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Dhriti's Story

Notes on the condition of the elderly in poorer households in Nepal between uncommonness and the negatively commoned

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ABSTRACT | These fieldnotes focus on the case study of 68-year-old Dhriti, whom I met in Nepal during fieldwork in 2018-2019. This story invites reflection on the condition of poorer households – which in most cases still nowadays belong to families of lower caste backgrounds in the context of urban Nepal today. Despite the abolishment of the caste system in 1963 and its criminalisation in 2011, caste-related disparities and discrimination are still a reality, where centuries of socio-economic disadvantage still persist in cycles of injustice. If 'commoning' is the collective practice of creating and sustaining shared resources to meet common needs and well-being, a situation such as that of Dhriti's household shows a case of what I shall call 'uncommonness' in a domestic space, where a communal project of well-being seems unattainable in the face of limited resources, and in the context of broader social stratifications. The struggles of ageing among the poor in Nepal also point to ongoing practices of elderly mistreatment, which could make us think of 'negatively commoned' social spaces, where certain (often vulnerable) groups become the recipients of negative treatments that become socially accepted.

Keywords: ageing; caste; fieldnotes; Nepal.

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'Dhriti's smile', drawing by Paola Tiné, 2024 ©

When I met 68-year-old Dhriti, in the square of the Elephant Erotic Temple of Shiva Parvati, just outside of the Durbar city gate in Bhaktapur (Nepal), she was sitting on a large concrete step, wearing a beautiful yet worn black and red dress. While chatting with other women, every now and then she looked around, hoping to sell some of her small hand-made colorful bags that she had on display. My local friend Bob briefly introduced me to her, and she smiled at me. As usual, I first got some initial information on her age and domestic arrangements before starting our informal interview. She soon began to reveal some details about her difficult life:

> I was orphaned at the age of six. I then had a marriage contract arranged for me by my uncle and aunt with a fifteen-year-old low-caste boy. I lived in their house and helped with the household duties. He was a musician of the Dapha guthi. He died seventeen years ago.

Dhriti was impatient to show me her house, so after this initial chat, she invited me to go inside. The small building, an old three-story structure, stood in front of us like a thin tower crushed between two larger buildings. Each floor was comprised of a single room whose space was so narrow that a person could embrace it wholly by just reaching out their arms. I followed her into the ground floor room, which was pitch black. She turned on a light from a switch hidden somewhere behind a pile of sewing material. I could then see a delicate pink color on the old inner walls, and a tailoring machine that took up almost all the space. When we moved upstairs, walking with both feet and hands on a steep wooden ladder, I noticed some dusty black and white photographs hanging on the wall. The space was so narrow that I struggled not to brush up against the photographs, risking knocking them down. I recognised her eldest son in one of the photos, as I had interviewed him in the past weeks. He shared with me that he is currently

facing hardship and suffering from multiple health problems caused by his hectic lifestyle as he works three jobs trying to maintain his family together with his wife.

We finally reached the next floor, which consisted of one room whose entire space was taken by a small bed. From the open window, we could see people chatting at the tea shop in the square downstairs and we could almost touch the edge of the elephant temple, with the figures of the loving couples of animals, swans, elephants, peacocks, and camels adorning the shrine.

The story of Dhriti – one of my oldest informants during my fieldwork in Nepal in 2018-2019 – provides an important insight into the inner dilemmas and interpersonal conflicts that exist in households facing significant economic hardship. It shows the emotional struggles associated with the impossibility of choice in the context of Nepal as a developing country among people belonging to the lower caste strata.

While my research assistant Binod stood at the edge of the room, Dhriti asked me to sit with her on the mattress and started to explain her story:

> Until ten years ago, we kept ducks and chickens under this bed, we sold the eggs daily in the morning market in Taumadhi square. One day, the municipality prohibited this practice for health reasons, and we were left with nothing. The only thing that I have now is my tailoring machine with which I make small bags to sell to the tourist shops. It was left to me by my late mother-in-law.
>
> My youngest son went to work in Qatar for 10 months, but he broke his back while working and he came back and now works as a housepainter here in Bhaktapur. With him, his wife and their child, I have been sharing this house for five years. I receive a living allowance from the government of 1000 NPR (10 USD) per month. With this money, I buy tea at the tea shop, biscuits for the grandchildren, and *rāksī* [local alcohol derived from the distillation of rice], and sometimes I contribute to some of the house expenses.

They have a small kitchen on the top floor that is also her son and daughter-in-law's bedroom. Dhriti does not generally have access to this room at any time of the day, so we did not move upstairs to see it. She told me that there is a mattress kept standing up on the side of the wall, which they put down on the floor at night.

As we continued our conversation, Dhriti told me more about not having access to the kitchen:

> I am not allowed in the kitchen, and I have to eat what they make for me, because I am not allowed to cook. But I like tasty food, and my daughter-in-law's food is not tasty. She is not a good cook, and she is not neat and clean (Nep. *safa-suggha hoina)*. Because my daughter-in-law and my son both have health conditions with high blood pressure and diabetes, they limit sugar, salt, and spices, and so their food is not good. I only accept some food from her for lunch, such as *dal bhat*, but I generally skip dinner and drink rāksī. I am angry (Nep. *risāunu*).

> I am angry that I cannot have the food that I like. And when I get angry, I drink *rāksī*! When I get angry, I also wash my clothes. They do not allow me to cook for myself because they say that I would use too much gas. Very occasionally they allow me to cook boiled eggs, because they are also good for them to eat. I bought potatoes once, but they even refused to cook them for me, because it is not good for their diabetes.

