

**School of Built Environment  
Department of Urban and Regional Planning**

**The Polemics and Discourse of Conservation in Nepal: a case study  
of Sonaha Indigenous Minorities and Bardia National Park**

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**This Thesis is presented for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
of  
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## **Declaration**

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature:



Date: June 11, 2014

## **Abstract**

Contestations between indigenous peoples and practices of modern Protected Areas are at the heart of contemporary people-conservation debates globally. This thesis presents an ethnographic investigation into tensions between the Sonaha indigenous minority group, who are the original inhabitants of the lower Karnali river delta, and the management of Bardia National Park, the largest lowland protected area in Nepal. I approach this case study through the frameworks of the political ecology of conservation and social theories of *space*. This work is a critical ethnography conducted under a qualitative and interpretive research paradigm.

I argue that the Sonahas' marginalisation and, in their terms, unjust separation from their ancestral territory, dismantling of their customary livelihoods without adequate provision of alternatives and other negative consequences resulting from the national park interventions is a case of conservation violence that continues to exist despite recent participatory conservation reforms and initiatives. The discursive creations of the Park and the riverscape in the delta by the various parties and the associated mainstream conservation discourse and practice are considered in an historical perspective, with respect to their implications for the Sonahas. The changing lives of the Sonahas in the Park buffer zone have been shaped by both mainstream conservation discourse and a counter discourse of indigenous peoples' rights and identity, and by the practices related to these competing discourses. I argue that the hegemonic conservation discourse legitimises and reinforces violence against the Sonaha, through the enclosure of the riverscape by the state, and that it disregards the Sonaha worldview and spatial practices.

Sonaha resistance to the Park regime is examined as a struggle for livelihoods through the enactment of cultural politics; and hence, as a site of counter discourse and collective ethnic consciousness. The Sonaha-Park/State authority contestation is also presented as an example of the multidimensional politics of space within which a theoretical link between space-power-discourse and a framework of "biocultural social space" are postulated as potential bases for a just conservation.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

ACA:	Annapurna Conservation Area
AUD:	Australian Dollar
BNP:	Bardia National Park
BZ:	Buffer Zone
BZCF:	Buffer Zone Community Forest
BZMC:	Buffer Zone Management Council
BZUC:	Buffer Zone Users' Committee
BZUG:	Buffer Zone User Group
CBS:	Central Bureau of Statistics
CBD:	Convention on Biological Diversity
CDO:	Community Development Organization
CFUG:	Community Forest User Group
CNP:	Chitwan National Park
DDC:	District Development Committee
DoF:	Department of Forest
DNPWC:	Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation
ECOS:	Environment Conservation Society, Nepal
FPS:	Fauna Preservation Society
FIAN:	Food-first Information and Action Network
GoN:	Government of Nepal
HURECOC:	Human Rights and Environment Concern Centre
HH:	Household
ICDP:	Integrated Conservation and Development Program/Project
ICIMOD:	Integrated Centre for Integrated Mountain Development
IUCN:	International Union for Conservation of Nature
MoFSC:	Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation in Nepal
NEFEJ:	Nepal Forum of Environmental Journalists
NEFIN:	Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities
NFDIN:	National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities
NGO:	Non Government Organization

NPSS:	Nikunja Pidith Sangarsa Samiti (National Park Victim Struggle Committee)
NPWC:	National Parks and Wildlife Conservation
NR:	Nepalese rupee
NSS:	Nepal Sonaha Sangh (Association)
NTNC:	National Trust for Nature Conservation
PA:	Protected Area
PARF:	Protected Area People's Rights Federation
PCDF:	People Centred Development Forum, Bardia
PCP:	Participatory Conservation Program
PPP:	Park and People Program
SCAM:	Samrachhit Chetra Jana-adhikar Mahasang (Protected Areas Peoples' Rights Federation)
SSBU:	Sonaha Samrakchyan Tatha Bikas Upasamiti (Sonaha Conservation and Development Subcommittee)
TAL:	Terai Arc Landscape Project
UN:	United Nations
UNDP:	United Nations Development Program
USAID:	United States Agency for International Development
VDC:	Village Development Committee
WHO:	World Health Organization
WTLCP:	Western Terai Arc Landscape Complex Project
WWF:	World Wildlife Fund
YCL:	Young Communist League

