

## 4 Temple Building in Secularising Nepal: Materializing Religion and Ethnicity in a State of Transformation

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### Introduction

*I was tired of my wife going away for several days each year to celebrate the Deolang Jatra (Festival of Deolang – a temple located two days walk away). I thought, “Why can’t we have our own temple here?” Then I wouldn’t suffer from my wife’s absence for so many days. We have our own deities, we know where they live in the earth around us, but we needed a temple to become a center for worship. So I began talking with other families in our area. They all said, “Let’s build the temple to look after the deity Seti Devi since it looks after us.” So we began raising funds. But it was very slow – 100 rupees here, a few sacks of rice there. It was only when the government began offering each Village Development Committee a new budget under the janajati [indigenous nationalities] heading after the Interim Constitution that we could fulfill our aspirations. Now the temple is built. We still need more money for some further work. But now everyone can see how powerful our deity is. And my wife does not leave to go to Deolang Jatra anymore!* Former

Chair of the Rikhipole Seti Devi temple committee, Suspa-Kshamawati VDC, Dolakha, Nepal (Interview with author, May 31, 2014)

How does secularism materialize? In other words, what are the political economic dimensions of secularization, and how do they intersect with ongoing expressions of religiosity during processes of state transformation?

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In a place where “religion” has long been understood to operate in synthetic symbiosis with other elements of “culture” and “ethnicity” to comprise a key vector of identity for both historically dominant and marginalized groups, how does a constitutional commitment to political secularism materialize through the idiom of local development in places far away from the state center? What do these material experiences of secularization as a societal process tell us about the meanings of categories like “religion” and “ethnicity” for citizens living through a moment of great political change? How does secularization in such a context lead to “the objectification of belief”? (Iqtidar and Sarkar 2013: 38).

This chapter addresses these questions through an ethnographic exploration of temple-building practices among the Thangmi (also known as Thami) community of Dolakha district in central-eastern Nepal since 2000. My ethnography focuses on the Village Development Committee (VDC) of Suspa-Kshamawati, Dolakha district, where at least six new temple-building projects (at varying levels of completion) have been initiated over the last fifteen years (see the map in Figure 4.1).

Village Development Committees were the key subdistrict administrative units in Nepal’s governance structure until 2017.<sup>2</sup> Called *Gau Vikas Samiti* in Nepali, they constituted an important unit of territorial belonging for rural Nepali citizens and the primary locus for funding and decision making about community development projects like the temples I describe here (CCD 2009: 5–6; see Shneiderman 2015b for more on how VDCs shape social relations).

Taken together, the spiritual aspirations, aesthetic imaginaries, and administrative histories behind these temple-building projects tell us much about how religiosity, political agency, state policy, and concepts of development come to articulate with each other at the local level. These elements converge in the crucible of materiality facilitated by state resources made newly available as part of Nepal’s transformation from a unitary Hindu monarchy to a secular federal democratic republic, as asserted in the Interim Constitution of 2007. Investigating Nepal’s recent experience contributes to broader debates over the relationships between

<sup>2</sup> As part of the country’s process of federal restructuring, the 2017 Local Level Restructuring Commission merged VDCs to create a smaller number of geographically larger administrative units, called *nagarpalika* (municipalities) or *gaupalika* (rural municipalities). These were implemented through the 2017 local elections, held in three phases. Suspa-Kshamawati is now Ward Number 1 of Bhimeshwor *nagarpalika*. This chapter is based on fieldwork completed before the restructuring took effect; I therefore use the terms *Village Development Committee* and *VDC* throughout to refer to the administrative units current at the time of research.

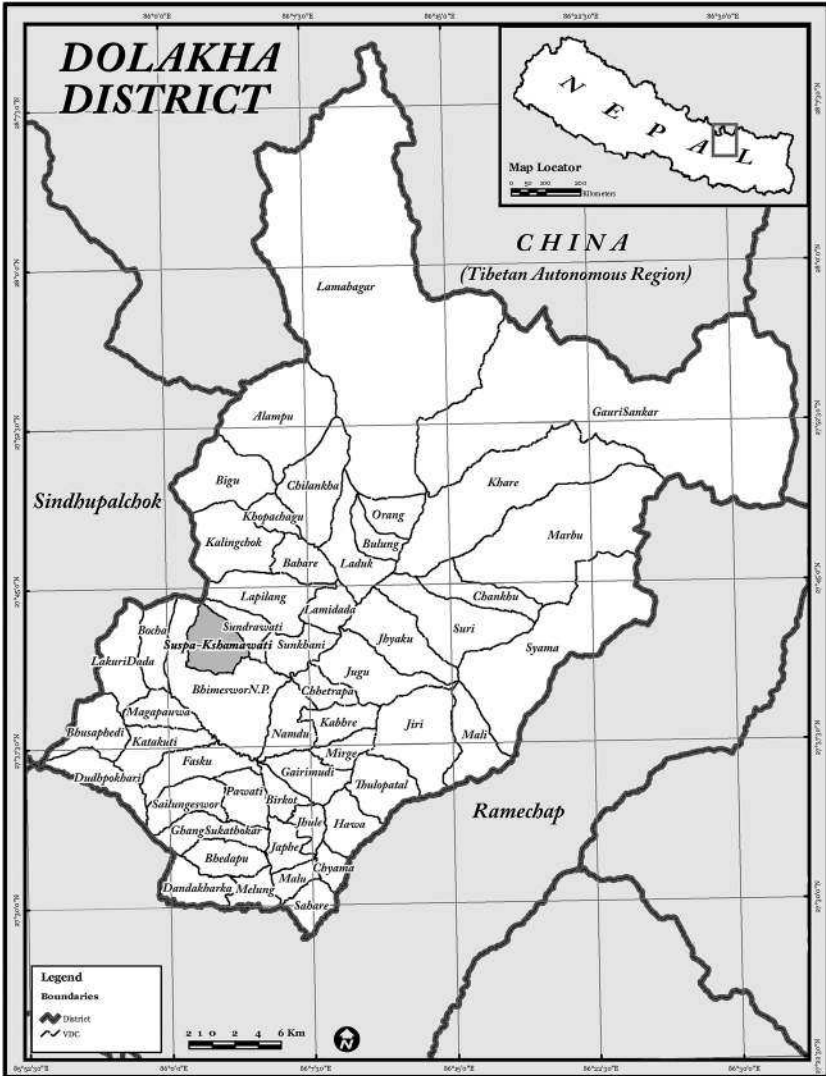


Figure 4.1 Map showing Suspa-Kshamawati VDC, Dolakha, Nepal. These were the VDC boundary lines until the May 2017 local elections. Map adapted from public domain *Map Displaying Village Development Committees in Dolakha District, Nepal, United Nations*.

secularism and secularization in South Asia (cf. Iqtidar and Sarkar 2013), which material from Nepal may illuminate from new perspectives.

I make several related arguments in this chapter, each of which develops existing strands of scholarship. First, there remains a significant gap in our understanding of the meanings and material manifestations of secularization in localized contexts within Nepal. Early scholarly examinations of the concept in Nepal have primarily focused on how political secularism has been understood in judicial and constitutional terms at the national level (Letizia 2011, 2013; Malagodi 2011), and/or in Kathmandu-centric contexts of religious practice and activism (Hausner 2007; Leve 2007; Michaels 2011; Snellinger 2012).<sup>3</sup> I argue that while the technical definition of “secular” – *dharma nirapeksa* in Nepali – may not always be well understood by common citizens in rural areas, many are highly aware of this element of state transformation (International Idea 2013), perceiving it primarily through material changes in the state’s management of resources earmarked for religion and culture, and adapting their own practices accordingly.

