

# **SUBALTERN PHOTOGRAPHY'S MEDIASCAPES: ALTERNATIVE MODERNITIES AND COUNTERCULTURAL IMPLICATIONS**

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With the help of transmission of photographic images through new media and other forms of media, oppressed and marginalized people across the world have been constructing alternative counternarrative discourses to the oppressive narratives that only garnished prejudiced and monolithic views. One of the reasons why subalternized groups of people deliberately take recourse to organized circulations of photographic images through various new media, is their consolidated efforts to re-claim authority over their own public and private consciousness so that they can construct their agencies. The subaltern's construction of agency will eventually subvert their imposed condition of subalternity. At this juncture, media as landscape emboldened by images and information, functions as a space for "imagined communities" of oppressed people to "produce and disseminate information, which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world" (Appadurai 35). It means photographic images occupy central stage in "image-centered" transmission of information for the oppressed.

In "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," Arjun Appadurai examines complex conflicting trends of today's globalization predicated on 'cultural homogenization' as 'Americanization' or 'commodification' and 'cultural heterogenization' as 'indigenization' or forces emerging from various centres and peripheries (Appadurai 295). In doing so, Appadurai proposes to study five different forms of global cultural flows: a. ethnoscapas; b. mediascapas; c. technoscapas; d. finanscapas; e. ideoscapas, through which the global or local entities circulate and tend to rub against each other. For the purpose of this paper I would like to delimit to mediascapas as cultural flow in which images and messages of homogenizing as oppressive forces and the heterogenizing as relatively hegemonized subjects counter with each other through Internet and various new internet platforms. At one-point, public accessibility to digital photography technology provided by ubiquity of smartphones and Internet platforms, images and voices of previously oppressed groups of people around the world have phenomenally escaped to inform about their historical condition(s) of oppression and their incessant struggles for freedom and identity. Photographic images (digital and/or non-digital) and intertwined messages circulated by African American people through Twitter hashtag #BlackLifeMatters initiated in 2014, #HandsUpDontShoot, #IfTheyGunnedMeDown are a few out of thousand such examples of mediascapas to protest against hegemonizing authorities. Similarly, photographic images and campaign messages posted by oppressed groups on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram from Nepal, India, and Bangladesh regarding racial oppression on particular minority communities such as Dalits, Muslims, Madhesis (people living in lower plane in Nepal) functions as subaltern mediaescapes for resisting intersectional oppressive forces in those regions.

Such recourse to photography and new media technology by the oppressed and marginalized public is inextricably linked with the notion of modernity (specifically Western modernity). It is because the very practices of photography, and new media technology are either invention or perpetuation of Western capitalist version of modernity well into the

present. By contrast, the use of this mechanism for/by oppressed classes of people suggests either inflecting or indigenizing Western version of modernity (photography being one upshot) for forming agencies and resisting master discourses. Moreover, this tendency instantiates post-structural condition, where alternative modernities as establishment of their own vernacular cultural practices emerge as opposed to singular modernity (unifying hegemonizing culture) with the help of photographic practices and their circulations. These alternative modernities are consciously-built-multiple-cultural-narrative spaces where the oppressed and the marginal voices assume their ownership and authorities. In an important context like this, the idea of plural modernities (therefore photography as poststructuralist) initiated by the subalternized people resonates with Dilip Gaonkar's notion of alternative modernities, which "has its origin in the persistent and sometimes violent questioning of the present . . ." (14). In this sense, photography (mostly digital photography today) and new media have the ability to refashion themselves for questioning any hegemonic authority at present.

