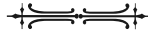


## Chapter 4

# THE ROLE OF ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES IN NEGOTIATING CONSENT



### Development Tourists and Village Women

On my second day in Bhairahawa I became acquainted both with the landscape on the way from the irrigation project offices to the villages, and with the ritual encounters that were part and parcel of visits to the villages. Leaving Bhairahawa, we drove on wrecked roads, sharing them with animals carrying wagons, old bicycles, and vehicles—a typical countryside scene. Green rice fields made a lovely sight to watch during the uncomfortable ride. On the muddy banks of the wide river Dno, many men were digging deep into the mud, probably looking for useful construction materials. The way to the villages required shifting from the main roads onto muddy, bumpy paths, which made the drive almost unbearable. The visits to the villages were characterized by some routine activities. The women were either gathered before we arrived or were called out by the WGOs to meet with us. The meetings would last for an hour or two in each place. After checking the women's names off against a list to confirm their participation in the literacy course, we would then tour the village, the local school, and other public locales, including Tahal's wells. Sometimes the women brought out their handicrafts to show us, and occasionally we would come across religious event, a local market, and so forth.

Robert Chambers's cynical description of the "standard route" visitors of "rural development tourism" (Chambers 1983: 16) take easily fits our travels to the villages. Chambers perceives these tours as a "show" for visitors in which "The same people are met, the same buildings entered" (ibid.: 17); "Buildings, machines, construction works, new crops, exotic animals, the clinic, the school, the new road, are all inspected" (ibid.: 12). Similarly, Celayne Heaton Shrestha calls these visits to project sites a "showpiece," "painstakingly staged performances" (Shrestha 2004: 13) for donors. However, it appears that beside the tourist element of these encounters, meeting the village women also had ethnocentric and patronizing implications. The kind of power relations encountered in development settings are perceived by some (e.g., Manzo 1995; Gardner and Lewis 1996) as "guardianship, found to have been characteristic of colo-

nial relations“ (Shrestha 2004: 12). Yet, the women and other people we met in the villages interacted willingly and even took advantage of these encounters.

## **Ekala: Literate Developers meet “Illiterate” Villagers**

On my first tour of the villages in the project area, the first we came to was Ekala. It was a typically hot and humid day, and there were six of us traveling in Leon’s jeep: Pandit, Leon, Anita, two WGOs and myself. A few male Association Organizers (AOs) joined us later.

Traveling in a relatively large company of some ten people (beside the WGOs, Anita and I, there were senior male officials and AOs) seemed to me to imply that the irrigation project employees were not overloaded with work, and thus could easily join our trips to the villages. Although it was not the norm on all our trips to the villages, they could nevertheless be described as social events. The impression that project employees, whether junior or senior, had a light work load was also clearly conveyed in the daily gatherings of AOs and WGOs that took place in Pandit’s office, meetings that were sometimes joined by senior officials.

Leon had decided to join us on our first trip when he found out that the local engineer could not attend a meeting with him that had been scheduled for that morning. His decision could have also been influenced by the fact that Pandit decided to join our trip. Presenting himself as the boss of the women’s project, Leon did not want to have his position usurped in his absence.

The journey to Ekala lasted about half an hour. Approaching the village, we passed a filthy pond, in which children were bathing, while large insects and mosquitoes buzzed overhead. Upon arrival, we entered a school class of girls, studying in a small dark muddy hut. Some twelve girls, aged 8 to 16, were sitting around the hut’s walls studying Nepali and mathematics from text books. The girls were deeply absorbed in their books, and seemed to be unhappy about being distracted from their work (or about being observed by a group of strangers). The teacher, an old woman, answered the many questions addressed to her by the WGOs. I also asked her many questions, which Anita helped translate. The men, except for Leon, did not enter the hut. Leon asked about boys’ and girls’ education in the village. He was told that the girls do not go to the nearby school because their mothers need them to stay at home to help with the babies and in the rice fields. Then I turned to one of the students and asked her to read. She tried her best but had difficulties reading to us. The teacher explained that the girl had missed a few lessons and therefore was experiencing difficulties.

Behaving as the source of authority and knowledge, “literate” people confronting “illiterates,” our dominance was accentuated all the more by our physical position, standing, as we did, in the low-roofed hut high above the shy young girls sitting on the ground. It was not only the girl who stumbled over her reading who was shamed by us. The teacher too was put on the defensive,

having to explain and apologize for her student's failure, which also meant her own failure.

Later on Anita told me that the class in Ekala was privately funded by Thapa. Soon I found out that the Ekala class had a unique story. I later heard from the division chief of the engineering section that the year before the head of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn, had visited the project. That visit made the local heads of the project anxious, feeling that the project (and they themselves) had to look good. Driven by the anticipated visit of the Bank's delegation, Thapa, the Nepali manager of the project, had opened a literacy class in Ekala. This he did with his own resources, paying a woman from the village to start teaching the first (and apparently almost the only) class in the project. The Bank's delegation arrived at Ekala by helicopter and visited the women's literacy class. Thapa's initiative was a success, as was made clear in the World Bank report on the delegation's visit to Ekala. Leon showed me an excerpt from a letter the Bank sent some time later, which stated the satisfaction of the delegation with the progress made in implementing the project. However, the letter also included a demand from the local heads of the project for the hiring of a new local coordinator for the women's program by March 1997, as the previous coordinator had not been replaced for a long time. Leon commented: "It is only the Bank's pressure that makes things move here." In fact, the new coordinator was Anita, who was hired as a result of the World Bank's remote and limited control over the local heads of the irrigation project.

After the encounter in "Thapa's class," we went to see the village school. It was a single-floored, ugly, gray-looking building constructed of bricks with a few attached huts, located on the outskirts of the village. We entered one of the classes where some ten boys and two girls were sitting on the floor with their bags next to them. The English teacher, who did not seem to know much English, answered our questions. Within the two dark huts we saw some tens of boys sitting on the floor studying. It was explained that the children, aged between 6 and 10, had studied there daily from 8.00 A.M. until 2.00 P.M., for some four to five years. We were also told that the girls who attended school came from more affluent families, who could afford to do without their labor at home and in the rice fields. Close to the school some twenty women were standing in the shade of some trees. A small group of women was sitting on the ground, some of them holding babies, and some were nursing them. On that day children were receiving polio vaccinations. A nurse from the Ministry of Health approached us and explained what was going on. She told us that she came to the village every month and that the health ministry's professionals used to visit the village regularly and offer the women lectures about health issues. This practice took place in all villages in the region.

In considering our interactions with the villagers, it appears that we were mainly interested in educational matters, asking questions "drowned in statistics" (Chambers 1983: 17): years of schooling, gender differences in rates of

school attendance, and so on. This bias disclosed our attitude to the children and women in the villages, as well as toward the entire village population. Focusing on quantitative measurements of children's and the women's schooling hints at our latent prejudice about their poor intellectual skills and levels of attainment. Our perception of the self-evident worth of schooling (efficiently installed in our minds from the first day of attending school) made us blind to more complex and relevant elements in the children's and women's lives. Moreover, implicit in this ethnocentric attitude was a sense of the villagers' backwardness when compared to our own intellectual achievements and superiority. In any event, that is how things appear to me from the observations and impressions recorded in my fieldnotes.

### **Khurmundihawa: Intruders meet Locals**

The visit to Khurmundihawa, the next stop after Ekala, further illustrates our intrusive methods and arrogance. However, my account of the visit to the second village also highlights the women's assertiveness in responding to our presentation of the women's project. Khurmundihawa was in many ways similar to Ekala, though it looked even poorer. It was in Khurmundihawa that I first met Manju, a WGO. I was deeply impressed by her charismatic character, typical of foreign visitors who, according to Chambers, tend to be impressed by the "charisma" of local people who are regarded as "exceptional leaders" (Chambers 1983: 17). She was an intelligent, energetic, and charming woman in her early thirties. The group she organized gathered around us, conveying a pleasant welcome. Manju explained that the original group had split into two as a result of political disputes, one group identifying with the Communist Party and the other with the Congress Party. In each of the groups there were some thirty women.

The two spokeswomen explained that the women expected to receive 1 to 2 rupees (about \$0.017) per day for lunch while attending literacy classes. I asked if this was a prerequisite for attendance and received a positive reply.<sup>1</sup> We went on asking many questions and the women cooperated willingly, especially the spokeswomen. The village women were obviously aware of our desire to gain their confidence and, more importantly, their participation in the literacy project.

Manju informed Anita and me that she had found a teacher for the literacy class in that village, and this woman was also willing to rent us a room in her house in which the classes could be held. On our way to check out the potential classroom we passed through some animal mud-huts, which had dung stuck to the walls (for cooking purposes). The brick constructions<sup>2</sup> were used for people's accommodation and the mud-huts were used for cooking and storage. The animals seemed integrated in the living houses. This impression finds evidence in Tahal's socioeconomic Survey (1992) of the irrigation project area. The Survey's findings suggest that "About 74% of the households are having separate animal shed. The remaining households keep their animals in any corner of the living houses" (ibid.: 32).

The room we were shown, intended for the twenty-five or so women who were expected to attend the literacy class, was around two by three meters. It smelled bad and was dark. A bed with no mattress on it occupied most of the space. When I commented that the room was too small and dark the woman rushed us into another room, where some big stones were laid out. This other room was bigger than the other one; nevertheless, it too was appalling. I asked if it was possible to study outdoors, in a shady place, and also urged Pandit and Anita to consider constructing study huts. These could be used for the women's literacy course and to house the Unicef class, which we had visited on our way to the teacher's room. The Unicef class was housed in a small, dark hut, although there was a school building nearby. Their teachers were employed by Unicef, who, we were told, would not pay for anything except the teachers' wages. Observing the children in the dark room, it occurred to me that a specially constructed classroom could serve the children in the mornings and the women in the afternoons. When things seemed to be finalized I asked to see the women's handicrafts. Baskets of different sizes, decorated fans, and home ornaments were brought out.

It appears that in my visits to Khurmundihawa and Ekala I reacted with simultaneous feelings of revulsion and compassion. My awareness of the prevailing conditions in which people lived motivated my urge to do something about it. This ambition was naive and pretentious, but it was also a way of justifying my intrusion into local people's lives, part of group of who were scrutinizing the villagers' way of life. Moreover, my perception of the living conditions as repulsive revealed my latent, alienated, attitude to the place and the people. My mixed feelings—embarrassment (at inspecting poor people's lives), alienation and revulsion (from the “primitive” life conditions of local people), compassion (for their misery), admiration (of “charismatic” local people)—were all part of my daily encounters with the village women, though this uncomfortable state of mind was always hidden behind a professional mask and my seemingly self-confident air of expertise.

My written descriptions of village encounters reveal the ethnocentric attitude of a foreigner. Certain expressions concerning village life and its recurring scenes disclose my unconscious disdain and aversion. At times I even expressed my emotional attitude explicitly—using, for instance, the term “appalling”—to convey my impression of a room offered to us as a classroom. I often described roads, paths, and huts as “muddy,” considering them too disgusting to walk or drive on, or live in, or “filthy” to denote the lack of basic hygiene, when referring, for example, to children washing in the river. In alluding to diseases associated with flies and mosquitoes, I revealed my distanced and judgmental position. Focusing on the close quarters humans and beasts shared in the villages, and on the dung stuck on the (mud) walls of the huts, discloses an aversion to the way of life and probably towards the people as well. It appears that I perceived this way of life as unbearable and inconceivable for

“normal” people like me. The associated images of disease, dirt, and proximity to animals on the one hand, and of weakness and poverty on the other, recorded in some of my descriptions of the villagers, created a perceived unbridgeable distance between “me” and “them.” From this perspective, comparing Fenster’s reports and my own, I can see that whereas Fenster exposed her latent stereotyped views by writing about the “many diseases” of the local population, I revealed my latent stereotypes in my fieldnotes.