Second, while there has been much discussion about the role of ethnicity in Nepal’s process of “postconflict” state restructuring since 2006 (Adhikari and Gellner 2016; Mishra and Gurung 2012; Shneiderman and Tillin 2015) and also significant public debate about the role and nature of secularism,<sup>4</sup> there is still much to be understood regarding the *relationship between* these two debates and their impact at the level of everyday action. In other words, how have these two ongoing national conversations affected how Nepali citizens conceptualize the relationship between “ethnicity” and “religion”?

My examination of temple building in rural Dolakha demonstrates that there have been significant shifts in the way that people understand the difference between – and, therefore, the relationships among – these two elements of identity. This shift results in large part from the way that the

<sup>3</sup> *Religion, Secularism, and Ethnicity in Contemporary Nepal* (Gellner, Hausner, and Letizia 2016) was released just as the present book was going to press. I could not fully incorporate the important new insights that Gellner, Hausner, Letizia, and their contributors offer; readers seeking further treatment of secularism and secularization in Nepal should consult their volume.

<sup>4</sup> Gellner and Letizia (2016: 12) cite Jha’s (2008) statement that, “Nepal became secular without adequate public discussion and debate on what it meant”. However, Bhargava (2016: 435–436) nuances this assessment with the trenchant observation that “it is not correct to conclude from this that it was embraced without any understanding. Nepalese political agents understood that to get on the path of a freer, more egalitarian, and more democratic society, they had to delink the state from Brahmanical Hinduism; the state simply had to be minimally secular. The Nepalese people have acted to bring it about and at least so far have managed to sustain it.” The ethnography presented in this chapter suggests further that it was not only central level political agents who acted upon this understanding, but also common citizens across the country who have a stake in state transformation.

state has refigured its pragmatic usage of these terms for development resource allocation since declaring itself a secular federal democratic republic. The increasing consciousness of the official boundaries between such categories – even if their legitimacy is disputed in practice – tells us much about the work of secularism as an “engaged universal” (Tsing 2005). In a place where religiosity has long been understood to be the product not of a field of recognizably distinct “religions,” but rather of a fundamentally “syncretic” (Gellner 2005; Holmberg 1989; Ortner 1995) – or, as I prefer to call it, “synthetic” (Shneiderman 2015a) – set of boundary-blurring practices, the introduction of secularism has indeed worked to increase access to state development resources in a more inclusive manner across religious and ethnic categories. At the same time, it has increased awareness of such categories through processes of reification and objectification. Indeed, if we reconceptualize secularism “not as a one-time separation of religion and state, but as the management of religious thought and practice by the state,” we can begin to see how, in Nepal, “this management of religious thought and practice creates new opportunities for religious groups as well as profound changes in the fabric of religiosity” (Iqtidar 2012: 54).

This insight provides the necessary context for my third argument, which attempts to explain why a community that identifies as a historically marginalized, “non-Hindu” *adivasi janajati* (indigenous nationality) group, has built so many new temples in seemingly Hindu aesthetic and architectural forms at precisely the moment of secularization (Figure 4.2). I suggest that while the state’s new commitment to political secularism has, in fact, extended access to development resources earmarked for religious and cultural purposes to a much broader range of Nepal’s citizens than was previously conceivable, many members of historically marginalized communities in rural Nepal such as the Thangmi of Dolakha still conceptualize the visible signs of progress in the aesthetic terms of Hindu modernity promoted by the Nepali state since the high modernist era of *panchayat* rule from the 1960s–1990s (Pigg 1996).

This leads to the fourth and final argument about the importance of paying close attention to the materiality of religious practice in times of social and political transformation. Recent debates in South Asian studies have focused on the shortcomings of the influential Subaltern Studies collective. Much of the discussion has to do with how scholars like Ranajit Guha (1999) addressed – or not – the relationship between political economy and cultural practice in understanding the emergence of political consciousness at certain historical conjunctures. A sort of neoorthodox Marxian reading – exemplified by Vivek Chibber (2013) – argues that the subalternists invested too much in the cultural turn and



Figure 4.2 Suspa Bhumethan on Bhume Jatra, Suspa-Kshamawati, Dolakha, Nepal. May 2008.

Photo by author.

not enough in understanding the basics of materiality and how it compels people to act. In such representations, materiality is understood in a reductive manner that focuses on the material dimensions and sensations of “well-being” or its absence (Chibber 2013). But another group of scholars (Chandra 2016; Shah 2014) argues that the problem with the subalternists was that they did not accord enough attention to the truly substantive effects of religious experience on political consciousness.

Here I suggest that a means of bridging these two approaches might be found in a focus on the materiality of religious practice in times of political transformation. “Material culture” as a concept at once recognizes the very pragmatic nature of the world around us and connects it to the representational practices that we understand to make up the domain of culture. Through my analysis of the newly emergent temple buildings in rural Dolakha, I develop an approach that at once recognizes the political economic dimensions of religious positionality in a secularizing, once-Hindu state *and* accounts for the soteriological, affective experiences of spiritual life that are at once embedded in and generative of such



political economies. As such, my account contributes to Mohita Bhatia's call to deepen the study of secularization by "locat[ing] conceptual propositions within the phenomenological realm of everyday reality" (2013: 106).

Through all of these arguments, which emerge primarily out of empirical detail rather than comparative theoretical considerations, I contribute to the "anthropology of secularism" (Asad 2003; Cannell 2010). Rather than attempting to evaluate the success or failure of secularism as a normative category, however, the ethnography presented here works to "explore the plurality of the secular" (Bubandt and van Beek 2012: 9) as it has been experienced on the ground during Nepal's ongoing state of transformation.

### Historical and Political Context

Nepal has experienced several phases of political upheaval since its unification in 1769 by the Shah kings, who ruled it as a self-proclaimed Hindu state, or *asal Hindustan* ("pure Hindu land," in implicit contradiction to India under colonial rule). After a brief experiment with democracy in the 1950s, from 1960 to 1990, the country was governed as a "partyless *panchayat* democracy" under kings Mahendra and Birendra. After the 1990 People's Movement, then King Birendra agreed to become a constitutional monarch, and Nepal "returned" to democracy. While secularism was already a major demand of the 1990 People's Movement, the 1990 constitution still defined the country as a Hindu kingdom. 1996 saw the launch of the Maoist People's War. The call for a secular state was one of the initial forty demands submitted by the insurgents to the state in 1996.

After ten years of conflict, the 2006 Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) set the country on the path towards its declaration as a secular federal democratic republic, a new state form that was ultimately enshrined in the 2007 Interim Constitution. In 2008, elections were held for the country's first ever Constituent Assembly (CA). With the Maoists winning a plurality of seats, this 601-member body sat for four years before being dissolved in May 2012 without ever achieving its primary objective of promulgating a new constitution for the now ostensibly secular federal democratic state (Adhikari and Gellner 2016).

The election of a second CA in 2013 signaled a shift to the right with the Nepali Congress this time winning a plurality of seats, while the Maoists faced significant losses. After protracted debates that focused on the nature and location of federal boundaries, the second CA finally promulgated a new constitution in September 2015. Coming in the wake

of the massive April–May 2015 earthquakes, the new constitution was seen as a rush job fueled by political expediency, which resulted in a less progressive document than many hoped. Its promulgation yielded months of protest and a blockade along the long border with India. Some of the key contested provisions relate to federal boundaries, citizenship provisions that discriminate by gender, and the revised definition of secularism. Although it reaffirms Nepal’s commitment to secularism, the 2015 constitution adds an additional clause, stating in Article 4 that in the Nepali context, secularism is to be defined as, “*sanatan-dekhchialiaeko dharma sanskriti ko samraksan*”, which is unofficially translated as “the protection of religion and culture being practiced since ancient times” (as cited in Gellner and Letizia 2016: 5–6). This is read by some as being a not-so-covert reference to Hindu traditions, whose exponents often refer to their practices as *sanatan dharma*.