## Glossary (some Nepalese and Sonaha terms)

<i>Adhikar:</i>	Rights, both individual and collective.
<i>Andolan:</i>	Social movement, also used to mean collective protest, struggles.
<i>Arakchya:</i>	Wildlife reserve
<i>Ban Paley:</i>	State forest guards in the 1970s.
<i>Ban Samiti:</i>	Forest management committee of a community forest user group.
<i>Basahi:</i>	A way of life using temporary shelters for fishing and gold panning.
<i>Bhutta:</i>	Revered or feared spirit, god.
<i>Birta:</i>	A tax free land grant, a form of privileged land ownership granted by the state.
<i>Bukri:</i>	A makeshift (temporary) shelter on a river bank or river island.
<i>Chaudhari:</i>	Locally used to refer to Tharu ethnic people. Historically <i>Chaudhari</i> also meant land tax and revenue collector.
<i>Darshan:</i>	Sonahas' sacred shrine of a god.
<i>Dera/Dyara:</i>	Necessary belongings and items carried to a temporary shelter while fishing and gold washing; sometimes it is also referred to the shelter.
<i>Doli:</i>	A traditional human carrier who escorted a bride or transported a royal woman, women from the family of big landlords.
<i>Gaun:</i>	Originally, the customary gold panning sites of the Sonahas which were divided among several lineages. The popular meaning now is a village in the Nepali vernacular.
<i>Gaun-wala:</i>	The key person of a particular lineage who regulates the gold panning sites within their <i>de facto</i> jurisdiction.
<i>Ghat:</i>	Ferry point
<i>Janajati:</i>	Indigenous nationalities of Nepal
<i>Jat:</i>	Refers to a caste, but also locally used to refer to an ethnic group
<i>Jati:</i>	Ethnicity
<i>Jimidar:</i>	Non-official revenue collection functionaries in Tarai, employed to collect land and crop taxes at the village level under a system called <i>Jimidari</i> introduced during Rana rule who later became landlords.
<i>Kafthans:</i>	Gold panning commons or customary gold panning sites regulated by the key person of a particular lineage.
<i>Kamaiya:</i>	Male agricultural bonded labourer.

<i>Kamalari:</i>	Female agricultural bonded labourer.
<i>Kattha:</i>	The land size measurement, 1 <i>kattha</i> [Nepal] = 0.0339 hectare (ha), 20 <i>kattha</i> = 1 <i>bigha</i> .
<i>Laddi:</i>	River
<i>Lau:</i>	Canoe
<i>Loponmukh Jati:</i>	Endangered ethnic group
<i>Macchi:</i>	Fish
<i>Napi:</i>	Land survey team of the government
<i>Nawab:</i>	A governor in India or rulers of princely states during the Mogul empire. The title was awarded to individuals and families for service to the British government in India and it bestowed power and privilege.
<i>Nikunja:</i>	A national park
<i>Pahadey/Pahadi:</i>	People of hill origin in Nepal
<i>Parbatiya:</i>	People of hill origin who speak the Nepali language.
<i>Phanta:</i>	Grasslands
<i>Purkha:</i>	Ancestors, elders
<i>Raja:</i>	A King; also used to refer to big landlords by the elders.
<i>Rastriya Nikunja:</i>	National Park
<i>Sammeylan:</i>	Conference
<i>Samaj:</i>	Society, community
<i>Samrakchyan:</i>	Conservation
<i>Sangh:</i>	Association
<i>Sanskriti:</i>	Culture, cultural practice in an instrumental and popular sense.
<i>Sarkar:</i>	The government
<i>Sikar Arakchya:</i>	Hunting reserve
<i>Swan:</i>	Gold
<i>Tipariya:</i>	River islands