## **West Bharaulia: Procedural Rituals and Challenging Stereotypes**

The alienated attitudes were reinforced by our visit to the next village, West Bharaulia. The scene there was similar to the one we encountered in the other two villages: huts, muddy and dirty surroundings, cattle and people mingling together. We sat in the shade of some trees and were gradually joined by women, children, and men. One man was urging his wife to join the group and to sit next to us. Again, old iron beds with straw mattresses were brought out for us to sit on, while the village people sat on the ground. We were offered water, which came from the nearby hand pump. This time I refused to drink the water because Leon had warned me, after having tried the water in the previous village, that it was not safe enough to drink.

Similar questions to those raised in the previous villages were raised here. An assertive woman mediator, who seemed to take control of the meeting, told us that many of the women in the village had taken a sewing course, which was organized by the rural development department of the Nepali government. The women asked that the women’s project provide them with sewing machines and with further training in sewing. Literacy training was also requested.

While inquiring about the women’s expectations of the project, Manju interacted with the women cheerfully. They responded to her warmly and confidently, while she signed them up for the literacy class, which most women did using their thumb. Some twenty-four names and signatures were eventually collected. During the conversation, which was mediated by Manju, the woman leader said that she hoped that a female teacher would replace the male teacher in the local school, thus enabling parents to send their daughters there. While the process of signing up the women was going on, Leon chose to gather some “statistics,” asking Manju to find out how many of the women’s husbands could read and write. She told him that only one or two of the men did.

Signing the women up for the literacy classes appeared to take the form of what Gideon Kunda calls a “presentational ritual,” “a mechanism for mediating normative demands and normative responses,” and used in developing “an organizational culture”. (Kunda 1992: 159). The process began with small talk with the women, establishing personal contact and winning their confidence. Then Anita’s or my presentation of the program followed. We described in detail the women project’s objectives and schedule to the women sitting around us. Next the women would ask questions and we—Anita in particular—pa-

tiently answered all questions and tried to appease doubts. The lists of women thus obtained indicated the WGOs' good work in preparing the women for committing to the literacy classes, and also attested to Anita's and my success in convincing the women of the project's importance and seriousness. The lists served as a kind of contract between the women's project and the village women, perceived by the latter as the project's commitment to provide them with literacy and, more importantly, to deliver anticipated material resources and benefits, such as refreshments, vocational training, and sewing machines. The dramatic moment of counting signatures and informing other project members of the results turned the list of signatures into a symbol of professional and personal attainment.

While discussing with Pandit how we might find a suitable location for the literacy class in West Bharaulia, he said that it might be possible to use the well site, which was near the village. After concluding the enrollment process we went to see the place. Pandit explained authoritatively that we could take advantage of the fact that the well was soon to be transferred to the local people. We agreed that the well site could accommodate the literacy class. En route to the site, a male villager approached Manju, asking her to hire his wife as a teacher. Manju agreed willingly and assured him that in any case his wife was the one she had intended to recommend for teaching the local group, since she was the most educated woman in the village.

Just as I had done in the other villages we visited, I asked the women about their handicrafts. Again, many pieces of work were quickly brought out which the women and children were excited to show us. Nevertheless, we were told again that the handicrafts were not for sale.

In retrospect, my encounter with the women in West Bharaulia clarifies the superficial and stereotypic picture I had in my mind when I engaged with the women and while later writing up my experiences in my fieldnotes. Clearly the overall impression that I had of the villages and their inhabitants was a product of my distant, alienated position. While this attitude is probably clearest in my initial impressions of the villages, it could also have been latently present throughout my visit to Nepal and afterwards. Nevertheless, my initial and unacknowledged images of the village women did not correspond to their actual self-presentation, as it emerges from the ethnography. The women were obviously very aware of the fact that we needed their cooperation, and openly expressed what they expected from us. As they had attended a sewing course in the past, they expected to benefit from the project in economic terms. Moreover, although many of the women were illiterate and could not even sign their names, they were capable of learning and apparently could manage their lives without recourse to formal education. As the women's handicraft skills made clear, they were able and capable of producing objects that were not intended for subsistence. My eagerness to see the women's products appears to be stereotypical tourist behavior; the women villagers, meanwhile, contradicted my representations of their poverty and weakness by refusing to sell their handicrafts.

## Structured Social Distance and Men's Marginality in the Village Encounters

Social interactions between project people and village people assumed the pattern of dichotomized encounters. The theme of “us” versus “them,” “outsiders” from the town versus “locals” from the village, “literate” versus “illiterate,” was the most prominent feature of many of our visits. We came to the women’s villages, sometimes into their homes; they awaited us, sometimes for hours on end because of delays. They would gather round us, seated on the ground, most of the time listening or reacting to our directed conversation and questions, while we sat on seats offered by them. The hierarchal social distance created in these encounters was even more conspicuous in relation to Leon and me. We did not know the local language and had to rely on Nepali-speaking colleagues to interpret for us. Yet, our disadvantaged position in communicating with local people never prevented us from taking front stage during the encounters, thus pushing the Nepali employees of the women’s project into a secondary position, serving us in their role as mediators and interpreters.

Leon’s presence and my own seemed to introduce formality and social distance into the encounters. Our foreign, Western appearance must have contributed to fostering social distance between local employees and the two of us. This distance was enhanced by imposing the use of English on all participants in the situation. This imposition of a “stronger” foreign language on the locals can be viewed more positively by taking into account the fact that both parties (speakers of Nepali and Hebrew) were obliged to use a non-native tongue to communicate, thus introducing into the encounter a sense of mutual disadvantage.

Thomas Ricento’s (2000) collection offers support for this line of argument, suggesting that an interactive and subtle influence occurs in interlinguistic encounters and processes. Martin Hoftun, William Raeper, and John Whelpton, meanwhile, describe how English was politically employed by Nepalese in reaction to India’s dominance in the 1990s “to stress their linguistic independence” (Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton 1999: 277).

However, although the mutual disadvantage of language (greater even for the Israelis, who had no recourse to the local language) brought the higher-ranking Nepali officials and the Israelis closer, it clearly created a social distance and alienation between those, on the one hand, who did not speak English—the villagers and the junior officials—and those who did. Thus, I consider Robert Phillipson’s (1992) perception of English as an important component of neocolonialism relevant in this context. This interpretation finds support in Anna Robinson-Pant’s comment, that “the need for English language in Nepal has been initiated by foreign development agencies rather than by government administration” (Robinson-Pant 1995: 5). Robinson-Pant stresses further that the “need for funding” enforced the use of English on local NGOs. Hence, most literacy reports, studies, evaluations, and so on produced until the mid 1990s were in English, written “primarily for a Western rather than a Nepali audience, the majority being written for donor agencies such as UNICEF or the World Bank” (ibid.: 4).<sup>3</sup>



These hierarchal encounters also involved a gender component, which effected a reversal of the usual pattern of gender stratification. In most meetings with the village women, a few men were present, but they usually sat at some distance. This could mean either that they were curious to hear what was going on in the meetings between their wives and the “important,” urban, and foreign, project people; or, alternatively, that they were suspicious and reluctant in relation to the possible outcomes of these encounters. Yet another alternative interpretation is suggested by Fenster. She reports that the “presence of men enabled women to express themselves freely” (Fenster 1996: 8), indicating that men’s attendance gave the women confidence when facing project people. This explanation suggests that the women were in some way vulnerable in their interactions with project people, and portrays them as needing men’s protection. However, I would question this observation. Although it is true that the meetings placed village women in an inferior position, the women did not behave as either helpless or in need of men’s protection.

Moreover, my impression was that the men were made marginal in these encounters, while the women’s project people invested a great deal of energy in pleasing the women. As women’s empowerment was the focus of these encounters, men were almost entirely ignored and excluded. Furthermore, from speaking to some of the men I inferred that most of them were also illiterate; thus, the fact that only the women were offered literacy courses implicitly discriminated against men. Similar observations have been made by scholars like Naila Kabeer (1994), Anita Dighe (1995), Alaka Basu (1999), and Anna Robinson-Pant (2001). Robinson-Pant, for example, argues that the common focus on women as participants means that “even non-literate men often feel reluctant to join a class”.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, she adds, the “common focus on women as participants” and the “feminisation of literacy programmes” that exclude men limits their potential to initiate social change, particularly in the area of HIV/Aids prevention, family planning, and gender equality (*ibid*). Ila Patel and Anita Dighe (2003) also point to the feminization of literacy programs in terms of facilitators, participants, and curriculum, which tend to focus on subjects seen as belonging to “women’s domain.” Thus the potential for social change and changes in gender relations are probably diminished, as these require men’s participation.

Another possible explanation for the men’s attendance at these meetings is their interest in making sure that any potential advantage offered by the women’s project is not missed. That is to say, by attending the meetings they could be involved in bargaining over prospective benefits. One example of this is the occasion when one of the husbands asked Manju to appoint his wife as a teacher in their village. Whatever the men’s motivation was in attending the meetings, their presence never seemed to imply reservations about the program, but rather the opposite.

Another aspect of the gendered dimensions of the village encounters was the passive, cautious participation of the women project’s male employees (the AOs).

I suggest that although the meetings took place in an informal setting and manner (a countryside location, sitting close together on the ground, in an informal arrangement), status and gender differentials emerged. This was demonstrated not only by the domination of proceedings by Anita and myself, an artifact of our central positioning, but also by the formation of distinct groups and their different relative positioning, such as the visible exclusion of men from the women's circles. Those attending the meetings regarded themselves, and were regarded by others, as belonging to distinct gender groups, and were identified by their formal job titles (which were in English and not in Nepali).

The marginalized place of the men and their seemingly reduced prominence in these encounters indicate the latent, although definite, impact of project staff on gender and power relations. Their attendance and conduct indirectly influenced the villagers' patterns of socializing, the groups' clustering, the prominence in groups' discussions, the voicing of opinions, according to gender. It appears, therefore, that structured hierarchal distance and gendered group formation, introduced by the presence and conduct of project staff, have the potential to influence gender power relations, even reversing them at times. Moreover, the influence of project staff fosters gender division even though no formal means are used.

## **The Village Women's Assertiveness**

Although some of the descriptions of the women in my fieldnotes, especially those from my first visits to the villages, paint a picture of women as compliant and passive, they were in fact nothing of the kind. Viewing the women villagers as vulnerable, helpless, or ignorant ignores the ample examples which point to the opposite. Moreover, the use of the blanket stereotype "illiterate women"—implied in Fenster's report, documented in my fieldnotes, and often expressed by officials—reveals the ethnocentric thinking of developers rather than the reality of women lives.<sup>5</sup> Robinson-Pant makes a similar point, using case studies of women "who are confident, [and who] have developed other strategies to survive without literacy" (Robinson-Pant 2004a: 4). She also argues that "women are not powerless because they cannot read or write" (Robinson-Pant 2004b: 28).

When project people entered the villages they were perceived to be backed by formal authority, professional advantage, and anticipated budgets, and these fostered social distance between the women villagers and the project people. Nevertheless, the interactions described above reveal many of the women to have been assertive, self-confident, politically-minded, and even suspicious at times. They were certainly not, at least not in any generalizable way, powerless or ignorant.

Manju was probably the most remarkable example of a young, liberated, and self-confident village woman. She had completed twelve years of schooling, was a mother of two, and had her own motorcycle. Before being recruited by the

project, she used to go around the villages, helping needy women with groceries they could not afford and encouraging other mothers to send their daughters to school. She proudly told Anita and me that her husband used to share responsibility for the household and helped care for their daughters. My perception of Manju as a “charismatic leader” (Chambers 1983: 17) may be criticized as an example of a (romanticized) biased perception which underestimates rural deprivation and poverty (ibid.: 1–23). However, I contend that this kind of argument implies a generalization of poverty, rural poverty in this case, in a way that erases numerous narratives of individuals. Manju was a very impressive person indeed, but she was definitely not an exception but rather an example for some of the young Nepali village women.

Most of the women we saw in the villages were dressed in lovely colorful fabrics that they seemed to keep clean although they were long enough that they trailed on the ground. The longer the meetings went on, the more the women would open up and chat freely and cheerfully with the Nepali-speakers among us. At moments when Leon and I were less involved, and when communication was centered on Anita and the WGOs, the conversation seemed to be more fluent and personal.