The ethnographic work on which the present chapter is based was conducted between 2012 and 2014, before these most recent developments. It therefore serves as a period piece, documenting how secularization was understood at the level of lived, day-to-day reality in a rural context during the protracted period of political transition that Nepal experienced beginning in 2006. I argue that one of the silver linings in this extended period of political transformation was that people across the country – not only politicians or elite members of “civil society” – had the opportunity to think about what kind of state they desired to live in. Despite some representations of a fatigued and disaffected populace, I hope to show here that engagement with core constitutional issues like secularism and the federal design of the country was widespread at the grassroots level during the nine-year period between the end of the conflict in 2006 and the constitutional promulgation in 2015. However, in this contribution, I am unable to assess how the seminal events of 2015 – the earthquakes and the political upheaval following the promulgation – further shaped the experiences of secularization that I describe here.

### Articulating Religion and Ethnicity

Nepal is an extraordinarily diverse country, with over one hundred languages and over fifty recognized *adivasi janajati* (indigenous nationality) groups; several regional minorities, notably the *madhesi* (plains) communities of the Tarai; and various *dalit* (formerly “untouchable”) groups. Nepal’s 1854 *Muluki Ain*, or legal code, rationalized the unequal status of individual ethnic communities through the Hindu ideology of caste (cf. Höfer [1979] 2004), recognizing inequality as the legal “basis of



the state” (Onta 2006: 305). Since the 1990 return to democracy, these groups have asserted increasing political agency through organizations like the Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN) and an influential series of *madhesi* political parties.<sup>5</sup> Demands from these groups for a more inclusive state shaped the process of state restructuring, and, indeed, agreements reached between the interim government and both NEFIN and *madhesi* leaders in the wake of the 2006 CPA played an important part in the declaration of the country as a secular federal republic in the 2007 Interim Constitution.

One of the key debates during the period of transformation between 2006 and 2015 focused on how new federal boundaries would be drawn and whether they would acknowledge ethnicity as a basis for political constituencies defined in territorial terms. This debate to a significant extent eclipsed discussion about secularism, which was initially understood as a *fait accompli* after the 2007 Interim Constitution. After all, unlike redrawing territorial boundaries to achieve the objective of a federal state, the pragmatic mechanisms through which secularism was to be implemented were never so clear, and therefore secularism was less publically debated than federalism. In other words, precisely because the relationship between secularism as a political commitment and secularization as a societal process were unclear in Nepal, the shift to secularism did not initially provoke fears commensurate with those that emerged in response to the much more concrete proposals for identity-based territorial restructuring.

I suggest that during the transitional period, the agenda of secularism in Nepal, therefore, came to serve as a proxy for the agenda of ethnic self-determination, leading to a complicated set of articulations between religious and ethnic identity for both ethnic activists and common citizens as they have struggled to understand what secularism actually means and what its relationship with secularization might look like. This process of articulation generated some unexpected expressions of identity – such as the new temple buildings that I will discuss later in this chapter – which demonstrate a complicated and rapidly changing set of relationships between religious and ethnic subjectivity.

Figures on religion from the 2011 census show a country that is 81.3 percent Hindu, 9 percent Buddhist, 4.4 percent Muslim, 3 percent Kirant (an indigenous religion), 1.4 percent Christian, and 0.9 percent

<sup>5</sup> On the historical dimensions of caste and ethnicity vis-à-vis the Nepali state, see Gellner, Pfaff-Czarnecka, and Whelpton 1997, and Levine 1987; on the contemporary dynamics of *janajati* organizations, see Hangen 2010, Onta 2006, and Shneiderman 2013; and on *madhesi* movements, see Jha 2014, Mathema 2011, and Sijapati 2013.

other. But figures on ethnic and caste identity show approximately 44 percent high-caste Hindu (Brahmin and Chetri), 37 percent *janajati*, 13 percent *dalit* (who identify as Hindu, but due to their low-caste status might be seeking to transform terms of that identity), and 4.3 percent religious minorities. Adding the figures for high caste Hindu and *dalit* together, we reach 57 percent Hindu—which means that in order to reach the 81.3 percent Hindu figure enumerated in the religious identity section of the census, a significant portion of the 37 percent *janajati* or other “minority” respondents must have *also* identified themselves as Hindu. Nonetheless, at the political level, the *janajati* movement has explicitly positioned itself in opposition to a Hindu identity. This provokes the question: Whose demands have driven the secularist agenda in Nepal, if such a significant proportion of the population actually identify themselves as Hindu at the level of practice, even those who would identify as non-Hindu in ethnic terms? The implications of this question will become clear in the ethnographic discussion below.

Lauren Leve suggests that, indeed, in post-1990 Nepal, the idea of “secularism became a rallying call for multicultural democracy” (2007: 84) in a manner that brought together in new ways a small group of well-positioned Buddhist activists and a much larger group of grassroots based ethnic activists. The latter group was most recognizably represented in the public sphere through NEFIN, which brought together more than fifty indigenous groups under an umbrella organization. One of NEFIN’s criteria for definition as an “indigenous nationality” group is that it is “not included in Hindu caste system.”<sup>6</sup> There is some sleight of hand here because, at least from the state’s perspective, the 1854 *Muluki Ain* legal code brought these groups within the caste system as codified by the Shah kings in their project of state making (Höfer [1979] 2004). Further, it is clear from the census figures that at the level of personal practice, a significant number of those who identify themselves ethnically as *janajati* today also identify themselves as practicing Hindus. This is hardly news to most Nepalis, or to scholars of Nepal, who have long argued that exclusive definitions of religion as a singular identity are not appropriate in the Nepali context (Gellner 2005) and that, historically, non-Hindu groups have adopted Hindu practices over time as they sought inclusion in the explicitly Hindu Nepali nation-state. However, it prompts a more careful investigation of how the discourses of secularism and practices of secularization have been experienced by people on the ground for whom such multivalent religious and ethnic identities are

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.indigenousvoice.com/en/indigenous-peoples/national.html>, Accessed April 22, 2018.

integral parts of day-to-day subjectivity and how the broader political transformation in which concepts of secularism are embedded is shaping contemporary religiosity itself.

Before turning to my ethnographic material from the central-eastern district of Dolakha, I should clarify here that the relationship between secularist and indigenous rights agendas in Nepal sets it apart from other South Asian contexts. Here, the most vocal advocates of secularism are not dominant “liberal elites” (cf. Kaviraj 2013) who promote the concept as part of a broader liberal agenda, as in India and Pakistan, but rather ethnic activists for whom secularism is not primarily a normative ideal but a tactical means of gaining a broader suite of minority rights. Arguments about the advent of secularism being undemocratic in quantitative terms might have some relevance here (cf. Kaviraj 2013; Chapter 2 of this volume, following Madan 1998); recall the discussion cited above over whether there was adequate “public debate” over the meanings of secularism before its political introduction. However, we also must acknowledge that in Nepal, the achievement of secularism is part of a broader agenda to refashion the polity in a newly inclusive manner by making it, for the first time in history, a “multiple agent-dependent state” (Bhargava 2013: 88) – by diversifying stakeholders beyond the historically dominant caste Hindu hill elite. For this reason, critiques of secularism have a different political valence in Nepal than they do elsewhere in South Asia.

To critique secularism is not to critique a so-called liberal elite – many of whom in private may not support the notion of a secular state per se – but rather to undercut minority rights movements from below. This is not to say that critique is impossible but rather that it must be fashioned with a careful awareness of its potential real-world effects in a political context where these questions remain raw and open. To put a point on it, in the run-up to the 2015 constitutional promulgation, a new social movement crystallized around Hindu nationalist elements that sought a return to defining Nepal as a Hindu state, with the most publicly recognizable faction led by former Home Minister Kamal Thapa in his new role as leader of the royalist Rastriya Prajantantra Party-Nepal (RPP-N) (Wagner 2018). This mobilization seems partly responsible for the changed definition of secularism in the new constitution and suggests that despite constitutional affirmation, the category itself is still subject to political negotiation in the domains of both popular mobilization and legal opinion.