# **Chapter One: Introduction**

## **1.1 Introduction**

This thesis centres on the contestations between a marginalised Sonaha ethnic minority group and a national park regime and authority. It focuses on the experiences and the struggles of the Sonahas who inhabit the bioculturally diverse lower Karnali river delta region adjacent to the Bardia National Park, the largest protected area in the Nepalese lowlands. As a people customarily engaged in artisanal fishing and gold panning in the rivers, the Sonahas have a deep and unique affinity, relationship and history of interaction with the river and the riparian environment of which they consider themselves a part. I consider the modern conservation intervention of the Nepali state in the area through the development of the national park and the participatory management of its buffer zone and the Sonaha resistance to engage in and examine Sonaha-state relations, and thereby indigenous peoples-national park interactions and contestations; and the competing discourses and politics that surround them. The politics of *space* is at the heart of this inquiry. Under the critical political ecology framework, this ethnographic investigation contributes to global discussions on the contestations, interactions and complexities surrounding the rights and the practices of indigenous peoples and local communities in relation to modern approaches to nature conservation.

This chapter begins by locating the author as a researcher into this topic and to the subjects of my inquiry. It then introduces the objectives and key research questions of this inquiry. The chapter provides an overview of the key debates surrounding the idea of nature conservation, and of how nature conservation has the potential to impact on the lives of local populations. It then considers how contemporary understandings of conservation and its related discourses globally are changing and becoming more nuanced. The protected area and local people conflicts and debates in Nepal are outlined focussing on the impacts of protected area development and management on the indigenous peoples. The changing policies and paradigms of protected area designation and management in Nepal, including the arguments for

and against participatory conservation especially in the context of the buffer zone management are summarised. It then presents a general rationale for this study. Finally, a broad overview of the chapter organisation of the thesis is provided.

## **1.2 Locating, situating and positioning the researcher**

The intellectual journey of this research project formally commenced as a part of my academic socialisation and research training in the course of a doctoral degree program. But the topic and issues under investigation here as well as the unfolding stories captured in this thesis are meaningfully linked to my prior personal and professional engagements with issues of a similar nature. However these were not undertaken and reflected upon with the same amount of academic vigour, rigour, detachment and scrutiny. Commencement of this research project was neither an abrupt choice and decision nor a sudden quest for academic knowledge and social change. Rather it was an outcome, an articulation, a creative yet critical expression of the experiences, learning, insights, curiosity, passion and commitments accumulated over my years of involvement (2004-2010) with this issue. My experience had been at the grassroots, and in national and international forums, within the domain and terrain of conservation, biodiversity, natural resource governance, and the rights of local people, social justice and democracy.

I can recall moments in 2005 on the edge of the sacred River Narayani that buffers the forests and grasslands of the very first national park in Nepal, the Chitwan National Park (CNP), from the surrounding villages. Around an evening fire, in a hamlet of landless indigenous fishing communities at Nawalparasi, I keenly listened to the stories recollected by the fishers: of their everyday struggles living at the frontier of this ecosystem so rich in biodiversity; of their frequent encounters with rhinoceros, elephants, tigers; as well as everyday tensions with the military guards and the national park officials. I also recall my first sight of wildlife from the national park in 2006. I was at a night temporary shelter on the bank of Narayani, adjacent to the park boundary with the members of three fishing communities, Bote, Majhi and Musahar, from the villages on the Park's periphery. A fisherman alerted us to a one horned rhinoceros, swiftly crossing the river and entering the fields in the village under the moonlight. We remained calm and quiet next to the bonfire and

witnessed the rhino returning to the Park in the dark. As we left the camp in a canoe with the fish catch, I realised that the same riparian area had been shared by the fishers and the wildlife from time beyond their memory.