Women villagers were not only assertive, self-confident, neatly dressed, and friendly, some of them also conveyed an evident air of dominance. In many of the villages—as in the account of our visits to Khurmundihawa and West Bharaulia—we met spokeswomen who mediated between the WGOs and others from the irrigation project and local women. They represented other women in negotiations over the study venue and the choice of teachers. They also bargained on behalf of their companions over the possible benefits that could be obtained for those who joined the literacy classes. The spokeswomen were in a position to advance their own interests, as occurred in Khurmundihawa, where the spokeswoman expected to profit from the women’s project by renting a room and being employed as a teacher.

It appears that these women leaders knew that they had some bargaining power in negotiating the terms for hosting the literacy classes in their villages.<sup>6</sup> They realized that the women project’s employees needed their approval of the literacy classes. This awareness empowered them to demand certain benefits, such as lunch money. Being so confident of their bargaining power, sometimes the women presented their demands as ultimatums. The women’s project employees, the WGOs, and Anita in particular, depended on the women’s signatures, indicating their agreement to attend the literacy course. The longer the list of signatures, the more evident was the WGOs contribution to the program. In fact, they probably depended more on the village women than vice versa, for the enrollment lists meant that they would continue to be hired by the irrigation project. In response to their demand that they be given an allowance for their lunch, Thapa instantly agreed that “refreshments” for participants in the courses would be included in the budget. Thapa understood quite well the significance

of the demand and the need to buy-off the women, giving them something in return for their consent to be included in the women's project. This bargain was very good from his point of view because it involved minimal costs.

The women in West Bharaulia were no less assertive, asking for advanced training in sewing to supplement the course they had finished already. They also openly requested being provided with sewing machines, which would enable them to put their training into practice and make some kind of living from it. The women in Ekala signed up for the literacy course, assuming that further training and assistance in purchasing sewing machines would be provided if they joined the course. Anita and I did not say anything to cast doubt on their expectations, mentioning vaguely that the women's project did indeed aim to provide for "economic needs" at some later stage. The woman leader in West Bharaulia was also cognizant of the potential of cooperating with the women's project, and tried to get project staff to agree to help the local school obtain a female teacher so that villagers would be able to send their daughters there, assuming that it was in the project's power to do something about the matter.

The men in the villages also seemed to be aware that the introduction of the literacy program would entail various benefits. This was illustrated by the men's behavior in both Khurmundihawa and West Bharaulia. Encouraging his wife to join the women's group, the man described in the account of our visit to Khurmundihawa must have assumed she would benefit somehow from participating in the literacy course, thus indirectly benefiting their family. The husband, who asked Manju to appoint his wife as a teacher in West Bharaulia, was clearly aware of the advantages of being a project employee, in terms of both a salary and social prestige for his wife and indirectly for himself. If these two husbands represent the village men's general attitude to the women's project and to their wives' educational advancement, then it appears that their wives' advancement did not pose a threat, but rather the opposite. Men's passive attendance at our meetings in the villages can be perceived as their endeavor to make sure that their wives took full advantage of what the women's project had to offer. If so, then the argument about traditional constraints on women's progress, and on promoting gender equality (in the villages in particular), which were often used by the irrigation project's heads and by directors of other local organizations, was not substantiated by the men's actual behavior. Hence, those arguments were clearly excuses used to justify the project leaders' reluctance to implement the women's project.

## **Bhwarabari: Women Leaders and Economic Issues**

The second round of visits, which took place two days after the first, foregrounded many of the features previously observed. However, some further understandings emerged from interactions in the villages and from unique episodes we experienced there. These meetings also revealed the women's assertiveness as they expressed their wishes and objections, while drawing on their past experience with development projects. The women's interest in eco-

conomic issues, in particular, was pronounced during our encounters. Moreover, the village women's entrepreneurial spirit was clearly apparent, indicating their essential need for access to financial and information resources. As with the previous round, three villages were visited. Once again it was very hot and damp, with six of us in the pickup truck, four crammed in the back seat. One of the passengers was a professional instructor in agricultural training.

Our first stop was Bhawarabari. Women, girls, small children and babies gathered gradually, as Aruna, the local WGO, and the other WGOs went to call the women to join the meeting. We were told by Aruna that about half of the girls in the village attended the nearby school, some 2 km distant, while the others were forced to stay at home and help with household chores. The WGOs, Anita, and I sat on a thin straw mattress laid on an iron bed. Some fifteen women villagers were seated, with a few small children at their side, on sackcloth spread on a thin layer of straw, which had been brought in by an old man. Some time later he brought a mat for another four women who joined us with their little children. The man then sat next to the woman who was leading the meeting, listening to her very carefully. A few men joined the group, sitting behind us on another bed. Pamela, one of the WGOs, encouraged more women to approach, while Anita explained to me that those women were shy and did not dare to join us. Many of the women were wearing a golden nose-ring and some of them had a traditional red mark on their foreheads.

The women told us that they were interested in raising sheep and goats rather than breeding chickens, as these had been causing them trouble, consuming their neighbors' crops. They also asked if the literacy class could run for two hours a day, instead of three. Meanwhile, Pamela wrote down the women's names quietly, bending down to get closer to the women so that they could stamp their thumbs next to their written names.

While we were chatting and collecting names, one of the women was trying to cope with her son's jealousy as he persistently harassed his baby brother in her arms. The group grew steadily and some young men and a few more women joined the event. More than thirty women were gathered eventually. Three girls, aged about seven years old, who were standing nearby arm in arm, requested that they be given a basic education. They added that this learning would allow them to know what kind of vocational training to seek. Some of the women at the meeting expressed a desire to have kitchen gardens, for cultivating vegetables. They expected the project representatives (presumably addressing, indirectly, the local agriculture instructor who was accompanying us) to provide them with a solution to the problem of water shortages. The women villagers were probably hoping that they could gain access to the new irrigation system of deep wells introduced by the irrigation project. The small wells that were dug by families, and from which they drew water using a hand pump, had dried up. Pamela explained that due to water shortages, cultivating vegetables was unfeasible and, therefore, some of the families used drinking water for growing vegetables.

The local women's leader, dressed in a turquoise sari with pink flowers, a red traditional spot on her forehead, and wearing a gold nose-ring and earrings, seemed to be in control of things. Having had a high-school education, she was, undoubtedly, the most natural candidate for teaching literacy in her village. The woman was an activist in a women's organization and had headed a group that participated in an agricultural training course some six months earlier. She explained that the three-day course, which she regarded highly, offered training in vegetable and fruit cultivation, in basic health care, and in marketing. She also told us that she liked to help people with traditional medication and agricultural activities, and that she had done so before joining the agricultural course. A few women mentioned that family-planning training should be provided for women with more than five children. The leader asked us to consider her home for the literacy class. When I suggested an open, shaded place to study, assuming that her place would look like the other rooms we had observed before, the women objected, saying that the children would disturb them.

The agricultural course that the women had previously taken had included training in growing red beans, which at that time were very expensive (around 75 rupees per kilo [that is about \$1.3]). Following that training, the women grew a large quantity of beans, by which time the local market was flooded with them and their price had dropped to 33 rupees (that is about \$0.6) per kilo. Consequently, the women did not sell their entire crop and stored the beans at home, preferring to sell their stock as seed during the sowing season, something which would bring a good price. The leader explained that in order to facilitate the women's use of their stock of beans to generate income, all they needed was some basic instruction in marketing the beans, mainly packing techniques and selling practices. When the women told us that they also grew potatoes, Anita suggested selling them as potato chips.

Sewing was another economic option discussed at the meeting. The group leader said that providing the women training in sewing would enable them to sew uniforms for factory workers, and also to sell some of their products elsewhere. Moreover, it was suggested that while some women sewed others could be in charge of sales to markets and factories. I was curious to know how the women would obtain the sewing machines needed for this enterprise. When Anita posed my question to the group leader, everybody listened carefully. She replied that the village women's group had savings of some 25,000 rupees (about \$431). Every woman had to pay 5 rupees (less than \$0.1) per month into the savings fund and was entitled to obtain a loan at an interest rate of 2 per cent. The money had to be repaid within a month, thus facilitating the fund's continuous growth.<sup>7</sup>

The option of selling the women's traditional handicrafts was also raised, as in previous encounters with the women in the villages, but the women rejected the idea spontaneously. The leader explained that the items were designated for their daughters' dowries. Nevertheless, she added that the women could

produce different items for commercial sale. On our way to see the place offered for the literacy class, one girl showed us a colorful basket that had been made by her mother. The leader explained that they would be prepared to sell such a basket for some 70 rupees (about \$1.2). Producing a basket of that relatively small size involves two hours work per day for a whole working week, paying its maker about 5 rupees (about \$0.09) per hour. By comparison, factory workers earned about 6 rupees (about \$0.1) per hour or 40 rupees (about \$0.7) per six-hour work day.

After I had taken some photographs, something I did at each village meeting, the leader took us to her home to see the room she had offered to rent out for the literacy classes. The room was small and dark but the attached balcony was suitable for studying. At that time it was being used for an animal husbandry course, in which some twenty-five men participated. The room would become available for the literacy classes as soon as the men had finished their course, which was to run for twenty days.

At the time of the visit I failed to notice the fact that only men were participating in the animal husbandry course. However, I became aware of women's absence from this and many other agricultural training courses later on. Being fully aware of the discriminatory implications of women's exclusion, Tovi Fenster reported as follows: "Although women contributed a significant share of the agricultural work and the households' livelihood, they were often excluded from governmental development programs. They were widely excluded from training programs provided by the Irrigation Project" (Fenster 1996: 15). Noting the conspicuous absence of women from the irrigation project farmers' training programs, Fenster asked "why women farmers' participation in training programs is relatively low in spite of the fact that they are doing at least half and sometimes more of agricultural work" (*ibid.*: 15). Tahal's socioeconomic survey of the irrigation project region offers some quantitative evidence for women's significant contribution to what it calls "farm operation." It states that the division of labor in "farm operation" between males and females was as follows: land preparation and irrigation: 5% done by women and 95% by men; planting and processing: 70% by women and 30% by men; weeding, harvesting and storing: 55% by women and 45% by men; threshing: 30% by women and 70% by men (Tahal 1992: 34 "table 3.7.1: Stage III Area – Proportion of Female and Male Labour in Farm Operation").

The biased perception of gender, including the sexual division of labor, that prevailed in the irrigation project, and in development projects in Nepal more generally, was particularly conspicuous when compared to information on Nepali women's significant role in agriculture and the labor market. A study carried out by Shtrii Shakti, a women's organization,<sup>8</sup> for instance, indicates that women contribute 63 per cent of the family farm income in the rural sector, and produce 35 per cent of agricultural farm products in the local market economy (Shtrii Shakti 1995: 197–8). Prativa Subedi contends that women are definitely

“those who are most involved in the production and utilization of food grains” (Subedi 1993: 85). Moreover, “except for plowing the fields,” women are responsible for almost every agricultural activity, “like preparing the land for cultivation, carrying fertilizer, seed sowing and planting, weeding, harvesting, sorting grains, selecting and drying seeds” (ibid.: 76).

It appears that although women were assertive, ambitious, capable, hard-working, significant contributors to the family and national economy, the heads of the irrigation project did not consider them as relevant participants in agricultural training courses and only minimally included them in running the irrigation activities. It follows, from the situation of both the irrigation project and development in Nepal more generally, that the government and developing agencies play a crucial role in gendering the national economy, and more specifically in denying women fair access to public resources and inflicting relative poverty upon them.

### **Brindban and Sikatahan: Banking NGOs and Village Women’s Enterprises**

The next village we went to was Brindban, where we met the local WGO, Sita. During our visit Sita needed help with interpreting because a different Nepali dialect was spoken. The women were already waiting for us when we arrived, sitting on the ground between two huts. Some fifty people were gathered there, among them women, men, and small children. A baby was crying. A soft breeze was blowing and made the dreadful humidity somewhat more bearable.

A representative of a credit NGO, who had come to discuss loans to the local people, was there, sleeping peacefully nearby. He woke up when things started to heat up, and credit programs were debated. The village men came nearer and discussed the issue of loans and interest. It was explained that loans were based on repayment of the borrowed amount within five years, while the interest had to be paid starting from the end of the first week after receiving the loan. The rate of interest could be as high as 16 per cent per annum. Anita explained to me that people did not like the lending conditions of the organization. They did not like the high rate of interest, and nor did they like having to begin repayments immediately, because, they said, this prevented them investing in a serious venture. Therefore, the people preferred to take modest loans and to use them for their daughters’ dowries, and for purchasing hand pumps for the household.

