I also get these comments about looking thin or sick and it makes me angry. It's an older person thing. New ideas and development cannot come in Nepal until the old generation die! You need to tell them that athletes the world over do not look fat or big and you have to tell them that you are healthy. I don't like big fat men, they are lazy. Brahmins are often fat and lazy. Nepalis are slow to understand the idea that people are not thin or sick but healthy from running.

In all these ways, Nepali runners' sporting practices were volitional, not obligatory, and could receive negative social sanction. Moreover, agency and volition were also understood as important within the very physical acts of trail running. It was at moments of severe challenge when optimism, the sense that 'I can do it', was mobilised. The phrase 'garna sakchu'—literally, 'I can do this'—was frequently used by my interlocutors to describe their orientation to running challenges. As the runner Dinesh Tamang put it to me, 'If it's hard, in my brain I think "you can run." You have to have a positive vibe. You have to have positive thinking. If I get muscle tightness, if my stomach hurts and it gets tough out there, I have to think "you can run." It's possible.'

Dinesh then repeated the Nepali word 'sakincha' (it can be done) several times. 'During a race, I have to think of my family,' he said, again indicating to me how hope was a collective form. 'My baba[59], daddy, mummy,' he continued, 'I have to think of family… then it's not so hard.' Through 'positive thinking', an English expression Dinesh used, he attempted to overcome the pain, fatigue and nausea which came with extreme endurance. In this way, hard work and a positive mentality as the means of overcoming obstacles was a key element in runners' understandings of agency both in running itself and in their broader life trajectory.

Where, for Bhandari, leisure time in Nepal is sanctioned by the dominant social order, among the dedicated runners their sport was practiced as the expression of another system of values, at times in conflict with those of their parents and the wider society (though not always). Indeed, the features which Bhandari claims are characteristic of leisure among Nepalis were hardly present among the dedicated trail runners, at least as regards sport. They used much of their free time to

[59] Baba is a Nepali word for father.

train and compete, even if they might have been at odds with their family and community in doing so. Far from being ‘social time’, moreover, training time was alone time for many runners.

Playing as if

Dedicated runners believed that their long-term objectives could be achieved through hard work and determination. Hope itself was strongly related to this sense of agency—rather than resigning themselves to what was fated either by the divine or by economic structures, dedicated runners opted for optimism. Hope, moreover, was more than an ideal. It was pragmatic. Such an approach can be characterised by the term ‘subjunctive instrumentality’, which anthropologist Amanda Snellinger uses to describe the attitudes of Nepali student activists (2016:27). For these students, overcoming the corrupt interference of party hierarchy in student politics was effected by behaving ‘as if’ such interference was absent—*as if* student politics was an authentic expression of grassroots will. This acting as if was not a delusion but, in Snellinger’s words, hope as ‘pragmatic’, ‘a form of concrete social action that enables change.’ (2016:27) The students expressed this active orientation pithily in the phrase ‘herum, ke huncha’, meaning literally, ‘let’s see what it is.’ (29) Likewise, when I asked the runner Santosh Kulung Rai about how his running had progressed and what he intended for the future, he described his athletic history to date and added, ‘herum’—‘let’s see’.

This dimension of hope as ‘more than an affective state’ (Snellinger 2016:27) but rather as a practice, was evident in the ways runners acted as if their dreams of success were viable while at the same time recognising the structural limitations on their agency (which the next chapter explores). This speculative, practical approach—acting as if constraints are less limiting than they might appear and then seeing what happens—can be understood through Hans Vaihinger’s ‘philosophy of “as-if”’ (1924) which he proposes in a book of that name. For Vaihinger, much of human thought works not through the construction of accurate representations of reality but rather through fictions which are then acted upon ‘as if’ they were true. Through fictions or ‘As ifs’, working hypotheses about the world are generated which are then used to attain particular practical ends. Vaihinger’s philosophy draws our attention towards the pragmatic nature of truth claims and the instrumental aspect of human cognition both in science and everyday life. Thus, in

her article ‘Is the Law Hopeful?’ (2010), anthropologist Annelise Riles points to the way legal fictions, while consciously false, are used as means to ends—ways of achieving certain objectives. ‘[T]he legal fictions of economic law’, she writes, ‘show less concern with the adequation of law and reality than with intervening technically in economic realities.’ (2010:9–10) In the same way, runners’ optimisms are not ‘irrational’ or based in ignorance but are models geared to helping them intervene in reality.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored dedicated Nepali trail runners’ optimism. It has shown that hope for these runners was related to strong beliefs in personal agency and was a concrete practice as well as an ideal. As Riles expresses it, ‘the As if is something akin to hope’: it is a model of how things are expected to be which facilitates action. I see dedicated trail runners’ optimism in this way, as a model of and for reality; runners act according to their models, behaving as if their dreams are realisable. This playful, as-if venturing, however, is in some tension with runners’ recognition of structural constraints. It is these structural constraints or, more specifically, runners’ perceptions of them, which the next chapter explores. The preceding discussion of hope has set out how athletes mobilised optimism in the pursuit of long-term objectives. By looking at these athletes’ understandings of the constraints on their agency, the next chapter examines how this optimism was sustained despite the research participants’ own critical awareness of the limitations imposed by larger social forces.

Chapter 7: Constraints

Introduction

We were watching the livestream of the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc in a bar and climbing wall in Thamel. I was speaking to Saurav Mishra, a trail race organiser who was a keen supporter of high-performing Nepali trail runners. 'Based on your research,' he asked me, 'what do you think Nepali athletes need to do to win the UTMB?'

I had no idea, but I stuttered something about coaching, trying to sustain the conversation.

'No! Money!' He replied. 'Write that in your research.'

For Saurav, dedicated Nepali runners' fitness and knowledge of the sport was more than sufficient to make them globally successful, but they were held back by a lack of funds. Saurav was not alone in seeing it this way—many of the dedicated trail runners I spoke to pointed to economic constraints on their pursuit of elite status in the sport, linking these to political and cultural factors too. As well as low incomes, the high cost of trail running equipment and the expense of attending races, runners highlighted presumed state corruption and political neglect of sport along with a perceived cultural ignorance about athletics among Nepalis. This chapter avoids adjudicating on the reality and relative weight of these constraints. Rather than making an objective analysis of such conditions, I focus on dedicated runners' *perceptions* of these obstacles to achievement which, as the preceding chapter has shown, coexisted with hopeful orientations to the sport.

After exploring the particular perspectives of three trail runners concerning the structural constraints on their agency, I look at the way these constraints were encountered in practice. I do so through a discussion of the related issues of prize money, gendered inequality in the sport, parental expectations, and the disparity in resources and opportunities between richer and poorer countries within global trail running. All of these practical struggles speak to the question of how runners perceived their agency as powerfully constrained by forces outside their control and yet, as this thesis argues, continued to evince hope that the sport could change their lives.

Dedicated Nepali trail runners' perceptions of structural constraints on their agency were produced within a broader societal context of poor economic progress in Nepal. According to the Asia Foundation's 2022 Survey of the Nepali People, just 7.7% of Nepalis felt that employment opportunities in their local area had increased (2023:90), down from 22% in 2020 (2020:216). Between 2020 and 2022, the proportion of survey respondents expressing positivity about the country's economic outlook halved from 40.1% to 20.7% (2023:v). While my interlocutors' responses reflect concerns in some ways particular to the sport of trail running, then, their frustrations were also reflective of general patterns and commonly expressed critiques of Nepal's lack of progress on economic productivity and good governance. In response to the 2022 survey, 39.7% said that corruption was the biggest problem facing the country (2023:6), while political parties were identified as the country's most corrupt institution by respondents to Transparency International's 2017 Corruption Perception Index in Nepal. The Asia Foundation-supported surveys conducted in 2018, 2020 and 2022 found an increase in those reporting a drop in local income generation opportunities—from 7.3% in 2018 (2019:126), to 14.2% in 2020 (2020:216), to 20.3% in 2022 (2023:91). Such growing negative perceptions of Nepal as a place where economic opportunity can be found, combined with the sense that politics is corrupt and unable to deliver the needed changes, is reflected in my ethnographic material on the specific constraints faced by Nepali trail runners.

'I don't have a future': Rupesh Tamang

'I haven't been running lately,' Rupesh told me at our first interview. 'Why not?' I asked. 'I have no money for races,' he explained, 'and all my shoes are ripped, broken.' Now 21, Rupesh had been aware of constraints on his running from the very beginning but had kept on hoping anyway. 'How did you get into running?' I asked him. 'Since I was a child, this was my desire, my hope,' he replied. 'But every problem. Visa. Family problem. No money. Shoes not available…'

Rupesh's running life began with promising successes. He had finished in fifth place at his first race in 2017, the Panch Pokhari half marathon, and not long after in 2021 he won the Sindhupalchok International Trail Race on his first attempt. These results encouraged him, fostering an optimistic relation to trail running as a way of creating a future. 'I've been running for

five years,' he said. 'I'd like to continue. To become an athlete.' (Among my interlocutors, to 'become an athlete' or a *kheladi* meant making a career out of sport, not simply being a regular participant.) 'But,' he added, 'I've run out of money. And my family don't understand. So, I don't have a future. I don't have a life.' I inquired about Rupesh's goals, what this 'future' was that he had lost. 'I had a target,' he explained, 'but now I can't… I feel like, I had a target but now I don't have any money. Despite my hard work.'

When we discussed running, Rupesh was confident in his abilities but consistently pointed to his family's poverty as a factor that was holding him back. Rupesh felt that his childhood in a hill village had laid the foundation for his fitness but that his poor background constrained him. 'What is your village like?' I asked him. 'It's called Bhote Namlang in Sindhupalchok,' he told me. 'It's about 1700 meters high but if you run up you can get to 3100, 3200 meters, which is good for training. But there's no money, so it's not easy to take part in trail races. Can't race. These events are far away and I don't have the funds. For trails, my village was really good, but my family background is low. Poor.' He often used the English phrase 'family background' to explain why his engagement in trail running was so constrained: 'if your family background is good,' he said, 'it's okay, but, if not, then it's hard.' 'Not enough money?' I asked. 'Food is enough, but not enough money,' he went on. 'For farmers, life is only busy. No free time. We have to work and we make no money. We work only for food.'

Given that I had seen Rupesh at a few races, I was curious about how he managed to participate in the sport given such deprivation. 'How do you pay for races?' I asked him. 'Transport to and from, food and accommodation, et cetera…?' 'Loan,' he replied simply. Taking a loan could just about cover a race, if Rupesh could win and repay the lender with prize money. Like most dedicated Nepali trail runners, though, Rupesh was very dissatisfied with the winnings on offer at Nepali races. 'Do you win a lot of prizes?' I asked him. 'Sometimes I win.. but it's little, little,' he answered. 'Fifteen thousand, twenty thousand [Nepal rupees].'

Rupesh believed that if he was ever going to earn a meaningful amount from trail running, it wouldn't be in Nepal. His sense of barriers to success was related to his view of Nepal's marginal

place within the global sport of trail running. ‘But these days trail running in Nepal is growing,’ I suggested:

> Rupesh: It’s increasing. But prize money isn’t good. There aren’t the funds to travel to take part in races.
> Will: You have to go abroad for prizes…
> Rupesh: Yeah. But I have no sponsor. It’s hard…
> Will: Yeah. Only Sabin and Sunmaya.

I mentioned Sabin Kulung Rai and Sunmaya Budha, two athletes who were among the very few trail runners from Nepal with corporate sponsorships at that time. ‘It’s a good club they’re in,’ he replied, ‘North Face’: the two were then part of the North Face Adventure Team and had been travelling to Europe to compete in major international competitions. But Rupesh compared the situation of dedicated Nepali athletes unfavourably to that of international-level runners such as Sabin and Sunmaya. In Nepal, he told me, ‘in some places races are organised badly. Sometimes good and sometimes bad. Sometimes they won’t provide anywhere for athletes to stay. So we pay for ourselves and it’s expensive. It’s a big struggle for athletes here.’ The sense that Nepali trail running was not financially rewarding kept his eyes trained on the possibility of competing overseas. The example of Nepali runners abroad such as Sabin and Sunmaya reinforced this attitude.

Keen to understand more about his perception of the Nepal-specific obstacles to trail running success, I asked Rupesh, ‘What are the main problems facing runners in Nepal?’ ‘No money,’ he began. ‘Not possible to participate in races. Added to that, shoes. For a long race, we don’t have the bag, like, for a 50, 70, 80 kilometre race, we can’t carry our food. It’s very expensive, this stuff from overseas.’ I wondered what Rupesh thought about the local alternatives, the trainers available from Nepal-based footwear companies such as Goldstar and Magic. ‘For training they’re really not good,’ he answered. ‘But foreign shoes are too expensive. We can’t pay for them. There aren’t good shoes for trail running here [in Nepal].’ ‘So,’ I asked him, ‘you don’t have any shoes for training?’ ‘I do,’ he replied, ‘but they’re old, like, all worn out.’

Rupesh’s frustrations concerned economic limits. He perceived these constraints as being reinforced by the attitudes of others, pointing to a lack of moral support from his family, who, he said, didn’t ‘understand.’ ‘They don’t understand sport?’ I asked:

Rupesh: Yeah, they don't get sport…
Will: So, your family… what do they think about your running?
Rupesh: They don't think about it. Not interested.
Will: So… what do your family want you to do?
Rupesh: To go to a foreign country and get a job. You have to go abroad. That's the plan.
Will: Which country?
Rupesh: Arabian country… Saudi.
Will: For what work? Security or…?
Rupesh: No, waiter. I won't find work staying here [in Kathmandu]. I can't pay for training.

Rupesh perceived this 'plan' as an imposition on him. In this respect, the obligation to migrate to a Gulf country and work in the service industry was in direct contrast to his ambition to be an elite trail runner, though to his parents it was a much more realistic option. Rupesh saw his parents' perspective as based in a lack of knowledge. 'They don't know anything about the subject,' he told me. 'It's like, they don't have knowledge about running. About sport. They don't understand. There isn't awareness.'

For Rupesh, this lack of awareness seemed to be spread across Nepali society, high and low—among ordinary Nepalis, there was ignorance of sport, while among politicians and bureaucrats, there was corruption. 'How can the situation [of Nepali sport] be changed?' I asked him.

Rupesh: Government, district, municipality, all should give support. Road running, football athletes, they help with other sports but it's little, little. 15–20,000 rupees per month is not enough for food and accommodation.
Will: Why doesn't Nepal's government support sport?
Rupesh: Our government isn't good. There's a budget for athletes, but they don't use it. They eat it themselves.[60]
Will: Corruption?
Rupesh: Yeah, corruption.

His comments reflected a view, common among my interlocutors, that the state was unfairly neglectful of mountain runners, which often came with the belief that trail runners in other countries get financial support from their governments. Rupesh's remarks highlighted constraints both specific to him and general to Nepali trail runners. Despite Rupesh's perception of obstacles

[60] Rupesh used the phrase 'afno kanche' meaning, literally, 'they eat it for themselves', which refers to embezzlement. I have retained the expression in this English translation. The phrase is a pun on 'afno manche', which means literally 'own people' and refers to a commonplace form of social reciprocity in Nepal by which material aid and social advancement are achieved through personal and familial connections. The practice is frequently criticised as a kind of nepotism or corruption responsible for Nepal's lack of progress on metrics of inclusion, equality and democracy. See Subedi 2014.

to making a future through trail running, he repeatedly, as Berlant phrases it, 'returned to the scene of fantasy'. His hope and desire to become an elite runner were not abandoned, but endangered. Dedicated runners' recognition of strong constraints on their agency often led not to resignation but to attempts to work around these constraints—in Rupesh's case, through loans and gifts. (I became a part of this process when I was able to donate a pair of trail running shoes to Rupesh.) Through taking on loans and requesting gifts, Rupesh sought to circumvent the economic constraints on his running in the bet that, in the long run, the gamble might pay off in the form of a running career.

'If I wear those, I won't have confident level': Tashi Tamang

'Foreign shoes are expensive,' trail runner Tashi Tamang told me. 'Trail shoes 60,000, road 40,000. Nepali rupees. Very expensive… so I have to run in Goldstar,' (a Nepali brand), he explained. 'What are they like?' I asked the 23-year-old runner from Sindhupalchok. 'Goldstar are okay, but…' he hesitated, looking for the right word. 'Not confident. Not a confident level. I will slip.' Was it the design of the shoes which gave runners confidence or their symbolic associations? 'In Nepal,' Tashi claimed, 'sport is not valued.' Elaborating, he explained that 'there aren't facilities here for athletes. So Nepali athletes go abroad and they stay abroad. It's not valued here,' he repeated.

Tashi's view that sport was not valued in Nepal, common among the dedicated runners, may have shaped his attitudes towards the local shoe companies. By contrast, a German trail runner living in Nepal told me that Goldstar shoes were fine and that he had run long ultras in them. But whatever the real merits of Nepali trainers versus foreign brands, the perception had practical consequences. Whatever the physical properties of the footwear, Tashi's belief that he was missing out by not having these expensive shoes affected his 'confidence'.

Eroded by economic constraints already, Tashi's confidence was further limited by his assessment of the status of running (and sport in general) within Nepal. 'The athletes aren't valued,' he told me. 'The government aren't interested and there aren't facilities. And the prize money is so little.

In Nepal, after one or two years, national players[61] go to out-country. Because they don't get support in this country. So they leave. Hopeless. It's politics…corruption.' Not only was sport 'not valued', it could only be a 'focus' for a minority, Tashi felt. 'It's not the focus[62] here,' he said. 'The ones who are focused are the army. Because they have a club. But us civil athletes, we do it ourselves, run ourselves. Just, other people tell us about races, then we take part. It's like that.' The lack of an infrastructure and networks of social connection to support athletes, other than those in the Nepal Army, Nepal Police and Armed Police Force, was frustrating to many of my interlocutors. 'Impossible for a civilian to win,' another runner had said to me after a road race in Kathmandu. Tashi shared the same cynicism. 'It's easy for the army runners,' Tashi told me. 'Just, morning training, then afternoon sleep, then evening training…' While Tashi aspired to be an elite trail runner, nothing in his social environment would let the sport become a 'focus' like it was for the army runners. I wondered if he might join the army. 'I'll try,' he suggested, but went on:

> Tashi: See, I have a family problem. Low economic condition. So I need to go to out-country[63] and help my mum and dad. My brothers are overseas.
> Will: Your older brothers are abroad?
> Tashi: Yes—Malaysia and USA.
> Will: Doing what work?
> Tashi: Security guard and office manager. They are married with children already.
> Will: So, like them, you have to work and send your parents money?
> Tashi: Yeah. My mother and father, money… they don't give to me, I give to them.
> Will: You have to look after them in future?
> Tashi: I have to look after them a lot in future. Mum and dad are Bhagwan [God]. I'm happy. They taught me everything.

The 'focus', for Tashi, was earning money overseas to support his mother and father. As with Rupesh, his parents were more interested in this 'plan' than any trail running ambitions. His obligation to them was paramount, a socially sanctioned purpose in life which overrode his personal desires. The same compulsion brought him from his rural village down to Kathmandu, a migratory journey shared by most of the runners I knew. He was still engaged in farm work for much of the year, however, and wasn't yet able to support himself in the city. This limited his engagement in trail running even more: 'There are a lot of races but I can't go to most of them unless I'm coming from Kathmandu,' he explained. 'When I'm in Kathmandu, I can do training, but

---

[61] 'Player' means athlete in Nepali parlance. Therefore a 'national player' is a nationally ranked athlete.

[62] Tashi used the English word 'focus'.

[63] The phrase 'out-country' means foreign country.

in the village it doesn't work. I have to cut grass, plough, et cetera. No time.'

While he wished that trail running could be a means of improving his conditions, Tashi's mere engagement in the sport was precipitous. It was only by being in Kathmandu that he was able to take part, but his situation in the city was temporary. Being there was one step towards moving to *bidesh* for work, as his older brothers had done—a logic that was already in motion and left little room for running.

'No option': Sumnima Sunuwar

Many of the dedicated runners were caught between the arduousness of village life and the precarity of urban living. Both of these were bad options, encouraging the desire to leave Nepal altogether. Sumnima explained, 'it's only farming in my village,' the high-altitude settlement of Khiji Chandeswori in Okhaldhunga. 'No option,' she said, 'Just farming, farming.' Sumnima described conditions in her birthplace as constraining the opportunity to run; she listed these arduous and time-consuming activities: 'Carrying grass, ploughing with buffalo, fertilising with manure, milking buffalo, planting corn, potato, cutting grass, carrying manure, busy, busy, lots of work. *Melapat*[64], grass- and firewood-carrying, work. Any time, busy. Free time, no.' The village environment allowed little time to engage in training activities, and, moreover, was limiting in terms of economic opportunity and lacking in some basic necessities. Sumnima explained, 'in the village, no income. Not enough clean water, either.' Conditions there had taken a toll on her family: 'My father doesn't work,' Sumnima told me. 'He's paralysed. Mother is a farmer. There are eleven people in my family in total. The rest, they're all unemployed. It's all hard.'