As a young social activist and a researcher trained in social science with a strong human rights orientation, I had been exposed to the realities and struggles of marginalised social groups in the peripheral villages of national parks and wildlife reserves in the Nepalese low-lying rural hinterlands. As an NGO researcher, I had interacted, observed and learnt about the lives of poor and disadvantaged communities who were significantly dependant on the natural resources. They were living in close proximity to the ecosystems strictly protected by the state authorities as Protected Areas. I had researched the realities and predicaments of their lives entangled with poverty and conflicts with wildlife as well as with the park authorities.

Whether they were Malaha fishers on the periphery of Koshi Toppu Wildlife Reserve, in the east; artisanal fishing communities and indigenous Tharu people around south-central the CNP; the Sonaha small scale fishing and gold panning ethnic groups and the Tharu living adjacent to the Bardia National Park under this study in the mid-west or the rural peasants in the Buffer Zones (BZs) of these protected areas, they were all interacting and benefitting from the natural environment and its resources as well as facing the onslaught of restrictive conservation. They were grappling with frequent crop raids; property damage and attacks by wildlife; land lost due to extension of the protected area boundaries; sexual harassment of local women or physical and verbal assaults by the protected area security forces. In response, these diverse groups expressed a similar anger and vented similar dissent against the conservationist state. They often felt ignored and excluded by the state and, covertly and overtly, they resisted the protected area regime.

I had documented their local suffering and hardships, and their campaigns and social movements which revealed the local costs of conservation (S. Jana, 2008)<sup>1</sup>. I had

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<sup>1</sup> American Psychological Association (APA) 6th referencing style is used throughout this thesis.

advocated the integration of conservation ideals with those of social justice. I was involved in several pieces of action research (S. Jana, 2007a, 2007b, 2008) with the Community Development Organisation (CDO), a rights-based NGO that supported local people in their rights campaigns and struggles against the protected area authorities. Later, I was also engaged in policy research concerning people and protected areas, local community rights and natural resources in Nepal with a research organisation called ForestAction, Nepal ([www.forestaction.org](http://www.forestaction.org)).

During my engagements with these NGOs I had actively participated in several policy dialogues, deliberations and forums among diverse and competing stakeholders and actors; raised concerns over the lack of democracy and rights violations in the policy and practices of Nepalese protected areas; voiced the need to reconcile conservationist desires with local livelihoods and equity; and advocated stewardship of conservation by local people (Paudel, Jana, & Rai, 2012). I have also had several opportunities to experience some of the contradictions between the ideals and practices espoused by the techno-bureaucratic conservationist state, and by donor funded projects, the mainstream conservation discourse and practices and, on the other hand, the rise and fall of social movements of local people contesting the current laws, rules and practices of protected areas in Nepal, at the local and national levels.

However, while exploring and seeking to understand local peoples' grievances and protests against these state policies and interventions, I have become equally sensitive to the challenging situation of the wildlife, ecosystems and landscapes and the daunting tasks facing the state authorities which seek to protect them. I have witnessed how protected areas, mainly in the Nepalese lowlands, have become islands of conservation surrounded by an upsurge of human population, and impacted by larger development forces, shrinking spaces for mobility of wildlife and for their habitats. I have learnt from the villagers about the problems of poachers and of the illegal timber 'mafia' penetrating the forests in the national parks and their BZs, benefiting illicitly, and at times manipulating and exploiting poor people. I have experienced the successes of forest regeneration and conservation through stewardship by locals on the peripheries of protected areas.

Likewise, my own affiliations as a young voluntary member of international groups and networks such as Theme on Indigenous Peoples, Local Communities, Equity and Protected Areas (TILCEPA); a global expert body of the World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA) of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) ([www.iucn.org](http://www.iucn.org)) and of the emerging movement of areas and territories conserved by indigenous peoples and local communities known by the acronym of ‘ICCAS’ and organised under the global forum ([www.iccaforum.org](http://www.iccaforum.org)) have been equally crucial. These affiliations have also shaped my concerns over the conservation of biodiversity and ecosystems, and the politics and broader challenges of conservation.