The women in Brindban were also interested in agricultural training, such as instruction in growing vegetables and animal husbandry. While we were leaving we met the village school teacher, a 16-year-old girl who had completed six years of schooling.

We were one hour late arriving at the next village, Sikatahan. The local WGO was Aruna. When we arrived, an unusual event, from my point of view, was taking place: in the center of the village setting a “field bank” was operat-



ing. Two men were sat on the ground in front of some thirty women, and buffalos ambled around between them. One of the men was taking money from the women, who were queued up in front of him. Piles of bills accumulated at his feet. When women handed the man their money, he jotted down the relevant details in their savings books. The two men represented a credit NGO, which lent village women money at an interest rate of 25 per cent per annum, the loan to be repaid weekly.

While waiting for the money transactions to end, we chatted with the leader of the women's group in a nearby tea house, which the leader owned. Her home of some nineteen years sat outside the village on the hillside. As it was rather hard to make a living in that area, she had to come down to the village to earn her livelihood. While we were watching the field bank in operation, the leader explained that its loans were only offered to women. Repayments of 10 rupees per 100 rupees (about \$1.7) loans had to be paid monthly, and the entire loan (with interest) had to be repaid within fifty months. Most of the women took the loans to start small enterprises, such as the small tea house we were sitting in. Sometimes the money was used for agricultural needs. Loans could amount to as much as 300,000 rupees (about \$5172). She mentioned an example of a woman who had bought a taxi with a loan, making a profit from running it while at the same time repaying her debts.

As we talked, the leader expressed reservations with regard to the literacy classes. She argued very persuasively that there was no point in offering literacy classes to everybody because some of the women were old and had difficulties with their vision. Anita explained to me that the leader was trained at teaching birth-control techniques, and that she was involved in distributing contraceptive devices provided by one of the NGOs that was active in the region. She also used to accompany women to clinics to have contraceptive devices installed, and sometimes to sterilization procedures at the hospital. According to the leader, some 200 to 300 women were using birth-control pills while a similar number preferred to have an injection that prevented conception for about three months.

From where we were sat we could hear the women praying loudly together. Anita explained that as there was no other way to guarantee that the women repaid their loans, their commitment to repay the money was based on this collective ritual prayer. When the money lenders eventually left, we joined the group of women.

Anita was given a bench to sit on and I sat on a chair that was brought out from the tea house especially for me. Buffalos approached us from time to time, and were chased away by an old woman with a stick, assisted by a little boy. I was suffering so much from the heat and humidity that I could hardly follow the exchange between Anita, the other two WGOs, and the village women. Desperately exhausted, I sat there waiting for the meeting to end and did not bother Anita with questions for the women.

A little while later, when the topic had changed and the lists for the literacy classes were being signed, the encounter became informal. Anita and I came down to sit on the grass. A woman in her late 70s came to sit beside me, and waved a fan at my face to relieve my noticeable suffering. She was very amused by my visible distress, and made, so it seemed to me, jokes at my expense. She leaned her head towards mine, as if to show we resembled one another on account of us both having white hair, and patted my feet, thus causing her friends' unconcealed excitement at her daring gestures. Anita suggested taking pictures of the old woman and me, and then of all the women who had attended the event. Later, she told me that that village was relatively advanced (referring to the tea house and other small enterprises as proofs of this), and that some of the women had gone through literacy classes already. The school we visited also seemed relatively more "advanced." The classrooms had blackboards, and the girls sat on chairs next to tables.

On our way back to Bhairahawa the familiar sights could be observed: children carrying wood parcels on their heads; women working in the paddy fields, their feet immersed in water; cattle walking around; wretched mud huts scattered along the way (described in my fieldnotes as "disgusting"); dirty-looking ponds with buffalos bathing in them. The hour-and-a-half drive to Bhairahawa seemed to last forever. The vehicle was unbearably cramped, with three of us at the front, and when another WGO joined us there were four people in the back of the jeep, all sweating heavily. A large dead snake lying on the road broke our exhausted silence, eliciting some excited comments from the people crowded in the jeep. The light rain that started to fall, and the drinks I bought for everyone a short while before arriving back at the project's site, made it a bit easier to endure the heat.

## **Manipulative Development: Ignoring Women's Wishes**

The main insights derived from the second round of visits to the villages are compatible with the conclusions from the previous round. The women were very clear in stating what kind of activities they preferred. Economic enterprises, material needs, and health services were the ones they described as the most important for them. They clarified their preferences in detail: training in vegetable cultivation, animal husbandry, marketing, and sewing; access to resources such as water supplies; better credit facilities; and improved health services. However, the women's stated needs and desires were practically ignored by all parties involved in the gender activities project, including officials from the World Bank, the Nepali government, the local irrigation project administration, and Tahal's representatives, Leon, Tovi Fenster, and myself. Thus, literacy studies, which were, in fact, the core of the women's project, had very little to do with what the women explicitly stated they wanted.

A similar situation, involving an imposed bargain on female peasants in rural El Salvador, is described by Julia Betts (2004). In her study of the relationships between "dominant constructions of the 'illiterate' female peasant"

and “actual gender constructions and processes within rural communities” (ibid.: 68), Betts asserts that the figure “who stands ‘out there’ in the land, waiting to be classified and ‘made literate’ in the name of the greater good ... exists only as a phenomenon created through discourse” (ibid.: 81). It seems that the women in both contexts—Nepal and El Salvador—were aware in some way of the fact that “literacy skills do not represent a direct means to social status or a channel to dominant codes of communication,” and that “these routes lie elsewhere ... in experience, history, relationships and local constructions of social power” (ibid.: 82).

I do not mean to suggest that the women did not want literacy classes, although more than a few objected to it, but rather that literacy was not presented as a salient need by the women. Moreover, as literacy classes were the only thing offered, it follows that the women were made to think that the classes were the best they could hope for. This was explicitly voiced by an older, energetic woman in one of the villages we visited, who said: “We are not interested only in literacy, but in more practical things”. It seems that the women assumed that once they became involved in the women’s project, the other more attractive benefits might follow. In fact, as I suggested earlier, in our talks we made it quite clear that when the literacy classes ended the women’s desires would be addressed. Furthermore, even when women did respond positively to the offer of literacy classes, they often stipulated certain conditions, the most common of which had to do with the place where the classes would take place. Demands for refreshments, and for a local, experienced, and respectful teacher, were additional preconditions brought up by the women.

Sales of handicrafts were another example of imposing an idea, though one that was clearly rejected by the women. Certain that marketing handicrafts would be relatively easy and profitable for the women, Anita and I repeatedly suggested the idea to the groups we met, despite the women’s explicit rejection of this and their insistence that their handicrafts were not intended for commercial but rather for social and traditional purposes.

Our conversation with the women of Pakadihawa offers a further example of our belief that we knew better than the women themselves what was good for them. When we arrived at the village we saw a woman knitting a small decorative table cloth with one needle. My instant reaction was to find out whether this kind of object was commonly produced in the village. It did not take long for the woman’s little daughter to bring us a few more samples of her mother’s handiwork. Anita commented that she has seen similar examples at the regional market. I asked if the village women knew about the market. A local woman who followed our conversation replied that similar handicrafts were sold at a nearby market, but that the women were not interested in selling their works. She explained that this was due to practical reasons, and not just because of cultural norms, namely the high price of the raw materials. Producing one article would cost around 400 rupees (about \$6.9).

Moreover, the women not only knew what they wanted and needed, and well informed about marketing options, they were also capable of empowering themselves through initiating independent entrepreneurial ventures. Given the necessary capital, the women were resourceful and capable—as the examples of the tea house and taxi business in Sikatahan demonstrate. The cooperative fund, which the women in Bhawarabari founded, also serves to show how resourceful women could be when they gain access to credit, and then using it for different ventures. Some of the women in the villages volunteered in women's organizations and were involved in helping other women. This feature of the village women's way of life was evident in both the first and the second rounds of visits. The women had been organized for mutual help and other social activities before the women project's representatives (the WGOs in particular) started to work in the villages, and even before the government's agricultural training projects were introduced into the villages.

I contend that the women's enterprises, whether economic or social, had nothing to do with the irrigation project. These were self-organized, economically focused initiatives that had emerged regardless of Tahal's irrigation project and the introduction of the gender-oriented rhetoric and projects of the mid 1990s. Tahal's groundwater project, the BLGWP, which was inaugurated in 1978, did not contribute much to the village women's economic opportunities nor to their advancement. A few women entered the agricultural training programs provided by the irrigation project after 1986. According to Fenster's report, only 19 per cent of the 1135 farmers who participated in the training program that took place from January to June 1996 were women (Fenster 1996: 14). Moreover, the agricultural division of the project, which was in charge of training the farmers, only employed male technicians. Furthermore, at the tubewell meetings, women comprised only 2.2 per cent of the participants (12 out of 540), because most of the water-user groups, where decisions concerning water use were made, did not include women.

The kind of gender system detailed here—both with regard to villagers' everyday lives, and the perceptions and biases of developers—is not unique to the rural Nepali context. David Mosse's analysis of Bhil society in rural India describes a similar gendered economic reality. He reveals that “the structure of gender responsibilities produces an unequal distribution of tasks and workloads” (Mosse 2005: 63) and, moreover, “despite the fact that women share agricultural tasks, exert decisive influence over farm management based on distinct interests, deploy specialist knowledge, expertise and skill in key areas ... their roles are socially constructed as unskilled, manual, ancillary and low status, as menial ‘housework’ which does not imply technical skill” (ibid.: 64). Furthermore, the men are the “holders of knowledge, decision makers as farmers or herdsman,” and they “dominate interactions with the market, moneylender, input supplier, cooperative, bank...” (ibid.: 64). However, the reason for this extremely inequality and these discriminating practices is

perceived by Mosse to emerge from “cultural ascriptions of women as dependent labour” (ibid.: 64). Yet, in a note Mosse hints at an alternative explanation: “Officially promoted ‘farmers’ groups are typically understood as male groups, while the activities of women’s groups do not emphasise their roles as farmers” (ibid.: 258 n.45). Mosse contends further that women’s roles “are socially constructed (by themselves as well as by men)” (ibid.: 64). Thus, the construction of gender inequality has its roots in the society itself. Bracketing out those who engender gender inequality lends vagueness to the process. Thus, it seems that Mosse neutralizes the role of development and other bureaucratic agencies, such as the Indian government and the development project who employed him. A final point in this regard relates to Mosse’s argument that, “The gender division of labour is an ideological structure that naturalises gender-based inequality rather than a functional allocation of tasks” (ibid.: 64). However, he does not disclose whose ideology is being pursued in this context.

A similar picture emerges from Dorothy Hodgson’s study of the cultural politics of development among the Maasai (Hodgson 2001), although she offers a different explanation from Mosse’s. Hodgson reveals the role of development, as well as commoditization, in empowering Maasai men and displacing Maasai women “from their former rights and roles,” and by producing “separate male-dominated domains of the ‘economic’ and ‘political’, as opposed to the female domain of ‘the domestic’” (ibid.: 271).<sup>9</sup>

My own study suggests that gender inequality and discriminating practices in development contexts are closely connected to the organizational policies of development programs. The irrigation project ignored women’s significant role in agriculture, and thus succeeded in “naturalis[ing] gender-based inequality” (Mosse 2005: 64), partly by denying women access to resources, which were provided solely or mainly for men. As a result, women’s position and participation in decision-making processes and their access to available resources diminished.

## Foreign Agencies and the Takeover of State Responsibilities

My impressions from the second round of visits reinforce another conclusion, namely that state agencies were not only capable of carrying out agricultural training, in fact that they were doing it quite efficiently, although unequally, whenever and wherever they were involved in providing basic services to the population.