Given these circumstances, Sumnima chose to move to Kathmandu, like many young Nepalis. In the city, however, were other constraints. 'In Nepal, if you have a low educational level, they look down on you at work,' she explained. 'And it's a lot of labour for little money.' Sumnima had been working as a waiter at a recently opened climbing wall in Gokarna, Kathmandu, before deciding to leave because of the poor working conditions and low pay. 'I left my job at Gateway Adventure

[64] Melapat refers to the exchange of labour, a form of mutual aid.

Hub,' she told me. 'The job wasn't good—they abused me, looked down on me. I worked from 10–9 every day for 8000 rupees per month. I had to walk to work from Sundarijal[65] and walk home at night too. It was a big struggle, so I left.'

Interlocutors often responded to constraints by seeking to escape, since transformation of social conditions seemed improbable. Thus, having escaped Khiji Chandeswori, Sumnima had to escape her job in Kathmandu too. For Sumnima, her 'low educational level' was key to her constrained opportunities and her vulnerability to exploitation, but resources for giving political expression to her dissatisfaction were limited: proletarian life in Kathmandu, in general, means seeking an elsewhere, not seeking transformation.

Even so, mobility was hardly unconstrained for my informants. After finishing her job at Gateway, Sumnima described her situation as 'stuck at home'. Only after receiving financial support from a benefactor—an older Nepali trail runner based overseas—did she resume training and look hopefully towards competing in an ultra race in Thailand. Racing was expensive, especially abroad, which is where, Sumnima thought, the competitions of real significance which could really help her make a future were taking place. She explained, 'We need gear for an overseas race. Shoes, flight, bag, water bottle, poles. All these things, they're not available in Nepal. Not possible, it's very expensive. Comfortable bag not available. But if an athlete can get a sponsor, it's easy, it's possible to give a good performance. Sometimes we can get support from a senior athlete. Otherwise, we don't have the income for gear.' Like Rupesh, who borrowed money and asked for help from others in the trail running community, Sumnima sought help from other athletes as a way of working around the economic constraints she faced.

These financial constraints could sometimes distort the act of running itself, such as when runners participated in events purely to win prize money. Sumnima ran the 2023 Sindhupalchok Trail Race despite suffering from a '*jwaro*' (a fever), for example. 'Don't run 60 kilometres if you're sick,' I gently suggested. 'Money!' she exclaimed by way of explanation. She finished the race in first place, seemingly unwell—pale, sniffling—but securing her cheque for ten thousand rupees. In this

[65] Sundarijal is a village which is technically not a part of Kathmandu Metropolitan City but sits at the edge of the Valley's urban sprawl, and is about 5 kilometres from Gokarna by road.

case, economic limitations did not curtail her participation in the sport but affected its purpose and meaning. Did Sumnima enjoy running while sick? Another athlete, a runner almost twenty years her senior, upbraided her after the race for her finishing time. To him, there was something dishonourable about running purely for position. Because there were so few women participants that year, however, competing while ill seemed like a rational decision to Sumnima. Optimism thus became cruel. While running was seen as a way of making a future, the practice of trail running could become distorted and degraded by economic constraints.

Running is cruel

As Sumnima's experience of racing while sick exemplifies, the objective of making money at times took precedence over other important features of the sport such as health and enjoyment. In situations such as this, the promise of extrinsic financial rewards overrode metrics such as pleasure, training effect and physical wellbeing. Runners who raced excessively, risking injury, were in a similar predicament—sacrificing, to some extent, their long-term durability for the perceived necessity of earning money in the sport. During a rest break as part of a group training run in Gokarna, Sabin described his upcoming race schedule, to which Mira—the more experienced athlete—voiced disapproval and counselled him to be careful. 'No, just do one, you'll get injured,' she said. 'I got injured because I overdid it. So did Anita. It's important to *plan* your training.' Pemba pointed to his injured ankle as if to substantiate Mira's point.

At other times, economic constraints prevented participation altogether. If runners judged an event too expensive to attend or their equipment insufficient to take part, races would be missed. Training could be shelved entirely if the burdens of work, either village- or wage-labour, were too great to allow time for running or if disposable income was too meagre to pay for shoes and other necessities. Rupesh's hiatus from the sport due to a lack of footwear, described above, exemplifies the way in which deprivation restricted engagement in trail running.

As Mira's counsel suggests, many of these economic constraints were made evident by the ways runners dealt with the issue of prize money. The presence or absence of a monetary prize was often a make-or-break question when runners were deciding whether to join a race or not, and the

amount of the prize was a topic frequently explored in the conversations I had with athletes. Examining how runners talked about prize money, then, shows up some of the material limits to their agency in seeking to build up their profiles as trail runners and realise their ambitions of achieving elite status. The next section explores this issue at length, using the issue of prize money as a focal point to indicate the broader economic constraints shaping Nepali runners' engagement in the sport.

The prize is the price

For many dedicated Nepali trail runners, prize money was a powerful incentive for racing; a lack of prize money was often met with disapproval and a disinclination to take part in a race. For example, while we were discussing a 35-kilometre trail race in Kathmandu which did not award prize money, the runner Santosh Kulung Rai tersely expressed his opinion with the formula, 'prize chaina, manche chaina': no prize, no people. 'Only foreigners,' I joked to Santosh. Prabin, usually a podium-finisher, similarly said of this race, 'no prize', when I asked him if he wanted to attend. As it turned out, Santosh was right. The race we were talking about had a relatively low attendance, and of the ten who participated only a few were from the category I call dedicated runners. The rest were either foreigners or Nepali hobbyists, out for a good time but uninterested in competition. Runner Pemba Tamang reflected in an interview that, 'without a good prize, Nepalis don't run.' Actually, some Nepalis did—but the dedicated trail runners, largely *janajati* and born in rural, hill areas, did not (at least in my fieldwork experience).

This interest in prize money was largely conditioned by dedicated runners' conditions of relative economic deprivation, due to which the activity of running had to be justified by some reference to financial gain. As Sabin Kulung Rai told me before the 2023 Khiji Demba Ultra in Okhaldhunga district, 'the prize money is less than it used to be, and it's so expensive to attend these races.' By contrast—as Pemba implied—foreigners took little interest in prize money, not only because they were unlikely to win but also because the races were relatively affordable for them and because they tended to already have reliable sources of income, so viewed the sport as a hobby rather than a money-maker. For dedicated Nepali trail runners, however, prize money could make

running worthwhile by compensating for the cost of the entry fee, as well as, when attending events further afield, contributing to travel and accommodation costs.

The prospect of prize money was such a draw that posters advertising races often had the prize amounts prominently displayed. The poster for the Bhojpur Trail Race which I saw hanging above a storefront in Dharan, for example, announced, 'Total Prize: Rs. 3,41,000' and 'Prizes for 37 runners'.[66] (This was remarkable to me since I had come from a running context in the UK, that of English fell running, in which it is a rarity for significant prize money to be awarded.) This emphasis on prize money in the calculation of whether or not to participate in a race was so strong that it affected even those runners who were not in contention for the podium. Nisha Chaudhary, for example, a novice runner hailing from the Terai, keenly asked me about the reward amounts for the Stupa to Stupa race (an event in Kathmandu). I reassured her that she was under no pressure to win, but she retorted, 'if I don't win, then all the money will be wasted,' referring to the entry fee as well as the cost of travel and accommodation for which I and a few other runners had helped her to pay. Moreover, prize money was an issue of some interest not only to runners themselves but to runners' friends and family members (as I explore further below): for example, a few days before the Jumla to Rara Ultra, Nisha took a phone call from an excited school friend back in Kailali (a district in the Terai), who demanded to know how much prize money was on offer.

The question of prize money arose not only when it was an inducement to run but also when runners would cite the lack or insufficiency of prize money as the reason for not attending races. For ultra-runner Bhola Tharu, the insufficient prize money in many Nepali races encouraged him to travel to India to compete. 'The third time I ran the Annapurna 100, I came second,' Bhola told me. 'How much was the prize?' I asked. 'No prize,' he said. '*Dherai duhkha lagyo.*[67] So after that I went to India to race instead. The prizes are very good there, much better.' Similarly, Sunkala Rai told me that she was not attending the 2023 Jumla to Rara Ultra because it was 'too expensive to

[66] The 2023 Bhojpur Trail Race was an event with two different races, a 55km and a 10km, with many different prizes according to age and gender category.

[67] This phrase means, roughly, 'what a shame'.

get there, the transport and accommodation are too much. And it's a tough journey by *gadi*[68]*;* it takes too long. Even if I win the race, the prize won't cover the cost of travelling there. The fee for the gadi is 5000 rupees and it takes two and a half days to get there.' The financial costs of racing could thus be too much for dedicated trail runners, even if they were in contention for prize money. For women trail runners, moreover, inequity in prize amounts was a further stumbling block.

Inequity

Indeed, the broader interest in prize money was reflected in female runners' frustration with gendered inequity in prize amounts. When I asked ultra trail runner Kamala Rai if participation in trail running was harder for women than men, she explained, 'distance and prize are different sometimes. They make women run less distance[69] and the prize is also less. In some places, even, the distance is the same but the prize is still less for the women. These days, in many places, I have struggled against this issue but many girl players don't speak out against it.'

This situation is changing—almost all of the trail races I attended during my fieldwork awarded equal prize amounts for men and women. Nonetheless inequality in prize amounts was a frequent enough occurrence and was accorded enough significance by informants that it came up in conversation on several occasions. Kamala cited the Guerrilla Trail Race, for example, with its 46-kilometre route for men and 34-kilometre route for women as an example of ongoing inequality. For the men, the first place prize was 100,000 rupees while for women it was 60,000. While this instance of inequity was frustrating to Kamala, since the proportional amount for the women's prize would have been around 73,000 rupees, there were more egregious cases. The Annapurna

---

[68] Gadi can mean bus or car or jeep. I am unsure which she was referring to here and she may have needed to take a combination of these modes of transport to get to Jumla from Bhojpur, her home district.

[69] As Kamala notes, women and men were sometimes segregated into different distances, the implication being that women and men are suited to different challenges. Such practices were normal in the early decades of UK fell and mountain running (Chilton 2023) with women only allowed to compete in the British Fell Running Championships from 1979 (Ross 2020). In rarer cases in Nepal, some running events had a separate distance for middle-aged women, something I have never come across in the UK. Thus local perceptions of age, gender and physical capacity were expressed in the way races were designed and prize money awarded.

Marathon, for example, awarded women half as much money as men for the same race distance, paying out 150,000 rupees to the first male and 75,000 rupees to the first female.

Likewise, professional ultra runner Mira Rai expressed her discontent with inequality in prize amounts. About a Nepal Army-organised trail race in Sindhupalchok, Mira told me that, 'they asked me to send [the runners from my NGO] but because the male and female prize money was different, I said no.' I told her that I had seen a few races with such differences in prize money, to which she replied, 'this is the culture here.' On this 'culture', the social media manager of ultra runner Rita Rai put it to me that, 'categories for women are considered less significant, so there's less prize money. Women's races are less highlighted and covered in news media compared to men's. It's quite unfair.' She added, 'women … are finishing the race faster than some men. But it's still considered less significant.' The inequality in prize money and in the organisation of events was not only seen as unjust but was understood by many to constrain women's participation. At the finish of an uphill-only 12 kilometre race in Pokhara, the female winner Anita Rai expressed her frustration with the unequal prize amounts. There were very few women participants at that race, though not to a degree unusual by Nepali standards. 'There aren't many women here,' Anita pointed out. She suggested, simply, 'if the prize money was more, they would come.'

Both the unequal prize amounts and the unequal distances meant that many women runners perceived their engagement in the sport and thus their means of building a future from it as especially constrained. This reinforced the sense that while a trail running life could be initiated in Nepal, trail running *futures* were made elsewhere. It also meant that the running life in Nepal could be frustrating and regarded as insufficiently rewarding.

Pressures on runners to earn prize money were also generated by family members. In general, money earned from trail running, whether in the form of prize money or from other sources such as commercial sponsorships, was seen not in a purely individualistic or acquisitive light but as a means of reproducing the kin network. Thus the desire to earn money from trail running was bound up with obligations to parents, as has been previously discussed (chapter 5).

Money as a sport negotiator

Intertwined with the goal of earning money and supporting one's family materially through trail running was the fact that such monetary prizes could also be a means of *legitimating* the activity of trail running in the eyes of potentially disapproving elders. The preceding chapter (7) argued that, unlike Bhandari's interviewees, runners did not use 'religion as a leisure negotiator' (2020); but, as will be further evidenced below, they *did* use 'money as a sport negotiator', so to speak. 'If I win, they like my running. If I don't, they don't,' as Sarita Rai put it. 'If you bring in money,' she continued, 'everyone loves you.' As discussed in chapter 7, runners dedicated their time to the sport despite, in some cases, familial and community disapproval. This disapproval, however, could be counteracted by runners winning prize money—in this way, the pressure to earn prize money was an effect of economic constraints which was socially reinforced.

In media interviews, for example, sponsored trail runner Sunmaya Budha has explained that her family's initial skepticism about her pursuit of the sport began to change once she was winning races and earning impressive rewards in the sport, though initially they were baffled that she would compete in races without the chance of winning prize money. (Ref) Similarly, ultra-runner Rita Rai's social media manager explained to me that, despite some initial skepticism, '[the views of her neighbours in the village in Bhojpur] changed, after learning about [Rita] and the news about her participating and winning Bhojpur trail race', for which she won 341,000 rupees. As this example indicates, success in trail races and the money that often comes with it could have a powerful effect on the opinions of family and community members. While the parents of Rita and her sister Kamala (also a runner) had always supported their running, other residents of their natal village stigmatised the activity, though their attitudes shifted when the two sisters showed that they could win races and earn significant prize money in doing so.

For Nepali runners, then, money was not only what Zharkevich calls a 'substance of relatedness' (2019:1)—that is, a means of supporting kin and local community—but also a tactic of legitimation. Prize money was a means by which trail runners could legitimate their engagement with the sport in the eyes of family and community members. For this reason, the

desire for prize money has to be seen in relation to the desire to socially legitimate the practice of trail running. Money had a persuasive power which made winning cash prizes a particularly important way for young Nepali runners to secure the respect of family members and others in the community who might otherwise be skeptical.

Inequality

Frustrations with economic constraints were often expressed alongside comparisons with the condition of athletes from more affluent countries. ‘For Nepali athletes, it’s hard,’ trail runner Keshav Thami told me. He echoed what most of my dedicated runner interlocutors expressed when he said, ’We don’t have the shoes, the bags, the watches. They’re not available here or they’re too expensive. And the government doesn’t support us.’ He also articulated dissatisfaction with the quality of organisation at races in Nepal, which were the only ones he could afford to attend (though he aspired to race abroad). At a 2023 mountain marathon in Pokhara, Keshav took some wrong turns due to course markings being absent. The day afterwards he was still upset about it and said to me, ‘the race organiser didn’t apologise. He should! This race was expensive for me,’ he complained, referring to the combined cost of the entry fee, bus journey, food and accommodation.

Keshav’s sense that Nepali athletes were at a competitive disadvantage vis a vis runners from richer countries was played out during the event when he and Rupesh came across an Israeli runner who was now in first place thanks to their navigational error. ‘Where is the checkpoint?’ they asked him in English, since not visiting all the checkpoints would result in disqualification. According to Keshav, the Israeli runner ignored them and continued running. Though Keshav and Rupesh ultimately found the checkpoint, they finished behind the foreign competitor who won the race. ‘He had GPX,’ Keshav said, referring to the runner’s watch which he could use to navigate regardless of course markings (which sometimes go missing). Very few of the dedicated Nepali runners have such watches and almost all of them rely on course markings to follow a race route

rather than using a GPX file.[70] 'He was so lucky', Keshav said of the Israeli winner of the Fishtail 42K. The situation seemed to me like a microcosm of the global inequality which defines trail running, in which Nepali runners struggle to compete with runners from affluent countries who can more easily afford running kit and technology.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion of prizes has indicated how the pressure to earn money shapes the experience of running in Nepal for dedicated Nepali trail runners. While these athletes' *dreams* were built around becoming professional runners with a corporate sponsorships who would compete in internationally significant trail races overseas, the reality for most dedicated runners was one of constrained opportunities to participate in races, with prize money figuring strongly in their calculations about whether or not to participate. Financial constraints meant that the sport was required to justify itself monetarily, both to runners themselves and skeptical family members.

Part one of the ethnographic chapters has considered extrinsic matters—not only the long-term rewards runners saw as coming from engagement in the sport (chapter 7) but the external economic constraints seen as holding back their engagement with it (this chapter, 8). Part two seeks to understand what the *experience* of running itself was like for dedicated Nepali trail runners. I do this by firstly considering how the village-to-city migration made by so many of the dedicated runners shapes the sensory, emotional and aesthetic experience of running on trails, in both pleasurable and uncomfortable ways.

[70] Few of the dedicated Nepali runners have watches which can display GPX files since they are too expensive and rarely stocked in shops in Nepal. A phone can display a GPX file on a free app, but having to hold a phone by hand or keep in one's pocket rather than in a running bag, as foreigners and more affluent runners can generally afford to do, is distracting and uncomfortable.

Chapter 8: From village to city

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the perspectives of dedicated Nepali trail runners on the differences between rural and urban areas. Most of the runners I interviewed were originally from hilly rural places and had relocated to Kathmandu. While many of these athletes expressed a preference for village areas' mountain trails and clean air, they explained their movement to urban areas as a search for employment, education and superior facilities. There was an ambivalence concerning rural-urban contrasts: while they felt that migrating to the cities was a necessity, they at the same time favoured certain aspects of rural life. Moreover, among dedicated trail runners, frustration with forms of environmental degradation in the Kathmandu Valley encouraged hopes both for social transformation within Nepal and for movement to places perceived as doing trail management better. The dream of achieving the good life through trail running was thus sustained by experiences of city life as well as concerns about urbanisation's effects on the trails of the Kathmandu valley. After presenting findings concerning these perceptions of rural-urban contrasts and environmental shifts, firstly through the reflections of three trail runner interviewees and then through a broader description of dedicated runners' environmental perceptions in practice, I situate this empirical material within the anthropological scholarship on changing relations between communities and environments in the context of increasing rural outmigration.

'Due to compulsion only': Kamala Rai

There was no one who hated Kathmandu more than Kamala.[71] 'It used to be called Yalakhom,' she insisted. 'That's its real name. Before the Brahmins came up from India and took over everything.' An ultra runner as well as an activist with the ethnic political party known as the Mongol National Organisation, Kamala saw the capital as a citadel of the oppressor caste and felt somewhat alienated there. All of its problems, from the rubbish-strewn streets to the pollutants in the air to the selfishness of the people, Kamala tended to pin on the high-caste Hindus who ruled

[71] I mean this figuratively.

it. To Kamala, the cultural influence of the Brahmins and Chhetris seemed to ebb beyond the Kathmandu Valley, and in her village in the Eastern district of Khotang, she told me, 'it's very different. Everyone supports one another, while in the city they're selfish. We've got organic food, the weather is good. And it's a peaceful environment.' So, I wondered, why was she here, in filthy 'KTM'?

'Due to compulsion only, I live in the city,' Kamala told me. 'I don't like Kathmandu but I have to live here. Because in Nepal, in village areas, there are no facilities. There aren't roads. No hospital, no school, no college. The schools, hospitals, colleges in village areas, they're not good. So people have to come to live in Kathmandu. For studying, for work.' Having claimed that villagers were generally less selfish than urbanites, she noted that road-building efforts were proceeding slowly in her village due to the corruption of local politicians: 'they took all the government's money for themselves,' she explained. Nonetheless, what she loved about her 'dear Khotang', as she called it, was not difficult to deduce from her online posts—videos of villagers dancing, photos of organic local vegetables, and footage of her running in the hills with the description (in English) 'beautiful nature'. At an altitude of around 1800 meters and with plenty of steep trails to explore, Kamala's village was an ideal training environment, or so she told me. Only 'compulsion' took her away from her home district of Khotang to live in Kathmandu, where the *sewa subida* ('services and facilities') were better. 'I don't like Kathmandu,' she told me, 'but my family is here.' The compulsion to move was a general condition, Kamala suggested, one felt by all young Nepalis from rural areas. But for athletes, she thought, this came with its drawbacks:

> Kamala: For athletes, there's good, organic food available in the village areas. But when people come from the village areas to live here, life's hard. Athletes have to eat fruit and vegetables treated with chemicals. For diet, and for training, the village is better. Kathmandu isn't so good for that.
> Will: The food in Kathmandu isn't as good?
> Kamala: Not as good as in the villages. It's treated with chemicals. And the meat… it's not fresh like in the villages. And the eggs aren't local. So… they're not good. [She laughs] That's what the city is like. That's what Kathmandu's like.

