

“We have arrived”: Gendered Roads in Bharatpur, Nepal

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“My desire is to create a middle-class area in the city. As the president of the neighbourhood group, my goal is to pave the three streets of our neighbourhood and to clean the streets of plastic.”

- Ram Prasad (pseudonym), November 2014

Ram Prasad, president of the Citizens’ Village neighbourhood group, is a high-caste Brahmin, a charismatic and energetic man in his early fifties. Ram is retired, a self-titled “social worker” engaged in community activities. He earns money from renting out residential and commercial space in his building as well as receiving remittances from his son living in the USA. In the mid-2000s, Ram and his wife migrated from the hills of Nepal to Bharatpur, a city of 270,000 residents on the plains of Nepal near Chitwan National Park. They built a three-story building on a quiet street in the centre of the city’s Ward 4. This photo-essay offers snapshots over a five-year timeline from 2014 to 2019, showing the temporality of road construction in urban Nepal and its intimate relationship to gendered aspirations for physical infrastructure.¹

¹ For insights into rural and mountain road construction in Nepal see Murton 2018, Pigg 2019 and Gurung 2021.



Commercial street adjoining the neighbourhood.
Photo: Hanna Rusczyk, 2014.

The four-block area that constitutes Ward 4 has a mix of three-story housing units, which are home to approximately one hundred households and light manufacturing businesses. As can be seen from the quote above, Ram has aspirations for his future in the city. He wants his neighbourhood to be viewed as a middle-class area where homeowners can live peacefully in a clean environment. This can be achieved through enhancing the physical infrastructure and also by “getting rid,” in Ram’s words, of informal settlement dwellers who live in one-room shacks.



Informal settlement.
Photo: Hanna Rusczyk, 2015.

Ram established and led an informal neighbourhood group comprising male homeowners in the neighbourhood who each contributed dues of approximately two hundred rupees, or two U.S. dollars, per month. In addition to the monthly dues, Ram was collecting money for neighbourhood infrastructure projects. Meanwhile, the wives of the members of the neighbourhood group were enlisted to keep the streets clean of plastic. This gendered division of labour is significant because while their opinions did not matter to the neighbourhood group members – i.e. their husbands – the women nonetheless provided labour.



Gravel road after drainage has been installed, informal settlement on the left.
Photo: Hanna Ruszczyk, 2017.



Ram showing me the paved road.
Photo: Hanna Ruszczyk, 2019.

By September 2015, the drainage pipes were purchased and about to be installed in the roads. In September 2017, I could observe their benefit in the community: there were no puddles to be seen. The street was no longer muddy and there were no potholes.

When I last visited Nepal in April 2019, Ram took me and my research assistant around the neighbourhood. The infrastructural transformation was complete in some parts: there was a paved road, and the streets were clean and tidy. Furthermore, the informal dwellers who had migrated from eastern Nepal, and who had been there for over a decade, were gone. Talking about the paved road, he told us proudly, "We [the men in the neighbourhood group] have arrived!" The gendered, masculine nature of this comment reflects his priorities. The neighbourhood group had focused on paved roads and clean streets as their gendered infrastructural desires. It took years of sustained effort and relationship-building, but they were successful. "Slowly, slowly," Ram had achieved his urban aspirations within his own realm of possibility.

← *Paved road in the Citizens' Village leading toward the informal settlement.*

Photo: Hanna Ruszczyk, 2019.

→ *Close-up of partly paved road in the neighbourhood.*

Photo: Hanna Ruszczyk, 2019.



Informal organizations of women called 'mothers' groups' (*Aama Samuha*, in Nepali) are present in various neighborhoods across Bharatpur. They have different aspirations for their families and the lives of people in their neighbourhoods. Members of several mothers' groups I interviewed explained that they were concerned about issues such as access to healthcare, domestic violence, education for their children, including

access to learning English, support for poor families struggling with purchasing school uniforms, as well as needing savings and loan schemes for members (Truelove and Ruszczyk 2022). The divergent gendered aspirations for urban futures were thus clearly visible by comparing neighbourhood groups with mothers' groups (Ruszczyk 2019).

Mothers' groups are not deemed necessary in Ram's neighbourhood since, in his opinion, he effectively manages everything of importance himself. Over five years of travelling to Bharatpur, I learnt that if there is a powerful neighbourhood group, more often than not there will be no mothers' group. In places where there were no neighbourhood groups, the mothers' groups thrived. They met the social, cultural and financial needs of the community.



'Forest road' dirt track.
Photo: Hanna Ruszczyk, 2017.

With my repeat trips, it became evident how quickly Ram Prasad had learnt to navigate relationships in the neighbourhood and with the ward-level local government to achieve masculinized aims in the city. He had the time, the social power accorded to his high caste, the right gender and homeowner status to be able to network with the appropriate men to meet urban aspirations such as the paving of roads. He understood how to access the new state spaces and how to rework the grey space of governance (Yiftachel 2009) to fulfil these desires.

The municipal government shared certain dimensions of this vision, as it was also concerned with providing visible, modern forms of physical infrastructure and had informally declared that it would bring paved roads to some parts of the city. The caveat was that there must be an informal neighbourhood group that could provide 20–30 percent co-financing for construction of such roads.² The local authority did not communicate directly with all neighbourhood groups; rather, information was passed on informally in these re-spatialized state spaces open only to some neighbourhood groups, specifically the male-dominated groups.

² For similar practices in Kathmandu, see Dennis 2017.



← Forest road partly paved.

Photo: Hanna Ruszczyk, 2019.

↓ Forest road partly paved, with yellow and white lines.

Photo: Hanna Ruszczyk, 2019.



Of the ten male-dominated neighbourhood groups I interviewed, all strove to address this one specific aspect of infrastructure – the poor condition of dirt roads. Roads can be considered an indicator of urban arrival (Harvey and Knox 2015), of an evolving cityness (Dennis 2017). One member of a neighbourhood group near the community forest remarked: "We are finally part of the city," now that the road had been built. They had self-identified as being "backward" – in other words, lacking basic physical infrastructure such as paved roads and electricity. This 'forest road' was paved after two attempts to raise the required co-financing from residents. Over time, I learnt to pay attention to the quality of road surfaces – dirt track, gravel, paved road, painted markings – as a marker of not only political, social and economic conditions, but also those of gender.

A gendered delineation of aspirations is visible on a local level in Bharatpur, in this case specifically masculinized aspirations (Sharma 2018; Turin and Yang 2021). Local cultural understandings dictate that men are the residents whose views matter, who are allowed to become true urbanites, expressing their version of modernity (Liebrand 2017), and who wield particular types of power within neighbourhood institutions. Their aspirations are focused on the immediate future and a realistic interpretation of that future. Paved roads in Bharatpur are markers of people's participation in Nepal's transition to a modern and urban future (Ruszczuk and Price 2020). Neighbourhood spaces of urban possibility are hence markers of gendered aspirations, interpretations of urban arrival, and reflect the relationship between urban residents and the authorities. The practices of Ram and his neighbourhood group are thus a window onto gendered infrastructures and patterns of belonging as well as exclusion.

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