My exposure to these global networks as well as my participation in several international gatherings and events such as the IUCN World Conservation Congresses and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Conference of Parties have increasingly informed me of the complexities, on the one hand, of the issues of local peoples’ rights, social justice and the governance of protected areas and, on the other hand, of the significance of biodiversity, the diverse values of protected areas and of some of the global conservation challenges confronting the countries of the world. Likewise, I also have been following global discourse, notably the increased attention in international forums, contemporary debates, thinking and international policy processes given to local people in relation to protected areas and their practices of biodiversity conservation.

My orientation and values on environmental conservation on one hand, and rights and social justice on the other, are therefore based on these experiences and my subsequent trajectories. As a student of social science and human geography, I have always considered topics related to the conservation of wildlife, ecosystems, landscapes, biological diversity and the natural environment to be intimately connected and implicated with the people inhabiting the same areas. This connection is equally and essentially socio-politico-economic and cultural (spiritual), and therefore can not be achieved only by techno-centrist approaches. Over the years I have sought to apply the value and scope of critical social science to the topic of nature or biodiversity conservation. This is not to advocate social science knowledge in an instrumental or utilitarian sense, as serving and merely complementing the

cause of the natural sciences, biocentric scientific conservation and their related discourses. Rather it has been an attempt to develop critical knowledge with transformative potential, which acknowledges the inherent reality and the intrinsic value of the intricately and inextricably linked ontologies of human-non human, human (society)-environment and nature-culture.

### **1.3 Objectives and research questions**

This study is guided by following objectives and researchers questions.

#### **1.3.1 Objectives**

1. To inquire into the ways of life and practices of the Sonaha ethnic minority groups inhabiting the river delta adjacent to the Bardia National Park.
2. To identify and examine the diverse impacts and consequences of state intervention, through the creation and management of the national park and its buffer zone, upon the lives of the Sonaha people.
3. To document and unravel the responses and actions of the Sonahas in relation to the national park authority and its interventions, and to consider their meanings, politics and significance.

#### **1.3.2 Research questions**

1. How are the Sonahas' experiences and lives related to and implicated in the river and riparian landscapes of the lower Karnali river delta?
2. How have state interventions and mainstream conservation discourse impacted on the lives of the Sonahas in the context of the national park and its buffer zone?
3. How are the Sonahas responding to the conservation discourse and practices and how can their responses and politics to these be understood?
4. How might the findings from this study contribute to debates on the contestations of people and protected areas more widely; and, thereby, inform the field of political ecology?

## **1.4 Navigating the key debates on People and Protected Areas**

### **1.4.1 The problematic of nature and nature preservation**

Protected Area designation is a geographical strategy for conserving natural environments, biodiversity, sea/landscapes and ecosystems that is practiced globally.

It has been defined as:

A clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values (Dudely, 2008, p. 8).

This definition is perhaps more comprehensive than the one used by the CBD of the United Nations, namely “a geographically defined area which is designated or regulated and managed to achieve specific conservation objectives” (Secretariat of the CBD, n.d.).

The knowledge, conception and construction of the very idea and meaning of *nature* and *wilderness* shape the ways in which nature conservation is conceived, understood and practiced, in particular through the designation of protected areas. The historical roots and underpinnings of Western ideas and imaginations of nature, and its socio-cultural construction have been questioned. This is particularly the case for their dualistic conception and separation of nature and culture (society) that perpetuates exclusionary visions and ideas within modern nature conservation and shapes popular perceptions of a dehumanised natural environment (e.g., Adams & Hutton, 2007; Brechin, Wilshusen, Fortwangler, & West, 2003; Martinez, 2003; Neumann, 1998).