During one of my many illnesses, Kamala declared, 'my dream is, when I become leader, I'll make [Kathmandu] a clean city and you'll be able to come here and not get sick.' She encouraged me to stay in Pokhara, a cleaner environment, and warned, 'Kathmandu is dirty. If you stay there too much you'll die. I don't like Kathmandu,' Kamala continued, 'but I have to live here. The city is so

dirty because Kathmandu's leaders are all Brahmins. Bad people. If Mongols ran this country, it would be a much better place.' The racial classification 'Mongol' refers, broadly speaking, to Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups, most of whom are in Nepal nowadays understood to be hill janajati. (Hangen 2005:60) To Kamala, the environmental differences between Kathmandu and the rural villages were homologous with political inequality; being in Kathmandu meant being exposed not only to PM2.5[72] but to a version of Nepal she rejected. The bahun[73] didn't care about environmental health, and they didn't care about sport either, especially not trail running, she claimed: 'Only once we have Mongol leaders can sport advance in Nepal,' she told me. Ethnic, political and environmental distinctions thus mapped onto each other. In Kamala's view, trail runners, like lahure, were all 'Mongol', while the Brahmins lacked 'himmat' (courage) and were 'lazy'.

This connection was so strong for Kamala that when I asked her why she thought the 'Mongols' were disproportionately represented among high performing trail runners, she answered with a rendition of history. 'In history, before,' she said, 'there was a Kirat kingdom in Nepal. Then, people came from nearby countries—from Pakistan, from India. And so the Kirat kingdoms had to move to the East and the hills, which is where Mongols can be found nowadays. But the hills, compared to here [Kathmandu], are a very harsh place. Going uphill, downhill, people who live there from birth, it makes them strong. The climate makes them strong. It's very clean there, and the food and drink is organic. For that reason they're strong…that's the way it is.' 'So, their childhoods are tough?', I asked. 'Yes, yes,' she replied. 'In the hills it's hard… while going around collecting grass and firewood, going to the jungle, it's all exercise.' She added jokingly, 'there's no need for training!' The movement from village to city, for Kamala, was a dislocation not only from a cleaner environment but a partial alienation from a proud historical legacy.[74] Emphasising the long

[72] PM2.5 is a pollutant.

[73] Bahun is the Nepali word for Brahmin.

[74] In another conversation, Kamala told me, 'the country wasn't originally called Nepal. It was Limbuwan, Khambuwan, Kirat, et cetera. We need to write a new constitution, make a new country, because the current one is written by Brahmins for their own power; they took rights and independence away from *janajatis*. We are the indigenous people. Even the Nepali language is really a Chhetri language and we don't speak our language now, only our parents speak it, a little bit.'

pedigree of the so-called ‘Mongol’ runners’ talents, she explained,

‘This is our inheritance. It comes from our ancestors. Mongol people, their lives are hard, they can do hard things. That’s why we talk about ‘bir Gorkhali.’[75] It’s unrecognised, but Mongol people can work hard, they can endure pain.’

‘It gave me stamina’: Dinesh Tamang

Like Kamala, Dinesh credited his rural childhood for his mountain running ability. A 27-year-old Nepal Army runner, Dinesh explained, ‘in my birthplace, [a hill village in Ramechhap], it’s very hilly, up and down. I had to run to school. For that reason my stamina is very good for up and downhill and on narrow, uneven foot trails.’ As well as running to school, Dinesh had to work in the village in the morning, ‘cutting wood,’ he said, ‘cutting grass, carrying things.’ ‘Life was hard when I was a child,’ he told me. ‘Work was more of a focus than school. But this has given me good stamina and muscles.’ I wondered if Dinesh understood the effect of rural modes of livelihood on fitness in more general terms, so I asked him, ‘why, in particular, are so many of the good runners Tamang, Rai…’ and before I could finish my ethnic catalogue, he interrupted with ‘Rai, Sherpa, Tamang, Mongols,’ echoing Kamala’s racial classification. To Dinesh the term ‘Mongol’[76] seemed to mean ‘hill people’. ‘They live in the hills since they were small,’ he continued. ‘That’s why they can do it. Difficult trails, rocky terrain, Nepalis are very good at going downhill. It’s their environment. They don’t fear.’

Dinesh’s identification of ‘Mongols’ as hill people and hill people as Nepalis confused me at first. But read as a statement about what Nepal *should* be, it made sense: for Dinesh, like many of my interlocutors, Nepalis from the hill villages, understood as especially tough and brave, were the essence of Nepal. That a question about a specific subset of Nepalis led to a statement about Nepalis in general, then, reflected Dinesh’s style of patriotism in which archetypal Nepaliness was

---

[75] ‘Bir Gorkhali’, a patriotic expression, means ‘the brave people of Gorkha’. Gorkha is an archaic term for Nepal.

[76] I rarely used the term ‘mongol’, but if an interlocutor used it first, I might then use it in response to them.

equated with being ‘Mongol’ and from the hills. Trail running was an expression of *Nepalipan*[77] as well as pride in his ethnic and regional background. Dinesh thus fused his nationalism with a continued, affective attachment to the environment of his natal village.

As well as remarking on the technical terrain, Dinesh attributed his fitness to the altitude of his natal village at roughly 2800 meters. Having won races such as the Annapurna Marathon and the Everest Marathon, he sensed he was especially good at high-altitude challenges. His childhood which was spent living, working and running to school at that elevation was ‘very good for heart and lungs,’ he told me. Running at high altitude was, he said, ‘very easy’ for him. He thus saw his running capacity as partly the product of his childhood. When I asked Dinesh why he preferred trail to road races, he reiterated the importance of childhood physical activities. ‘My birthplace in Ramechhap district, it’s very hilly there,’ he explained. ‘It’s that kind of place. During my childhood, to get to school, it was such a long way, uphill and downhill, every day. On foot it would take three hours to get there. There wasn’t enough time, so I had to run. And that built up my stamina.’ During a run together, Dinesh invited me to stay in his village for two weeks’ training, insisting that it would be good for me. ‘After two weeks in my village,’ he said, ‘you will be very strong.’ His village was the ideal training environment, Dinesh suggested.

Living in Sundarijal, at the edge of Kathmandu’s sprawl and close to the Shivapuri Nagarjuna National Park, Dinesh seemed to have found a balance between running trails and modern amenities. When we ran together on what he called the ‘army track’, meaning the trail often used by Nepal Army runners for training, I observed the mix of agriculture, new houses, shops and snack bars in this rapidly changing outskirt of Kathmandu. As the population was growing, farming was continuing to give way to housing and small businesses. ‘Do you like it here?’ I asked Dinesh. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘The drinking water supply system is best here. Plus the showering water. Because of that facility, I live here. It’s important for athletes, to drink enough water, to wash.’ He pointed in the direction of the Sundarijal[78] water treatment plant, the biggest in Nepal. ‘Plus,’ he added, ‘for training, it’s a good environment. There are trails very close by. The jungle is close by, so it’s not too warm. So I like living in Sundarijal.’

---

[77] *Nepalipan* is the Nepali word for ‘Nepaliness’.

[78] Appropriately, Sundarijal literally means ‘beautiful water’ in Nepali.

I wondered if Dinesh saw any drawbacks to being in the city, or if there were features of his natal village which he preferred to Kathmandu. 'For training,' he said, 'the village is good. It's a quiet environment,[79] not busy. There aren't cars, we have good cold weather conditions, it's high altitude. Also, there aren't so many steps in the village like there are in Kathmandu. It's more like traditional foot trails.' Nonetheless, Dinesh also marked out the lack of facilities as a limiting feature of village life. 'Nowadays we don't have many facilities, the bazaar isn't nearby, and good food isn't available.' This last comment surprised me since many of the runners I interviewed had been very positive about the food available in their natal villages. He continued,

> in the village, we just eat whatever's been cooked—dal bhat, chickpeas, eggs. But chocolates,[80] bars, aren't available. Fruits aren't available. You get whatever grows according to the season in the village. It's like that. Apples, bananas aren't available, because of the cold. Whatever we can grow there, we can eat. As for food, it's Nepali food—dal bhat, tarkari [vegetables], chickpeas, eggs, potatoes.

Almost shocked, I asked, 'so the Kathmandu diet is better for training?' 'For training,' he said, 'the village is good. But for food, for fruit, juice, Kathmandu is better.' By contrast with Kamala, Dinesh preferred the Kathmandu foodscape, given the availability of high energy snacks such as fruit juice and chocolate bars. Juice was an important energy source for Dinesh, who regularly hung out at a fruit shop near the Dasarath Rangasala (Kathmandu's athletics track) after training. He did mention that the village food was 'organic', but that didn't seem as important for him as it did for many other interviewees. Dinesh even liked to eat at Kentucky Fried Chicken sometimes, or one of Kathmandu's many knock-offs.[81] While he liked the cold conditions in his village and preferred its foot trails to the roads and stone steps of the Kathmandu Valley, the city's modern amenities, his job in the Nepal Army and even small conveniences such as the availability of energy-dense snacks were cited as factors which made Kathmandu preferable to his *ghar.*[82] Living in Sundarijal

---

[79] Dinesh used the term *batabaran* here, the Nepali word for environment.

[80] Among Nepalis, generally speaking, the word chocolate means any sweet snack other than the traditional sweet foods which are known as *mithai*. The term 'chocolate' thus includes foods like Skittles and Menthos, for example.

[81] Genuine Kentucky Fried Chicken branches were comparatively rare. There were many similarly named restaurants, including Kathmandu Fried Chicken, Krispy Krunchy Fried Chicken, et cetera.

[82] *Ghar* is a Nepali word meaning 'home' which is often used by rural-urban migrants to refer to their village. Dinesh used this word (as did many of my interlocutors), indicating a sense of ongoing connection to the place of his birth.

on the outer edge of the city seemed to be a kind of compromise, close to mountain trails while connected to the city proper and modern amenities such as the water treatment plant.

Moreover, living in Kathmandu meant relative ease of transport to competitions outside of the valley. Dinesh told me that while he preferred trail running, he ran road races during the 'off season', seeking prize money. Although he preferred the trails, there was an economic incentive to competing on the roads. In some road races, Dinesh could earn up to 60,000 rupees in prize money—twice his monthly salary. Many such races were in the Kathmandu Valley, so they cost him little financially. Thus, while Dinesh retained an affective attachment to his natal village and preferred its climate and trails, employment and facilities anchored him in Kathmandu. In this way Dinesh's understanding of rural-urban contrasts was shaped by an attitude of ambivalence.

'Don't go to village areas': Nabina Rai

Ambivalence about rural life was shared by many of my interviewees. Nabina Rai railed against the rubbish problem in Kathmandu while also bemoaning that 'village people don't understand running,' as she put it. A 21-year-old trail runner from a village near Lukla in Solukhumbu, she even counselled me, 'don't go to village areas. The local politicians, the ward chairman, they don't care about making development. They just care about looking after themselves.'

These comments seemed to stand in contrast to some of Nabina's other reflections. During our interview she told me, 'village life is better than in Kathmandu. The food is fresh,' she continued, 'life is fresh, there's clean air.' By contrast, Kathmandu was 'dirty and polluted,' she said. 'But I come to Kathmandu because of the facilities,' she continued. 'I come here for education. Right now I'm doing trekking guide training.' Third place finisher at the 2022 edition of the Everest Marathon, Nabina lived in Lalitpur in Kathmandu with her aunt and had been staying there for six months at the time of our interview. Before that, she had only been to Kathmandu as a tourist. While she valorised the clean air and 'fresh' quality of life in her natal village in Solukhumbu, she pointed out that farm work left little time for running. 'In the village it's so busy,' she said, 'there's hardly time to eat, especially during monsoon, with so much work to do.' Did she dislike village

work, I wondered. ‘It’s not hard,’ she told me. ‘I have been doing it since I was a kid, since I was 6 or 7 years old, so it’s fine. I enjoy it. We can work and play around a bit as well.’

Like Dinesh and Kamala, Nabina related her trail running ability to her village background. When I asked why she preferred trail running, she said, ‘for road running, you need lots of training. I can’t do it. We village-dwelling people don’t have the training for it.’ This view seemed to be a negative spin on the attitudes expressed by Dinesh and Kamala—and many other runners—that people from Nepal’s hill villages were especially fit for trail running. Here Nabina drew attention to a perceived *lack* of ability in road running rather than an ingrained capacity for endurance on mountain trails. Yet she also voiced the positive side of this association, making the same argument as most of the other dedicated trail runners: ‘for hill people, exercise comes easy’, she explained. ‘They work a lot, carrying grass and firewood, walking up and downhill. It’s all exercise. Hill people are strong.’ I noted that, like Kamala, she used the English word ‘exercise’ to mark the way the physical activities of farming were believed to prepare people for the sport of mountain running.

Nabina preferred to pursue a career as a trekking guide and continue running in her spare time than to remain in her village. But while being in Kathmandu enabled her to pursue a career, there were aspects of the environment she disliked, such as the presence of rubbish on the trails of the Kathmandu Valley. ‘I was running in the Chandragiri hills with Santosh *dai,*’[83] she explained, and there was so much rubbish because people threw it there after a picnic.’ Rubbish was a common complaint among dedicated runners, and not without reason: during the fifteen months which I spent running in Nepal, mainly in the Kathmandu Valley’s Shivapuri Nagarjuna National Park, rubbish on the trail—primarily detritus of hiking trips, including plastic plates, Wai Wai[84] noodle wrappers, bottles, Snickers wrappers and cartons—was ever present. Trails in rural areas, with far lower populations, tended to be much cleaner. As part of Nabina’s trekking guide training, she had been taught ‘Leave no Trace’, a set of ethical principles promoting responsible outdoor recreation, which had reinforced her dislike of rubbish left on mountain trails. Thus, along with her own

[83] *Dai* literally means older brother. It is most often used to refer to a male older than the speaker, rather than someone’s actual kin. Santosh is not biologically related to Nabina.

[84] Wai Wai are a popular brand of noodles produced in Nepal.

experience of moving from Solukhumbu to Kathmandu, she was influenced by global discourses of conservation, shaping her perspective on rural-urban distinctions. While Nabina was drawn to Kathmandu to pursue a career as a trekking guide, and saw the atmosphere of her natal village as, in some ways, stifling, with a lack of understanding and support by the community for her trail running (and still less time to practice it), movement to the city nonetheless entailed a loss. The 'freshness' of Jubing, her village, stood in contrast to the pollution in Kathmandu and the rampant waste-dumping on the valley's trails. Like most of my dedicated runner interlocutors, then, Nabina's relation to the urban was defined by ambivalence.

Perceptions of the environment in practice

Such a tense relationship with urban transformations was played out on the run. While interlocutors often pointed to the aesthetic and sensory pleasures of trail running, such enchantments could be interrupted by the effects of Kathmandu's rapid and disorganised urbanisation, as Nabina's comments above indicate. Running could be an escape attempt for stressed urbanites, but it could also occasion a more intense acquaintance with the very features of Kathmandu they were hoping to get away from. Runners' movement practices made them especially conscious of haphazard urbanisation and environmental degradation, which only sharpened their sense of a contradiction between town and country.

Encounters with rubbish, viewing the haze of pollution from a mountaintop, bumping into roads under construction where there once there had been foot trails—such experiences produced a heightened awareness of Nepal's ambivalent development and, in many cases, desires and actions to remedy it. In these ways, runners' good-life dreams, forms of cruel optimism, were sustained by the emotional and sensory experiences of mountain trail running not only through a positive reinforcement (which the next chapter explores), but also through aversion.

Challenging too were dedicated runners' attempts to train in the city of Kathmandu itself, either early in the morning on the roads, at the city's only public athletics track (the Dasarath Rangasala), or in one of the few public parks. Everyday life refuelling and recovering (or trying to) also met obstacles created by haphazard urban growth, including injuries incurred on the disordered

roadways, mental stress created by the *halla* (chaos) of city life, and a sense of social anomie articulated as cynicism about Nepal and Nepalis.

The sensibilities produced in the movement from village to city shaped the good-life ideal: aversive experiences of urbanisation, compared with memories of rural childhoods, fuelled an optimistic attachment to a future condition in which, through migration, through activism-driven social change and/or through the recirculation of running earnings in athletes' natal villages, trail running life could be pursued more authentically, without these confrontations with ecological damage. As the runner Santosh Kulung Rai put it, 'in foreign countries, there isn't pollution and dust. The trail, it's like…'—he gestured a smooth, direct movement in the air—'zip. Like that.'

This desire to visit foreign countries which were perceived to do environmental stewardship better than Nepal was a common one. In his conversations with me, the runner Pemba Tamang frequently expressed the desire to visit the UK, often remarking that, 'it looks clean there.' Now living and working for part of the year in Austria, Sarita Rai and Santosh Rai both commented on the cleanness of the trails in their new Alpine environment. Similarly, Rita Rai, a sponsored runner who competed in trail races in Europe, told me that it was cleaner 'bahira' (in foreign countries), and there was less urban bustle and disorder.

Among dedicated trail runners, then, sensitivity to ecological problems in Nepal was part of their motivation to make their names and earn wealth as athletes overseas. The so-called 'big countries', the places seen to be the real centres of trail running opportunity, were perceived as 'developed' and free of many of Nepal's limitations, including environmental ones. Optimisms were thus formed by runners' experiences of spatial contrasts in the context of a life history of movement from village to city.

Aversion in practice

These aversive experiences were at times reflected upon and at times made evident to me through people's actions. Such practical responses varied—Sunita Rai always wore a mask when she was outside, leaving it on even while running, at least until we were through Gokarna's Sahid

Smarak park and onto the trails. Her intention was to protect herself from visible dust as well as particulate matter, adapting as she could to Kathmandu's defects. Contrastingly, Pemba insisted I didn't need a mask in Gokarna, which he told me was 'cleaner' than the busier parts of Kathmandu. Pollution was one of the main reasons Santosh Lama didn't go down to the city very much, preferring to stay in his nearby village, Tarebhir, in the foothills of Shivapuri National Park, rather than experience the '*halla'*—chaos—of city life, with what he called its 'overcrowding, disturbance, tension—sound pollution, air pollution, everything.' On the hillside itself, the symptoms of Kathmandu's sprawl could not be avoided, which Santosh registered in a weary 'people don't care' as we ran past heaps of trash on the way up Shivapuri Peak.

While running together, I and my co-runners sometimes remarked briefly on pollution and other challenges of urban living, while at other times our responses were entirely tacit, but shared nonetheless—atmospheres between us generated by gestures and facial expressions. When Mira Rai and I reached Tarebhir from Gokarna and walked out to the viewpoint, a vague disappointment hung in the air as we stared at the haze. There was no rewarding vista after the climb, just the colourful patchwork of the city's lego-like buildings that seemed to have grown denser since our last excursion. Without such pollution, the Himalayas would have been visible. Neither of our faces bore the dismay of naive tourists, since Mira knew the sight well and I was already used to it. But our expressions bore disappointment nonetheless. Such experiences gave shape to the trail running dream as a transnational one: a sense of Nepal's limitations as a running environment reinforced the idea that the real centre of the sport was elsewhere and that it was there, in bidesh, where a runner had to make his or her name.

Social change

As well as the desire for transnational movement, environmental frustrations fuelled social movements. The sense that the 'big countries' were doing it right on trail management was particularly strong among those who had been abroad, and extended to wider criticisms of *bikas* (development) in Nepal. Partly inspired by experiences overseas, some of these runners organised trail 'clean-up' events, which were both practical interventions on the hillside and, they hoped,

means of promoting greater public awareness of the need for responsible trail stewardship. Sabin Kulung Rai was one such transnationally traveled runner, having been sponsored for a time by Asia Pacific Adventure, with whose support he had competed in Austria, Spain and Hong Kong. When I asked Sabin about pollution in Kathmandu, he offered his thoughts on development as follows:

> There's a lot of development going on in Nepal. It's a lot better than it was before. Five years from now, nine or ten years from now, let's make Nepal good and clean like Europe, let's also build good roads, no? And in everything, let's have a system like in the foreign countries, in government also. In Nepal it's very bad: they don't put it in the dustbin, they drop it in the road. Let's not do it like that. Let's keep our country clean, everyone. First the government will lead and then, after that, the people will follow, just like in the foreign countries. Let's keep our country clean.

While some respondents were more pessimistic about the prospect of change, Sabin seemed to have a voluntarist sense that through determined action a greener, cleaner Nepal could be brought into being, one which would be, in his view, 'like Europe… like in foreign countries'. Thus, for Sabin, travel and exposure to new spaces and discourses was reinforcing his social critique of practices in Nepal. He was optimistic about the way his trail running success could afford him a platform to promote change: hence Sabin's clean-up event was advertised not only as a mass volunteering practice but as an 'Awareness Campaign'.