This observation is backed-up by studies such as that of Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton (1999). They point to the large-scale educational reforms which were carried out by the governments of the 1950s and by the National Education System Plan (NESP) from 1971. The reforms “brought schools under government control and the use of Nepali as the medium of instruction was made compulsory ... [A] standard national curriculum was introduced, including subjects relating to national culture and history. The aim of this was to further integration between Nepalese belonging to different communities and different social classes” (ibid.: 221). Although Hoftun, Raeper, and

Whelpton consider the NESP's implementation a failure, they admit, however, that it ensured "an explosion in the numbers of children receiving a primary education" (ibid.: 222). In 1942, Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton report, the literacy rate in Nepal was only 0.7 per cent; by the end of late 1980s it had risen to nearly 40 per cent (ibid.: 220).

It appears that the problem of social (gendered included) stratification lies mainly in an unequal distribution of resources, in particular with regard to rural regions, as compared to the urban parts of Nepal. Thus, for instance, both Deepak Thapa and Bandita Sijapati (2004) and John Whelpton (2005) point to the economic dualism of Nepal. They suggest that economic development has benefited local elites and deepened poverty and the exploitation of the poor (Whelpton 2005: 128). Furthermore, Thapa and Sijapati claim that economic policies work in favor of the rich and the urban sector, and that,

even if the government verbally commits itself at every opportunity to the progress of society as a whole, most of the organized activities and modern facilities are concentrated in the urban areas ... poor people in rural areas are asked to match government investment in irrigation, electricity distribution, and other types of infrastructure while these facilities are installed in urban areas without any direct costs for urban dwellers. (Thapa and Sijapati 2004: 60)

A similar picture of Nepal's economic dualism emerges from my ethnography. In one of my conversations with Leon's friend Sam, an American consultant living in Bhairahawa, he compared Tahal's irrigation project with another agricultural project for which he was working. He claimed that Tahal's project could have been considered a good one had it been labeled "a project for constructing roads and electricity." However, he added,

as an irrigation project it is not efficient. It would have been better to dig more wells which are smaller in size and closer to each other, for the benefit of the smaller farmers, whereas the main concern of the project planners and practitioners is directed toward the bigger farms. The 'small' farmers cannot organize in groups and also cannot pay for the electricity, and therefore the usage of the water is limited.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, I argue that the assistance of international and local NGOs was not really needed to provide large-scale services for the rural population, women included. Providing basic services for nationwide populations, urban and rural alike, obviously necessitates large scale policies and practices, as well as massive budgets.

I conclude again, therefore, that the Nepali government did not need to import professional expertise, clearly not for literacy training, nor for vocational training such as sewing. Employing foreign consultants is an important

part of development projects and it absorbs a substantial portion of a project's funds. Thus, the Nepali government's desire for financial resources, in the form of overseas aid, carried with it a price tag in terms of economic dependence and vulnerability. This dependency was embedded in wider neocolonial processes. Thus, Mark Smith, for instance, argues that, "Given the scale of indebtedness and the lack of internal funds for education and social programmes, Southern countries have become particularly dependent on assessments and perspectives made by key international and national agencies in the North" (Smith 1998/2001).<sup>11</sup>

I suggest that development projects aimed at social change entail long-term involvement, probably longer than projects that introduce technological changes and infrastructure, which are subject to a relatively strict and formal schedule. Projects such as literacy programs are "easier to advocate than other solutions" (Horsman 1990: 65), and can be conveniently presented to donors in appealing terms to describe the aims and methods that are involved in their implementation. This means that organizations and agencies involved in projects which aim to effect social change can present their aims in somewhat vague and manipulative terms, "mobilizing metaphors ('participation', 'partnership', 'governance') whose vagueness, ambiguity and lack of conceptual precision is required to conceal ideological differences so as to allow compromise and the enrolment of different interests" (Mosse 2005: 23).<sup>12</sup> The instrumental component of social programs, literacy programs in particular, is exposed in the extensive use of the ideological terminology of "development vocabularies" (Chatty and Rabo 1997: 10), which include numerous buzz words, like people's participation, structural adjustment, and community involvement (Chatty and Rabo 1997; Pfaff-Czarnecka 2004). Chatty and Rabo argue that concepts like "growth, social development ... and sustainable development have riddled development debate. Concepts such as production, basic needs, people's participation, and structural adjustment, have been used as both catch-words and solutions for all major Third World difficulties" (Chatty and Rabo 1997: 10). The manipulative terminology clearly "bears a high legitimating potential for those who claim that they are facilitating the process" of negating "physical distances and power differentials" (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2004: 186). Once in the field, development agencies can claim that additional, more advanced programs are required (Hertzog 1999).<sup>13</sup> They can also easily claim the need for extending the implementation phase.

Introducing overseas expertise in the field of social issues into local social services accentuates the colonial tendencies of development agencies. Reflecting critically on the meaning of foreign expertise in social matters makes one wonder what kind of advantage these experts can offer in terms of socio-cultural structures, relations, habits, norms, and so forth. They seldom know the language; most of them are hardly familiar with the local social, economic, political, and cultural contexts; and they are usually "passers-by," short-term vis-

itors, and always “foreigners” (Chambers 1983: 10–12). Discussing the implications of foreign consultants’ role and conduct in the context of a development project in western India, Mosse points to the “fragmented experience” consultants had of their project, being “disengaged from the day-to-day routines and the pressing demands of relationship building. Their knowledge of the project derived from short visits ... within busy itineraries that connected thinking about the project to other intellectual endeavors ... for other clients” (Mosse 2005: 133). Mosse also highlights the instrumentally constructed distance between foreign experts and local people, the short visits of the former mediated by project staff.

In my case, the role of expatriate consultant that I assumed emphasized the fact that I could offer no real expertise whatsoever, nor could I contribute to any social change. My background as a feminist activist in Israel was clearly not relevant to the Nepali context, and in any case there were numerous local feminist activists much better equipped and suitable for dispensing advice in the context than I was. It should also be noted that I was never asked by Tahal about my knowledge concerning Nepali society, history, and so forth. Nor was I advised to prepare myself on the subject.

Incorporating agricultural training for women, aimed at socioeconomic change, but not directly connected with irrigation, into the irrigation project suggests that this extended sub-project of the gender activities project enabled Tahal to prolong its stay in Nepal. Moreover, agricultural expertise, as suggested earlier, was effectively provided by the Nepali authorities, thus proving that Tahal’s involvement was essentially unnecessary.

The fact that numerous women’s NGOs were extensively engaged in such enterprises all over the country, including the rural regions, underscores the needlessness of overseas expertise in gender matters and in projects aimed at changing gendered power relations. The extensive presence of women’s and other NGOs in the irrigation project area became clear during a visit by Anita, the WGOs, and myself to the local office of the regional development ministry to obtain a list of active women’s organizations in the region. We received a list of some 200 NGOs, 100 of which were women’s NGOs. I suggest that the intervention of outside agencies in the subtle, complex social webs of Nepal, as well as in other countries, entails inevitable neocolonial connotations, and is doomed to be resisted.

Assuming that the Nepali government and its officials were well aware of these entailments, the question arises of why they continued to accept this kind of foreign intervention, which could only be superfluous and detrimental? I suggest that the Nepalese authorities were trapped in the aid and development web, which necessitated compliance with excessive overseas demands. The heavy dependency of the Nepalese government on international aid, which started as early as 1952 (Whelpton 2005), is described by Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton as follows: “it is the developed countries which provide most of the



foreign aid and loans on which the Nepalese government is heavily dependent. Assistance is generally provided either directly from government to government, or, more importantly in recent years, through international agencies such as the UNDP or World Bank” (Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton 1999: 280). Whelpton further suggests that by 1987 aid programs in Nepal were provided by “sixteen individual countries and six international organizations” (Whelpton 2005: 135).

Craving international financial help forced Nepali governments to allow the massive entrance of foreign actors into spheres of state responsibility, over which the latter often took control. The World Bank’s loans to Nepalese governments, including the loan for the irrigation project in the early 1980s, became fiscally important in the early 1970s (*ibid.*: 128).

It is possible that the low visibility and non-threatening nature of interventions in social matters that development projects entail made it easier to accept them. Moreover, as these socioeconomic projects focused on the poor, and probably politically weak populations, governments could easily ignore the infiltration of outsiders into national territory. In other words, weak populations are relatively easier to submit to foreign influence because they are not considered to be an essential asset or as possessing significant political power that should be taken into account by politicians in power. Indeed, this conclusion applies in particular to social categories such as women and children, rural women and children even more so. Another relevant perspective in this socio-political game, within the context of literacy and other programs for women, is the fact that although there were numerous women’s NGOs in the field, they appeared to have no substantial political power. Thus, the government could ignore their contributions in the spheres in which foreign NGOs and other agencies stepped in and took over parts of their ongoing activity.

By 1997, Whelpton estimates that the number of Nepali NGOs was between 20,000 and 30,000 (*ibid.*: 228). The substantial increase in the number of Nepali NGOs involved in aid programs is attributed by Whelpton to foreign donors’ preference for cooperating “with Nepalese non-governmental organizations rather than with government departments” (*ibid.*: 135). The channeling of funds from a foreign governmental or non-governmental organization to a Nepali NGO has grown significantly since 1980. Whelpton suggests that local NGOs “were registered and regulated by the Government’s National Social Services Co-ordination Council ... but generally operated more flexibly than the civil service” (Whelpton 2005: 135). Hence, I suggest that the preference of foreign donors for cooperating with local NGOs could be attributed to their weakness as compared with the governmental establishment. Thus, foreign NGOs were less controlled and had greater freedom to operate from a more powerful position in the field.

This weakness of local NGOs was no less relevant to local women’s NGOs, as became apparent in the context of the women’s program. Thus, local and na-

tional women's NGOs were dependent on our willingness to turn to them, and there was no doubt as to who occupied the leading role in the field. Literacy classes and sewing training were provided for women villagers by both governmental agencies (such as the Women's Training Center, the Women's Development Division, and the Rural Development Department) and Nepali women's NGOs (such as Mothers' Club and Didi Bahini). From what Anita told me, based on the experience of her previous work place, development projects initiated by the government (the Ministry of Agriculture, in this case) could benefit village women in terms of literacy, agricultural training, and access to credit. It follows that governmental organizations are potentially more capable and more committed to providing necessary services to their citizens, since they are not geared to the profit motive. While banks are interested in making money, and most NGOs are interested, in practice, in generating paid jobs, the government is more oriented toward providing services for the population. The fact that governments are extensively exposed to internal and external criticism is another reason why the state fosters a deeper responsibility for providing basic services to its citizens. The state must be publicly accountable for their performance, to a much greater extent than private enterprises such as banks or NGOs. It emerges, then, that projects aimed at women's advancement could be organized by national, regional, and local Nepali agencies with no need for outside intervention.

I suggest that because the Nepali government was eager to obtain international investment it used women as a social resource for bargaining over financial aid. Thus, by virtue of being a socially and politically weaker group, women were gradually left out of national projects and vocational training practices while becoming more accessible to non-governmental agencies, whether Nepalese or foreign. The fact that children in the villages were also part of these non-governmental, foreign initiatives (Unicef's in Ekala, for instance), provides further evidence for the argument that the weakest groups in society, like women and children, were used as a bargaining chip in negotiations over financial aid with powerful and rich international organizations.

The practically invisible character of overseas involvement in social-change programs can be illustrated by Tahal's case. No governmental agency connected to education, either national or local, was aware of and certainly not involved in Tahal's Women's Development Program. This was made clear in all our interactions with local and national representatives of the Ministry of Education, whether in relation to supplies for the literacy classes and teachers' seminar or to the employment of village teachers. When we met with local officials of the ministry, the director and his assistants said they were pleased to become involved in "our" project and to offer us any assistance they could. This attitude was revealed repeatedly and in various ways. It seemed that they were pleased that we had approached them and appeared to have no qualms whatsoever regarding the fact that we were doing "their" work, and breaking into their field

of expertise. They did not even seem to think that we should have considered them as the responsible party in education projects. Indeed, we were involved in informal education and their main responsibility was for formal education. This once again illustrates the fact that relatively socially and politically weak groups (such as “the illiterate”) are easier to ignore and to marginalize.