### **My Personal Conceptuality on Internet Accessibility**

I feel a necessity of narrating my own childhood experience that might lay out background for discussing about today's burgeoning Internet uses and progressive utilization of new media platforms in remote rural Nepal, where I spent my good eighteen years. Traveling into retrospect vis-à-vis present context there, delves me into dreamlike coincidences when it comes to witnessing rural accessibility to information technology and explosion of internet and new media platforms' utilization for social, cultural, political, economic causes and so forth. It is more than obvious to see today how Internet and social media platforms are defining spaces for emboldening individual independent expression(s) (therefore realization of self-existence) and expanding their meaningful horizons towards multiple centres within the national boundary and beyond. In the year 1993, as a fifteen year old boy, I travelled barefoot, three hours up and down rugged and forested trails with sparsely present mud and stone built thatched roof houses on sides to the district head-quarter to learn my School Leaving Certificate result via one only government operated telephone booth, which would provide pass or fail result by telephoning their central office located in capital city Kathmandu upon payment of couple of cents. I still vividly remember that I remained four hours in line-up waiting to hear my result. However, in a short span of two decades or so, one can see how every young and adult in each house possesses smart mobile phone and has Internet accessibility, with which to actively debate and assert independent expressions on politics and identity related issues, which once were completely unheard of. Let alone private communications. That being said, swift progress in digital literacy, digital democracy and digital photography made possible by cheap digital cameras and smartphones in rural and outlying spaces, seems to have been continuously breaking long held conservative traditions such as inhuman social and cultural taboos, caste-based and gender based discriminations, state political reluctance to social, cultural reforms and consolidations. By breaking those boundaries with the help of Internet and social sites platforms, the oppressed groups (still oppressed though) have been raising consciousness and solidarity and have been fighting against social ills and state apparatuses smeared with discriminatory practices.

At the outset, it is no denying of the fact that digital democracy is an instantiation and propagation of western capitalist ideology in the form of globalization to hegemonize non-western world buttressed by western digital technological advancement. However, in South Asian countries like Nepal and India, digital democratization, on the one hand, has to do with obligatory indigenization of the Western ideology through which localized authorities in these specific geographies control and circulate their own versions of ideological control over their citizens by providing them liberty to use the technology. On the other hand, it has also allowed incredible access to digital technologies to common consumers (especially historically oppressed group of people) outside business world. For example, the personalized use of digital photography, their uses of social networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter have provided autonomy over their own images, actions and communicative practices, which were realized almost impossible before the explosive availability of digital technology in rural parts of Nepal over the last couple of decades. Copley and Haeffner's understanding of digital democracy supports this conditionality when they argue that "digital democracy, in which digital technologies, particularly those to do with imaging, grow at a very rapid rate and become available to consumers outside a purely industrial setting to the extent that information imbalance is, in some measure, ameliorated"(124). As discussed by Copley and Haeffner, 'digital democracy and 'digital literacy' practices are inseparable aspects of digital technological use, 'critical literacy' of digital technology is a most useful strategy for the oppressed to politically engage with the oppressive forces for the assertion of their agency and independent existence within "intersectionality" of discrimination in which the subalternized people are oppressed on multiple points (such as the one Crenshaw compares with an intersection on a road) religiously, politically, economically (qtd. in Safia and Tynes 2).

### Subalterns Radicalizing New Media

Ubiquity of Internet access and smartphones in Nepal has proven to be instrumental for subalternized people to speak and assert their own identity through various social media such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Gyanendra Pandey considers 'subaltern' as a political category attached to a particular group of people based on their being deprived of equal access to social, political, religious, educational, and cultural amenities made available by a state to its citizens (Pandey 4735). That means subalterns are outside hegemonizing power structures in social spaces. That said, there exists varieties of subalternity based on the kinds of discrimination, marginalization and geography: Dalits in South Asian context, emigrants, gendered subalterns as women, people neglected because of remoteness of location and so forth in any part(s) of the world.

In this short paper, I limit my focus on Dalits (caste based oppressed people in Nepal and India) as subaltern population based on caste and their active uses and utilization of photography and new media for political purpose of identity and freedom. In "Comparative Contexts of Discrimination: Caste and Untouchability in South Asia," Jodhka and Shah explore about problems of discrimination being faced by Dalits, groups of people being oppressed and segregated based on biased religious convictions held by so called "upper castes" in four South Asian countries, namely India, Nepal, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Quite strikingly, the two writers show that Dalits as subalternized people have still been left unheeded by official state apparatuses in those countries: "Caste and practice of untouchability have for long been known as "peculiar" cultural practices of the people of India, particularly Hindus. Given that Nepal too is a country with a Hindu majority" (99). However, for over a decade now, these subalternized people have started turning to new-media platforms as reliable and effective space for fighting against wretchedness of discrimination.