He may have been inspired in this effort by his erstwhile Asia Pacific Adventure teammate Stone Tsang, one of Hong Kong's most prominent trail runners: in 2016, Tsang founded the Concern Group on Concretisation of Hong Kong Natural Trails to campaign for the preservation of the territory's footpaths. The model of athletes as social change makers, whose respectability and profile are used to encourage 'awareness' and collective action, has spread through the transnational network of trail running—Mira Rai not only leads an NGO aiming to 'empower' young women but has been a UN ambassador for mountain conservation and has helped organise races with environmental agendas, such as the Red Panda Trail Marathon. This association between trail running as a way of earning prestige through victory in races overseas and trail running as a platform from which to generate social change reflects a broader trend in Nepal, one relating to ideological formations surrounding *bikas* (development). As anthropologist

Tatsuro Fujikura explains,

> In contemporary Nepal, there is a proliferation of discourses about new modes of 'consciousness' or 'awareness'—modes of consciousness that are often regarded as leading necessarily to new ways of conducting life appropriate to the changing times. … 'Consciousness' in such talk often denotes a general urge to transform oneself and one's environment, precipitated by a sudden discovery deep in oneself of a fundamental desire for improvement and progress. (2001:271)

Such a drive to promote so-called 'awareness' lay behind the mass litter-picking campaigns organised by trail runners. Having begun in 2020 when Mira Rai organised the Champadevi Trail Clean-Up and Awareness Campaign, group hikes during which runners pick up litter from the trails of the Kathmandu Valley seemed to be part of a growing movement. Karma Tamang and Sabin Kulung Rai have both led clean-up events on the trails in the Kathmandu Valley, advertising their events through Facebook and YouTube, and both describing them in terms of 'awareness'. Nepali news organisation Routine of Nepal Banda reported approvingly on one such event, posting on Facebook, 'Good Work : A group of youth from Kapan area cleaned Shivapuri Forest trail near Kapan Gumba during Dashain week and collected around 150 kgs of waste. #YouthInAction'. The objective of raising awareness thus motivated the organisation of these events. Moreover, their documentation on social media and by Nepali news outlets helped—the organisers hoped—to spread this awareness further.

Such frustrations with rubbish in the Kathmandu Valley were influenced by some runners' overseas experiences and encouraged desires both to leave Nepal for places where trails were believed to be better looked after *and* to work for transformation within Nepal. In our interviews one such clean-up organiser, Sabin Kulung Rai, contrasted his experience with rubbish in Nepal to his experience of trail running overseas. 'They eat it, they dump it, don't they?' He said, referring to the way some Nepali trail runners would litter the landscape with food taken from checkpoints during trail races. He continued:

> Sabin: They don't put it in a dustbin, do they? They drop it on the trail. Let's not do it like that. Let's keep our own country clean, no? Just like in foreign countries, let's keep our own country clean… that would be good.
> Will: In Nepal, after a race, it's very dirty…
> Sabin: Very! In Nepal it's not like in foreign countries. You put it in your running bag, carry it with you, then put it in a dustbin. But as for Nepal, it's just eat and throw, eat and throw, isn't it? It's like that.

Indeed, such was the degree of littering during some races in which I participated that I could actually use the refuse to help me navigate—at the Khiji Demba Ultra in Okhaldhunga, for example, plastic 'Frooti'[85] cartons dropped by the tens of runners in front of me functioned as alternative waymarkers—along with banana skins, Snickers wrappers and water bottles. At that race, the majority of participants were local, many of them first-timers. Behaviour like this irritated Sabin, a more seasoned, and internationally traveled, athlete. In one of his video blogs posted on YouTube, Sabin eats Oreos with his friends after a run and exhorts them and his viewers to refrain from littering. Standing before his seated running mates, he begins,

> Guys, everyone, eat this and don't drop rubbish. Here [in Kathmandu] everyone drops it. Then they complain to the government and ask, 'what is the government doing?' In foreign countries, it's not like that. People take their rubbish in their bags and carry it away from the trail. And the government puts rubbish bins out so people can put rubbish in there. In those places it's very clean. In Nepal everyone says, 'agh, why can't the government clean this up?' No! It's not the government's job. We, the public, need to tidy up. Take it away yourself and put it in the dustbin.

Through his online video blogs, as with his clean-up events, Sabin sought to use his profile as a relatively well known runner to spread messages of this kind. In such ways the optimism that tied dedicated trail runners to their sport at times had a sociopolitical element: the sport was seen to offer not only a personal transformation in runners' circumstances and capacities but a wider-reaching change through a new, enlightened environmental awareness and new kinds of collective action. Trail running was seen as, in part, contributing to the resolution of problems created by haphazard urbanisation and resulting environmental degradation. Thus, tied up with the trail running dream of earning wealth and a name for oneself was the hope of a better Nepal. As one veteran trail runner put it, 'in the middle of Kathmandu it's not a good environment—it's an unbalanced environment.' Could trail running help to restore 'balance' to Nepal through encouraging better public stewardship of mountain trails? That seemed to be a part of many runners' optimistic attachments to the sport and this narrative was sustained, in part, by sensory and affective experiences of running in the Kathmandu Valley which regularly reminded such athletes of the problems besetting Nepal's trails.

---

[85] Frooti is a mango-flavoured drink manufactured in India and popular in Nepal.

In these ways, the sensitivity to rubbish, pollution and other forms of environmental damage which was generated through the running experiences of those who could compare city to village life shaped the good-life dream of becoming an elite trail runner. In the pursuit of this dream, it was believed, 'balance' could be restored through moving to countries with better trail management and/or working to preserve and restore trails in Nepal.

A liberating mobility?[86]

Runners' movements to Kathmandu in search of a better life reflected broader trends and, in many ways, their optimistic attachment to the sport was a species of a larger genre of hope. As hinted at in the chapter '#gurkhaonthetrail', mobility has a long history in Nepal. But rural outmigration has accelerated in the past few decades. An estimated 37 per cent of farmland in Nepal has now been abandoned (Dahal, Pandit and Shah 2020:1) and the contribution of agriculture to the Nepali economy has fallen to 25 per cent (Kumar 2024). Due to outmigration over the past three decades, many villages are now desolate, often described in the Nepali media as 'ghost villages'. The young in particular are leaving, with elders left behind. Kathmandu and other cities are struggling to cope with the influx of people, as unorganised development proceeds in a manner described by Pokharel as the 'ruralisation of cities' (Kumar 2022).

These migratory trends are reshaping the human geography of Nepal. As Chaitanya Mishra has put it, 'Nepal is no longer a country filled with villages.' (2023) Increasing numbers of young people continue to leave behind their villages for urban areas and abroad. Yet while Nepal is both one of the least urbanised and fastest urbanising countries, this process does not entail a wholehearted embrace of cities by rural-to-urban migrants. Rather, as Mishra notes, and as my own ethnographic data shows, '[w]ith urban decay, there is an over-romanticisation of the rural in Nepal as being natural, pure, clean, or honest.' (2023)

Nonetheless, Nepal's urban and rural spaces are now inextricably linked through labour migration and the sending of remittances. Mishra explains that 'The longstanding discourse of… self-

[86] This phrase, 'a liberating mobility' is taken from Florent Grazide's 2024 article 'Chimerical Emancipation: The Road to a Better Future in Nepal'.

sufficient and even subsistent village families is [as] passé as the idea of Nepal being somehow unique in relation to the rest of the world.' He adds, '[r]ural and urban are not opposites but mutually connected, and one feeds on the other.' (2023)

The causes of young people's outmigration from rural Nepal are manifold and compounding. They include the relative underdevelopment of villages, a lack of employment opportunities in rural areas, poor educational services and a lack of other facilities such as healthcare, a related frustration with local politics which are often seen as corrupt and the fact that many prefer not to be involved in the arduous work of agriculture, especially when such work is being made more difficult by climate change. What are loosely called 'cultural' factors cannot be ignored either, those ideologically saturated perceptions of the difference between urban and village life, which arrange themselves around a binary of developed and underdeveloped, modern and non-modern —or to use a less polite Nepali term, *jangali* (uncivilised).

Discussing this popular understanding of rural-urban contrasts, Bhandari (2018) argues that cities are idealised by Nepalis for their modernity. He explains that cities' superior facilities are 'frequently perceived as the factors symbolising modernity' and that 'the urban residence is taken as a matter of greater prestige or of higher status and a form of modernity.' He continues, 'Often, it is found that urban dwellers regard themselves as more developed denizens compared to their rural counterparts due to the possession of various facilities that symbolize modernity.'

Rural-to-urban ambivalence

Yet, as Sato's research with Hyolmo[87] women relocated to Kathmandu (2023:83–103) indicates, the experience of movement to the city for better facilities and work opportunities can be viewed with ambivalence. She notes that,

> whereas the Hyolmo village is definitely a place where modern amenities, the potential to earn money, and he means for living other than doing physically arduous work…are hardly available, most Hyolmos still adore their homeland with fresh air and water as well as an abundance of

[87] The Hyolmo are a people from the Helambu region of Nepal which is located in the eastern and northern Himalayas.

> potatoes and radishes, as a place where one has little need for money and where one can obtain things that money cannot buy. Villages in Hyolmo are not just places for rustic villagers from whom Kathmandu residents want to distinguish themselves. (93)

Sato's findings about these rural-to-urban migrants resonate with my own. This ambivalence had a particular inflection for athletes—it wasn't uncommon for a runner to describe certain aspects of rural life as ideal and preferable for an aspiring athlete. Runner Man Kumar Magar, for example, described organic food from his village in Rolpa as being 'best' for his running. 'For me,' he said, 'what's important is soybean, potato, and dhindo[88]. It is the best vitamin for me in running. Because… it doesn't have foreign chemicals in it. It is not mixed in out-country's chemical. It's local. It's organic. We can produce this crop, then we eat it, it's not got foreign chemicals mixed in. For me it's best, that diet.'

This ongoing sense of attachment to the *ghar,* which Sato found among Hyolmo women in Kathmandu, was more than sentimental—the rural-to-urban migrants she researched retained their formal membership of their villages by continuing to co-sponsor village temples from a distance. Like my own interlocutors, Sato's informants harboured 'mixed feelings' (2023:94) about their move. They pointed to the difficulties of daily life in Kathmandu, as did the dedicated trail runners. Sato explains that, for these women from Hyolmo,

> Kathmandu is a place where living is far from comfortable…with its deteriorating environment and dysfunctional infrastructure (polluted air, water shortages, electricity failures, traffic jams, congested public transportation, etc.)… this deterioration seems being further accelerated by the massive inflow of migrants from rural Nepal…and…this trend shows no signs of easing in the foreseeable future. (94)

Ghar ideal and basai reality

The ambivalence felt by runners with a rural-to-urban trajectory about their new environment in Kathmandu was far from unique, then. For these athletes, running on mountain trails was, to some extent, an attempt to resolve this tension by briefly getting away from Kathmandu's *halla.* Negative experiences with urban living motivated this continued search for a better life through running. As one runner, Karma Tamang, put it, 'I like trail running because, while running

[88] Dhindo is buckwheat porridge, a widely eaten food in Nepal.

marathons in the city, there's a lot of traffic jam, it's like that. But on the trails, it's a peaceful place.'

Linked to this aversion to certain features of the urban environment was a valorisation of the natal village. As well as sentimental attachments, however, ongoing ties to village areas could also be expressed more concretely. Sato notes that her informants sought to balance their ongoing commitment to their villages with their new urban residence. '[T]hey do not want to abandon their home village completely,' she writes. 'The point of compromise for many is that they basically stay in Kathmandu but visit their home village occasionally, either to take part in the village temples or other ceremonials, to tend their homes or fields, or to simply visit their relatives.' (2023:94)

Similarly, many of the dedicated trail runners attempted to strike such a balance by returning to their home villages occasionally to help with farming work, to celebrate festivals and marriages and to care for elders. At the time of our interview, for example, Dinesh Tamang had just returned from Ramechhap, having been there to help his ill father reach the nearest hospital. Both his Nepal Army career and his pursuit of success in running, however, kept him mostly in Kathmandu. The ambition generally shared among dedicated trail runners was that through wealth achieved consequent on becoming elite athletes, they could (re)forge stronger ties to their natal villages. When I visited the village of famous Nepali ultra runner Mira Rai in Bhojpur, I stayed in an impressive two-storey timber house where her parents now lived, the construction of which she had paid for with her earnings from an international sports career. Additionally, bonuses her sponsor Salomon had awarded her after several race victories had helped her to purchase a small farm in the village and 200 chickens. Similarly, Sunmaya Budha—now sponsored by Chinese brand Kailas—has spoken of her intention to pay for the construction of a new home for her family and help her younger family members with their education (García 2023).

The ghar thus remains what geographer B.P. Subedi (1999) calls 'not just the house to live in…but an irreplaceable centre of significance.' For Subedi, the *ghar* is 'neither limited to physical structure nor a physical space to carry on livelihood. It captures broader networks, intimate relations with the land and environment, and a place of rooted memory.' (1999:138)

The kind of ambivalence which experiences of rural-to-urban migration in Nepal often entail is referred to by Nelson as a contradiction between 'ghar ideal' and 'basai reality' (2013:1) (ghar meaning home village, basai meaning new place of residence). His research with Newari rural-urban migrants in a peripheral Kathmandu neighbourhood reveals '[h]ow informants reconcile the fixity and permanence of a ghar left behind with a life of transient and temporary basais.' (Nelson 2013:2) As the earlier chapter of this thesis '#gurkhaonthetrail' indicated, this sense of what Nelson calls a 'nuanced and integrated relationship between the places of home and away' (2) has deep historical precedents. Within this relationship, the home village retains its status as an important facet of identity while people feel compelled to move in an attempt to improve their conditions. In this way, *ghar* and *basai* are integrated with each other.

Nelson notes, moreover, that Kathmandu was not a final destination for his informants but a temporary one, understood as 'in between Tarai towns, Gulf cities, and European-American universities.' (2013:18) This is a widely shared perspective on the meaning of Kathmandu residence for rural-urban migrants. As Bhokraj Gurung puts it in his study on Nepali migratory hopes, 'Kathmandu is not a place one can belong to.' (2024:155) The same was true of my informants, for most of whom Kathmandu was seen as a temporary place on a career journey which, at the farther end of their imaginations, would lead to their competing in trail races outside of Nepal.

For young Nepalis who migrated from village to city, Kathmandu was just one temporary location in a life of mobility which always kept in view the *ghar* as a site of ongoing material and emotional ties. What I have sought to highlight in this chapter is how this was inflected in the life trajectories of runners specifically. While the dream of a career as an international athlete drove movement to Kathmandu, runners' preferences for villages' 'freshness' and perceived health-related benefits sustained a continued attachment to the places of their birth. Aspirations to elite runner status combined with an ongoing, sentimental attachment to an ideal of rural life produced a desire to recapture some of what may have been lost in the movement from village to city.

Conclusion

For dedicated trail runners, the movement from village to city was bound up with optimistic attachments to a good-life future. While living in Kathmandu came with perceived drawbacks, it was seen as a temporary destination on the way to a career to be made beyond Nepal, in the 'big countries' which were understood to be the real centres of trail running. In the environment of Kathmandu, experiences of tension in everyday city life both in Kathmandu proper and on the surrounding mountain trails helped to create a somewhat nostalgic valorisation of the freshness of the rural *ghar* or village, encouraging a critique of—and in some cases practical movements to address—aspects of Kathmandu's disorganised and rapid urbanisation. These experiences of tension fuelled the good-life dream, a hopeful vision of the trail running life as one in which, through attaining the status of an international *kheladi* (athlete), a clean or 'fresh' nature (prakritik/batabaran) could be enjoyed and ideals associated with the valorised natal village realised. These values could be realised through migration to cleaner environments, through recirculating earnings in home villages and/or through using sport as a platform to promote environmental change in Nepal. The sport of trail running was cathected with these hopes, made to bear these strivings and yearnings despite the limited economic basis for their realisation. While experiences of tension generated through experiencing urban life fuelled this cruel hope for a trail running career made *bahira* (in foreign countries), this narrative was also reinforced by more positive embodied experiences of running in environments considered to be closer to 'nature', which the next chapter will explore.

Chapter 9: Running in the web of life

I was happily surprised to be invited on a training run by two young women runners. While male runners seemed more keen to train with me, my usual '*hamisangai dagurumla, hai*?' ('Let's run together sometime, okay?') seemed to be received as a sort of polite formality rather than a serious request when addressed to female athletes. So, sensing a rare opportunity, I tried to be as observant as possible on our run. We met in Sundarijal just outside the entrance to the Shivapuri Nagarjuna National Park, and today's training, Phulmaya hold me, would be 'uphill fast' followed by 'easy downhill'. Normally I would have had to spend two thousand rupees for a ticket to the national park but the Nepalis accompanying me obviated this payment today. Phulmaya's training schedule was put together by a male runner in his forties, an athlete for the Tribhuvan Army Club[89] with an impressive CV of ultra wins and competitive placings at international events who provided *pro bono* coaching to some promising younger Nepali trail runners. Sabina had no coach and trained more casually, joining her friend for this speed session. I was later sent some photographs of a week in Phulmaya's schedule, written down in an exercise book, and I noted its balance of hard work and easy days.

Phulmaya and Sabina would probably finish an hour or more ahead of me in a 50k, but on a short training run I could reach the top of the hill thirty seconds or so in front. I wondered if I ought to stay closer to them but during our hard uphill effort there seemed to be zero words exchanged as we were all breathing too heavily while we made our way up the climb, which was mostly a staircase. Such was the character of many so-called 'trails' in Nepal. When we reached the top my training partners laughed at my sedentary and gasping state and I hid my face in my hands when Phulmaya removed her phone from her running bag, apparently preparing to ambush me with a photo.

We walked around the viewpoint and enjoyed the sight of Kathmandu below us, its always-under-construction status making it appear, as the journalist Thomas Bell puts it, like a 'mouth full of broken teeth' (2016), before I could not delay it any longer: selfies had to be taken. Added to this

[89] Tribhuvan Army Club is the name of the official Nepal Army running club, named after King Tribhuvan who ruled from 1911 to 1950.

ritual was a new experience for me, the post-run dance for the benefit of TikTok. Some Hindi or Nepali pop music was played from Phulmaya's phone, set down on a cafe table, and the two women mimed to the lyrics while encouraging me to mimic their dance moves. I tried my best, which wasn't good enough, to the amusement of the staff in the hillside '*khaja ghar*' (cafe and snack bar).

This amusement was shared by Phulmaya and Sabina who seemed to be tickled by the incongruity of both my maleness and my foreignness as I tried to mimic them. I thus learned the hard way that, as anthropologist of Nepali dance Marion Wettstein explains, 'dance gestures are… a form of communication that need to be learned culturally, just as different spoken languages do.' (Wettstein 2019:223) Basically, I had no idea what was going on. The videos required multiple takes because of their mistakes, not mine; indeed, the ethnographer's slip-ups were part of the entertainment, almost intentional. The only dance move I really understood was the 'running' one, with arms swinging back and forth in an exaggerated mimesis of the serious work we'd just undertaken. Running as effort was transmogrified through dance into harmless play, and all of the struggle, indeed, the concerns around the variables of a training run—is this fast enough? Did I pace this correctly or start out too hard? Is this the best cadence? Should I power-hike here? One step at a time or two?—were momentarily, at least, cast into the background. That stuck me as part of the function of singing and dancing in the life of a runner, but I wanted to know what they thought. So when we had wrapped our video and started our descent back down the hill, I took advantage of the easy, conversational pace at which we were now moving and asked Phulmaya why she liked to make these TikTok videos.

'For fun,' she said simply. *Ramailo* in Nepali. And I could have such fun too, Phulmaya and Sabina assured me, if I would only make a TikTok account for myself and start producing my own videos. I was skeptical about this idea, pressing them on what benefits TikTok could offer to a trail runner. 'To show training, to show videos of our travels, for singing and dancing,' Phulmaya said. That seemed to them a comprehensive enough response. I pushed further, but beyond this, it was hard to extract any more reflections on the purpose of TikToking. But what it suggested to me, like the run itself, was the complex admixture of extrinsic and intrinsic rewards which dedicated Nepali runners found in the practice of trail running, both training and racing. On the one hand,

there was the need for sporting performance—reflected in the arduous, work-like, 'uphill fast' training run. On the other hand, there was the playful conviviality of dancing on a hilltop which followed it. There were activities which were clearly goal-oriented and there were experiences which were more intrinsically rewarding. Moreover, at one and the same time an activity could contain both aspects. This chapter explores the distinct, intrinsic rewards dedicated runners sought through moving in the mountains, whether those were transparently pleasurable, like dancing for Tiktok, or less obviously fun—like the physical and mental struggles encountered while training and racing. Running uphill fast might be a means to an end in the form of prize money or a physical training stimulus, but it could also be intrinsically rewarding, tough though it was. This chapter asks how running in mountain environments provided such varied, rewarding experiences for dedicated trail runners.