### **The Thangmi Ethnographic Context**

The Thangmi (as they call themselves), or Thami (as they are referred to by the state), are a group of approximately forty thousand split between

several districts of Nepal – especially Dolakha and Sindhupalchok – and the Indian states of West Bengal (in Darjeeling district) and Sikkim.<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I focus only upon Thangmi temple building within Nepal, indeed within the single VDC of Suspa-Kshamawati in Dolakha district, but broader dynamics of ethnicity and religiosity certainly shape the highly localized scenario that I describe here. The Thangmi speak a distinctive Tibeto-Burman language (Turin 2012) and practice what they call *Thangmi dharma*, or Thangmi religion, which blends elements of Hindu and Buddhist religiosity into a synthetic form officiated by Thangmi *gurus*, or shamans, in a ritual register of the Thangmi language.

For reasons that I have described elsewhere (Shneiderman 2015a: chapter 1), the Thangmi have remained historically understudied. They also have not been well represented within Nepali discourses of ethnicity and indigeneity until relatively recently. They were recognized as a *janajati* group by the 2002 Nepal Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities act, and their representative organization, the Nepal Thami Samaj, has been a member of NEFIN since then. However, as a relatively small *janajati* group in terms of population, Thangmi have often remained critical of *janajati* movement leadership, particularly around the cultural politics of identity. The Thangmi define themselves as ethnically distinctive and speak often about their history of exploitation at the hands of caste Hindus who migrated to their areas of settlement in Dolakha and Sindhupalchok in the mid-1800s, appropriating land previously held as Thangmi *kipat*, or legally recognized ancestral territory (see Forbes 1999; Limbu n.d.; Shneiderman 2015a: chapters 4 and 6). However, many Thangmi openly describe elements of their religious practice as “Hindu” – although such references are couched within the broader framework of *Thangmi dharma* as a synthetic religious system that incorporates motifs from a range of traditions including both Hinduism and Buddhism (Shneiderman 2015a: chapter 3). For this reason, over the years of my research, I have often observed the Thangmi coming into ideological conflict with *janajati* activists from other groups who have advocated the boycott of the Hindu state festival of *Dasain* (Hangen 2005), for example, or the prohibition of other “Hindu” practices in order to conform to the activist definition of *janajati* as being “non-Hindu”.

To sum up, when defining themselves in ethnic terms, the Thangmi clearly opt for membership in the *janajati* category. They assert difference

<sup>7</sup> For details of the Thangmi, see Shneiderman 2013, 2014, 2015a; and Gurung and Thami 2014.

from caste Hindus, as well as *janajati* groups who practice Buddhism in a number of explicit and implicit ways (Shneiderman 2015a: chapter 3). However, when defining themselves in religious terms, Thangmi will combine the concept of *Thangmi dharma* with those of *Hindu dharma* and *Buddha dharma* to describe what they actually do in practice. Many Thangmi deities share names with Hindu and/or Buddhist counterparts, and the material objects of Thangmi religiosity also draw upon both symbolic fields; for instance, both “Hindu” *trisul*, or tridents, and “Buddhist” *phurpa*, or ritual daggers, play important roles in Thangmi ritual.<sup>8</sup>

### Temple Building Projects and their Discontents

In the early 2000s, I first observed how a Thangmi temple-building project became a site of contention. Thangmi worship sites were historically animistic ones: rocks embedded in the ground without any enclosure to set them apart from the rest of the natural world. But an activist teacher, decided in the late 1990s that it was essential to enclose Bhumethan, the most important Thangmi shrine in the village of Suspa. An active member of the Nepal Thami Samaj (NTS), the primary ethnic association representing the community at the national level, the teacher launched a local fundraising campaign to build a temple around the Bhumethan rock, and secured additional funding from a Japanese NGO. The annual festival of Bhume Jatra (honouring the territorial deity Bhume) held in 2000 marked the building’s inauguration, the first time the deity was surrounded by stone walls (see Figure 4.2). With wooden rafters, a yellow aluminum roof topped with a steeple, and an elaborately carved wooden door, the new structure alluded to both Hindu and Buddhist Himalayan temple architecture. Despite the temple’s hefty price tag of over 500,000 rupees (more than USD \$7,000 at the time) and 742 days of villager manpower, Bhume apparently remained unimpressed, as the deity expressed its frustration through the voices of several shamans in trance.

Although some villagers agreed with the teacher’s logic that spending money and time on such a structure showed their devotion to the deity and would also help make Thangmi practices more recognizable to outsiders, many felt that to enclose Bhume was to challenge the very source of the deity’s power. After all, Thangmi came to make offerings to the rock itself, embedded in the earth, not icons or statues installed in a

<sup>8</sup> I cannot describe Thangmi ritual practice in further detail here; interested readers are directed to Shneiderman 2014 and 2015a.

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temple. As my hostess, an uneducated woman in her forties in the hamlet of Balasode, explained in 2000:

For us Thangmi, Bhume is part of the earth. We are different from Hindus and Buddhists because we do not need temples to know that Bhume is with us. Now the temple that they have built makes our Bhume small and makes it seem like any other Hindu deity. The walls separate us from Bhume. I do not want to go inside there now. That temple belongs to Gopal [the teacher who had initiated its construction], not to Bhume or common Thangmi people like us (as cited in Shneiderman 2015a: chapter 6).

My hostess continued to describe how the temple building appeared to be a concession to a form of state-promoted Hindu modernity with which many Thangmi themselves felt uncomfortable. Since Thangmi religiosity itself was grounded in the worship of animistic deities who manifested in rocks or other natural features, historically, temple buildings had not been deemed necessary. In fact, as my hostess described, enclosures were felt to separate human from divine rather than bring them together. Such temple buildings were seen to be a feature of orthodox Hindu practice, which to my hostess and others in her school of thought symbolized the encroachment of caste Hindu values on Thangmi territory. In her view, building a temple to Bhume worked not to recognize the deity in Thangmi terms, but rather to make it over in the image of the dominant Hindu state in a manner that would transform the nature of Thangmi practice itself in an undesirable manner.

Roll on to summer 2012, when I first set out to understand what the post-2006 political transformations had wrought. As I asked open-ended questions about “what has changed in your life,” and listened to responses that sometimes suggested no change at all but at other times articulately described transformation with terms like “secularism” (*dharma nirapekshata*) – literally meaning “religious non-alignment” – and “federalism” (*sanghiyata*), I also began to realize that the visual landscape was changing. There were several new temple buildings, and I began to seek an explanation for this in interviews. In the single VDC of Suspa-Kshamawati, there were a total of four new temple constructions and two more in process.

I was taken aback by this proliferation of temple building. Based on my experiences from the early to mid-2000s, when such buildings were taken by many Thangmi as a capitulation to the idiom of state-promoted Hindu modernity – and strongly resisted, as evidenced by the quotation from my hostess cited previously – I had imagined that the transformation to a secular state would have taken Thangmi projects of material self-representation in a different direction. I was aware of several such



ongoing projects, like the initiative to standardize and codify Thangmi shamanic ritual chants to create a text out of previously oral practice. But, contrary to my expectations, such initiatives that focused on ritual practice were complemented by a rapid acceleration in temple building, mostly along the same aesthetic lines as the earlier project to enclose Bhume, which had resulted in such vigorous debate within the community.

As I inquired further about this apparent paradox, an intriguing story began to emerge. People talked about how resources of the state were newly available to them for their own cultural projects. Such resources came largely in the form of grants available at the district level for “development,” which could also be interpreted in terms of cultural and religious development. Several of the new temples had been funded through such grants, and others in conjunction with donor-led development projects, such as the Janajati Social and Economic Empowerment Project (JANSEEP) funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) (Shneiderman 2013).<sup>9</sup> Many of the local organizers involved with these temple-building projects spoke about how only after the state had become secular could they, as Thangmi, hope to apply for state funds earmarked for cultural and religious development purposes. Previously, they explained, such funds would have gone automatically to orthodox temples run by high-caste Hindus.