Internet itself is a paradoxical site of contestation. Indian critic, Shashi Kumar in his essay, "The exercise of hegemony in contemporary culture and media, and the need for a counter-hegemony initiative," initiates discussion on ramifications of late capitalism around Frederic Jameson's cultural logic of capitalism and argues that new media made possible by internet in recent times has become a pervasive site of contestation between two forces: persuasive hegemonic power of digital capitalism and the resisting power of liberation seeking sections of societies. Kumar regards this as a "paradox of internet" (39). On the one hand the oppressive forces use it as a means of maintaining surveillance and control over particular kinds of people due to the fear that former's regime can be subverted. On the other hand, Internet and various social networking sites are very useful means of escaping (mediaescapes, to borrow Appadurai's term) and resisting to such surveillance and control.

No Matter how paradoxical space the Internet is, marginalized and historically oppressed people's recourse to digital photography and new media platforms (no matter whether Western capitalism has invented and propagated them) clearly indicates unique indigenization (localization) for political purpose of their identity. And it is through such indigenization, they have been continuously subverting aspects of theoretical establishments such as the one by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak, in her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" argues, "The subaltern cannot speak" because historically perpetuating "representation has not withered away" (104). In this situation of inability to self-represent by the subalterns she states by referring to Marx "they must be represented" (29). However, the oppressed people's purposeful utilization of photography practices and new media platforms directly rehashes Spivak's claim and proves that subaltern can speak and do activism. Therefore, the problem is not on the part of subaltern that they cannot speak, but on the part of the treacherous agencies and state authorities' reluctance to hear their echoic voices.

Unlike Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Indian critic Gyanendra Pandey foresees potentiality of subaltern to claim their citizenship status in a community they live. In another important context, Pandey points to a recent shift in subaltern activism from struggle for "recognition as equals" to the struggle for "recognition as difference" (4740). In other words, Pandey envisions that subaltern identity is fundamentally predicated upon cultural and political notion of difference when he asserts that difference and subalternity are indivisible parts of each other: "Subalternity and difference rolled into one. Difference as subalternity. Subalternity as difference" (4740). If we look into various subaltern social networking organizations such as Nepal Dalit United Liberation Front, it becomes obvious that they are shifting their focus from equality toward their identity with difference. But unlike, what Pandey and Spivak have argued, their politics of identity cannot do away with politics of equality primarily because, still, they have been living with wretchedness of multiple discriminations.

It is for this idea of prioritizing equality over difference social network organization, Nepal Dalit United Liberation Front (NDULF) presents advocacy for the liberation of the oppressed in the name of so called *castism*. In addition, NDULF is also found to have been posting achievement photos of the Dalits:



Lokendra Pariyar of Muscle World Gym celebrates after winning the 12th Dharma Shree Nationwide Open Bodybuilding Championship in Kathmandu on Monday.

# Pariyar claims 12th Dharma Shree crown

Defending champ Sanu's exit sparks controversy

Rajendra Chapagain

Kathmandu, September 19

Lokendra Pariyar of the Muscle World Gym claimed the 12th Dharma Shree Nationwide Open Bodybuilding Championship amidst controversy here at the Nepal Academy today.

Lokendra was declared a winner in the above-75kg ahead of two times overall defending champion Sanu Gurung but the latter's supporters protested no sooner than the qualifier was announced.

The security personnel later had to do all they can to prevent Sanu's supporters from creating a mess at the Academy Hall after they hurled bottles and rods at the stage.

Sanu, who was aggressive with the decision, blamed biased judging. "All the judges and even the organisers conspired against me. It was a pre-planned decision," said Sanu, who had won the 10th and 11th editions.

In the overall section final, Lokendra edged Shyam Shrestha (65kg) of Nepal Byayam Mandir, Sachit Pradhan (60kg) of Kalimati Friendship Gym, Sanjeev Kumar Shrestha (70kg) of Nepal Byayam Mandir, Maheshwor Maharjan (75kg) of Universal Gym and Nareesh Diwakar (55kg) of Active Physical Fitness to win the biggest prize in national bodybuilding.