Introduction

Dedicated runners' optimistic attachments to trail running were sustained not only by the kinds of dreams of the future described in chapter 7, but also by the intrinsic rewards available through engagement in the sport. This chapter explores those intrinsic rewards. In particular, I focus on how the distinct environments encountered in trail running made possible various affective states —not all of them pleasurable in a simple sense, but which were nonetheless valued experiences that reinforced runners' continued engagement in the sport. What dedicated trail runners shared was a perception that the sport brought them closer to environments understood as 'natural', 'fresh', or 'organic'—in contrast with urban spaces, their perspectives on which were discussed in the previous chapter. While runners reported feelings of bliss, peace and the relief of 'tension' through moving in mountain environments, the physical challenges made possible by such settings also allowed for affective experiences of overcoming difficulty through struggle. In this way, both unambiguously pleasant experiences of relief or elation and experiences of *duhkha* or suffering generated by trail running were intrinsic profits of participation in the sport. The intrinsically rewarding features of trail running, moreover, were not only private psychological states but could also be shared forms of affect, atmospheres of conviviality created through group training runs, trail races and post-run celebrations. These experiences were contrasted with road running, and were understood to be related to the distinct qualities of rural or mountain

environments. The intrinsic benefits of trail running, then, were tied to the spaces in which the sport took place. In this chapter, after engaging with these issues by presenting three portraits of individual runners' reflections on the intrinsic enjoyments experienced through trail running, I explore the same themes through a discussion of training and racing practices which I observed and participated in during my fieldwork.

'Running in nature is like next-level': Sarita Rai

On her social media profiles, she referred to herself by the nickname, 'Mountain Sarita'. In one of her YouTube videos, she explains her love of trail running to her followers: 'Hi everyone,' she says, 'today I'm doing up-and-down running in the forest. Here we can see nature, on this route through the green jungle. There's such stillness here, such peace.' The video shows her bare feet paddling in the river, a waterfall, and pigeons flying around her as she runs in slow motion. There are images of prayer flags. The video is set to flute music.

In our interview, Sarita reflected further on the intrinsic value of trail running for her mental wellbeing. 'I like running,' she told me. 'I was depressed before. *Ke garne*? [What to do?] It was very hard. At that time, my mental state was rough, and I wanted to die. I didn't want to live. But running made me happy; it gave me a new mind, so I was inspired to continue.' I wondered, what was it about trail running that gave her a 'new mind'? For Sarita, trail running was a kind of nature therapy. 'I prefer trail to road,' she explained. 'Since I was small, I've been in the jungle. I always liked it. It feels good. I work hard to go uphill and it's a great feeling when I reach the top. It's just like life.' Why was running in the hills so therapeutic for Sarita? It was a metaphorical expression of life's struggles, she explained: 'Life is also like that,' she said, 'going uphill and downhill, uphill and downhill again.' In this way, the environment afforded Sarita the chance to act out the metaphor of overcoming life's difficulties.

Indeed, Sarita's sense that trail running was 'like life' meant that her running could offer moments of achievement, creating feelings of elation. 'When I have run uphill,' she said, 'and I reach the peak and there is a breeze, I am happy.' For Sarita, attaining the summits of hills was a

metaphorically rich experience which produced the feeling she called '*ananda*'—bliss. By contrast, road running was seen as monotonous. 'It's all flat,' she said, 'so I don't like it. And road running, I don't have the speed. In the jungle there are lots of things. Rocks, steps, slippery. Sometimes it's hard or sometimes soft. But road? It's just flat.' Moreover, 'nature'—a term she frequently used, in both English and Nepali—seemed to have sacred connotations. In one of her videos, she reflects on trail running as follows: 'As you can see, I arrived at Bishnudwar temple.[90] Trail running, what are its benefits? I can find new places I hadn't expected to discover. I had no plan, but I arrived here through running. Look inside the temple. This is a very sacred place.'

The video shows rows of small model Buddhas inside the cave at Bishnudwar temple. Thus, for Sarita, one of the benefits of trail running was the opportunity to visit places with religious value. Mountain spaces, then, were not only aesthetically valued but also sacralised. Similarly, in short clips made for Facebook and TikTok, Sarita performs yoga and meditates on the hillside. In one such clip, she sits in lotus position beneath a tree, having taken a break during a run up Shivapuri Peak. In the clip's description, she used the hashtag '#naturelovergirl'. In this way Sarita juxtaposed the practice of meditation with the sensory appreciation of the environment, sacralising her surroundings and making running part of a spiritual practice.

In another video, entitled 'What is trail running and advantages of trail running?', she tells viewers, 'I want to show everyone what I've learned about trail running.' Footage of her running is then interspersed with shots of her taking a drink at a mountain stream, waterfalls, wild flowers, and the sacred space of Bagdwar, the shrine to Lord Shiva close to the summit of Shivapuri peak.[91] Later, Sarita moved to the Austrian alps to work as a waiter in a hotel; in her new environment, as her online posts indicate, there were similar enchantments: the videos show her picking berries, watching ruminating cows, and looking out over verdant mountain vistas.

During one of our very first interactions, Sarita told me, 'road running is okay, but when I run in nature, it's like…next-level.' The media Sarita produced reflected this valuation of trail running as

---

[90] Bishnudwar is a temple within the Shivapuri Nagarjuna National Park in the Kathmandu Valley. It is a temple to Vishnu and is believed to be the source of the Bishnumati river. It literally translates to 'Vishnu's gate'.

[91] Like Bishnudwar, Bagdwar is considered to be the source of a river—in this case, the Bagmati.

qualitatively different and offering special '*phaidaharu*' or 'benefits' distinct from those available through road running. In another video, the subtitle 'The benefits of trail running' is added to footage of green hillsides seen from Bhojpur's Mundum Trekking Trail,[92] followed by clips of wild ponies and rhododendron[93] trees. Sarita's motivation to engage in trail running was thus a mixture of her long-term ambition to make a living from the sport combined with the search for these intrinsic pleasures. Such pleasures entailed interactions with both 'nature', so-called, and the divine.

'I run from the heart': Bhola Tharu

Like Sarita, 31-year-old ultra-runner Bhola Tharu articulated the benefits of trail running in terms of both 'nature' and the sacred. 'I like trail running,' he told me, 'because I love running in nature. *Pahad*, *himal*, *terai*,' he said, listing Nepal's three ecological zones—the mid-hills, the Himalayan mountains and the lowlands. Alongside this aesthetic appreciation of the environments in which he ran, Bhola's running practice involved an engagement with spiritual teachings. He showed me the YouTube playlist which he listened to while running on the trails of the Kathmandu Valley: along with Buddhist-themed music, there were recordings of Eliud Kipchoge interviews and dharma talks by Osho[94] and other religious gurus. 'Osho is great for meditation,' he told me. 'It's all about Gautam Buddha.'

Adept at yoga and a meditator, Bhola thus made running—though it was still a competitive pursuit—a part of his spiritual life. When I asked Bhola to name his religion, he said, 'Om Shanti', though at other times he used the more recognisable term 'Hindu'. 'But Hindus love all religions,' he said, telling me of his respect for the Buddha and his visits to sites such as Boudhanath[95], Nagi

[92] Mundum is the name of the religious system of the Rai people.

[93] Known in Nepali as *laliguras*, the *rhododendron arboreum* is the national flower of Nepal.

[94] Osho was a religious guru also known as Acharya Rajneesh (1931–1990).

[95] Boudhanath is a famous Buddhist stupa in Kathmandu.

Gumba[96] and Lumbini.[97] Nonetheless, though his father had been a *sadhu* (holy man) for roughly fifteen years, Bhola seemed sure this wouldn't be his path: 'I'm an athlete,' he said. 'I'm simple! I don't eat meat, I don't drink alcohol, I don't drink, smoking, no. Only vegetarian; simple.'

'I run from the heart,' Bhola told me, beating his chest with his fist. While he sought prize money from racing and had the dream of becoming a professional runner, his engagement with the sport was also driven by a search for certain intrinsic qualities, including those of *ananda* (bliss) and *shanta* (peace). For Bhola, these terms referred to spiritually tinged experiences which were especially available through trail running.

Accessing these experiences through trail running required focus, so Bhola sought to keep his practice undisturbed by distractions such as those of online social media. 'Do you have a Strava?' I asked him. 'In the past, I made one,' he explained, 'but I stopped using it. It's annoying. Any time, mail, any time, mail. I blocked it.' Rather than arising directly from an engagement with the environment, then, experiences of *ananda* and *shanta* while running had to be deliberately sustained, protected from any such distractions.

While Bhola sought to immediately experience states of bliss and peace through trail running, the concepts *ananda* and *shanta* also seemed to be oriented to the transcendental. His 'Om Shanti' religious practice consisting of meditation, yoga and listening to the teachings of Osho and other gurus suggests as much. In other words, although Bhola could temporarily find bliss and peace through running, his interest in religion indicates that Bhola was also searching for a more permanent bliss, one found beyond this life. The experience of trail running was, for Bhola, a way to reach closer to those transcendental ends, insofar as they could be approached from within worldly existence.

Bhola's engagement with trail running was shaped, moreover, by his life history—as with my other interlocutors. But unlike most of the dedicated trail runners, Bhola was from the Terai (the

---

[96] Nagi Gumba is a Buddhist nunnery located in the Shivapuri Nagarjuna National Park.

[97] Lumbini is the birthplace of the Buddha, Sidhartha Gautama, and a popular pilgrimage site.

lowlands) rather than the mid-hills. He had spent much of his childhood working in his village in Bardiya, though this village work did not involve moving up and down steep and technical inclines as it did for most of my other interlocutors. For runners derived from hill areas, trail running could be, to some extent, a kind of recapturing of childhood experience. To Bhola, however, moving in the hills was a new experience which he discovered only after moving to Kathmandu at the age of eighteen. Bhola was highly aware of this peculiarity: 'Most of the fast Nepali runners are from the hills,' I suggested. 'Yes,' Bhola replied. 'They are all hill people,' he said, 'apart from me. I'm the only one!' He laughed.

The chance to experience environments radically different from those of his childhood and to test his mettle and endurance against these spaces was part of the allure of trail running, for Bhola. During our interview I mentioned Sunmaya Budha, a sponsored ultra runner from Nepal. Her village in Jumla[98], Bhola told me, was '*ukalo-oralo, ukalo-oralo*' (uphill, downhill). 'But me,' he explained, 'I'm a Terai person. Still, I can go to the Himal. If a man from the Terai like me can run in the Himal, that makes me very happy.' With a sense of his own distinctiveness and against-the-odds performances, Bhola asked rhetorically, 'How is it possible? For a Terai man to run in the Himal? How? Strong heart. Strong thinking. I can. I can.' Bhola's comments echoed the strong voluntarism which was evidenced in both the spoken reflections and online discourse of many dedicated Nepali runners (as discussed in chapter 7, 'Hope'). The hills themselves afforded Bhola the chance to overcome his own perceived limitations as a 'Terai man' racing against people from the hills. In this way, like Sarita, Bhola derived psychological benefits from an engagement with the challenging features of mountain environments, overcoming his perceived limitations through physical effort.

As well as seeking these experiences of physical and mental challenge, Bhola approached his trail runs as improvised, playful excursions. Unlike athletes bound to predetermined routes—such as the Army runners—Bhola's solo training on mountain trails meant he could not only run at whatever pace he liked but go wherever he wished as well. 'How do you decide on a route?' I asked him. 'Maybe, tomorrow Friday. Friday, my decision,' he explained. (Friday was his long run day.) 'Three way,' he continued, making a fork with his fingers. 'Just, Shivapuri, and this Kakani,

[98] Jumla is a district in the far west of Nepal.

and this Chandragiri,' he said, naming three potential routes in the Kathmandu Valley. 'This night sleeping,' he said, 'and this morning, four o'clock, four-twenty, this, move! Run run run, decide! Where this, Kakani and Pulchowki. Decide!' Bhola laughed. Relative freedom of movement on the trails of the Kathmandu Valley was another aspect of the environmental pleasures of trail running, and a sharp contrast with daily life in the city—indeed, a sharp contrast with his 9–5 job in a branch of Nabil bank.[99] Unlike his runs on the city's athletics track or, early in the morning, on the roads of Kathmandu, his trail runs were playful and exploratory, marking the distinct pleasures of the sport which set it apart from both everyday life and the regularity and uniformity of road running.

'Here there's no tension': Sabin Kulung Rai

While online media was a distraction for some runners, for others it was a way of expressing what they found so appealing about mountain adventures. 30-year-old trail runner Sabin Kulung Rai documented his training and racing experiences through video blogs in which he described and displayed, in various ways, the sensory and aesthetic offerings of trail running. Pleasurable engagements with the environment during training runs included running along fallen tree trunks, eating sweet bamboo shoots found in the jungle, and the amusement of removing leeches from ankles. Hilltop views frequently provoked the use of the adjectives '*ananda*', '*shanta*' and '*sundar*'. Respectively, these words refer to bliss, peace and beauty, terms Sabin used to describe the psychological benefits he sought through trail running, whether in Solukhumbu, the Kathmandu Valley or the Alps. (Briefly having been a member of the North Face Adventure Team, Sabin had travelled to Hong Kong and Europe to participate in international trail races.)

Sabin's aesthetic and sensory enjoyment of mountain spaces contrasted with his distaste for the bustle of Kathmandu, where he lived. Running in the trails of the Kathmandu Valley was an escape from the city environment where there was too much '*halla*'—a term, met in the previous chapter, describing the loud, busy and disordered character of life in the densely populated and often polluted city. While Sabin's search for work had led him to Kathmandu, his trail running

[99] Nabil Bank is a major Nepali banking company.

experiences at times reminded him of the more placid environment of his early youth in Solukhumbu. Indeed, Sabin explicitly related the two through his online videos. In one such video, for example, while Sabin excitedly picks berries from a bush at the side of the trail, he explains, 'we used to eat so many of these in the village. Check it out, guys. Look how many berries there are here—so tasty. If you're hungry in the jungle, you can eat these berries.' Sabin instructs the viewer, 'look out for leaves like this,' pulling the plant with its star-shaped foliage towards the camera. 'If you're getting muscle cramps while running, look for these fruits,' he adds.

The editing of these videos was also used to make connections between trail running and the environment of his early years. For example, one video juxtaposes footage from his natal village in Solukhumbu with images from the Pyrenees, followed by a clip from the Khiji Demba Ultra[100] in Okhaldhunga, Nepal. Rather than put these three clips into separate videos, Sabin combined them into a collage, suggesting a common theme. What each of these different environments seemed to offer to Sabin was the chance to relieve 'tension', a word frequently used to refer to mental distress or interpersonal conflict in the so-called 'Neplish' *lingua*, the English-treated variant of Nepali often heard in Kathmandu. As Sabin puts it in a video of a group trail run, 'in a place like this, you say, "wow." There's no tension. You feel bliss when you're here. Everyone should come here to relieve their tension.' The next part of the video is a collage of clips, one showing him singing by a waterfall, another showing him swimming with friends in the Okhreni pool[101] in Sundarijal and then, once again, footage of him running in the Pyrenees. His narration tells the viewer, 'what a beautiful place, these Spanish mountains. So green, so many flowers.'

Moreover, running was not only a chance to observe and interact with natural features of the environment but also provided the opportunity to see different ways of life. In one video, while running through a hill village, Sabin describes the settlement as 'organic'. The English word 'organic' was frequently used by dedicated Nepali runners—while it sometimes referred to food grown without pesticides or herbicides, in other cases 'organic' simply referred to something seen as natural and uncontaminated. Even a baby, for example, could be described as 'organic',

[100] The Khiji Demba Ultra is a 42-kilometre mountain race which has its start and finish in Khiji Phalate in Okhaldhunga.

[101] 'Okhreni pool' refers to a natural pool by the Okhreni waterfall in an area of the Shivapuri Nagarjuna National Park in the Kathmandu Valley.

meaning innocent, clean and untainted by city life. Trail running, for Sabin, provided an opportunity to see such 'organic' places. Having traveled overseas as a sponsored athlete, the places Sabin visited were understood in comparative terms—and for him, 'Europe' signified cleanness, 'nature' and peacefulness. During our interview, he reflected that, 'in Europe, the weather isn't too different. But it's not like here because, how to say, the trails are looked after. They spend their budget on trails for hiking and cycling, not just building steps like in Nepal. And in Europe it's clean—but in Nepal, dirty.' In a video of Junbesi, a village in Solukhumbu, Sabin tells his viewers, 'it's a beautiful place here, just like Europe.' His friend adds that the area is 'Nepal's Switzerland'.

Thus, trail running for Sabin was a way to get closer to what was considered 'organic'—his ambition to make a living as an elite, internationally recognised trail runner was mixed in with his desire to explore spaces seen as 'taja' or 'fresh'. Together, these extrinsic and intrinsic factors formed the motivational structure for Sabin's engagement in the sport.

Pleasures in practice

Trail running had intrinsic rewards for dedicated Nepali trail runners. These can be understood in terms of psychological states experienced by individuals, but they can also be registered in the group dynamics observed in training runs and races and the kinds of discourse generated online about trail running's distinctive benefits. As a fieldworker I was able to observe how these intrinsic benefits were created through trail running and, since they were often shared experiences, also to participate in them. Describing these, as I do below, provides a window onto the particular excitements and enchantments which trail running was understood to offer *in the moment*, as distinct from the sport's potential value to dedicated runners as a way of making a living or a name, which was discussed in chapter 6.

Before discussing this subject through detailed examples, a few general statements are worth making about the varied ways in which training and racing were engagements with environments which offered intrinsically rewarding experiences to trail runners. Training runs could be, as the opening vignette illustrates, opportunities for *ramailo* or fun. Generally, runs were not always

approached narrowly as attempts to achieve some kind of physical 'adaptation' through exercise, but were seen rather as enjoyable, multi-sensory engagements with mountain ecology. This purpose often coexisted with the need to produce a physical training adaptation, and these two, sometimes conflicting, priorities were often reflected in the runs themselves. Aesthetic pleasures available through hilltop views, enjoyable engagements with plant and animal life and senses of enchantment through encountering sacred places such as shrines, temples and monasteries were reliably afforded by trail running in Nepal, all of which were experienced alongside and at times in tension with the need to effect a certain training response through a physical stressor of some kind.

Trail running pleasures were experienced not only in training runs but also in races, though these contained the added element of competitive struggle. Competition did not exclude cooperation, conviviality and thus the opportunity for collective *ramailo,* however—in fact, the particular arduousness of a race could bring runners together in distinct inflections of sociality. Participants would often run together for long stretches of the course, especially in very long or 'ultra' races. Competition could thus produce intrinsically rewarding forms of cooperative social activity as challenging mountain environments were the setting for runners' assisting each other with pacing, helping each other to avoid navigational mistakes, and maintaining each others' good humour and morale. This cooperative sociality existed alongside and at times in tension with the pressing need to outrun others for the sake of prize money and prestige. Regardless of whether competition or co-operation were dominant, however, the hills provided runners with the opportunity to test their strength and endurance, an aspect of the sport which had intrinsic psychological rewards even if there was no chance of prize money or professional advancement. In trail running generally—whether racing or training—the experience of *challenge* was central, with the mountain setting being more than an aesthetically pleasing object and becoming a physical challenge to be reckoned with.

To do justice to the multifarious ways in which mountain environments afforded intrinsically rewarding experiences of fun, excitement, exhilaration and struggle for dedicated Nepali runners both in training runs and races is a challenge in itself, to which the examples discussed below can only partially respond. Nonetheless, the aforementioned themes can be seen at work in these

concrete situations, shedding light on how trail running was not simply a means to an end but a complex of activities which were, to some extent, ends in themselves. To begin with, the description given below of a training run will illustrate how such excursions could combine physical work for the 'serious' purpose of a training adaptation with the more serendipitous and fun aspects of mountain running.

Running with Kamala and Rita

As the preceding portraits of Sabin and Sarita indicate, dedicated runners' engagement with mountain trails for their aesthetic value was intertwined with the creation of online media. These videos and photos celebrated mountain trails as spaces of play which offered distinctive, multi-sensory enjoyments. This playful aspect of trail running coexisted with the use of the hills as training environments, a fact that was demonstrated to me during a run with Rita Rai and her older sister Kamala in the Shivapuri Nagarjuna National Park. We began the run with Kamala and I tailing behind Rita, who was undertaking a training exercise she described as 'three hours, fast and long'.[102] After about half of this projected time, Rita slowed down and the nature of our run seemed to change in both purpose and content. First of all, we reached a waterfall where Rita suggested we stop and take some photos. Kamala made TikToks of us, which she would later set to music and convert into slow motion.

Soon after this we left the runnable track for some very steep, extremely technical jungle trail which seemed almost vertical to me. Rita descended fluidly and I followed stumbling in her wake, while Kamala, apparently amused by this risky running, stood at the bottom of the steepest drop and made TikTok clips of Rita and I, shouting, 'very technical!' We had now completely lost the footpath and were exploring thick jungle, a terrain which made any kind of fast running impracticable. We were moving without any sense of direction and soon we ended up at a raging stream, to cross which Kamala had to remove her shoes and clamber over a boulder, trying to figure out for the benefit of Rita and I whether there was any kind of trail to follow on the other side. As it turned out, there was—a very overgrown one which led to a portal back to Kathmandu

[102] The purpose of the training was to practice running fast for three hours, in other words.

in the form of a hole some other adventurer had helpfully ripped in a chain-link fence. This creative route-finding exercise provided ample material for Kamala's TikTok channel, the second, whimsical, part of our run having been of far greater visual interest to her than its first segment on the wide, official trails of the National Park.