The problem, several Thangmi interviewees told me, was that for their projects to even be recognizable as cultural or religious ones, certain categorical boxes had to be ticked. Building a temple where there was none previously was an aesthetically obvious project of cultural “development” in the modernist terms of progress understood by the still demographically largely “Hindu state,” even though it had officially espoused political secularism. Funds for the codification of oral tradition, as well as funds to support shamanic training, were also sought in the immediate post-2006 years, but such applications were not as easily granted.

Somewhat counterintuitively, the declaration of official state secularism began to alleviate the sense that Thangmi difference needed to be protected in the manner that my hostess in the area had described in her response to the first Bhume enclosure in 2000. With the state now

<sup>9</sup> The Arkapole Bhume temple funded by JANSEEP is one of the six new structures I refer to in this article; however, I cannot provide ethnographic details of this project here. Interested readers are recommended to read the present article in conjunction with Shneiderman 2013 for a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between donor- and state-funded projects.

officially recognizing the possibility of religious difference as legitimate within the national imaginary, people became less concerned about marking difference at the level of local practice. Moreover, as several Thangmi informants put it, in an environment where ethnicity was becoming an increasingly polarizing political category, they became concerned with promoting “tolerance” between themselves and their caste Hindu neighbors. Put literally in Nepali, they were concerned with ensuring their ongoing ability to live together amicably – *milera basne* – through focusing on shared elements of religiosity in an ethnically mixed and increasingly politically charged environment. Temple-building projects provided a perfect opportunity to do just this. As the ensuing ethnographic vignettes will show, the declaration of political secularism had preceded secularization as a societal process, but as the latter ensued, it at once served to objectify various categories of belief and to identify long-standing tropes of shared religiosity as a grassroots resource to counteract trends of ethnic polarization. The ability to live together amicably – perhaps what is elsewhere coded as “tolerance” or “peaceful coexistence” (see Chapter 1 of this volume) – itself became objectified as a shared value.

### Rikhipole Seti Devi Mandir

Situated on a rocky outcropping known as Rikhipole, the white walls and bright yellow aluminum roof of the Rikhipole Seti Devi temple (hereafter referred to as “Seti Devi”) overlook the Thangmi hamlet of Pashelung. Although the first official meeting of the temple-building and management committee was held in 2005 and construction was only completed in 2010, the temple was first envisioned by a group of Thangmi men in winter 2000 over a drink one night when their wives were all away at the Deolang Jatra (as described in the epigraph to this chapter). At that time, construction on the Suspa Bhumethan had just been completed, inspiring this group of Thangmi to imagine their own local temple building. The Suspa Bhumethan is about a one-and-a-half-hour, steep walk uphill from Pashelung on a narrow rocky path that weaves between terraced fields and hamlets of mud-walled houses roofed with a mix of thatch, slate, and aluminum. Although the Thangmi from Pashelung always went there for the annual Bhume Jatra festival in the spring – just as they went to Deolang Jatra in the winter – they were beginning to wonder why they needed to go so far.

The former chair of the Seti Devi committee explained the rationale behind their thinking: “In terms of recognition, once there is a temple in the middle of a village, it [the place] will be known. ‘There is a temple

there,' people will say, 'it is possible to work there, it is possible to bring development there, it is not a sinful or polluted place'" (Interview with author, June 4, 2014). These statements reveal a similar logic to that which drove the teacher's initiative to build the Suspa Bhumethan. Constructing a temple was explicitly imagined as a means of bringing "recognition" to this out-of-the-way place and its Thangmi residents. It was also seen as the necessary prerequisite for attracting outsiders – such as the predominantly caste-Hindu representatives of the state, as well as national and international NGOs – and the various forms of development they might bring.

The notion that the temple would designate the village as virtuous and unpolluted in the eyes of such outsiders demonstrates a strong awareness among the Seti Devi committee members in the early 2000s that, as Thangmi, the onus lay on them to prove their worthiness as recipients of state development by showing that they were willing to accept the terms of state-promoted Hindu modernity. In response to my question about how the temple committee had determined what the structure would actually look like – for instance, why they had chosen the pagoda style and painted it yellow, another member of the committee said, "It's suitable. It suits us, it suits the deity, and it also suits the government." (Interview with author, June 2, 2014).

The chair continued to explain that they intended the Seti Devi temple to serve as a "center" – *kendriya* – for all sorts of community activities, not just explicitly religious ones. Indeed, youth groups held meetings there, wedding bands rehearsed there, and, as one member of the committee recounted in excited anticipation, plans for future development included the installation of what he called "cinema seating" to accommodate audiences for various cultural performances.

Intriguingly, the Seti Devi temple stood immediately downhill from, and in easy view of, the official VDC "community building," which had remained largely empty since local governments were disbanded in 2002. This compelled me to ask why it was necessary to construct a new temple building to serve as a community center when there was a perfectly sound nonreligious community building sitting unused right next door. The chair's reply articulated the paradoxes of Nepali secularism perfectly: "There we have no access. It belongs to the government. This temple that we have built is ours, here the government has to recognize us" (Interview with author, June 4, 2014).

These statements must be understood within the context of the Nepali state's changing approach to religious and cultural resource allocation over the last decade. When the Seti Devi committee first began thinking about building a temple in 2000, it was nearly impossible for "non-Hindu"

religious organizations to secure state funding. Despite efforts to build temples like the Suspa Bhumethan in a recognizably Hindu aesthetic mode, temples whose main officiants were other than verified Hindu *pandits* (priests) did not qualify for governmental support. In the wake of the Interim Constitution of 2007, these dynamics began to shift. Since it would have been politically impossible for the newly secular state to sever governmental support for Hindu religious institutions overnight, the Nepali state instead sought to demonstrate its commitment to secularism by expanding funding to other faiths. As Letizia writes, “Secularism has not sought to prevent the state from financing Hindu religious institutions, but has instead been seen as an opportunity for religious minorities to claim equal support” (2013: 41).

The question then becomes *how* such groups have claimed support. The pathways are relatively clear for adherents of theistic traditions that are obviously non-Hindu, such as Islam and Christianity.<sup>10</sup> By registering with the District Administrative Office, organizations belonging to these faiths could apply for governmental funds (US Dept of State 2012). Although they might experience discrimination during the registration process (US Dept of State 2012), their basic claims to be bona fide religious organizations were unlikely to be challenged, and once the registration process was complete, they could apply for funds earmarked for non-Hindu religious institutions.

For groups like the Thangmi, however, securing the explicitly *religious* resources of the secular state was more challenging. This was because, in large part due to Thangmi projects of self-representation over the last few decades that sought to make themselves recognizable in Hindu terms, state functionaries were likely to classify Thangmi temple building projects *as* Hindu, and therefore, in effect, disqualify them from receiving funds intended for other faiths as part of the government’s commitment to secularism. But the Catch-22 was that since Thangmi temples’ primary officiants were traditionally Thangmi shamans, not Hindu *pandits*, they still would not qualify for funds formally designated for Hindu temples. Committee members spoke about encountering precisely this problem when they attempted to register Seti Devi with the Dolakha district authorities in early 2008 as a non-Hindu temple. They were told that they could not register the temple as “Hindu” since it fell under the jurisdiction of Thangmi shamans, but they also could not register it as belonging to another faith since *Thangmi dharma* was not one of the

<sup>10</sup> On Nepal’s Muslim communities, see Dastider 2007 and Sijapati 2011. On Christianity in Nepal, see Fricke 2008, Gibson 2017, and Leve 2014.

available categories. For this reason, the Seti Devi committee imported a Hindu *pandit* from elsewhere to consecrate the temple's foundation and frame. However, members of the Thangmi community who had donated to the temple's construction felt so uncomfortable with this strategy that after a single ritual, the *pandit* was dismissed and the committee began to consider other alternatives.