A tear ran down her cheek, and her voice became strangled as she said that saving gas was deemed more important than her eating needs. Then she found the strength to continue when I asked her when was the last time that she had eaten a complete meal (Nep. *samaj baji*):

> I only eat good food when my daughter occasionally comes back from Canada and takes me to local restaurants in Kathmandu. She was adopted by a rich family from China, who provided her the money to study abroad, but sometimes she returns to visit us.

Another term that Dhriti used in conversation to express her emotions alongside that of 'anger', was *mane-khanlhagu*, which means 'heart-talking'. It comes from '*mane*' (which means heart) and '*khanlhagu*' (which means talks'), literally being 'talking alone with your heart'. 'Some days I feel *mane-khanlhagu*', Dhriti said. I had previously encountered this term in conversation with people experiencing harsh economic adversities and intense suffering (Tiné 2025a: 46, 105). Binod explained that this mental state 'occurs when you feel stressed and desperate. During this tense period, you talk to your own heart, you feel alone and do not see an escape.'

The story of Dhriti sheds light on a rather unexplored area of life in urban Nepal, bringing at the centre the voice of an elderly widow in a struggling household that exists – and is imbricated with –a growing middle-class strata and its priorities in the context of the Kathmandu Valley. In a series of writing based on my research in Nepal, over the past seven years, I examined the experiences of middle-class families as they clash and negotiate priorities and values in the context of new aspirations and possibilities. I took the middle class as a group characterised by 'a condition of precarity' (Tiné 2025a: 53) where a struggle is experienced (with different degrees of intensity across families who are upper-middle class and lower-middle class) to maintain the socio-economic standing acquired through hard work. I explored the emergence of forms of social and economic solidarity between friends and peers (Tiné 2021c), and the problematisation of notions of family in relation to the renegotiation of domestic spaces (Tiné 2021a, 2021b, 2022c), especially in the context of women distress in the joint household.

Showing a specific dimension of domestic conflict, in some of these works, I focused on the experiences of daughters-in-law as they clash with their in-laws in regard to family formation and management (Tiné 2024b), and of younger generations more broadly as they rethink and oppose hierarchical relationships in the house space (Tiné 2024a). Elsewhere, I looked at issues of parenting (Tiné 2020, 2025c) and ageing (2025b) in middle-class households, showing how parents and children reflect on their own responsibilities towards one another while also striving to achieve their personal desires. In one instance

(Tiné 2025a: 110), I referred to the case study of Dhriti's sister, Geeta, who lives in a middle-class household, and I told the story of her clash with her son and daughter-in-law and their decision to divide their kitchen in half due to perceived irreconcilability (2021b). Geeta, who had married into a wealthier family than her original household, mentioned being worried about her sister Dhriti who was struggling to meet basic dietary needs. Differently from Geeta, Dhriti's cannot partition her kitchen. The members of her household are struggling to fulfil more basic needs than the middle-class families I talk about in these other works.

Dhriti's case study invites us to reflect on the condition of poorer households – which in most cases still nowadays belong to families of lower caste backgrounds – in the context of global capitalism that is localised within site-specific logics. Despite the abolishment of the caste system in 1963 and its criminalisation in 2011, caste-related disparities and discrimination are still a reality, where centuries of socio-economic disadvantage still persist in cycles of injustice. Dhriti's experience especially points to the phenomenon of declining geriatric health in Bhaktapur among poor families, confirming medical studies linking mental distress and undernutrition (Ghimire, Saruna et al. 2018). In Nepal, the government gives full responsibility to the family to care for the elderly. Under the Senior Citizens Act (SCA 2006, article 4/1), 'it shall be the duty of each family member to maintain and care for the senior citizen, according to the economic status and prestige of the member' (Sharma Bhattarai 2013: 355). The contents of such provisions of care are left unclear in this recent legislation and the absence of state support for poorer households widely creates additional dysfunctions. These arrangements might be impossible in some cases as economic pressures increase (see Tiné 2022b; Liechty 2003), becoming unsustainable as the suffering of older people testifies.

The story of Dhriti shows the inner dilemmas and interpersonal conflicts that exist between family members in households facing significant economic hardship as well as health problems that are often related to the very condition of economic hardship. Here, choices have to be made by Dhriti's children on basic dietary practices, on the amounts of gas and salt that should be used to maintain the household's ecology. My broader research in urban Nepali households reveals that decision-making power is a recurrently contested matter between parents and children in different ways across different generations, and these often – as the case of Dhriti demonstrates – are negotiated on the basis of economic possibilities and impossibilities. If 'commoning' is the active, collective practice of creating, managing, and sustaining shared resources, spaces, and institutions, involving communities taking matters into their own hands, making decisions by consensus, and sharing responsibilities to meet common needs and well-being, rather than relying solely on markets or governments, a situation such as that of Dhriti's household shows a case of what I shall call 'uncommonness' in a domestic space, where a communal project of well-being seems unattainable in the face of limited resources, and in the context of broader social stratifications.

These stratifications – which have their roots in entrenched centuries-long inequalities that are amplified by capitalistic logics – divide people on the basis of social and economic status. The struggles of ageing among the poor in Nepal also point to ongoing practices of elderly mistreatment, which are demonstrated in much growing literature (e.g., Ghimire et al. 2018; Sharma Bhattarai 2013), and which could make us think of 'negatively commoned' social spaces, where certain

(often vulnerable) groups become the recipients of negative treatments that become socially accepted.

Ultimately, Dhriti's tears, her recurrent access to alcohol, and the shadow of her struggling son and daughter-in-law invite questions on our role as researchers to bring these issues outside of the domestic walls, and what can be done to support them.

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