Of that first, more goal-oriented half of the run, the only record was Rita's Strava log, its quantitative data faithfully transmitted to her remote coach, a Spanish ultra trail runner. Strava, an app for athletes, was primarily used to record the 'hard' training data produced by sports watches, such as a runner's heart rate, cadence, elevation and pace, while TikTok, Instagram and Facebook were ways of displaying the qualitatively valued aspects of the trail running experience—its romantic side, in other words. The example of this run, with its balance of work and play, demonstrates how trail running allowed for ludic exploration as well as training and competition—intrinsic pleasures as well as goal-oriented efforts.

Thus, the run with Kamala and Rita was particularly illustrative of the balancing act runners often performed between the goal-oriented features of their running and the intrinsically rewarding aspects of moving in mountain environments. The use of phone cameras to take photos and short videos seemed to be a normal feature of group training runs; these media were sometimes taken in the flow of action but at other times were deliberately posed—Pemba Tamang, for example, the trail runner and Muay Thai fighter I described in chapter 5 ('#gurkhaonthetrail'), enjoyed having me take photos of him posing with his guards up after we had completed our uphill tempo run. After this photo-taking session, conversation flowed freely during our descent of Shivapuri Peak—a contrast with the spluttered remarks made about the number of minutes remaining which were the only words exchanged on our way up the hill. As with Kamala and Rita's run, our excursion was bifurcated into a more 'serious' bout of exertion and a more sociable second half. But while these practices of media-making were often appended to runs rather than an incidental record of them, they were also ways of celebrating the act of running in the mountains. Dramatic tableaux of athletes leaping over rocks or slow-motion shots of runners sprinting up steep climbs visually valorised trail running as a genre of physical culture. They were mini poetic documentaries made to rejoice in (and later exhibit to others) the daring and dedication of the Nepali trail runners.

I observed and participated in these dramatic stagings on several occasions. When I bumped into the Mira Rai Initiative women who were out for an easy run a few days before a race, they were engaged in making videos of their running which involved a very deliberate process of cinematic set-up, with much stopping and starting, doing multiple takes until the right shot was achieved. They recorded themselves sprinting uphill in unison and descending downhill in file. I helped to take photos of the whole group standing together in fist-clenched power poses. What these visual works celebrated was not only the joy of running in the hills but the value of being part of a training group—in this case, the 'MRI team', as they called themselves. The importance placed on trail running as a form of aestheticised physical expression for an (online) audience was such that sometimes—as seemed to be the case with the example just described—a whole session could be devoted to that purpose. These photoshoots emphasised the intrinsically valued features of running in mountain environments by generating an aesthetics of the practice. The *sundara* ('beautiful') trails were the context for the visual valorisation of the runner as heroic.

The Paddy Day Mud Run

As the examples above indicate, trail running could be intrinsically *ramailo* ('fun') for dedicated runners, even if the sport was also invested with athletes' long-term ambitions for improved social and economic status. The kinds of fun available through trail running, moreover, were often shaped by features of the physical environment. The Paddy Day Mud Run was one such expression of sporting *ramailo* made possible through engagement with physically challenging features of the environment—though in this case, it was features of agriculture's 'second nature' rather than wilderness or mountains which provided the context for such fun. The Mud Run was a vivid demonstration of how communal pleasures could be created through running. A race through a 400-meter course consisting of deep paddy fields, the event was held on the traditional festival day of Asar Pandra,[103] which marks the beginning of the rice-planting season in Nepal. A race bringing together recreational runners, dedicated trail runners and athletes from the army and police clubs, the Mud Run was not only a competitive sporting event but also a celebration of rural Nepali life and a festival occasion. The event was a kind of sportised version of the group

[103] Asar Pandra means the fifteenth of Asar, the fourth month of the year in the Nepali calendar, a date which corresponds to the 29th of June in the Gregorian calendar.

frolicking in the mud which is traditional on Ropain Diwas,[104] thus demonstrating how trail running could be, to some extent, a way of recapturing the childhood experiences of Nepalis from rural backgrounds. After the race, the athletes were given *dahi* (a kind of yogurt) and *chiura* (beaten rice), the foods traditionally eaten on Asar Pandra. Running events could thus be festive celebrations of local culture and of rural modes of livelihood.

Sanskritik karyakrams

This festive, specifically Nepali aspect of trail races was not unique to the Paddy Day race. Many races were accompanied by a so-called cultural programme (a *sanskritik karyakram,* in Nepali). Such events displayed the traditional dance forms, musical styles and clothing associated with a particular *janajati* ethnic group. In this way, celebrations of local and ethnic identity were folded into the proceedings of a trail race. These programmes did not take pace after every race I attended—they were more likely to be held at events in relatively remote areas with a stronger attendance of local people, such as the Bhojpur Trail Race, the Mundum Trail Race (also in Bhojpur) or the Saga Dawa Marathon in Solukhumbu. Events which were closer to Kathmandu or Pokhara, attended by a greater number of foreign competitors (both tourists and migrants) were less likely to have such programmes, indicating that the degree to which local and ethnic identity were expressed in trail races varied according to their location. The cultural programmes held alongside trail races point to the collective effervescence made possible through trail running events. While running could be construed as a solo sport—a competition of all against all, so to speak—the *sanskritik karyakram* fostered a shared sense of enjoyment. Moreover, these events implicitly made a link between hill running and the local, rural culture of hill janajati groups. In such a way trail running could become part of an expression of pride in an ethnic identity. This expression and valorisation of an ethnic and rural-based identity was one of the intrinsic rewards dedicated Nepali runners derived from the sport: as discussed in the preceding chapter, 'village to city', trail running fitness was frequently understood as the product of childhoods spent in the hills of rural Nepal. By thus associating the trail race with local cultural styles, the karyakrams reinforced this connection between sport and rural modes of livelihood.

---

[104] Ropain Diwas is the festival's other name, meaning literally 'Rice-Planting Day'.

This connection between valued features of rural life and the sport of trail running was also evidenced in my interlocutors' verbal reflections on the subject. Trail running as an engagement with rural places—or spaces considered closer to 'nature'—was a common theme in my conversations with dedicated runners. The sport was considered to offer distinct psychological rewards by bringing runners closer to settings believed to be 'fresh', 'organic' and 'natural'. 'I was a drug addict,' one ultra-runner explains in his YouTube vlog, 'but one big thing I realised, what I'm supposed to be—to connect to nature, running in mountains.' The elite trail runner Sunmaya Budha explains, in a documentary, 'it's not just a sport or a form of exercise, it's a lifestyle, a passion that drives me to challenge myself and connect with nature.' Similarly, the veteran trail runner Kiran Bahadur Gurung explained in the following terms why he preferred trail to road running:

> In the beginning, I started with road running. Road running is a job. But trail is different…I feel happy. It's fun. It's very, how to say…the batabaran [environment] is good. Forest, jungle, it's a healthy environment. In the middle of Kathmandu it's an unhealthy environment, unbalanced. Dust and pollution. But when I go to the trails, there's healthy water, fresh and clean air. That's why I prefer trail running.

This preference for the trails because of the perceived aesthetic value and health-giving properties of mountain environments was common among my interlocutors. 'Road running isn't fun, it's only duhkha [suffering],' Niraj explained. 'I don't like road running, I like trail running, mountain trail. In road, it's not possible to see nature. In the mountain trail, we can see all of nature, we can enjoy the environment. Road races are just in the city, aren't they. So I don't like that. I don't like city area… mathi, mathi [up in the hills], I like it there.'

On the one hand, dedicated trail runners preferred the mountains to the roads for performance-related reasons. Mostly hill janajati, these runners tended to believe that their rural childhoods had produced a fitness especially appropriate for mountain trail running (as discussed in chapter 8, 'from village to city'). However, as the above quotations indicate, they also preferred trails to roads because of an aesthetic and sensory appreciation for such spaces. In other words, their

preference for trails was not just about performance—it was also tied to the intrinsically rewarding aspects of running in places considered 'natural' or somehow closer to 'nature'. As another runner put it (in English), 'nature is the ultimate high.'

Transcendent trail running

While being considered health-giving and aesthetically rewarding, trail running was also, at times, spiritually tinged. This was almost to be expected given the ubiquity of prayer flags, gumbas[105], stupas[106], Tibetan stone carvings[107] and other signs of religion in the hills of Nepal, along with the fact that many of the major trail races have spiritually themed names—such as the Stupa to Stupa Ultra and the Mundum[108] Trail Race. Few runners reflected explicitly on their running as in any way religious. Despite this lack of explicit reflection, however, the spiritual aspects of trail running were evidenced in practice. What could be found in trail running was not just a sense of peace in the here-and-now but an experience which hinted at a greater, transcendental kind of peace. During training runs with dedicated Nepali runners I was shown how such transcendentally oriented experiences were produced on the move.

My run with Manoj Lama to Shivapuri peak was one such powerful illustration of how spirituality could be engaged through trail running. While we alternately ran and power hiked our way up the hill, my co-runner played Tibetan Buddhist chants from his phone. These accompanied us all the way to the summit. They included the famous Om Mane Padme Hum as well as the Green Tara mantra (Om tare tuttare ture soha). Running under countless streams of prayer flags and past various small stupas and then moving through the grounds of the auspicious Buddhist nunnery of Nagi Gumba on our way to the summit of Shivapuri Peak, the chanting music seemed an appropriate accompaniment to my first run in the Shivapuri Nagarjuna National Park, the name of this 61-square-mile area referring to 'the house of Lord Shiva' and the Indian Buddhist

---

[105] 'Gumba' means Buddhist monastery.

[106] 'Stupa' refers to a mound-shaped structure used as a place of meditation in Buddhism.

[107] Tibetan stone carvings are Buddhist religious scripts carved in rock, considered sacred. These are more common in Tibet than Nepal.

[108] The Mundum is the religious system of the Kirat peoples of Nepal. See Wettstein, Marion, von Stockhausen, Alban and Gaenszle, Martin, 2024.

philosopher Nagarjuna (c. 150 - c. 250 CE). Where other runs had been accompanied by a running app's robotic announcements of kilometres elapsed and at what pace, and others were set to Nepali and Hindi pop songs—as in my runs with the women of the Mira Rai Initiative—Manoj's music choice made this excursion into the national park one which seemed to have a transcendental or spiritual aspect. We reached Bagdwar, a shrine close to the summit where there is a pool with a statue of Lord Shiva. Manoj cupped the water flowing from the spout which was in the shape of a tiger's face and threw it over the statue before pouring it on himself. 'If you do this,' he told me, 'it will make problems go away,' and so I followed suit.

My run with Manoj was on a Saturday which is a day for many Nepalis to walk up Shivapuri Peak as a puja (an act of worship). Manoj was glad we had started out early to avoid the crowds of worshippers. Indeed, while our excursion had its worshipful elements, it was, nonetheless, primarily a training run. The run did contain elements of puja, but these were casual and incidental by comparison with the more serious tirtha (pilgrimage) being performed by the people we passed on our way down. Nonetheless, Manoj's use of Buddhist chants created an association between our run and the will to transcend everyday experience through religious action. Like Bhola's running playlist, Manoj's music choice indicated that, for some runners, running on mountain trails was related to transcendental ideals of liberation or, to use a technical term, nirvana. A Buddhist, Manoj had turned his running into a creative, idiosyncratic form of religious practice.

Manoj was not alone in practicing puja on the run. During group training runs, I observed and took part in small practices of religious observance—such as spinning prayer wheels with our hands when we passed stupas or putting red tika marks on our foreheads when our runs took us past temples and other auspicious sites. I also observed various instances of this fusion of running and spirituality in the runners' online world. In a TikTok clip, for example, Pemba Tamang sits in the lotus position in a forested part of the Shivapuri Nagarjuna national park, apparently taking a break from his run to meditate. Similarly, in a video posted to his YouTube channel, Jeevan Lama takes a few minutes' break to meditate at the Shiva Linga[109] after running uphill to Tarakeshwar Mahadev, a temple in the Kathmandu Valley. 'Today is a festival day [Shivaratri]; there's a holiday vibe. So it's a good day to meditate,' he says. Like Manoj and I, during his run Jeevan passes

[109] A Linga is an abstract representation of Lord Shiva.

groups of Nepalis walking up the hill, engaged in a more traditional puja. Dedicated Nepali runners like Jeevan and Manoj were reworking traditional worship practices, combining them with the exertion of sports training. While modern sport and religious practice might seem weakly related, the traditional view of pilgrimage as, in part, a test of body and soul—an endurance challenge—was echoed in the associations athletes formed between long-distance running and puja. In Donald Messerschmidt's ethnography of Hindu pilgrimage to Muktinath in the Nepal Himalayas, he quotes a sadhu who says,

> we will suffer the wet forest and we will endure the windstorm and raging rivers. People who come so far and bear these elements are fortunate, for only they are able to see the beauty of it all. Lord Krishna and Rama dwelled in the forest where they found peace and contentment. Rama and Krishna and other rishimunis (sages) who spent time in the forest have shown us the path leading to peace and tranquility. They have shown us how to attain karma (purity) by going through all the suffering of the trip… (1989: 106)

Such a perspective is not limited to holy men but is shared among many who make pilgrimages on foot in Nepal. In a review article on high-altitude pilgrimages (Basnyat 2014), the author concludes that many pilgrims 'feel that experiencing hardship during the trip is nothing to shy away from; indeed, suffering may be perceived as an integral part of the trip.' I at times heard the echo of such ideals in the ways trail runners talked about their efforts during long races, when religious icons could provide a source of confidence and reassurance in the midst of difficulty. One such runner, Lalita Chamling Rai, told me how, during the Bhojpur Trail Race, she had gained a newfound confidence and sense of her purpose for undertaking the effort upon encountering a religious statue. Her energy levels flagging as she struggled to climb Arun Danda, Lalita saw the mist pulling back to reveal a colossal statue of Lord Shiva.[110] 'When I saw Shivaji, I got a new power,' she said. 'I remembered why I'm there. It's not just about the race…'

Conceptions of pilgrimage as a gruelling physical test which worshippers undergo as a necessary part of the journey to ultimate salvation were thus being adopted and reworked by dedicated Nepali trail runners who ran in spaces understood to be sacred. Moreover, sacralising the mountain ecology on the run was not a practice necessarily linked to Hindu or Buddhist conceptions; dedicated runners who were Christian converts, such as Sarita, continued to see the

[110] The summit of Arun Danda in Bhojpur is home to very large statues of Shiva and Siddhartha Gautama.

mountains as divine abodes while adopting the signifiers of a different and new religious identity. In this case the signs of religion were not provided solely by elements of material culture already found in the hills of Nepal such as prayer flags, stupas, gumbas and other auspicious sites and objects, but were produced through runners' own media productions. Sarita's TikTok posts showing mountain views and documenting her training runs, with Christian terms and sayings used in the videos' accompanying descriptions, were ways of associating the sacred hills with a new religious idiom connected to a global network rather than any Nepali scene. Indeed, Sarita's newfound faith was mediated by social media rather than Church ritual—she had converted without participating in any Nepali congregation. Her faith was therefore expressed in terms of inner conviction—'I really believe', she told me—rather than by reference to collective practices or physical objects. Nonetheless, her inflection of Christian concepts through mountain running was not dissimilar to the running spirituality evidenced by my other, non-Christian interlocutors. Like Manoj, Jeevan, Bhola and others, Sarita's sense that trail running offered connection to the divine was an adaptation of religious traditions to a novel sporting context.

Indeed, Sarita's own practices of transcendent trail running, so to speak, were not doctrinally exclusivist: in one of her videos, for example, an Indian guru provides a voiceover, saying, 'Trust in yourself. Deep inside of you there is a god watching. Bhagwan, Allah, Yeshua,[111] Guru Baba…' In other words, it was not given solely to Christianity to represent inner conviction and determination. The agentive sense of personal empowerment (as discussed in chapter 6)—a sensibility reinforced in an embodied way through taking on physical challenges in the mountains—could be expressed in myriad religious idioms. Jamil, a Muslim trail runner, spoke similarly of God giving him inner confidence as well as protecting him from injury. Trail running as intrinsically rewarding because transcendentally connecting was combined with an attitude of confidence, of 'trust' in oneself, reflecting the way embodied experiences of mountain running were reinforcing the kind of 'inwardness' characteristic of modern selfhood. In *Sources of the Self*, the philosopher Charles Taylor notes that there is a 'massive subjective turn of modern culture, a new form of inwardness, in which we come to think of ourselves as beings with inner depths.' (1989:26) He adds, of relevance to these examples of trail runners seeking transcendence while valorising a characteristically modern style of subjectivity, that 'this idea that the source is within doesn't

[111] Yeshua is the Hebrew name for Jesus Christ.

exclude our being related to God or the Ideas; it can be considered our proper way to them.' (1989:428) These runners' creative 'remixing' of traditional religious practices, which dynamically combines them with a novel kind of sport, places the runners in the category of Taylor's modern 'seekers'. Though Taylor developed this concept to describe the modern West, it seems to be applicable to the Nepali athletes seeking transcendence through mountain running. Such 'seekers' find spiritual sustenance not in traditional religion but in a more direct connection to the sacred, one which is often undertaken as a 'personal search…coded in the language of authenticity: I am trying to find my path, or find myself.' (2007:507) Taylor notes that this 'search for spiritual wholeness is often closely related to the search for health.' (507)

This chapter has demonstrated that, whether aestheticised, spiritualised or convivially celebrated, trail running was valued by dedicated runners for reasons highly distinct from the pursuit of prestige or money, even to the degree that mountain running became for some a way of seeking a connection to the divine. Such intrinsic values available in the acts of training and racing, however, were not unrelated to the extrinsic rewards sought by the dedicated runners—which were discussed in chapters 6 (hopes) and 7 (constraints). It is the relation between these intrinsic and extrinsic elements which the next, concluding chapter explicates.

Conclusion

The intrinsic rewards discussed in this chapter are only *some* of the many enjoyments and excitements that dedicated runners sought to realise through the sport of trail running. The exploration of these intrinsically rewarding elements of the sport points to the existence of a shared understanding that the *distinct* benefits of trail running were related to certain positively valorised features of the environments in which the sport took place. The dedicated runners frequently contrasted their sport with road running, which was generally understood to lack the exploration of 'fresh' and 'natural' environments. Additionally, trail running offered not only 'bliss' and 'peace' but the chance to be physically challenged by features of the environment, a valued aspect of the sport which sustained runners' continued participation. The motivational structure of most of the dedicated Nepali runners I met was characterised by a combination of an attraction to

the intrinsic merits of the sport with the hope for long-term, extrinsic rewards, as discussed in part one. The concluding chapter will now draw together these two components of runners' motivations, explaining how embodied experiences generated while running helped to sustain the normative structure of aspiration examined in part one. In other words, I consider the interaction between the run and the long run.

Chapter 10: Conclusion

HOW TO CHANGE YOUR LIFE WITH ONE RUN

—Asia Pacific Adventure - Athletes, title of a YouTube video about Nepali trail runner Rammaya Budha's performance at the 2025 Hong Kong 100, 2025

Introduction

Dedicated trail runners' motivations for engaging in the sport were a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic factors. This conclusion discusses the relations between these extrinsic and intrinsic aspects of dedicated runners' motivations, arguing that the cruel optimism which characterised these athletes' hopeful orientation to the sport was sustained by the intrinsic pleasures and excitements of training and racing. In doing so, I underline my thesis's key contribution to knowledge in showing how Berlant's theoretical construct of cruel optimism (2011)—initially articulated as a way of depicting proliferating forms of hopeful attachment in the Global North during the neoliberal period—can also be used to illuminate forms of hope found in Global South contexts such as Nepal, where widespread economic precarity and a sense of historical impasse lead to similar good-life fantasies.

Extrinsic and intrinsic motivating factors

The extrinsic and intrinsic factors necessary to sustain the *cruel optimism* which defined dedicated trail runners' hopeful orientation to the sport have been explored in the ethnographic chapters of this thesis. The extrinsic factors driving dedicated runners' engagement in trail running were discussed in chapters six, 'Hopes' and seven, 'Constraints'—above all, these extrinsic factors were built around desires to make a living as an elite athlete. More short-term extrinsic factors were also important, such as the chance of winning prize money in domestic (Nepali) races.

By itself, however, the mere hope for these extrinsic rewards was not enough to sustain runners' interest in the sport, since such hopes were very often accompanied by a recognition of strong economic constraints on their agency, as discussed in chapter seven, 'Constraints'. Athletes' recognition of these constraints on their agency discouraged their continued engagement in trail running. However, they remained involved in the sport regardless of these limitations because of certain intrinsic rewards which the sport offered—those positively valued experiences immediately available in the acts of training and racing.

These intrinsic rewards have been explored in chapters eight, 'Village to city' and nine, 'Running in the web of life'. In chapter eight, I described runners' life histories in terms of their trajectory from rural to urban environments, which shaped how they engaged with the sport's intrinsic pleasures and excitements, while in chapter nine I discussed how trail running was valorised as an engagement with so-called 'nature'.