Moreover, this lack of awareness of foreign initiatives taking place in the field of education was also revealed by heads of the Ministry of Adult Education. When I phoned the national supervisor of the ministry and asked to meet with him in Kathmandu to talk about several issues concerning the literacy program, he said he was very willing to meet me, yet his reaction clearly indicated that he was surprised to hear about our project. It also transpired that the ministry was running a literacy project in the same region. He argued, therefore, that we should coordinate our involvement in the villages in parallel with the ministry’s own efforts. Thus, the government officials in charge of adult literacy appeared to be the last ones to hear about our project. This state of affairs suggests that government agencies have to compete with outside organizations, consultants, and local NGOs over control in a field that is clearly under their jurisdiction. It is reasonable to assume that as the government lacked the required budgets to provide adult literacy studies for all parts of Nepal it welcomed any additional resources and the sharing of responsibility.

On this background, of growing governmental dependency on outside financial resources, “neocolonialism within educational contexts” (Wickens and Sandlin 2007: 278) emerged, and, moreover, education operated as a form of neocolonialism (Milligan 2004). Murray Thomas (1993) and Murray Thomas and Neville Postlethwaite (1984) suggest that schooling within any country be assessed by considering it in relation to “a continuum where complete control by foreign powers is at one end of the continuum and complete control by independent nations is on the other” (as phrased by Wickens and Sandlin 2007: 279). Assessing the Nepalese adult education system according to Thomas’s continuum, it seems that it has not moved toward “political, economic, and cultural independence,” and cannot be described as having “self-determination [regarding] the purpose or role of education, curriculum and instructional methodology, and the financing of the education system” (Wickens and Sandlin 2007: 286).

The absence of cooperation between foreign agencies and state authorities, and the absence of state monitoring of enterprises that take place inside Nepal and which involve its citizens, convey an impression of political chaos (Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton 1999: 228).<sup>14</sup> This implies a situation in which the country has rendered itself vulnerable to unwanted consequences by failing, on the one hand, to adopt a coherent social policy, while, on the other, encouraging individuals and organizations to promote their own interests at the expense of the larger Nepali society.

## The Appeal of Village Women's Groups to Financial Agencies

Another issue that emerges from the description of the second round of visits to the villages relates to the field bank. Well-organized women's groups seemed to appeal to field banks and other financial institutions as a captive market. Though these were clearly money-making organizations, they did provide women with access to credit, effectively giving them the economic opportunity to improve their own and their families' socioeconomic conditions. In a way, the women villagers became an asset for many organizations, banks as well as NGOs, who behaved like "private consultancies rather than advocacy organizations" (Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton 1999: 135). These organizations discovered that women were good clients, and could be relied on to pay back their loans, even though the rate of interest charged was high.<sup>15</sup>

Women's NGOs were also involved in these financial ventures. For example, the Women's Development Organization used to offer the women in the villages sewing and agricultural courses. Eventually it ceased this activity, because, as one of its heads said, "We found [the courses] ineffective for the purpose of increasing family income." Consequently, the organization began to offer credit to the women, acting as a mediator between banks and the women themselves. Although the organization still provided some instruction in health care and family planning, that sort of activity had become marginal, and the organization's primary focus was on organizing women's groups for the purpose of obtaining cheaper rates of interest from the banks.

As Anita and I were planning to create a credit fund as part of our women's program, we approached the head of the Women's Development Organization for information about credit procedures. In response she explained: "first, you have to organize the group and see what they want to do with the money. Then the group comes into the organization's office and the women are asked to express their commitment to pay the money back, by signing a document." After the members sign the commitment form, the organization files a request to the bank on the group's behalf, and adds its own recommendation. If things run smoothly, seven days later the loan should be available for the women's use. Our informant added that the rate of interest for these loans was 12 per cent, and "this is cheaper than the usual 18 per cent rate of interest. In this way the women can start to earn some money, from raising livestock, for instance."

The extent to which women appeal to banks and mediating organizations as consumers of loans was also made clear during a meeting with the manager of the Grameen Bikas Bank in Pokara.<sup>16</sup> When Shova (a WGO), Anita and I met with the manager he was most welcoming. The meeting was arranged through Shova's relative, who worked for Grameen Bikas. The manager met us without delay, offered us coffee, and joined us. We chatted with him for over an hour and a half, during which time he showed genuine attentiveness. He made it clear that the bank would be very interested in taking part in the women project's economic enterprises, that is to say, in offering loans to groups of

women in the villages. From the bank's point, five women could comprise a group. The manager clearly set out the terms for loans: in the first year every woman could have 5,000 rupees, increasing to 10,000 rupees (about \$172) in the second year, and 20,000 rupees in the third. For the third loan, the woman would also need her husband's signature. Repayments commenced in the first week, and the weekly payment (of the big size loan) would be 510 rupees (about \$8.8), which equals an annual interest rate of 19.5 per cent. At a later stage the interest rate would drop to 10 per cent.

In response to my question concerning the method of repayment, the manager explained that the best arrangement for repaying a loan was to do it on a local basis, by sending Grameen's people to meet the women in the villages. I wondered why the coordinator, appointed by the group of women to represent them, could not be responsible for the repayments. The manager explained that the coordinator might not always want or be able to come to town to take care of the other women's payments, and subsequently the debts might pile up, resulting in the women getting behind in their repayments to such an extent that it would be impossible to overcome this. His eager interest in gaining access to "our" village women became obvious when he stated that the Grameen Bikas Bank would be very willing to incorporate the villages included in the project's region within the branch's reach, although the Lumbini region was not part of its territory. The manager addressed Anita primarily, speaking Nepali, which made me feel that he assumed, correctly, that Anita was the woman to be won over as she was the person who would be responsible for contacts with the village women in the future.

As the three of us were leaving the bank, Anita commented that the lending conditions sounded horrific and that the demand that repayments begin within a week of receiving the money was unfair. Then she told me that governmental officials who worked for the agricultural development department, with whom she had worked before, used to encourage women to establish independent credit groups. The department offered loans for a reasonable rate of interest, she said. Anita explained that the villagers in the region where she had worked were very successful tea farmers, and she added that women had comprised at least half of those benefiting from the department's loans. That night I told Leon about our meeting in the bank. He calculated the annual rate of interest that they charged, and claimed that it was about 40 per cent per annum, which he called a "murderous" rate. The village women were well aware of the profits generated by banks from their loans, and one woman said: "a lot of NGOs [who mediate between women and the Grameen Bikas Bank] come here. They give us small amounts of money but make a good profit for themselves."

The practice and implications of exploiting people's poverty for making easy profits are documented by Yunus (1998), and in fact they motivated his initiative in founding the Grameen Bank. Thus, he quotes one of his interviewees in a "street-survey" carried out in Jobra (Bangladesh): "... the money-lender would

demand a lot. And people who start with them only get poorer... Sometimes they charge 10 per cent per week. I even have a neighbour who is paying 10 per cent per day!" Yunus' conclusion is: "Usurious rates have become so standardized and socially acceptable in all third world countries that not even the borrower notices how oppressive the contract is." (ibid.: 6). Trying to understand the quoted rates (in the context described above as well as in others) I realized how hard it is. It turned out that they were confusing and perhaps misleading.

The social framework of a village, in which people are embedded in extensive social webs and dependencies, offers attractive opportunities for shrewd operators, who can take advantage of cooperative groups set up by social activists, community workers, and various organizations. Women in the villages partook in a variety of daily interactions, while working in the fields, in their social engagements and in child-care activities, as, for example, the gathering of many women in Ekala for the polio vaccination in Ekala, described above. In many villages, women's organizations and other NGOs were a visible presence, forming groups for the purpose of providing women with services, training, and so on. The literacy programs were a conspicuous example of initiatives offered to groups of women (and men) villagers by outside organizations. The gatherings of women provided a convenient access to organized groups of women for organizations and individual entrepreneurs who were interested in pursuing both, social and economic goals. Rather than dealing with individuals they could negotiate with groups' representatives who organized the women for them and mediated between the organization and the other women.

When the project people arrived in the villages of the Lumbini region, women's self-organized groups were well rooted in most of them. Thus, the women could be easily organized into functioning groups, facilitating the provision of various services and programs, such as the literacy program, to large populations. The women could also be conveniently accessed and targeted for extracting financial profits. Women's groups were evidently observed and exploited by banks and mediating NGOs (Hachhethu 2004).<sup>17</sup> It appears that women in the villages were easy to access, easy to persuade, easy to manage and, therefore, an easy source of profit. A term I used in my fieldnotes discloses this aspect of the women groups' attractiveness from the perspective of organizational interests. Following one of our visits to the villages I wrote in my notes that when we arrived at the meeting place in the village, and the village women were not present, "the WGOs went out to search for 'prey.'" This term cast us as hunters on the trail looking for suitable objects to serve our needs. We needed the women's groups to establish our project's value and relevance, while the banks and NGOs needed them for their interests, whether for the sake of money-making or for various organizational purposes.

In the case of the field bank, the exploitative undertones of the encounter involved a gender perspective as well. The encounter between the bank's men and the village women underscores the gendered power differential between these

two parties. The encounter suggests that the village women were vulnerable and naive in their relations with the men, and the men in turn were out to exploit the women and make easy profits from them. This representation of the relationship is echoed by the ritual that took place when the transactions were over. Thus, the men were portrayed as cynically manipulating the women's religious beliefs by sanctifying their commitment to repay the money, in order to benefit the bank and themselves. Moreover, the women were not perceived and treated as adults when it came to financial procedures. They were not obliged to repay the loan by signing the relevant forms, as men would have been required to. Rather, the women were treated like intimidated children, instilled with the fear of a sacred power.

## **The Appeal of Village Women's Groups to NGOs**

As soon as it became known that our project planned to spend a considerable amount of money on literacy studies, the project area became a popular destination for representatives of different NGOs, including literacy and health training organizations. One such NGO was involved in health training. Some ten days after my arrival at Bhairahawa, one of this organization's representatives showed up at the irrigation project office and offered to assist Anita and myself in planning and implementing the women's project. They were interested in particular in carrying out health training for the women in "our" villages. A few days later, two people from another local health-training NGO appeared in Thapa's office (while Anita and I were present) offering their services to the women's project. The men stated that they were interested in taking charge of implementing the entire project, as they had the volunteers and the expertise to do it best. Anita and I had previously approached the head of this NGO, a medical doctor, and proposed that he give some lectures on health care to the village women, to be done in conjunction with their literacy studies. Approaching Thapa directly meant that the men were very interested in getting involved in the women's project and they showed up to apply pressure and try to ensure that this would happen.

After the meeting in Thapa's office, Anita and I asked the two men to produce a cost estimate for a program to train the WGOs as health-care instructors. In response, they asked if we could tell them our budget ceiling before submitting a proposal. The negotiations with that organization's representatives dragged on for weeks. In fact, they went on almost until I left Nepal. The doctor and his colleagues came to the irrigation project offices every few days; sometimes, they arrived unannounced and found that we were not there. They seemed interested as long as they thought that they could get a slice of the women project's budget for their organization. Complying with our changing financial and professional demands, the NGO was ready to accept a substantially reduced role in the project, and with it a much lower payment than they had originally asked for. Because Anita and I had to comply with Thapa's instruction to reduce the budget significantly, we offered the

health NGO the task of training the WGOs as health-care instructors. The NGO accepted this reduced remit, probably because they hoped that, because of the women project's scale, if their organization were to become involved in it, the project would provide their employees with some extra income.

A representative of another NGO, who approached us in an attempt to gain entry to the women's project, offered to train village women in sewing and literacy. One day we found a short, thin woman waiting for us in Pandit's room. She had not made an appointment, and Anita and I had just returned from a meeting with the local head of the Ministry of Education. The woman told us that her organization owned four sewing machines, and that they trained groups of about twenty women for some six months each. In the past she had taught literacy to some 300 groups. We asked her to send in a proposal, which arrived a few days later, but we never invited her to another meeting.