It was just their luck that in the same year of 2008, the government introduced a new line item in local budgets disbursed at the VDC level. Known locally as the *janajati sirshak*, or "indigenous nationalities heading," these funds were earmarked for local development initiatives benefiting *janajati* residents (and usually implemented by them).<sup>11</sup> This was one of several ad hoc efforts to make local governance more inclusive in the absence of elected local officials. The terms of the last elected local governments had expired in 2002, and there were no local elected officials in place at the time of research – a situation that was only remedied with the 2017 local elections. In the meantime, the Interim Constitution of 2007 had established a mechanism by which the seven main political parties would constitute interim local bodies comprised of one member from each party (CCD 2009: 7). Although these were never formally established from the top down, in many areas, bottom-up arrangements that realized this seven-party consensus arrangement were formed. This was indeed the case in Suspa-Kshamawati VDC, where subsequent to forming the seven-party committee to manage VDC affairs in 2007, a subcommittee called the *Adivasi Janajati Samanya Parishad* (Indigenous Nationalities Official Assembly) was established in 2008. Although these structures of governance should have been established in VDCs across the country, Suspa-Kshamawati residents told me that their VDC was unusual in having a relatively well-functioning seven-party governance committee, as well as good working relationships among representatives of the different *janajati* groups in the area (in addition to Thangmi, these include populations of Jirel, Newar, Sherpa, and Tamang), who amongst themselves shared an appropriately diverse combination of party affiliations.

Once the *Janajati Parishad* was established, it became responsible for disbursing a certain proportion of VDC funds every year. Local organizations representing *janajati* causes could apply to receive such funding.

<sup>11</sup> As stated in the VDC Block Grant Guidelines of 2006, at least 18.75 percent of block grants "must go to focused programmes for women's empowerment, mainstreaming dalits and uplifting Janajatis and other excluded groups (VDC Block Grant Guidelines, 2006, as cited in Inlogos 2009)". I do not have comparable information regarding allocations for women and dalits.

In the first year of implementation, the bulk of the *janajati sirshak* funding went to a local group that set up a subsidized computer training center for *janajati* residents of the area. In addition to technical problems encountered with maintaining the hardware in the village environment, this initiative proved unsuccessful due to its polarizing social effect. Questions were raised about who could access the computer center and how their membership in a *janajati* group should be documented. Non-*janajati* members of the VDC governing body – as well as community members at large – raised the objection that providing such a basic service only to certain members of the VDC on the basis of ethnicity constituted a form of reverse discrimination. Such critics argued that *janajati sirshak* funds should not be used to provide discriminatory access to services that could be of benefit to all community members, regardless of ethnic identity. Instead, they argued, the earmarked funds should go to support “cultural” [word used in English] projects that were clearly recognizable as being by and for *janajati*. Several Seti Devi committee members were directly involved in this debate – the former Seti Devi chair was now chair of the *Janajati Parishad* – and quickly understood that they might be able to apply for funds to support their as-yet-incomplete temple-building project. But there was another Catch-22: the Thangmi community that had spent the previous decades establishing its “Hindu” credentials in order to receive state recognition was now being told that in order to secure development resources, they must show themselves to be recognizably *janajati* – which, according to the official NEFIN definition, as described earlier in this chapter, meant “non-Hindu.” Construction of the Seti Devi temple had already begun in 2005 with funds raised from community donations, with an architectural plan that replicated the Suspa Bhumethan’s yellow-roofed pagoda. Indeed, as the chairperson had explained, such aesthetics were then understood to suit everyone involved, from deity to government and the various ethnic communities in between.

Assessing the situation astutely, the Seti Devi committee applied in 2009 under the *janajati sirshak* for funds to support a “Thangmi community building” at the site of Rikhipole Seti Devi. They did not explicitly state that it was to be a “temple” or that it was to have any religious function. Instead, they explained that it was to be a space for Thangmi cultural gatherings – along the lines of the youth group meetings and wedding rehearsals that my interlocutors attested now occurred there – hence the need for “cinema seating.” They spoke of decorating the interior of the building with “life-like” [word used in English] portrayals of Yapati Chuku and Sunari Aji, the mythical ancestors of the Thangmi people (see the following section and Shneiderman 2015a



chapters 3 and 6 for details). For the purposes of the application, it was left as an unexplained coincidence that the site of the proposed structure was known as the abode of a local Seti Devi deity, which both Thangmi and caste Hindu community members venerated.

The application was successful, and yielded Rs. 100,000 (approximately USD \$1,000) toward the project from the VDC *Janajati Parishad* in its second year of operation. This amount was subsequently matched by the District Development Committee's (DDC) counterpart to the *Janajati Parishad*. The story that I have been able to document so far does not tell what the debate over the application – if there was any – looked like at either the VDC or DDC level. The local actors involved must have all been aware of the religious functions and architecture of the building that was already visibly under construction at the site; however its official representation as a “non-religious” *janajati* cultural center seemed to suit everyone's purposes well. The VDC could point to a material marker of its effective implementation of the mandated “provisions for the representation of the socially and economically weaker sections of society, ethnic and gender groups and other minorities” (CCD 2009: 3) by disbursing funds to a Thangmi “cultural project” under the *janajati sirshak*, while not muddying the waters by identifying it as a religious project that would have required further investigation of whether the temple was indeed “Hindu” or “non-Hindu.”

The fact is that it was both. The resultant temple served not only the Thangmi community but also caste Hindu devotees of the deity Seti Devi, who also participated in the regular calendrical festivals and came to make offerings to the deity for personal purposes. The chair spoke about this as an explicit benefit of the project, as it eased tensions during this time of transformation by giving the interethnic community a space in which they could all live and worship together – *milera basne*. However, the crucial fact was that the temple management committee was composed exclusively of Thangmi members, and funds were disbursed from the government through the *janajati sirshak* for construction of the building as a Thangmi cultural site. With its state funding, the Rikhipole Seti Devi temple provided for the first time in this locale a material, government-funded marker of recognition of the Thangmi as a distinct *janajati* group with a legitimate claim to participation in state development processes on their own terms. This is what the chair meant when he contrasted the lack of “access” symbolized by previously existing state structures like the abandoned VDC building with the assertion of Thangmi control over governance symbolized by the Seti Devi temple. The paradox is that while the government represented by the VDC building had in theory become secular, for the chair, it was still identified with the oppressive dimensions of the Hindu state; while the Thangmi-controlled temple that for him

represented greater inclusion and access to state resources was, in fact, a religious site which in aesthetic and devotional terms looked very much like its Hindu counterparts. However, through its classification by the state as a “cultural” site for a community defined in “ethnic” terms, instead of a “religious” one for a community defined in faith-based terms, state resources enabled the assertion of Thangmi ethnic identity and religiosity in new ways. In this sense, we can see how grassroots responses to state secularism have resulted in the “objectification of belief” (Iqtidar and Sarkar 2013: 38), through the reification and separation of the conceptual categories of “religion” and “ethnicity.” This might be seen as an unintended effect of the societal process of secularization, which in fact pulls in the opposite direction of the normative ideals of state secularism.

### **Yapati Sunari Sangralaya tatha Tilak Pokhari Mandir**

The biggest “cultural construction project” yet in the area was just becoming visible during my summer 2014 visit to Dolakha: not a temple alone but rather a museum complex that included a site of worship. Construction had begun on the site where the Thangmi forefather and foremother Yapati Chuku and Sunari Aji were believed to have first settled in the Rangathali area of Upper Suspa, a short walk uphill from the Suspa Bhumethan. The complex included a large stone structure intended to house museum displays, which the site’s management committee was calling Yapati Sunari Sangralaya (Yapati Sunari Museum), as well as an open-air worship site at Tilak Pokhari, an alpine spring where Yapati Chuku and Sunari Aji are believed to have drawn their drinking and washing water (Figure 4.3). The logics behind the museum’s construction in some ways converge, and in others contrast, with those that drove the development of Rikiphole Seti Devi Mandir. Some of the starkest contrasts emerge from the different regulatory regimes of classification that each project encountered, while others have to do with the specific historical moment at which the museum project began to come to fruition.<sup>12</sup> After the dissolution of the first Constituent Assembly in 2012, the political valence of the category of “ethnicity” shifted significantly (Adhikari and Gellner 2016), once again altering how it was conceptualized in relation to the category of “religion.”