## The winners

- Lokendra Pariyar (Overall and above-75kg)
- Maheshwor Maharjan (75kg)
- Sanjeev Kumar Shrestha (70kg)
- Shyam Shrestha (65kg)
- Sachit Pradhan (60kg)
- Nareesh Diwakar (55kg)

Six gold medalists of the six weight categories had made it to the overall championship clash winning their respective final rounds. Lokendra received Rs 150,000, while the runners-up and third place finishers took home Rs 75,000 and Rs 50,000 respectively. Players securing top six places were awarded Rs 40,000, Rs 30,000 and Rs 25,000 respectively.

Lokendra had made it to the final round defeating two-time defending champion Sanu Gurung of Kantipur Fitness Centre, Bimal Jung Shahi of Royal Gym,

Ratna Sundar Ngakusi of Desparado Gym, Kamal Gurung of Royal Gym and Shree Krishna Shrestha of National Gym.

Likewise, Shyam, a bronze medal finisher in the World Men's Bodybuilding Championship and a 65kg gold medalist in the seventh South Asian Bodybuilding Championship, had made it to the overall final ahead

of Prakash Chulyadhyo of Robust Gym and Devendra Bajracharya of Kalimati Friendship Gym from the 65kg section.

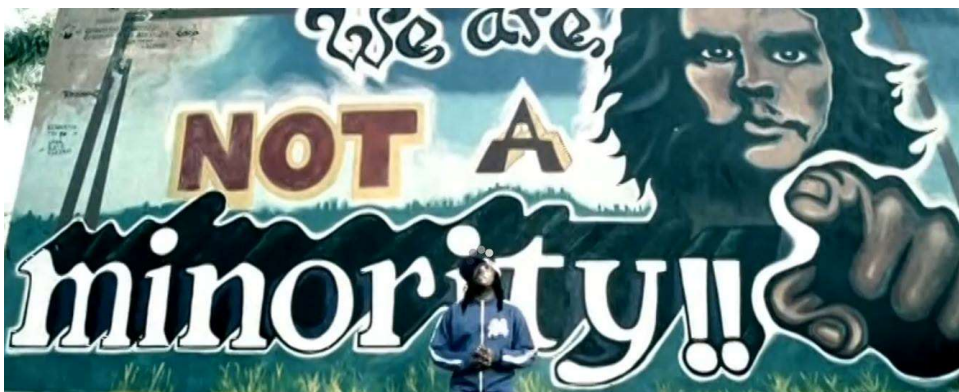
Sachit, who had won a gold medal in the seventh South Asian Bodybuilding Championship and was restricted to bronze in the eighth edition, edged Nepal Byayam Mandir duo of Gyan Narayan Maharjan and Ram Hari Khanal. Gyan Narayan had claimed a bronze medal in the seventh South Asian Bodybuilding Championship.

Sanjeev had overcome Arjun Barnawal of Nepal Byayam Mandir and Mukti Raj Rai of Platinum Physical Fitness, while Maheshwor was qualified ahead of Kiran Shrestha of The Perfect Gym and Biru Maharjan of Kalimati Friendship Gym. The 55kg winner Nareesh had come better off Sujan Tamang of Nepal Byayam Mandir and Bikash Yadav of Prime Fitness.

Six winners of the prejudging round in each weight categories had made it to the final round. The runners-up and third place finishers in each weight category received Rs 10,000 and Rs 5,000 each. A total of 36 bodybuilders in six weight categories were selected from the prejudging round on Sunday. In all, 95 players from 34 clubs across the country had participated in the pre-judging round.