A head of a regional women's organization, involved in literacy training and charity work for women, also tried to gain access to the women project's funds. Anita and I met the woman in a village bazaar that had been set up by her organization. It took place in a two-story, poor-looking building. Women's dresses and colorful nylon fabrics, as well as cheap ornaments and decorative items, were offered at low prices. The woman came up to Anita and me and told us enthusiastically and in great detail about her organization's voluntary activities in helping poor women. Before we left she pulled Anita aside and spoke with her for some time. Later on, Anita told me that the woman asked her why we (the women's project people) had not let her organization run the literacy classes. Anita replied that the classes had not yet started, and that if we found out that we could not manage the literacy program by ourselves we would let her organization organize some of the classes. Anita smiled mischievously and added: "They want too much money. Thapa is right in claiming that these organizations want a lot of money."

Anita and I were clearly perceived as being in control of a large-scale project with a substantial budget, though this was far from being the case. Anita's comment regarding Thapa's reservations about women's NGOs makes clear his underestimation of the work of these organizations and our willingness to represent the deceitful practices of the irrigation project's heads.

Anita and I seemed to enjoy our advantageous position. We acted as if we were in control of things and clearly enjoyed the fact that we were sought out by various organizations who looked up to us, eagerly asking to cooperate with us. However, this pretentious game was soon over. Even before I left Nepal it was already quite evident that if anything came of the women's project it would only be a very limited version of it. Meanwhile, the local NGOs were there to stay and continue their work, for better or worse.

Considering the vast number of active NGOs in the region (and beyond it) that work in the fields of literacy, health, and vocational training, the question arises: What is their actual contribution to improving social services, social mo-



bility, economic opportunities, and so forth? The evidence concerning the effectiveness of literacy programs in Nepal is rather dubious. Whelpton suggests that “at least some of the NGOs have been making valuable contributions” in raising literacy levels in Nepal, and “at village level they are providing opportunities to local people for upward social mobility” (Whelpton 1999: 228). However, this assessment seems overly positive when one considers the significant gap in literacy rates between rural and urban areas (Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton 1999: 222), and indeed between males and females—in 1991, the literacy rates for men and women were respectively 56.2 per cent and 23.5 per cent (*ibid.*: 96). It therefore follows that literacy was restricted until at least the early 1990s to “a small elite” (*ibid.*: 222).

My data suggests that literacy studies were offered repeatedly by both NGOs and government organizations in the same villages. As information on the extent, content, and value of earlier courses is unavailable, their contribution to changes in literacy in the villages remains obscure. Moreover, as Whelpton (1999) claims and my ethnography suggests, literacy initiatives carried out by NGOs were hardly monitored. Furthermore, reliable information concerning the proportional contribution of governmental and non-governmental agencies to increasing literacy rates in the villages is unavailable. Also, since “the impact of education on adult women, as compared to schooling, has not been disaggregated” (Robinson-Pant 2005: 3), and “the links between literacy and development have not disaggregated youth from adult literacy” (*ibid.*: 1), the connection between literacy and social benefits is difficult to substantiate.

Based on an extensive review of the literature on this issue, Robinson-Pant concludes: “The social benefits of literacy have been shown to be enhanced when literacy programmes are accompanied by supportive interventions, such as credit facilities, skills training, and in the health context, access to family planning facilities or maternal child health centres” (*ibid.*: 12). Such integrated, well-budgeted programs, were clearly not provided by the irrigation project. Moreover, even the much-reduced literacy program that remained following the hopeless round of negotiations between the irrigation project heads and myself was not carried out. It remains, therefore, to find out what actually did take place in lieu of the literacy program for women villagers.

## **The Village Women: Neither Naive nor Passive**

Our paternalistic encounters with the women villagers became a game, in which Anita and I played the role of benevolent and professional persons in possession of desired resources. The seemingly powerful position that we pretended to have was a short-term affair. Moreover, the encounters with the women villagers were clearly more complex than a picture of one-sided power relations conveys. My notes from the second round of visits to the villages reflect the interplay of all the participants in the meetings and the shifts in power that took place. The women villagers seemed to enjoy interacting with us. In most cases

they were clearly willing to cooperate, and sometimes, when they became aware of our eagerness to obtain their cooperation, they were openly enthusiastic and would take control of the situation.

From the village women's perspective, the encounters often seemed like a social gathering in which they had the opportunity to meet unfamiliar faces. This possibly made these events more exciting and diverting than the habitual round of social activities and gatherings. The idea that this kind of meeting was an opportunity for socializing, networking, and enjoyment is echoed in other studies of literacy classes. Juliet Millican, for example, speaks of classes that were designed to promote functional literacy but which turned into opportunities for "social and personal contacts" (Millican 2004: 204), and Sujata Khandekar speaks of a similar context as a "mental and social space and a platform for the sharing and ventilation of grievances" (Khandekar 2004: 217; cf. Dighe 1995; Patel and Dighe 2003)<sup>18</sup>

The recreational aspect of the village meetings is illustrated, for instance, by the incident in which the old woman used my looks to amuse her friends and draw attention to herself. That is to say, Anita, the WGOs, and, particularly, myself (because I could not understand Nepali), were also treated as objects in a cultural performance. Thus, while we perceived the village women as potential (needy) clients, the women themselves probably perceived us, aside from representing the authorities and carrying potential benefits, as a sort of social distraction from their quotidian routines. The fact that the meetings in the villages were pleasant social events for all—the village women as well as the men, children, WGOs, and AOs who joined the visits—was very noticeable and repeatedly described in my fieldnotes. For example, in recounting our meeting with some thirty women in Mazitihwa, I used the words "tranquility" and "peaceful" many times. While watching the ongoing interaction, I wrote:

The women with a few children at their sides, the WGOs, and the AO who joined us from the tube well (which is close to his little house), and his wife, are in a good mood; they seem very relaxed, as though having fun. A baby was peacefully sleeping on his mother's knees and she gently passes him to her friend's arms when she gets up to sign the lists of women interested in joining the literacy class. All this time a pleasant conversation is taking place among the WGOs, the AO and the women ... It seems that all are enjoying themselves and are not keen to end the meeting and leave the place. I am sitting nearby, on the grass, close to a small water pond, writing in my notebook. Opposite me an old man is leaning against a poplar tree, very peacefully, watching the ongoing scene. The tranquility is all-embracing, with the animals, brown and black buffalos, goats and sheep, eating the grass calmly. The women and children are sitting completely relaxed ... Some 30 meters away from us near a straw hut a young man is giving a haircut to a boy, sitting in front of the hut under a shadowed bush with yellow blossoms.

The women not only made fun of us and enjoyed the large social gatherings, they were sometimes blatantly critical about our women's project and other similar projects. They were far from being naive. This clearly came out, for instance, when we visited Pakadihawa, where Shiva Maya was the WGO in charge. We found out that the department of agricultural development had formerly organized a literacy class in the village and most of the people there knew how to read and write. A vigorous woman, dressed in a pink blouse and sari, seemed to tease and ridicule us sarcastically. Anita translated her comments, and she explained that the woman and others did not believe us. They had already met projects' people "some fifteen times," asking them about their willingness to participate in literacy and vocational training. And then "nothing happened."

The women in Pakadihawa did not hurry to meet us, and after waiting some thirty minutes for them we sent our driver to get them to come and see us. The woman with the pink sari also told us that the women's literacy class used to take place in the evenings. When at one point the teacher decided to hold the classes in the afternoons, the women stopped coming to the class. She added that some people had come to the village, taken pictures, and then gone away.

The women did not hesitate in voicing their critical views of organizations they had dealt with, and expressed their awareness of the benefits they expected to gain from them. This was also apparent in our visits to East Khungawa and to Madhuwani. Sumitra was the WGO attached to these villages. While chatting with the local women in East Khungawa, one of them complained bitterly about the loans they had been given. She said: "many NGOs are coming here, they give us some money but they themselves make a lot of money." Anita explained that the Grameen Bank could lend them 5,000 rupees (through mediating NGOs), and that they had to repay 110 rupees (about \$1.9) a week.

Women in Madhuwani complained that schoolteachers were recruited on the basis of their politics rather than their professional qualifications and performance.<sup>19</sup> The women said that since the teachers lacked basic training and experience they would tell the children to study by themselves. This evaluation of the standard of Nepali schoolteachers is backed up by Whelpton, who writes: "politicization after 1990 has eroded discipline and commitment among the teaching staff ... Although there certainly are some dedicated professionals among them, teachers are often appointed because of their political connections and often concerned principally with politics" (Whelpton 2005: 227). However, I would suggest that teachers anywhere are often used as scapegoats to hide the state's educational failures. In other words, blaming teachers for the education system's failure is a manipulative strategy to move attention away from dominant classes' role and the state's responsibility for children's poor educational achievements (Bowles and Gintis 1976, 2001)<sup>20</sup> as a result of restricted school budgets, poor wages for teachers, maintaining over-crowded classes, and so on (Hertzog 2010a). Moreover, governments tend to serve the hegemonic groups in society, which often are not interested in social change

(Carnoy 1974). In any case, whether the women's criticism was justified or not, the important point to make here is that the women clearly responded to public discourse, were interested in public affairs and political debates, and voiced their views.

The women in Madhuwani also commented sarcastically that politicians were like "buffalos," presumably meaning that they were lazy, and exploited others' work. During our visit to Pakadihawa, when one of the women commented ironically that, despite numerous visits by development project staff, "nothing happened," another noted that in the previous year Tovi Fenster had arrived at the village with Elka (Anita's predecessor), and that this time we had showed up instead. Raju, Leon's secretary, who joined us on some of our visits, commented ironically: "Who will come here next year?" Anita replied: "Next year they will throw stones at us and not just show us unpleasant smiles."

It follows, then, that although the women villagers could be easily accessed, because they lived in a relatively confined geographic and social setting, and because they were easily organized as a group, this did not necessarily entail the women's automatic acquiescence. Moreover, the fact that the women were collectively organized must have afforded them some reassurance, as this gave them a support network and an extended source of information. Even their involvement in loan arrangements with the banks (mainly through mediators), which appeared to be exploitative and cynical, cannot be considered as being due to the women's vulnerability. It appears that they were fully aware of the banks' conditions, procedures, and large profits. They had, quite probably, entered these transactions consciously, because these provided them with certain advantages, as limited as they were, that they could not obtain otherwise. The enterprises that were set up by the women serve to reinforce this argument.

In conclusion, the women in the villages were far from being naive or vulnerable. They extracted what they could from meetings with development staff. These events turned the tables on those who represented seemingly established, powerful organizations. From my viewpoint as a participant-observer, the women seemed to me to reverse, albeit momentarily, the picture of powerful officials stood before weak peasants: the former had to leave their strongholds and came out of their way to the villages; there they were hosted by the women, depending on them for their cooperation, and even made themselves susceptible to the women's criticism and mockery.

The women in the villages we visited lacked economic resources, yet our women's project and other similar projects mainly offered them literacy programs that were hardly needed for the demands of their daily lives. Indeed, literacy classes had previously been run in many of the villages we visited. Nevertheless, if the villagers were deemed to need further literacy training, perhaps this meant that literacy was not a basic requisite of people's daily lives, and that despite the fact that they had been given lessons the literacy skills they had already acquired had not been used and had consequently been forgotten.

What we were offering did not seem particularly useful, and the women appeared to use the negotiations over literacy classes as an opportunity to extract other resources from the women's project.

## **Illiteracy and the Image of Women's Collective Intellectual Failure**

The village women's assumed or real illiteracy was an essential component of the development projects that were offered to them. Development organizations and their representatives assumed women's ignorance and backwardness, and this was seen to necessitate their need for professional help. These embedded assumptions in planners' and implementers' perceptions and writings about the women villagers clearly emerges from Fenster's report, as indicated in my analysis (see previous chapter).

The embedded image of the village women's "backwardness" was often revealed in comments by project staff. For instance, on our way to Madhuwani, a male AO who accompanied us commented sarcastically that "in our next village there are twenty-five women with 450 children." Anita added that the village was very backward. It emerged from these remarks and from many others that a village would be considered advanced if there were fewer children per family, if the village women practiced family planning, if the girls attended school, if classrooms were equipped with chairs and desks, and if local enterprises were operating. Sikatahan fit this description: many of the women in the village had gone through sterilization operations, some had installed intrauterine devices, several hundred were on the contraceptive pill, and some received a contraceptive injection every three months. "Advancement" implied, therefore, women's compliance with technological interventions in their bodies, which drastically affected their reproductive potential. Literacy and education were also major indicators of "advancement," as Anita's comment implies: "This is a relatively advanced village, some of the women have had literacy classes."