Modern protected areas, in the form of national parks, have been designated since the mid-1800s although areas with some forms of protection (e.g., hunting reserves) have existed throughout history (Ervin et al., 2010). In fact, modern ideas of nature conservation have their roots in the 17th century Europe, and 18th and 19th century North America, at the times of enclosure and rapid agricultural development. As such, the preservation of wilderness areas has long been embedded in European

values and discourses of nature (Büscher & Wolmer, 2007). Such views influenced European responses to rapid changes in the lands that they colonised and were manifested in a concern for the loss of wilderness. The colonisers therefore sought to preserve landscapes which they erroneously assumed to be wild and untouched (Stolton, 2010). To the colonial mind European colonisation therefore applied to both people and nature (Adams, 2003). In many countries nature protection, rooted in colonial and authoritarian rule, has also been used as an instrument of the state's control over valuable natural resources (Brechin et al., 2003; Neumann, 1998).

Nature conservation in the conventional sense is thus largely predicated upon the wilderness myth of nature as pristine and uninhabited (K. B. Ghimire & Pimbert, 1997). The national park movement that began in the late 19th century in the United States was driven by a conservation ethos of wilderness preservation, through setting aside so called natural areas for recreation and the preservation of resources that were perceived to have been unused and untouched by humans. These beliefs and practices have powerfully shaped the global pattern of conservation involving, as they did, the exclusion of humans from wilderness areas and the acceptance of an idealised notion of wild nature (Colchester, 2003). The national park ideal is viewed as dictating the protection of nature within a bounded park by a centralised authority (Neumann, 1998). This modernist conception of a filtered nature existing within protected areas is also criticised (Campbell, 2005b). Likewise, the constructed and idealised view of nature as existing in a non-human domain imposes a separation between nature and people. Hence, in both a discursive as well as a materialist sense, designation of protected areas has both material and social implications for people (Adams & Hutton, 2007; West, Igoe, & Brockington, 2006), especially for those social groups who interact, relate and depend on the natural environments in question.

As noted by Peterson, Russell, West, & Brosius (2008) modern conservation efforts have been rooted in "...the values, perceptions, and methods of Western conservation science and culture" (p. 7). The practice of conservation is also very much rooted in conservation biology and is based on biocentric values and assumptions, which privilege natural science views (Redford, 2011). A powerful scientific conception of "nature" has been used to justify conservation imperatives mainly related to

wilderness preservation and to the crisis of species extinction in contemporary times (Brockington, Duffy, & Igoe, 2008). In fact, as claimed by some, the authoritative claims of science have not only engendered crisis narratives and constructed discourses but also legitimised state and administrative control of so-called natural environments (Büscher & Wolmer, 2007).

#### **1.4.2 A critique of the protectionist paradigm and intervention**

The inadequacies or failures of top down approaches to nature conservation with an exclusive focus on a dehumanised natural environment have been recognised in diverse situations (Beresford & Phillips, 2000). There is a plethora of literature on the adverse social impacts of protected area creation and management in both developed and developing countries. This has noted the frequently problematic relations and the contestations between local people and state conservation organisations (e.g., Adams & Hutton, 2007; Andrew-Essien & Bisong, 2009; Dowie, 2009; Holmes, 2007; West & Brockington, 2006; West et al., 2006). The costs of the exclusionary creation and management of protected areas range from involuntary displacements, including forced evictions, to restrictions on access to and use of productive environmental resources by the local inhabitants. On numerous occasions designations of protected areas have led to the erosion of customary rights, livelihoods and cultural practices; alienation from natural resource bases and the violation of the human rights of local peoples, impoverishment (e.g., Adams & Hutton, 2007; Borrini-Feyerabend, Kothari, & Oviedo, 2004; Brechin et al., 2003; Campese, Sunderland, Greiber, & Oviedo, 2009; K. B. Ghimire & Pimbert, 1997).