Trail running as an engagement with 'nature' provided not only pleasure but opportunities to take on physical and mental challenges. Experiences of running in the mountains entailed pleasurable engagements with environments considered to be *taja,* ('fresh'), 'organic' and *sundar,* ('beautiful'), by contrast with urban spaces, while rugged mountain environments allowed runners to challenge themselves and compete on terrain which resembled that of their early childhoods spent in rural hill villages. These positive experiences made trail running a 'scene' worth returning to, even though runners perceived there to be strong limitations on their capacity to become professional athletes.

Dedicated runners did not strictly compartmentalise these extrinsic and intrinsic aspects of their motivations. Rather, the intrinsically valued features of trail running were *combined* with their hopes for long-term, extrinsic rewards from the sport, producing a motivational cocktail that was hard to turn down. The sport thus seemed to offer a fusion of immanent pleasures and tantalising, though largely chimerical, expectations for the future. Attachments to the sport were formed beyond rational, costs-versus-benefits calculation—rather, running experiences produced affects which *gave life to* the normative story of success through hard work, providing the necessary

emotional colouring to sustain the ideological achievement narrative. Running experiences provided the voltage which kept the dream of elite status alive when it might otherwise have been discarded: if looked at coldly and 'rationally', such dreams were not sustainable, but if they were infused with feelings generated on the run, this optimistic orientation to the future could retain its power.

The cruel optimism of dedicated trail runners

Berlant defines cruel optimism as '[a] relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic.' (2011:24) The genre of hope I have argued was characteristic of dedicated Nepali trail runners' orientation to the sport can be fruitfully interpreted as a variety cruel optimism. In chapter 6 I described the contours of this genre of hope, before setting out in chapter 7 how runners recognised the manifold and compounding structural constraints on their agency. Together, these two aspects of runners' attachment to the sport constituted a kind of cruel optimism—an ambivalent relation characterised by both affirmation and harm. On the one hand, involvement in trail running anchored runners in life, affording them a vocation, an identity, and even a sense of purpose and meaning. As Berlant describes such a relation, 'whatever the content of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep living on and to look forward to being in the world.' (2011:24) On the other hand, dedicated runners' attachment to trail running was bound up with the desire for elite status on the global stage and, with it, money and fame—an unlikely outcome for most. For Berlant, a relation of cruel optimism is both damaging and affirming: the desire for an object which is unlikely to be attained harms the subject while at the same time, nonetheless, providing a sense of affirmation in the present. Hence Berlant describes cruel optimism as the attachment to 'an enabling object that is also disabling.' (2011:25)

The ambivalence which characterises the relation of cruel optimism—both damaging and confirming—captures the experiences of dedicated Nepali trail runners, who recognised that their capacity to realise their running dreams was tightly constrained, and yet continued to cathect the sport of trail running with their hopes for the good life. For most of the dedicated runners it was

unlikely that this form of optimism would bear all of the fruits which it promised. Moreover, so long as this hope retained its power, it obscured other paths of action which could have been taken. In these ways, dedicated trail runners' optimism was, however reassuring it might have been in the present, cruel. And yet, for the time being, the cruel optimism of the aspiring trail runner provided an object to strive for, a vocation in which measurable progress could be made, as well as the components for an identity—one that was in some ways exciting because new and in other respects part of a longer tradition (as explored in chapter five, Gurkhas).

Cruel optimism is an affect structure. Beyond rational calculation, though at times inclusive of such economistic logic, it is not a formula or a strategy in a 'game', but a strongly felt attachment. For dedicated trail runners, it was an ideologically saturated story. If the words of this story were provided by the liberal voluntarist ideas that were circulating in 2020s Nepal, the music was provided by the affectively charged experiences of trail running itself. By themselves, the words might not always have rung true, because they often clashed with features of social structure apprehended by Nepali runners as powerful constraints on their agency. The music of experience, however, provided the necessary affective investments which made runners cleave to the achievement story despite these constraints.

In this way, attachment to trail running as cruel optimism was an affect structure partly produced through embodied experiences generated on the run. Without these experiences, the mere hope of a better future would not have sustained dedicated runners' dedication. Thus runners were 'drawn to return to the scene where the object hovers in its potentialities', as Berlant puts it (2011:24). Such 'is the operation of optimism as an affective form.' (24) While the runners were aware of, and vocal about, the structural constraints which made achieving elite status unlikely, they nonetheless repeatedly '[returned] to the scene of fantasy' (Berlant 2011:2), continuing to hope that they could achieve elite status through their own determined efforts. They did so because their engagement in the sport was sustained by a hope which was not a rational calculation, but an affectively charged orientation to the future, and also because hope was *pragmatic,* an acting 'as if' (Vaihinger 1924) the constraints were not there or could be worked around. The title of my thesis, 'Playing as if', points towards this speculative, playful form of hope. Dedicated trail runners played up to a narrative which had steadily developed through the process

of their deepening engagement with the sport, a story of against-the-odds success consequent on pluck and drivenness and talent. Their optimism was practical, a kind of willing reality to be as they desired it, even in the face of profound structural limitations—a 'playing as if' they could really achieve the elite running careers which they hoped for.

Berlant conceives of cruel optimism as a durable relation, difficult to break out of because of its affective or 'libidinal' nature. (2011:27) Hence they were fond of quoting Freud's reflection in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) that 'people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them.' (244) Berlant's conception of cruel optimism accords strongly with how I interpret dedicated trail runners' attachment to their sport. In the next section, therefore, I will explore how affects generated on the run sustained the cruel optimism which kept athletes attached to trail running.

Embodied experience sustained cruel optimism

'Life is also like that,' Sarita Rai told me, reflecting on how hill running provided her with both a physical challenge and an encouraging sense of achievement. The 'ups and downs' of running, for Sarita, were like the 'ups and downs' of life itself. She was not alone in bringing running experiences to bear on other areas of life. Dedicated trail runners in general used their running experiences to sustain their optimistic, hopeful attachment to the sport. In chapters eight and nine, I chose to discuss one part of this affective complex, examining how trail running, as distinct from road and track athletics, was an engagement with environments understood to be 'natural' or somehow closer to 'nature'. Indeed, it was in response to some variety of the question, 'why trail running?' or, 'why not road running?' that runners offered their reflections on the distinct and valued *environmental* qualities of the sport.

These environmentally focused, intrinsically rewarding aspects of trail running were not just important insofar as they were *added to* the extrinsic rewards runners hoped to achieve from the sport, such as corporate sponsorship. Rather, these intrinsic rewards worked in combination with such future-focused hopes and expectations to produce the effect of durable attachment. The

positive affects which running in ‘nature’ produced were associated, for dedicated Nepali runners, with the global sport of trail running. Trail running thus *felt* like a scene worth being involved in. Dedicated Nepali trail runners were affectively tied to the sport through the intrinsic, existential rewards it offered—what Nettleton calls, in a different running context, the ‘embodied reassurance rooted in the connection between the corporeal self and the landscape.’ (2013:206)

Moreover, for dedicated trail runners the sense of embodied reassurance which mountain running provided was not merely a one-off, an experience in itself, but was taken as an indication of a possible life to come—such embodied affect reinforced that inchoate future vision which philosopher Ernst Bloch calls the ‘Not-Yet-Conscious’. (1986:117) As Snellinger notes in her discussion of Nepali student activism, ‘Ernst Bloch locates the strength of the new in youth, who are the voice of tomorrow that consists chiefly of “not-yet” consciousness.’ (2016:44) Similarly, what trail running’s experiences of embodied reassurance offered to young, dedicated Nepali trail runners was not only immanent pleasure but an intimation of a future, a world not-yet. The combination of future-oriented hopes and immanent rewards continually produced the desire to engage in trail running. More specifically, the embodied affects generated on the run reinforced the sense, for dedicated runners, that engagement in the sport could lead to a future, better life, in both a personal and collective sense.

A promise—a world to come—was thus contained within the encounter with the sport. Cruel optimism is, for Berlant, always oriented around a ‘cluster of promises’ (2011:16): they write that ‘proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises, some of which may be clear to us and good for us while others, not so much.’ (2011:23–4) Dedicated trail runners’ engagement with their sport was thus a process by which ‘the subject leans toward promises contained within the present moment of the encounter with her object.’ (Berlant 2011:24) Like this cluster of promises, Bloch’s ‘Not-Yet’ vision of the future is by definition somewhat blurry, not fully formed, and subject to change. Nonetheless, in light of my research findings I can tentatively suggest some of the features of that world or life to come.

A cluster of promises

For dedicated trail runners, the 'Not-Yet' world intimated by their experience of the sport would be, in some respects, a resolution of the contradiction between village and city described in chapter seven. The runners' loss of a connection to 'fresh', 'organic' environments through their migration to urban areas could be resolved by a renewed relationship to mountain environments, a relation produced through trail running becoming a vocation and a career. The not-yet world of trail running would also be a resolution of the marginalisation, both ethnic and class-based, which most of the dedicated Nepali runners experienced in contemporary Nepal. The skills which most of the dedicated trail runners regarded as particular to hill j*anajati* Nepalis could be the resources for making a new and better life, one in which they would not be marginal subjects but instead seen as representative of Nepaliness as such.

Shneiderman and Rai argue that such 'deep-seated desires on the part of historically marginalised communities for greater participation and recognition from the state arose out of the particular history of Nepal's exclusive citizenship.' (2019:87) Nepaliness, historically, was defined by and for the country's high-caste, Hindu, hill-dwelling elite. For my trail running interlocutors, by contrast, hill fitness and sporting toughness were seen as characteristic features of hill *janajati* people, who through trail running could come to represent Nepal *per se*. Through sport, dedicated trail runners hoped to represent their country, valorising the nation as one constituted of *bir* ('brave') and strong people—'Nepal bir' or 'bir Gorkhali'. In this way, rather than being marginal to the nation, hill *janajati* runners would be typical representations of what it means to be Nepali. Thus, from a marginal position, they would take up a hegemonic one, at least at the level of sporting spectacle. Since mountain fitness was seen as, in part, having been produced by childhoods spent in rural, hill environments, these two features of the intimated world to come were related—the sense of empowerment of marginalised ethnic and class subjects was related to the sense of a restoration of a lost connection to the hillscape.

It is worth noting that such a vision risks excluding the peoples of the Terai, a form of erasure which has a long precedent. Historically the country's hegemonic elites exploited the lowlands

‘while withholding integration of the region and its people on an equal footing.’ (Sijapati 2013:91) As Shneiderman and Rai note, this exclusion produced a geographical imaginary in which Nepal’s ‘soul’ is equated with the hills, ‘an idea that discriminated against the Tarai, its peoples and their histories.’ (2019:91) As the exception of Bhola Tharu, discussed in chapter 9, shows, there is no hill running ‘essence’ exclusively possessed by hill janajati runners. Whether the Not-Yet vision of trail running in Nepal can take account of such diversity will become clearer as the sport continues to grow.

Moreover, the way in which a vision of Nepal’s cultural future with hill janajatis as central was articulated through the frame of sport was a curiously ambivalent and tense genre of the social imagination. Such subjects had been historically marginal to the project of (Hindu, male, high-caste) *Nepalipan* (Nepaliness) but, despite this, still desired to run as representatives of Nepal to the world—to ‘earn the name of Nepal’ in global trail running. As Shneiderman and Rai describe such a complex reality,

> Since the mid-18th century…individuals across what we recognise as the contemporary nation-state of Nepal have been grappling with how to possess multiple identities at any given time: as residents of particular locales, speakers of diverse languages, practitioners of multiple religions, members of caste and ethnic collectivities, and overarching all of these, subjects and eventually citizens of an integrated ‘Nepali’ state. (2019:91)

This negotiation between multiple, at times conflicting, identities is clearly ongoing—with trail running only one arena for this struggle. As the discussion of aspiring Gurkha subjectivities in chapter 5 and the interview with Kamala in chapter 8 indicated, identity formations relating to specifically janajati ethnicity, physical culture and livelihoods and regional particularity were at times in some tension with the historical project of high-caste Nepaliness. Nonetheless, actors often responded to this tension by seeking to take up a central position as representatives of a ‘true’ *Nepal bir* (‘Nepal the brave’) rather than to articulate distinct and separatist identities.

Alongside and interacting with such caste- and ethnicity-related components of runners’ idealised futures was the hope that, through elite success in trail running, athletes could make their families proud and provide for them materially through earning remittances. This desire to earn remittances through trail running was driven by senses of obligation to kin. Remittances,

Zharkevich argues, are a ‘substance of relatedness’ (2019:1) for Nepali migrant workers—means by which the kin network is sustained and duties of care to family members are fulfilled. Thus the drive to earn money through trail running was not purely individualistic but was, rather, grounded in networks of kinship obligation. It was hoped that success in trail running could somehow lead to overcoming economic constraints which dedicated trail runners apprehended (as discussed in chapter 7).

Regardless of the different shapes of trail runners’ future-oriented visions—how collective, individual or kin-focused they were—the sense of pride, achievement, and improved status which it was hoped would follow from a trail running career was hinted at in the very embodied life of the sport. The sense of overcoming difficult challenges in the form of steep hill climbs or tricky, technical descents was a kind of intimation of a future life in which social limitations could be overcome through hard work—in which precarious and relatively unrewarding forms of work could be replaced by the role of professional athlete. Along with this, the sense of resolving tension through engaging with ‘prakritik’ (natural) mountain spaces was experienced as a glimpse of a future life in which the relation to nature could be restored through achieving a career as a professional trail runner, both by migrating to cleaner environs and/or by runners using their new elite status to advocate change in Nepal.

In short, what trail running offered in the temporary spaces produced through training and racing, runners hoped could become more general through their attaining a professional sporting career. For dedicated trail runners, feelings of embodied reassurance generated by running on trails were hitched to the narrative of attaining elite career status through commitment and perseverance.

Suggestions for future research

What will become of the forms of cruel optimism this thesis has described? As chapter 2 emphasised, the ‘field’ of my research was not only fuzzy but subject to change. Future researchers will discover a social world of Nepali trail running transformed in various ways by comparison with the account presented here. Even observing the field from afar while writing this thesis has suggested to me that a substantial number of the analytical points I have made may

soon be ‘out of date’, so to speak. Whoever next researches trail running in Nepal may meet a social world in which trail running equipment is readily available in Kathmandu, in which those I have called dedicated trail runners may be composed of a greater proportion of urban Newari and high-caste Nepalis, in which major sports companies sponsor more than a few Nepali trail runners and in which Euro-America and the Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc have been decentred as focal points for Nepali runners, with Asia playing a much stronger role. Indeed, if trail running in the world system becomes more multipolar then this may change the structural terms of the game which have set the context for this ethnographic study, and therefore the strategic orientations of the ‘dedicated trail runners’ who were its research focus may change as well.

In the context of such rapid transformation, I can nonetheless suggest a few ways in which subsequent research could further illuminate what is at stake for the variously situated actors in the social worlds of Nepali trail running, based on the lacunae in my own work and the questions which linger in my mind.

Gender

As I discussed at length in my methods chapter, the topic of female Nepali trail runners and their situated perspectives as well as the gendered obstacles they faced in engaging in trail running was unfortunately under-explored in my research due to the seeming hesitancy of women runners to be interviewed. This made my findings on the subject of gender incomplete. While aspects of Nepali masculinities in relation to trail running were explored in chapter 5, ‘#gurkhaonthetrail’, any discussion of gender is flawed if it does not bring in female perspectives. Future researchers could therefore shed light on women’s perspectives through conducting interviews and participant-observation fieldwork with Nepali women trail runners, which would further help to uncover how the themes I have described in discussing runners’ orientations to the future have particular inflections based on gender.

Migration

Further research on the migration pathways of Nepali runners, entailing ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with Nepali runners who live abroad, working either as professional athletes or in other jobs, would also be highly valuable. While I was able to conduct telephone interviews with Nepali trail runners abroad, I did not conduct any ethnographic research in these other locations. Multi-sited work which would 'follow the people' (Marcus 1995:106) could therefore illuminate how migratory experiences interact with trail running as vocation and aspiration.

According to a recent World Bank report, as of 2021 23.3 percent of households in Nepal had at least one member living abroad and absentees accounted for 7.5 percent of the country's population. (The latter figure has remained stable since 2011.) (World Bank 2025:23) Therefore understanding many phenomena in Nepali society requires a grasp of the transnational dimension. With the growth of labour outmigration from village areas since the 1980s, for example, 'the village' as an economic and social formation can now be constituted across vast geographical distance internationally. I have hinted at this reality in my discussion of trail running as a means of earning money which can be used as remittances to support family members, though further research could be conducted among Nepali runners of more or less permanent outmigration statuses. Trail running was understood by my informants as a global social form and thus the more research that can be done among Nepali runners abroad, the better in shedding light on how and the extent to which the village, the family and the nation continue to be reproduced in this changing transnational context.

Long distance participation

My participant observation in trail races stretched to distances of up to 55 kilometres. A future researcher could take part in longer events such as 100-kilometre races, 100-mile races and 200-kilometre-plus stage races, challenges which require different skills and produce distinct qualities of experience. In this way our understanding of the phenomenon of Nepali trail running could be advanced. Since a large part of my thesis concerns the embodied affects generated through long-

distance running, it would be useful if future research could uncover the varied kinds of affects produced through different race distances beyond 50 kilometres.

The organisation of trail races

Moreover, becoming involved in supporting a race through volunteering at checkpoints or in another capacity could also generate new perspectives on Nepali trail running different from those I generated through participating as a runner. Because I was usually a participant in such races I could not get involved in the organisational side, though seeing events from such a support vantage point would be very useful. Indeed, as Wacquant argues, to enact the phenomenon need not imply that there is only one position within it from which insights can be gleaned. He writes that,

> You may just not possess the… litheness to be a ballerina… But you could well become a props technician for the ballet… There are always multiple doors onto any stage "where the action is"—to invoke Goffman's (1967) classic essay by that title— and this provides varied opportunities to experience, and thereby experiment with, components of the phenomenon by learning the part and taking up the position of one or another protagonist in the social drama at hand, be it a minor one. (2015:6)

Because I was interested in understanding the affective lives of the dedicated Nepali trail runners, I chose to participate in races as a runner. However, placing this experience in a larger context through conducting ethnographic fieldwork on the organisational side of trail races, especially since the dedicated Nepali trail runners are themselves sometimes involved in this supportive part of the action, would enhance understanding of Nepali trail running.

The Karnali Sports Club

Further study of the Karnali Sports Club based in Jumla Bazaar would be very illuminating. I visited Jumla for five days before the Jumla to Rara Ultra but did not conduct any other research on the athletics club based there, a very important group in Nepali trail running. Some of the highest performing trail and road runners in Nepal are being trained at this club in the remote far West of Nepal and their perspectives and experiences may differ from those of Kathmandu-based

athletes, so it would be valuable to conduct interviews and participant-observation fieldwork with those involved in the Karnali Sports Club, including its athletes, coaches and organisers.

The broader running community

Additionally, research on runners other than the 'dedicated' participants who I have focused on in this dissertation could contribute valuable new insights. Such research could analyse the practices of the more casual 'hobbyist' runners, those from urban backgrounds, those of higher caste groups and Westerners who run in Nepal (including both tourists and migrants). I focused my research on those who were seeking to finish in podium positions, earn prize money and dreamed of becoming professional trail runners. But these runners were only one section of the trail running world, which was also made up of many less competitive or 'serious' runners who pursued the sport for, among other reasons, their health and wellbeing, pure enjoyment or personal challenge. Seeking to understand these other motivations could shed light not just on these other categories of runners but on the dedicated Nepali runners as well, perhaps finding that the dividing line I have established in this thesis has been drawn too starkly.

Careers or social movements?

Finally, and in more general terms, a worthwhile avenue for future research on Nepali trail running would be to inquire into the balance and perhaps tension between runners' future-focused visions of improving their conditions through attaining professional status and collective ideals of promoting broader social change through sport. Are there contradictions between career-focused orientations to the future and visions of societal transformation? Or can runners figure out productive relations between the two? Exploring this question through ethnographic research could extend the findings presented in this thesis, bringing to light the changing forms and valences of dedicated runners' 'playing as if'.

My thesis has shown how a sporting practice can be both affirming in the present while being based on a promise that is largely chimerical. It has sought to understand this ambivalent relation as an interaction between the extrinsic and intrinsic rewards which the sport offered to aspiring Nepali trail runners. In doing so I have used Berlant's concept of 'cruel optimism' as a way of characterising the tension between hopeful attachments to a desired future and runners' recognition of structural constraints on their agency. While I have sought to bring out the intrinsically valued features of the sport of trail running, the thesis's critical edge has been in showing how, among a growing number of dedicated, mostly hill *janajati* trail runners, global trail running is invested with forms of aspiration for which there is only a very weak economic infrastructure—a reality which runners themselves noticed and of which they were critical. Will the sport continue to inspire such hopes, even as they are so often dashed? Or will dedicated trail runners make new paths, different from those the achievement story has plotted for them? Whether the not-yet consciousness of young Nepali trail runners will take novel forms in the years to come, producing new visions other than those of corporate sponsorship and elite success on the global stage, only more time and practical experimentation—*playing as if*—will tell.