<sup>12</sup> In October 2016, members of the Thangmi community held a ritual to formally mark the establishment of the museum, which has been supported through new fundraising efforts in conjunction with members of Nepal’s fashion industry (Kantipur 2016). I hope to update the narrative offered here through future ethnographic work that considers how this new funding and the 2015 constitution affected the museum project.



Figure 4.3 Members of the museum committee visit the Rangathali site, with Tilak Pokhari in the foreground. Suspa-Kshamawati, Dolakha, Nepal, June 2014.  
Photo by author.

The founding museum committee chair first submitted a proposal to both the VDC and the DDC in 2011 for funds to build a museum, entitled, “Why and How Do We Need a Thangmi Museum?”. The museum was to house items of cultural distinctiveness, including shamanic implements, as well as implements of everyday Thangmi life. The proposal includes a photographic argument for its need, showing all of the existing temples in chronological order of their building, and argues that this museum is the next logical step. It proposes developing a tourist trail linking all of the newly built temples, which would begin at the museum, conveniently located near a newly built agricultural roadhead that in the dry season brings vehicular traffic directly from the district headquarters of Charikot. As Dolakha is a district with a relatively small tourist economy, despite its many important cultural sites, the proposal argued, a Thangmi museum could serve as the lynchpin for a broader effort to develop cultural tourism in the region.

As with Seti Devi, the initial proposal cast the project in cultural, rather than religious, terms and also emphasized the potential economic benefits a museum could bring to the region as a whole, not only the Thangmi community. Yapati Chuku and Sunari Aji were described as Thangmi “culture heroes” [words used in English], and the museum was conceptualized as a tribute to their legacy. Shamans, their costumes, and their ritual implements held pride of place in the descriptions of what the museum would display, but they were described as Thangmi cultural elders rather than religious officiants. The successful proposal garnered the temple Rs. 100,000 each from the VDC and DDC *Janajati Parishad*. With those funds in hand, ground was broken for the museum structure in 2012.

However, the museum committee soon encountered a formidable problem. Soon after the groundbreaking, the Brahmin chairperson of the Community Forestry User Group (CFUG) in the area filed a court case to stay the museum construction. His main complaint was that the land upon which the museum was to be built was, in fact, public land entrusted to the management of the local community forestry user group and could not be used for purposes exclusive to a single ethnic community – in this case, Thangmi.

This suit was only the most recent in a series of legal battles between caste Hindu and Thangmi residents of the area over land rights. As members of the museum building committee recounted (conversation with author, June 3, 2014), in 1963–1964, a suit was filed by sixteen Thangmi households against a caste Hindu family for appropriating their land illegally.<sup>13</sup> The current CFUG chair's father was the chief defendant. The land in question overlaps significantly with the site of the current museum project. After several years of legal battle, the case was settled with an agreement to reclassify the disputed territory as *sarbajanik*, or public land. It was just at this time that community forestry was being introduced to the region by the Swiss Development Corporation (SDC), and in the wake of the legal settlement, the area in question was reserved for community forestry use. The museum committee members told me that they recognized the validity of the territory's legal classification as public land, but they disputed the exclusive equation of "public" with "community forest." Following a broader trend in which indigenous scholar-activists in Nepal have called into question the caste and ethnic hierarchies of the country's much-touted CFUGs (Tamang 2011), one of the Thangmi museum committee members alluded to the International Labor Organization Convention 169 on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (which Nepal became the second Asian country to ratify in 2007).<sup>14</sup> He explained that since the area had historically been Thangmi territory – which only came to be classified as "public" in the wake of its illegal appropriation by others – the Thangmi community had prior

<sup>13</sup> This description is based upon the narrative provided by members of the museum committee. I have not been able to interview the CFUG chair or access documentation of the court case.

<sup>14</sup> In a donor-commissioned social appraisal report addressing the challenges of inclusion in Nepal's Community Forestry sector, anthropologist Mukta S. L. Tamang writes, "government and social movements are increasingly aware that existing official forest tenure systems in the country discriminate against the rights and claims of indigenous people and other local communities" (2011: 20). He also calls attention to Hemant Ojha's statement that the Federation of Community Forestry User Groups Nepal (FECOFUN), "currently represents primarily high caste, economically middle class, and dominant *pahade* groups" (Ojha 2011: 11–12).

rights to *jal*, *jangal*, and *jamin* (water, forest, and territory) in this location. Therefore, chimed in another museum committee member, the Thangmi community should determine to what “public” use the land was put, and their current desire was to build a museum.

Clearly, this argument had its supporters at the VDC and DDC level; otherwise the proposal would not have been funded in the first place, as it outlined the museum’s territorial location and proposed use of public land in detail. The museum committee members continued to explain that their “supporters” [word used in English] at the DDC level had advised them to counter the CFUG chair’s suit by filing their own petition demanding the reclassification of the territory in question as *dharmik ban* – religious forest – instead of *sarbajanik*, or public land. While there was no longer any legal category approximating “ethnic territory” – as the concept of *kipat* had once done (Forbes 1999: Limbu n.d.; Shneiderman 2015: chapter 6) – the state still maintained the category of “religious forest” even after the advent of secularism. Just as the state had interpreted secularism to mean the expansion of resources to fund non-Hindu institutions – rather than the curtailment of funding for Hindu ones – here the “religious forest” category was maintained so that Hindu sites on government-managed forest land, such as Pashupatinath (Hausner 2007), would remain unaffected, while the category was also opened to applications from non-Hindu groups. As one of the museum committee members explained, in their petition to have the area reclassified as religious forest, they wrote, “Now the country is secular and everyone is entitled to have the protection of the state for their religious territory. This is the place of our ancestors; therefore it is the source of our *Thangmi dharma*” (interview with author June 3, 2014).<sup>15</sup> Quickly, a line item was added to the next year’s proposal to the VDC and DDC: a temple enclosure was to be built at the site of Tilak Pokhari, the sacred spring from which Yapati Chuku and Sunari Aji drew their water, and where Thangmi shamans propitiated the site’s territorial deities on a regular calendrical basis.

Herein lies the rub. The Seti Devi temple committee envisioned their project in religious terms but had to recast it in cultural terms associated with their ethnic identity in order to fit their agenda into the relevant state categories at the time and place of their application. Less than a decade later, the museum committee members conceived of their project in cultural terms associated with their ethnic identity but were compelled to recast it in religious terms in order to take advantage of the relevant

<sup>15</sup> This is based on the committee member’s oral account; I have not been able to review the actual petition.

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state category that would enable them to lay legal claim to the territory on which they wished to build the museum.

Reframing their project in religious terms was not unappealing to the museum committee members. The committee certainly understood the site as a source of the sacred originary in relation to which Thangmi identity is forged (Shneiderman 2015a: chapters 2 and 3), so it was not much of a stretch to begin speaking about Yapati Chuku and Sunari Ama as ancestral deities as well as “culture heroes.” Moreover, by 2012, in the wake of the legal suit over the land-use designation at the museum site, it was becoming patently clear that the agenda of ethnic inclusion and identity-based federalism that had dominated much of the political space from 2008 to 2012 was becoming less popular. Despite the funds still available through the *janajati sirshak*, the museum committee realized they might do well to soften the specifically ethnic dimension of the museum building project. The CA was dissolved in May 2012 in large part due to the inability to agree upon if or how ethnicity should be recognized as a basis for territorial restructuring. Interest groups representing high-caste Brahmins and Chetris blocked the passage of a social inclusion bill that would have classified them as “others” and demanded instead that they, too, be classified as “indigenous” (Adhikari and Gellner 2016). Soon thereafter, international donors who had strongly pushed the concept of social inclusion in the early days of the state restructuring process by funding several community development and advocacy projects targeting *janajati* groups (such as the JANSEEP project that operated in Dolakha and funded the Arkapole Bhume temple described in Shneiderman 2013) began to back away from this agenda.