Beside economic hardships, the restrictions imposed upon local inhabitants have further reinforced their social and cultural marginalisation in many instances. In this context, weaker and marginalised social groups tend to be impacted most adversely (Borrini-Feyerabend, Kothari, et al., 2004; K. B. Ghimire & Pimbert, 1997). Communities which are highly dependent on local natural resources are often dispossessed (Brechin et al., 2003). The nature of their displacement is not limited to physical removal (Adams & Hutton, 2007). It includes loss of rights to residence, to the use of land and resources, to their future use and the loss of non-consumptive uses. This can be argued to constitute violence against them (Neumann, 2001). Some

have argued that the adverse impacts of exclusionary approaches have fuelled conflicts and provided limited conservation gain (Lele, Wilshusen, Brockington, Seidler, & Kamaljit, 2010) and aggravated social justice problems (Brechin, Wilshusen, Fortwangler, & West, 2002). These have sometimes even been counterproductive to conservation (Kothari, 2008) or have adversely impacted natural environments (West & Brockington, 2006) although it has been argued that protected areas can be successfully imposed despite local opposition (Brockington, 2004).

There has also been a staunch criticism of state regimes that appropriate conservation concerns and ideologies to legitimise resource control as well as coercive approaches to the protection of forests and wildlife. Sometimes states have also sought to legitimate violence in the name of conservation and thereby to control marginalised peoples who contest the state's authority (Peluso, 1993). For instance, Neumann (2001) argues that violence against local people is inherent or concealed in state directed wildlife conservation efforts in Africa.

#### **1.4.3 Indigenous peoples and protected areas**

Indigenous peoples frequently figure in these criticisms. Colchester (2004) contends that conservation through the creation of national parks has violated the rights of indigenous peoples in many different parts of the world. It has been noted that wilderness protection based on the exclusionary models of Yosemite National Park (Dowie, 2009) or Yellowstone, the first national park, became the model for dispossessing native populations of their homelands (Spence, 1999).

The adverse consequences faced by indigenous peoples worldwide as a result of imposition of protected area designations have been well documented. Colchester (2003) postulates a fourfold marginalisation of indigenous peoples through classical and western conservationist practices: first, mainstream conservationists prioritise nature preservation over human beings; second, their view of nature is shaped by cultural notions of wilderness that are incongruent with the worldviews of most indigenous peoples; third, they possess and use their authority to regulate human interactions with nature through state power; fourth, their perceptions of indigenous

peoples are prejudiced and stereotypical. However, others have also cautioned against the simplistic acceptance of romantic and essentialist notions of indigenous peoples and their cultures, and in particular of their claimed harmony with nature (Kothari, 2008; Redford, 1991).

Dowie (2009) sees the conflictual relationships and encounters between modern conservation, driven by big international conservation organisations, and the indigenous peoples as a process which creates conservation refugees who have been adversely impacted by conservation interests. Critics have also pointed out the unequal power relationships between big conservation agencies and indigenous peoples (Chapin, 2004). But, on some occasions, indigenous peoples have also favoured the designation of protected areas, sometimes allying with conservation groups for the defence of their land from destructive forces of development. Indeed some trends of convergence between “global environmentalism” and “global Indigenism”, and meaningful collaborations between indigenous peoples and conservationists have also been noted (Brockington et al., 2008, p. 130). The experiences of indigenous peoples with protected area and conservation regimes have not been straightforward.

#### **1.4.4 The changing discourses of conservation and protected areas**

Biocentric, technocratic and rationalist scientific perspectives of nature and nature conservation have been increasingly questioned and redefined in recent years. Conservation “...is infused with political meanings and values...” (Campese et al., 2009, p. 7) rather than being a value-neutral venture. Conservation is therefore understood as a socio-political process (e.g., Adams, 2005; Alcorn, 1993; Brechin et al., 2003; Saberwal, 2000), and is, in fact, a project in politics (Zerner, 2000). Nature conservation is thereby influenced by power-knowledge, rather than being solely a techno-bureaucratic intervention.