Bibliography

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1993. *Writing Women's Worlds: Bedouin Stories*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Adams, Vincanne. 1996. *Tigers of the Snow and Other Virtual Sherpas: An Ethnography of Himalayan Encounters*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. 1944. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, translated by Edmund Jephcott, 94–136. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002.

Ahearn, Laura M. 2001. *Invitations to Love: Literacy, Love Letters, and Social Change in Nepal*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press.

Anderson, Ben, Akanksha Awal, Daniel Cockayne, Beth Greenhough, Jess Linz, Anurag Mazumdar, Aya Nassar, Harry Pettit, Emma J. Roe, Derek Ruez, Mónica Salas Landa, Anna Secor, and Aelwyn Williams. 2023. "Encountering Berlant Part Two: Cruel and Other Optimisms." *The Geographical Journal* 189 (1): 143–160.

Appadurai, Arjun. 1990. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Theory, Culture & Society* 7 (2): 295–310.

Appadurai, Arjun. 1991. "Global Ethnoscapes: Notes and Queries for a Transnational Anthropology." In *Recapturing Anthropology: Working in the Present*, edited by Richard G. Fox, 191–210. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.

Asia Pacific Adventure. 2025. *How to Change Your Life with One Run.* YouTube video. Posted January 2025. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S6zXCg6f3Xk

Atkinson, Paul, and David Silverman. 1997. "Kundera's Immortality: The Interview Society and the Invention of the Self." *Qualitative Inquiry* 3 (3): 304–325.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1981. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994.

Bell, Thomas. *Kathmandu*. London: Haus Publishing, 2016.

Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. North Carolina: Duke University Press.

Berlant, Lauren. 2012. "Without Exception: On the Ordinariness of Violence." Interview by Brad Evans. *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 20. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/without-exception-on-the-ordinariness-of-violence/

Berlant, Lauren, and Kathleen Stewart. 2019. *The Hundreds*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bhandari, Amrit Kumar. 2018 "Cities are What Cities Perform: Theorizing Cities in Nepali Context.

Bhandari, Kalyan. 2020. "Social Sanctions of Leisure and Tourism Constraints in Nepal." *Tourist Studies* 20 (1): 1–17.

Bhandari, Kalyan. 2023. "Fatalism and Leisure in Nepal." *Leisure Studies* 42 (6): 883–896.

Bista, Dor Bahadur. 1991. *Fatalism and Development: Nepal's Struggle for Modernization*. Calcutta: Orient Longman.

Bista, Dor Bahadur. 1995. “Khas of Chaudabisa.” *Himal Southasian*. Available online at https://www.himalmag.com/cover/khas-of-chaudabisa

Bista, Dor Bahadur. 2014. “Dor Bahadur Bista.” Interview. *La.Lit,* March 2, 2014. https://lalitmag.com/1900-2/

Bloch, Ernst. 1986. *The Principle of Hope*. Translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Borenstein, Hannah R. 2022. *Running to Labor: Ethiopian Women Distance Runners in Networks of Capital*. PhD diss., Duke University.

Braudel, Fernand. 1980. *On History*. Translated by Sarah Matthews. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Byrne, Sarah. 2018. “’From Our Side Rules Are Followed’: Authorizing Bureaucracy in Nepal’s ‘Permanent Transition’.” *Modern Asian Studies* 52 (3): 971–1000.

Campbell, J.D. 2000. “‘Training for sport is training for war’: sport and the transformation of the British army, 1860-1914.” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 17(4): 21–58.

Cantet, Laurent, dir. 2001. *Time Out (L'Emploi du temps)*. Paris: Haut et Court.

Caplan, Lionel. 1995. *Warrior Gentlemen: “Gurkhas” in the Western Imagination*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Central Bureau of Statistics, National Planning Commission Secretariat. 2012. *National Population and Housing Census 2011 (National Report), vol. 1*. Kathmandu: Government of Nepal.

Chilton, Steve. 2023. *Voices from the Hills: Pioneering Women Fell and Mountain Runners*. Dingwall: Sandstone Press.

Chisholm, Amanda, and Hanna Ketola. 2020. "The Cruel Optimism of Militarism: Feminist Curiosity, Affect, and Global Security." *International Political Sociology* 14 (3): 270–285.

Chisholm, Amanda. 2023. *The Gendered and Colonial Lives of Gurkhas in Private Security: From Military to Market*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Chitrakar, Anil. 2019. “Nepal’s Fatalistic ‘Ke Garne’ Culture.” *Nepali Times*, March 15. https://nepalitimes.com/opinion/12-full-opinion/nepal-s-fatalistic-ke-garne-culture

Clifford, James. 1983. "On Ethnographic Authority." *Representations* 2 (Spring): 118–146.

Crawley, Michael. 2019. *‘Condition’: Energy, Time and Success Amongst Ethiopian Runners*. PhD diss., University of Edinburgh.

Crawley, Michael. 2020. *Out of Thin Air: Running Wisdom and Magic from Above the Clouds in Ethiopia*. London: Bloomsbury.

Connell, R. W. 2005. *Masculinities*. University of California Press.

Connell, R. W., and Messerschmidt, James W. 2005. “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept.” *Gender and Society* 19 (6): 829–859.

Dahal, Ganga Ram, Pandit, Bishnu Hari and Shah, Racchya. 2020. “Abandoned Agricultural Land and Its Reutilisation by Adoption of Agroforestry: A Case Study from Kaski and Parbat Districts of Nepal.” *Journal of Forest and Livelihood* 19 (1): 1–16.

Dalzell, Victoria M. 2022. “Growing up Christian and Nepali: Negotiating Belonging through Music Inside and Outside the Church in Nepal.” *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 59: 1–22.

Dardenne, Jean-Pierre, and Luc Dardenne, dirs. 1999. *Rosetta*. Liège: Les Films du Fleuve.

Davis, Coralynn V. 2014. *Maithil Women's Tales: Storytelling on the Nepal–India Border*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

De Sales, Anne. 2002. “History as You Have Never Seen It: A Nepalese Film.” *Autrepart* 24 (4): 125–139.

Des Chene, Mary. 1991. *Relics of Empire: A cultural history of the Gurkhas, 1815–1987*. PhD diss., Stanford University.

Des Chene, Mary. 1999. “Military Ethnology in British India.” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 19 (2): 154–72.

Fischer, Mia. 2017. “‘Aktiv, Attraktiv, Anders’?: The Bundeswehr’s deployment of sports soldiers.” In *Sport and Militarism: Contemporary Global Perspectives*, edited by Michael L. Butterworth, 65–78. New York: Routledge.

Forsey, Martin. 2010. "Ethnography as Participant Listening." *Ethnography* 11 (4): 558–572.

Freud, Sigmund. 1917. “Mourning and Melancholia.” In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, *Volume XIV (1914–1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, edited and translated by James Strachey, 237–258. London: Hogarth Press.

Fujikura, Tatsuro. 2001. “Discourses of Awareness: Notes for a Criticism of Development in Nepal.” *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 6 (2): 271–313.

Fujikura, Tatsuro. 2013. *Discourses of Awareness: Development, Social Movements and the Practices of Freedom in Nepal*. Kathmandu: Martin Chautari.

García, Andrés. 2023. “La nepalí Sunmaya Budha se compra dos premios en los Mundiales de trail para construir casa y pagar estudios a familiares.” *Marca*, June 29, 2023.

Gawne, Lauren. 2015. “Ke Garne? The Linguistic Expression of Nepali Resilience.” *Superlinguo*, April 30. https://www.superlinguo.com/post/117720051513/ke-garne-the-linguistic-expression-of-nepali

Gelli, Giovan Battista. (1551) 1976. “I capricci del Bottaio.” In Opere, edited by Delmo Maestri, 3rd ed., 125–288. Turin: Union Tipografico-Editrice Torinese.

Gellner, David. 1997. N*ationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics and Culture of Contemporary Nepal*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers.

Gellner, David N. 2024. "The Persistence of Hierarchy: Paradoxes of Dominance in Nepal and Beyond." *Sociological Analysis* 44 (1): 1–18.

Genette, Gerard. 1997. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goffman, Erving. 1956. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, Social Sciences Research Centre.

Goffman, Erving. 1967. “Where The Action Is.” In *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior,* 149–270. Chicago: Aldine.

Graeber, David. 2007. *Lost People: Magic and the Legacy of Slavery in Madagascar*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Grazide, Florent. 2024. “Chimerical Emancipation: The Road to a Better Future in Nepal.” *The Newsletter* 97: 40–41. Available at https://www.iias.asia/the-newsletter/article/chimerical-emancipation-road-better-future-nepal

The Gurkhas. Written and narrated by Ian Wooldridge. Produced by Michael Begg. London: BBC, 1995. Television documentary.

Gurung, Bhokraj. 2024. *A Country of Departure: Migration and the Everyday Experience of Hope, Waiting, and ‘Bhagya’ in Nepal*. PhD diss., University of Kent.

Jaehn, Miriam. 2021. "‘Remote' Ethnography during a Pandemic: Frictions and Challenges in Translating Intimacies." *Fieldsights*, September 23. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/remote-ethnography-during-a-pandemic-frictions-and-challenges-in-translating-intimacies

Hangen, Susan. 2005. “Race and the Politics of Identity in Nepal.” *Ethnology* 44 (1): 49–64.

HOKA UTMB Mont-Blanc. 2024. *Conquering Mont-Blanc: The Path 2 UTMB | HOKA UTMB Mont-Blanc 2024 | Documentary.* YouTube video. Posted October 1, 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yudBTEJp0zU

Hopkinson, Leo. 2022. “Only one Mayweather: a critique of hope from the hopeful.” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 28 (3): 725–745.

Johnson, Liza, dir. 2006. *South of Ten.* Saltwater Pictures; True Enough Productions.

Kelleter, Frank. 2022. "Style under Stress: Quotability and Disaster in Lauren Berlant's Cruel Optimism (2011)." In *Culture²: Theorizing Theory for the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Frank Kelleter and Alexander Starre, 159–188.

King, Diane E. and Stone, Linda. 2010. “Lineal masculinity: Gendered memory within patriliny.” *American Ethnologist* 37 (2): 323-336.

Kiruppalini, Hema. 2022. “Imperial inheritance: The transnational lives of Gurkha families in Asian contexts, 1948-1971.” *Modern Asian Studies* 57 (2): 669–690.

Kumar, Ramesh. 2022. “Cost of Living in a Big City.” *Nepali Times*, November 26. https://nepalitimes.com/banner/cost-of-living-in-a-big-city

Kumar, Ramesh. 2024. “Nepal Economy Shifts Away from Farming.” *Nepali Times*, June 27, 2024. https://nepalitimes.com/news/nepal-economy-shifts-away-from-farming

Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lamichhane, Gaurav. 2022. '*It has worked on all the other men, why isn't it working on you?': Involuntary Childlessness and Masculinity in Nepal*. PhD diss., Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen.

Lathan, Sanaa, dir. 2022. *On the Come Up*. Paramount Players.

Law, John. 2004. *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*. London: Routledge.

Leavitt, John. 2014. "Words and Worlds: Ethnography and Theories of Translation." *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (2): 193–220.

Magar, Bishal Roka, dir. 2021. *Gurkha Girl (Lahureni)*. Independent film.

Liechty, Mark. 2002. *Suitably Modern: Making Middle-Class Culture in a New Consumer Society*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Limbu, Amrita. 2021. Hearts in Australia, Souls in Nepal: Migration and Affective Intergenerational Aspirations. *Culture Unbound* 13 (2): 199-220.

Limbu, Amrita. 2023. "Badhyata and dukha: emotions, labour and migration across education migration to Australia and labour migration to Qatar from Nepal." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration studies* 49 (17): 4390–4406.

Lord, Austin, and Matthäus Rest. 2021. "'Nepal's Water, the People's Investment'?: Hydropolitical Volumes and Speculative Refrains." In *Ethnographies of Power: A Political Anthropology of Energy*, edited by Tristan Loloum, Simone Abram, and Nathalie Ortar, Chapter 3. EASA Book Series 42. New York / Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Mangan, J.A. 1992. "Prologue." In *The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire, Society*. Edited by J.A. Mangan. London: Routledge.

Marcus, George E. 1995. "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 95–117.

Marx, Karl. (1852) 1963. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International Publishers.

Marx, Karl. (1844) 1970. "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction." In *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, translated by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton, 244–257. London: Penguin Books.

Marx, Karl. (1867) 1976. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Vol. 1*. Translated by Ben Fowkes. London: Penguin Books.

Maslak, Mary Ann. 2003. *Daughters of the Tharu: Gender, Ethnicity, Religion, and the Education of Nepali Girls*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

Messerschmidt, Donald A. 1989. The Hindu Pilgrimage to Muktinath, Nepal. Part 2. Vaishnava Devotees and Status Reaffirmation. *Mountain Research and Development* 9 (2): 105-118.

Mishra, Chaitanya. 2023. "Nepal is not a country of villages anymore." *Nepali Times*, December 27. https://nepalitimes.com/opinion/comment/nepal-is-not-a-country-of-villages-anymore

Nelson, Andrew. 2009. “From ‘Unmodern Sherpas’ to Madhesi Cricketers: Towards a History of Nepali Sport.” *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 26 (12): 1823–1839.

Nettleton, Sarah. 2013. "Cementing Relations within a Sporting Field: Fell Running in the English Lake District and the Acquisition of Existential Capital." *Cultural Sociology* 7 (2): 196–210.

Ong, Aihwa. 1999. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Onta, Pratyoush. 1994. “Duhkha during the world war.” *Himal Southasian*. Available online at https://www.himalmag.com/comment/duhkha-during-the-world-war

Onta, Pratyoush R. 1996. *The Politics of Bravery: A History of Nepali Nationalism*. PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania.

Ortner, Sherry B. 1999. *Life and Death on Mt. Everest: Sherpas and Himalayan Mountaineering*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Pettit, Harry. 2019. “The cruelty of hope: Emotional cultures of precarity in neoliberal Cairo.” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 37(4):722-739.

Phoenix, Cassandra, and Noreen Orr. 2017. “Analysing Exceptions within Qualitative Data: Promoting Analytical Diversity to Advance Knowledge of Ageing and Physical Activity.” *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 9 (3): 271–84.

Pink, Sarah. 2010. “The Future of Sensory Anthropology / The Anthropology of the Senses.” *Social Anthropology* 18 (3): 331–340.

Posch, Eva, Karl Michael Höferl, Robert Steiger, Rainer Bell, and Laxmi Gurung. 2019. “Ke Garne? How Values and Worldviews Influence Resilience to Natural Hazards: A Case Study from Mustang, Nepal.” *Mountain Research and Development* 39 (4): R1–R11.

Pradhan, R. 2015. “Chakari, Karma and Ke Garne.” *Our Kirtipur*, December 14, 2015. http://ourkirtipur.com.np/index.php/life-style/society/633-chakari-karma.

Rai, Janak, and Shneiderman, Sara. 2019. “Identity, Society, and State: Citizenship and Inclusion in Nepal.” In *The Politics of Change: Reflections on Contemporary Nepal*, edited by Deepak Thapa, 83–108. Kathmandu: Himal Books.

Rich, Adrienne. 1978. “Cartographies of Silence.” In *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974–1977*, 17–19. New York: W. W. Norton.

Richard, Mallory. 2024. "How Much Does It Cost to Be a Competitive Trail Runner?” *iRunFar*, January 22, 2024. https://www.irunfar.com/how-much-does-it-cost-to-be-a-competitive-trail-runner

Riccœur, Paul. 1970. *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*. Translated by Denis Savage. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Riles, Annelise. 2010. “Is the Law Hopeful?” In *Hope in the Economy*, edited by Hirokazu Miyazaki and Richard Swedberg, 126–146. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Ross, Ruth. 2020. “How an All-Women Fell-Running Course in Wales Helped Me Let Off the Brakes.” *The Guardian*, February 18, 2020. https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2020/feb/18/fell-running-wales-black-mountains-women-only-day-course

Ruszczyk, Hanna A., and Ramjee Bhandari. 2020. “Transitioning from Hope to Optimism and Back Again.” *Antipode Online*, September 30, 2020. https://antipodeonline.org/2020/09/30/from-hope-to-optimism-and-back-again/

Sato, Seika. 2023. *Women in 'New Nepal': Through the Lens of Classed, Ethnic, and Gendered Peripheries*. London: Routledge.

School of Arts, Kathmandu University, Interdisciplinary Analysts and The Asia Foundation. 2019. *A Survey of the Nepali People in 2018*. Lalitpur: School of Arts, Kathmandu University.

School of Arts, Kathmandu University, Interdisciplinary Analysts and The Asia Foundation. 2020. *A Survey of the Nepali People in 2020*. Lalitpur: School of Arts, Kathmandu University.

School of Arts, Kathmandu University, Interdisciplinary Analysts and The Asia Foundation. 2023. *A Survey of the Nepali People in 2022*. Lalitpur: School of Arts, Kathmandu University.

Shah, Saubhagya. 2018. *A Project of Memoreality: Transnational Development and Local Activism*. Kathmandu: Himal Books.

Sharma, Jeevan. 2018. *Crossing the Border to India: Youth, Migration and Masculinities in Nepal*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Sharma, Shiva, Joshi, Poonam and van Teijlingen, Edwin. “‘Nepenglish’ or ‘Nepali English’: A New Version of English?” *Asian Journal of Social Sciences & Humanities* 4 (2): 188–193.

Silverman, David. 2017. "How Was It for You? The Interview Society and the Irresistible Rise of the (Poorly Analyzed) Interview." *Qualitative Research* 17 (2): 144–158.

Solnit, Rebecca. 2004. *Hope in the Dark: The Untold History of People Power*. Edinburgh: Canongate.

Stern, Jeffrey. 2023. "What Do Professional Trail and Ultrarunners Earn?” *UltraRunning Magazine*, June 20, 2023. https://ultrarunning.com/featured/what-do-professional-trail-and-ultrarunners-earn/

Subedi, Bhim Prasad. 1999. ‘An Anthropo-geographic Approach to Territorial Mobility: Examples from Inside a Rural Nepali Community’. In *Anthropology and Sociology of Nepal: Cultures, Societies, Ecology and Development*, edited by Ram B. Chhetri and Om P. Gurung, pp. 122-150. Kathmandu: Sociological and Anthropological Society of Nepal.

Taussig, Michael. 1993. *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*. New York: Routledge.

Taylor, Charles. 1989. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Thapa, Deepak, ed. 2019. *The Politics of Change: Reflections on Contemporary Nepal*. Kathmandu: Social Science Baha / Himal Books and The Asia Foundation.

Thomas, Angie. 2019. *On the Come Up*. New York: Balzer + Bray.

Trail Running Nepal. 2014. “Girls Running Fund.” *Trail Running Nepal*. Accessed June 28, 2025. https://trailrunningnepal.org/girls-running-fund/

Trail Running Nepal. 2021. "Samir Tamang." *Trail Running Nepal.* Accessed May 28, 2025. https://trailrunningnepal.org/nepali-runners/samir-tamang/

Turin, Mark and Yang, Daisy. 2021. The Becoming: Young Working-Class Masculinities in Nepal. *Visual Ethnography* 10 (1): 107–120.

Uprety, Sanjeev. 2011. *Masculinity and Mimicry: Ranas and Gurkhas*. Kathmandu: Himal Books.

Vaihinger, Hans. 1924. *The Philosophy of “As If”*. Translated by C.K. Ogden. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Vansittart, Eden. 1890. *Notes on Goorkhas: Being a Short Account of Their Country, History, Characteristic, Clans, &c*.

Vindegg, Mikkel. 2021. *Power to the People: The Energy Anthropology of a Nepali Town*. PhD diss., University of Oslo.

Wacquant, Loïc. 2004. *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Wacquant, Loïc. 2015. "For a Sociology of Flesh and Blood." *Qualitative Sociology* 38 (1): 1–11.

Wettstein, Marion. 2019. “YouTube and the Rising Trend for Indigenous Folk Dance: The Case of the Sakela Dance of the Rai in Nepal and Their Diasporas.” In *Media, Indigeneity and Nation in South Asia*, edited by Markus Schleiter and Erik de Maaker, 213–228. London: Routledge.

Wettstein, Marion, von Stockhausen, Alban and Gaenszle, Martin. 2024. “Increasing Materiality and Emerging Concepts of Ethnic Religious Identity: The Case of ‘Kirat Religion’ in Nepal.” *Asiatische Studien - Etudes Asiatiques* 78 (2): 387–408.

Whorf, Benjamin Lee. 1956. *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf.* Edited by John B. Carroll. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Wikan, Unni. 2012. *Resonance: Beyond the Words*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

World Bank. 2025. *Nepal Country Economic Memorandum: Unlocking Nepal’s Growth Potential*. Country Economic Memorandum. Disclosure date: March 24, 2025. Washington, DC: The World Bank. https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099032125103030263/pdf/P179761-430153ad-672c-4418-89c5-ef3740c65113.pdf

Zharkevitch, Ina. 2019. “Money and Blood: Remittances as a Substance of Relatedness in Transnational Families in Nepal.” *American Anthropologist* 121 (4): 884–896.