By the time of my visit to Dolakha in mid-2014, these shifts in the national debate over ethnicity coalesced with the localized legal affront over land-use classification to sensitize the museum committee members to the challenges of advancing their project as an *ethnic* one – even though they had previously been encouraged to do just this in order to secure funds through the *janajati sirshak*. The following conversation with a Thangmi member of the museum committee demonstrates how local understandings of the relationship between ethnicity and religion were being refigured in relation to broader national discourses of state restructuring and secularism:

COMMITTEE	Secularism means that everyone can develop their own
MEMBER:	religion, so it benefits us.
AUTHOR:	But is your project [the museum] a religious or ethnic one?
COMMITTEE	They are inseparable. But if we say “it is ethnic,” others won’t
MEMBER:	let us proceed, while if we say “it is religious,” others will
	let us proceed. Everyone has religion.



The implication here is that while “everyone has religion,” the same cannot be said of ethnicity. The vitriolic debate over the role of ethnicity in shaping federal boundaries had reframed “ethnicity” as an attribute belonging only to certain marked categories of people – notably *janajati* – not to caste Hindus who remained unmarked as “others.” Therefore, to describe the museum project as part of a Thangmi ethnic agenda would appear more exclusive of non-Thangmi residents of the area, while casting it as a religious project would appear more inclusive, since everyone had religion, even – perhaps especially – those who remained “unmarked” in ethnic terms. This was especially so because the declaration of secularism was a *fait accompli*, and it was understood by all that, at least in theory, all religions were to enjoy equal rights; while the role of ethnicity in determining one’s potential access to special rights remained an open question, and, therefore, its invocation made many uneasy. In order to further demonstrate the museum’s status as a religious project with broad benefit for diverse community members, the Thangmi-led museum committee invited two caste Hindu residents to join the committee, and an updated proposal compared the site to the Hindu Bhimsenthan temple complex in Dolakha bazaar to further emphasize the economic benefits of the museum as an anchor for tourism in the region as a whole.

During my visit to the sacred spring of Tilak Pokhari in June 2014, the committee members explained that although they were happy to emphasize it as the spiritual center of the museum complex, they did not want to build a fully enclosed temple in the “Hindu” aesthetic style of the Suspa Bhumethan or Rikhipole Seti Devi. Indeed, although a low rock wall was built around the spring and a wrought iron door had been installed to mark the entrance to the sacred area just the day before I visited, there was no roofed temple. As one committee member explained, “This is how Thangmi religion is: natural religion. Before we had to show, ‘we are Hindu,’ but now that this country has become secular we can worship our deities in our own way. We must leave it open so that both gurus and common Thangmi can worship the deity” (conversation with author, 3 June 2014). In the years between the 2010 completion of the Rikhipole Seti Devi temple and the 2014 installation of the rock wall around Tilak Pokhari, the burden to prove their credentials as bearers of Hindu modernity that the architects of the earlier Thangmi temple buildings had felt in imagining the style of their sacred buildings had clearly lessened. Instead, leaving the sacred site unenclosed was seen as a means of returning Thangmi practice to its “natural” state of communion between gurus, common people, and the divine by doing away with the

walls that people like my hostess in Balasode, as quoted earlier in this chapter, felt compromised truly Thangmi forms of religiosity.

The museum building remains unfinished, and while the petition for religious forest classification has been approved at the VDC and DDC levels, it still requires final confirmation at the central level in Kathmandu by the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation. In 2014, an additional application for museum funding was submitted to the corporate headquarters of the Upper Tamakoshi Hydroelectric Project (UTKHEP), which is operating further north in mountain areas of Dolakha district and had called for proposals from community projects seeking funding. This possibility of privatized corporate funding adds an interesting new dimension to the landscape, and it remains unclear how UTKHEP would prefer to see the museum project represented – in ethnic, religious, or perhaps economic terms.

### Conclusion

Taken together, these ethnographic vignettes demonstrate how the temple buildings emerging across the landscape of Dolakha's Suspa-Kshamawati VDC are one materialization of the relationship between political secularism and the societal process of secularization in Nepal. The particular forms of religiosity they forge show how, over time, shifts in the categorical imperatives of state policy for resource allocation may actually shape spiritual practice. Moreover, such shifts in articulation between policy, resources, and practice work to materialize "ethnicity" and "religion" as distinctive, politically nuanced categories for those who enact them.

In post-2006 Nepal, the advent of secularism emboldened new forms of claims making on the state, both in terms of accessing resources and political power. But for members of Nepal's *janajati* communities who have appropriated various elements of Hindu religiosity over time, this has often been a vexed process. The process of secularization has compelled them to "objectify belief" as they work to disentangle the notion of "ethnic" identity from that of "religious" identity and bring these categories into new patterns of articulation on both political and ritual registers. The idiom of religious equality has enabled discussions of ethnic and cultural equality that otherwise might not have been possible, but it has also compelled the reification of religion as a category separate from culture and ethnicity.

Although secularism in its orthodox definition implies the separation of religion from state, most Thangmi seem to understand the concept to

mean the artificial separation of different religions – and religion from ethnicity – for the purpose of legislating equality. They see these as worthwhile and important objectives in themselves but nonetheless find it disconcerting to have to identify themselves as “non-Hindu” to make a case for “ethnic rights” – particularly when they felt the opposite was necessary until very recently. Many members of the community are very self-conscious about how they must adjust their own self-representation and practices in order to access state funds for community development projects. They distinguish between the notion of Hindu religiosity in practice and “Hindu identity” as an ethnicized form of political self-positioning. The temple buildings – managed and built by Thangmi, for Thangmi, but open to caste Hindus who also make offerings at them – are a way of embodying the former while maintaining an identity that is at once distinct from the latter and recognizable in its terms. They are also a material manifestation of how ethnically and religiously diverse residents of shared territory manage and seek strategies that allow them to *milera basne*, or live together amicably, through everyday practice.

Nonetheless, since the dissolution of the first Constituent Assembly in 2012, Nepal has witnessed the rise of an antiseccular Hindu nationalist movement, led by the Rastriya Prajatantra Party-Nepal, which seeks the return of a Hindu state (Wagner 2018). Publically vocal activists like RPP-N leader Kamal Thapa were buoyed by Narendra Modi’s 2014 electoral win next door, and their subsequent mobilization succeeded in altering the constitutional definition of secularism in a manner with implications that are not yet fully understood. But if only such activists knew that the process of secularization in the wake of the 2006 declaration of state secularism had in fact prompted increased religiosity and temple building projects – both expressed in largely Hindu modalities – on the part of *janajati* groups like the Thangmi, perhaps they would change their tune.

The 2015 earthquakes destroyed almost all of the temple buildings described in this chapter (Figure 4.4). Their architects in the Thangmi community are now starting all over again. It remains to be seen how the necessary resources will materialize in the postearthquake, postconstitution context. Will new temple building projects define themselves through the logic of ethnicity, religion, or perhaps commodification (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), in the manner that the current reinvigoration of the museum project seems to suggest? Will people’s ability to live together amicably be reinforced or challenged in new ways? Ultimately, material forces – natural, social, and economic – will continue to shape



Figure 4.4 Mahadevsthan temple after the earthquake, Suspa-Kshamawati VDC, Dolakha, Nepal, May 2016. Photo by author.

religiosity in a manner that both illustrates and challenges the conceptual boundaries of terms like secularism and secularization.

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