Figure 1: Lokendra Pariyar, winner of the 12<sup>th</sup> Dharma Shree Bodybuilding Championship (photo courtesy: NDULF, Nepal) <https://www.facebook.com/Nepal-dalit-united-liberation-front-189194207809244/>

The linguistic message implied by the picture in figure 1 is to (re)claim their unique cultural identity with difference to challenge statist and hegemonizing historiography and initiate their own cultural history that has been erased by the former. Regular posting of Dalit related photos and associated captions by the group also exhibits Dalit photography practice in Nepal that connotes the notion of "photography of the oppressed" (my phrasing) for the recuperation of the historically oppressed and marginalized voices of Dalits as subalternized communities in Nepal. In this sense, any of the Dalit photography practices online is a synecdoche of larger South Asian Dalit conditions and discourses offline, which get less media and political attentions. However, the easy accessibility of new media and affordance that the digital technology has provided to the marginalized communities, particularly the Dalits in Nepal and elsewhere in South Asia, has proven to be an uplifting means of expression for and about themselves. Not having social media platforms or lack of Internet accessibility would otherwise keep Dalits in the same age-old discrimination and oppression. The artistic photo below posted by NDULF speaks volumes about the subalterns' activism online.



Picture 2: Che Guevara (Photo Courtesy: NDULF posted on April 1, 2014)

The image in picture 2 looks like Argentine revolutionary Marxist Che Guevara. The image's radical visual signifiers that include bold-wide-open eyes, and straight piercing index-finger together with the expression "We are Not A minority" projects toward oppressive authority as its audience. By doing so, the image intends to express the Dalits' explicit politics of resistance to hegemonizing authority in Nepal and beyond.



Picture 2: 14th President of India (Facebook Photo Courtesy: Dalit Youth Alliance) <https://www.facebook.com/DalitYouthAlliance/>

NDULF and Dalit Youth Alliance Facebook groups have been posting achievement photographs of the Dalits as a rhetorical strategy for moral encouragement as well as the activism for de-mythologizing Dalit discourse as people with cultural, religious and heredity deficit (more lethal: as "untouchable humans" across Nepal, India, and Bangladesh). Picture 2 presents Fourteenth President of India, who represents a Dalit community from Uttarpradesh India. The Third picture represents energy and success potentials of Dalit people.

Most of the photos posted Facebook groups and Twitter posts reflect activism against discrimination and revival of their public awareness. However, the thing that is most surprising about real-life discrimination on Dalits is that the social platform users-- organizations-- have rarely posted photos to depict shamefully inhuman discrimination on Dalit communities themselves. Networks such as Dalit Freedom Network, Nepal Dalit Party, Feminist Dalit Organization-Dang, are other Dalit (religiously oppressed) organized groups online and offline who are actively engaged in recuperating their historically suppressed voices by openly discussing about problems of discriminations, and publicly sharing photographs on new media platforms.

Accessibility to internet made possible by big corporate organizations at cheaper prices allows affordances for common people to get informed and participate digitally as active agents, and as a consequence, enhances communication for social and individual purpose(s). Juxtaposition of picture 2 and picture 3 reveal political leadership ability and mental-physical potentials inherent within subaltern people when given opportunity to perform.

### Conclusion

Though photography and new-media technology are Western invention, they have been appropriated and indigenized in non-Western locations like South Asian countries. Interestingly, the uses and utilizations of the photography practices and new media by the historically oppressed groups of people in those locations have functioned as a political and rhetorical strategy of doing activism for the reclamation of their identity as ownership over their self-representation and public spaces. Present explosion of mediascapes of cultural flows of the oppressed, marginalized and ethnic community members through photography and social media has powerfully initiated new discourses on how they have been attempting to create their own modernities based on their unique cultural heritage and practices as opposed to homogenizing statist version of modernity in the non-western social spaces. In this sense, 'digital literacy' and 'digital democracy' are two key factors that have led to breaking and re-drawing the boundaries set by modernity. Similarly, due to the uses of critical digital photographic practices and new media participation, oppressed and marginalized people such as Dalits and other subaltern subjects have proved that they can meaningfully recuperate their ability to self-represent. Moreover, from theoretical perspective, these new media based agentive practices of Dalits in South Asia also counter the established view of subaltern critics such as Spivak who maintains that "subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak 28). Though there are area(s) left open for substantiating and critically engaging with the notion of photography and new media for oppressed as rehashing current cultural and political order in South Asia as a location,

there are established and acknowledged assumptions within scholarship that photography (digital) and social media platforms due to Internet accessibility, oppressed populations have (re)-gained possession over their own consciousness and public spaces. Yet, there is a long way to go.

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