These indicators of "advancement" entail three things. First, that Western concepts of modernization, including control over reproduction, literacy rates, and compulsory formal education, are embedded in the ideological background of development projects, such as the one described here. Development projects, therefore, differentiate between the developed-literate and the underdeveloped-illiterate, the latter assumed to need the former to instruct them. Second, that gender development projects are aimed at female populations, which implies that women are less educated, less literate, and therefore less advanced, or conversely more backward. Considered collectively illiterate and overly fertile, it was implied that the village women in the Bhairahawa Lumbini Groundwater Project area needed instruction and supervision. Third, focusing on women's "backwardness" distracts attention from governmental agencies' responsibility for and failure in providing basic universal services, such as education and health. This is particularly the case in Nepal (Thapa and Sijapati

2004; Whelpton 2005). Thus, women's collective failure to adapt to the modern way of life is established.

Two anecdotes can serve to highlight, from another perspective, the ethnocentric and stereotyped attitude involved in the encounters I witnessed and took part in with the village women. There was in place among project staff a set of oppositions by which modern, educated, advanced people were opposed to uneducated, backward, traditional villagers, and this was used to distinguish between foreigners and Nepalese, and between the Nepalese themselves. Gupta, the local consultant on farmer participation, joined us on a visit to the villages a few days before I left Nepal. It was a holiday and Gupta had brought along his wife. Raju, Leon's secretary, also joined us that day. As we were discussing the literacy project and its vague implementation plans, Gupta told me proudly that his two daughters, quite contrary to the prevailing norms in rural Nepal, were studying at university: one was doing her Ph.D. in India and the other was studying for a B.A. In their family, he explained, girls were treated similarly to boys with respect to educational opportunities. Gupta clearly viewed himself and his family as "advanced" and as an exception to the general situation in rural Nepal, probably even the whole of Nepal, in terms of women's educational opportunities. Thus, Gupta considered higher education a valued social ideal and a legitimate aspiration for young women.

This view, however, was inconsistent with the way he perceived the women in the villages and their families. According to Gupta, the women did not really share or deserve the same high aspirations and chances. He did not seem to conceive of any connection between his daughters' academic career opportunities and the irrigation project's obligation to contribute to village women's educational and professional opportunities. This is apparent from Gupta's claim that the decision-makers "in high places" were not interested in women's projects, and from his description of the women as easily manipulated by pretending to open up classes ("breaking the ice") instead of fulfilling promises made to them. Promises to the village women, so it emerges from Gupta's expressions, could be easily ignored. Irrigation, too, from his perspective, had nothing to do with women. It was evidently men's business.

Raju's comments on the same day introduce another dimension into my discussion of representations of the village women. Throughout the visit to the villages, which took place on a holiday, a few days before I left Nepal, Raju was diligently interpreting to me what the women were saying. He told me that they insisted on not telling the WGOs their husbands' names, because doing so might inflict death upon their husbands. He added: "You should write this down in your notebook." Raju probably assumed that I was interested in "exotic" behavior and thinking that demonstrated the women's superstitions and, hence, their ignorance. It follows that Raju considered the women to hold superstitious beliefs—that is, primitive ideas—and thus that they were irrational and quite different from himself and others in his social surroundings. Perceiving me as a Western, educated, rational person, and perhaps taking into

account my anthropological background, Raju assumed that I would appreciate the chance to learn about women's traditional, irrational thought. In fact, he was not far from the truth, as a comment I made in my fieldnotes following our visit to Sikatahan reveals: "At long last, after all the countless hardships in the 'advanced' village we returned to the 'big' city of Bhairahawa." My use of inverted commas discloses my ethnocentric views regarding village life, implying that the women of Sikatahan were not really advanced but, rather, were pretending to be so, and that Bhairahawa was not really a big city but was perceived as one by its (uncivilized, unmodern) inhabitants. I suggest that the ethnocentric, dichotomized categories that characterized my own and others' discourse were the outcome of the structured social distance and hierarchy constructed by the project.<sup>21</sup> This constructed power differential, associated with a range of oppositions—such as village/city, rural/urban, illiterate/educated, farmers/professionals, traditional/modern, women/men—facilitated the project heads' denial of their obligations toward the village women.

The foregoing analysis of the village encounters reinforces the conclusion drawn in the previous chapter. That is, the women's project was focused on literacy classes, whereas economic activities, which were clearly preferred by the women, were marginalized, and only ever used to gain the women's trust and cooperation.

In the next chapter I describe the seminar. This, together with Tovi Fenster's workshop, Thapa's privately funded literacy class, and ten other classes, opened after I left Nepal, was among the few negligible concrete outcomes of a project that aimed at providing 300 village women's groups with literacy training.

## Notes

1. Similarly, Mosse reports that fieldworkers' accessibility to villagers depended on "benefits they could, or promised to, deliver" (Mosse 2005: 81).
2. Tahal's (1992) socioeconomic Survey differentiates between two categories of villagers' homes in the irrigation project area: "permanent, and semi-permanent," explaining that "(a) Permanent Structure – made of brick/cement or mud with tint/tile roof. (b) Semi-Permanent – made of brick/mud with thatched roof." The survey reports that "all sample households reported having their own houses..." 64% of the farm households "Have semi-permanent type of houses while about 36% of the households have permanent type of houses..." (Tahal 1992: 32).
3. Robinson-Pant suggests that "unlike in neighboring India ... most Government letters and reports are still written in Nepali only" (Robinson-Pant 1995: 5).
4. This quotation, from Robinson-Pant 2001, is in the following link (a document titled: 'The Social Benefits of Literacy'): [http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/files/43483/11315414221/Robinson\\_Pant.doc/Robinson\\_Pant.doc](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/files/43483/11315414221/Robinson_Pant.doc/Robinson_Pant.doc). (retrieved 30 September 2010).
5. In the introduction to a volume on women, literacy, and development, Anna Robinson-Pant questions "the stereotype of the 'illiterate woman' which has informed most policy on literacy development" (Robinson-Pant 2004a: 2).
6. A reversal of power relations between visitors and locals in the village setting is demonstrated also by Shrestha with regard to relationships between NGOs and International Non-Government Organizations (INGOs). She argues that in the field, "the direction of power

seemed reversed—or at least, more easily reversible—as lack of INGO competence was highlighted” (Shrestha 2004: 12), and concludes that “if donors were generally in a position of power in relation to NGOs, this power was not always and everywhere experienced as irreversible or ineluctable ... [T]he view of NGO–donor relationships as ‘exchange of deference and compliance for the patron’s provision,’ is inaccurate” (ibid.: 14).

7. This is a common financial system, often referred to in the literature as ROSCA (Rotating Savings and Credit Association). Shirley Ardener’s and Sandra Burman’s edited volume (1995) on women’s ROSCAs, for example, contains a wide range of studies on this topic. Ardener points to “its wide distribution, its variety of forms and functions, and its relative durability in situations both of high financial insecurity and of prospering industrialization.” The ROSCA can be placed “within a broad set of institutions which provide credit and mutual aid” (Ardener 1995: 1). Ardener (1964) proposes a comprehensive and basic definition for ROSCAs, which may “isolate the common elements: ... an association formed upon a core of participants who agree to make regular contributions to a fund which is given in whole or in part to each contributor in rotation” (ibid.: 201).
8. According to its web-site Shtrii Shakti is working “towards women empowerment”. Its declared goal is “To find practical and innovative solutions to social problems to contribute effectively to the empowerment of women, men and youth from under-served communities, victimized individuals and so on.” Source: <http://www.shtriishakti.org/> (retrieved 1 October 2010).
9. Hodgson argues that the impact of development on gender roles and power relations is related to modernist ideologies of individualism, rationality, and progress which have empowered Maasai men “through such categories as taxpayer, head of household, and livestock owner” (Hodgson 2001: 271).
10. This argument finds support in Muhammad Yunus’ (1998) critique of irrigation projects (in Bangladesh and beyond it). He writes: “Because of their heavy operating costs, deep tubewells have proved highly inefficient, with corruption and wastage... Accordingly, almost half the deep tubewells sunk at the cost of millions of dollars had fallen out of use. The rusting machinery in abandoned pump houses was a testimony of a technology transfer initiative that was simply not relevant to the farmers. Yet another scandal, another failure of misguided development” (ibid: 48–49).
11. An extended discussion of power–dependence relations between neocolonizers and the colonized is offered in the Introduction.
12. Mosse’s analysis of the manipulations of terminology in the development context draws on Li (1999) and Dahl (2001).
13. The vocational training offered to Ethiopian male immigrants in Israel in the early 1980s is one example of this (see Hertzog 1999). Most of the courses provided for the male immigrants involved basic carpentry and car mechanics. They took place in old workshops containing outdated equipment. A decision was soon made to provide the immigrants with an “advanced” course, as the first one was recognized as being insufficient (meaning: a failure). Later on the various additional courses were also declared a failure and another stage was suggested. These courses drew on the vocational training system for unemployed and disabled people, which were already recognized as inefficient and outdated.
14. A similar impression stems from Whelpton’s comments regarding flourishing local NGOs. He suggests that “fears are also expressed that the state’s capacity to co-ordinate and direct development activities is being undermined” (Hoftun, Raeper, and Whelpton 1999: 228).
15. Muhammad Yunus was well aware of this fact when he established the Grameen Bank (see Yunus 1998).
16. Modelled on the Grameen Bank methodology, the mission of PasGBB (Paschimanchal Grameen Bikas Bank Ltd) is “to generate self-employment through micro-credit to the rural poor at their doorstep to reduce poverty level in the western region of Nepal.” The PasGBB “was established as a Regional Rural Development Bank in 1995 through a joint collaboration of the government of Nepal, Nepal Rastra Bank and Commercial Banks.” Source: [http://www.bwtp.org/arcm/nepal/II\\_Organisations/MF\\_Providers/Paschimanchal\\_Grameen\\_Bikas\\_Bank\\_Ltd.htm](http://www.bwtp.org/arcm/nepal/II_Organisations/MF_Providers/Paschimanchal_Grameen_Bikas_Bank_Ltd.htm) (retrieved 3 October 2010).



17. Thus, it is not surprising that one of the forty demands of the Maoist United Peoples' Front, submitted to the government in February 1996, a few days before they began their armed action (Hachhethu 2004: 58), was that "the invasion of colonial and imperial elements in the name of NGOs and INGOs should be stopped" (quoted in Hutt 2004: 285).
18. Millican (2004) offers a critical analysis of the Muthande Literacy Programme for adult women in Durban, South Africa. Khandekar (2004) examines the collective activism that emerged as a consequence of literacy learning among untouchable (Dalit) women in a slum of Mumbai, India. Dighe's study focuses on the Total Literacy Campaign by the Delhi Saksharata Samiti in Ambedkarnagar, a resettlement colony in south Delhi.
19. A similar criticism of teachers' meager performance is often made in regard to schoolteachers in poor neighborhoods and in state-funded public schools in other countries. Two examples from the Israeli context are relevant here. Elias Mazawi (1995) suggests that the Israeli government is responsible for politicizing Arab schooling, and consequently for the low quality of its teachers. Meanwhile, in his work on the social mechanisms that enabled the preservation of class stratification and hegemonic vested interests in Israel in the 1950s and 1960s, Arnold Lewis (1979) argues that poor children's failure at school was closely related to their teachers' poor performance. Lewis also argues that this was an outcome of the structured marginalization of the school, the town, and its population.
20. Bowles and Gintis (1976, 2001) perceive the role of egalitarian ideology as a "smokescreen", veiling the political construction and preservation of class stratification through schools. Following the Marxist theory they claim that the egalitarian ideology serves to hide the inequality of opportunity which is a central characteristic of the capitalist educational systems. According to them: "... beneath the façade of meritocracy lies the reality of an educational system geared toward the reproduction of economic relations... Dominant classes seeking a stable social order have consistently nurtured and underwritten these ideological facades... (1976: 103).
21. A similar argument is made by Stacey Pigg (1992), who points to the connection between development discourse and the hierarchical structure of Nepali society.