Since an understanding and appreciation of the socio-political aspects of nature protection remain underdeveloped, it has been argued that the understanding of conservation should be re-imagined as a social phenomenon and that there is a need to study the politics of conservation in order to address conservation related social

justice problems, conflict and resistance (Brechin et al., 2002; Brechin et al., 2003). Likewise, conservation is also viewed as being linked with *culture*, as a cultural practice and as a product mediated by different cultural groups with unequal power and thus as being embedded in cultural political struggles (MacDonald, 2004). Hence an increased sensitivity and consideration of aspects of history and culture in the context of conservation has been called for (Borrini-Feyerabend, MacDonald, & Maffi, 2004).

In fact, discussions on the social impacts and on social inclusion in relation to protected areas have been crucial in shaping contemporary conservation movements and discourses since the 1970s and the 1980s respectively (Adams & Hutton, 2007). The changes in the approaches to development since the 1980s that have increasingly emphasised participation, local empowerment and decentralisation have also influenced the thinking on and practices of protected areas (Campbell, 2005a). This participatory thrust has led to a conceptual convergence of conservation and development discourses, facilitated the rise of the paradigm of community conservation (Fisher, Maginnis, Jackson, Barrow, & Jeanrenaud, 2005) and the emergence of initiatives known as Integrated Conservation and Development Programs/Projects (ICDPs) (Brandon & Wells, 1992; Wells & Brandon, 1992). This shift was also reflected in the World Conservation Strategy, 1980 following the failures of the fence and fine approach of conservation (Dove, 2006).

Since the third World Congress on National Parks in 1982, issues around "...human development, partnerships, and indigenous groups and local communities" (IUCN, 2010, p. 6) began to gain primacy. The socio-cultural dimensions, the role of "traditional cultures" and the knowledge of "tribal and indigenous peoples" in conservation have been increasingly acknowledged since the early 1980s (McNeely & Pitt, 1985). Likewise, since the Fourth World Congress on National Parks and Protected Areas in 1992, international conservation NGOs have also focussed on ways to reconcile the interests of "indigenous and traditional peoples" in protected areas, and to recognise and respect their rights, bodies of knowledge, customary tenures and resource use patterns (Beltrán, 2000).

### ***Criticisms of ICDP or community based conservation***

The move towards ICDPs generated backlash from some conservationists concerned about the conflation of conservation and development. While Dove (2006) noted a “return to the fortress nature approach” (p. 198) others referred to a reversal of community based conservation initiatives (Adams & Hutton, 2007) or to a resurgence of the protectionist paradigm (Wilshusen, Brechin, Fortwangler, & West, 2002). It has been argued that practices of community based conservation or ICDP can also be as authoritarian and ineffective as fortress conservation and that they can sometimes generate negative consequences (Temudo, 2012) and fall short of fulfilling its social and environmental objectives (Naughton-Treves, Holland, & Brandon, 2005). Others contend that ICDPs are also fraught with inequalities (Paudel, 2006), that they can still impose nature-society dualism (Campbell, 2005a) and may replicate more coercive forms of conservation practice by expanding state authority (Neumann, 1997). As these practices face new challenges and dilemmas, critical dialogues and reflections on their politics revolve around the interface of social justice, cultural respect and conservation (Tsing, Peter, & Zerner, 2005).

### ***Contemporary discussions concerning people and protected areas***

Notwithstanding the criticisms made of exclusionary and protectionist protected areas, today, they are often praised for their diversity of values and multiple benefits to people. Positive experiences and evidence exist throughout the world of protected areas that exhibit a wide range of values and benefits of protected areas, including providing food, natural resources and supporting livelihoods; creating opportunities for tourism, improving health, maintaining ecosystem services, coping with climate change and natural disasters; their roles in poverty reduction retaining spiritual and cultural values and resolving conflicts (e.g., Naughton-Treves et al., 2005; Scherl et al., 2004; Secretariat of the CBD, 2008; Stolton & Dudely, 2010).

Beresford and Phillips (2000) note, “Whereas protected areas were once planned *against* people, now it is recognised that they need to be planned *with* local people, and often for and by them as well” (p. 19, emphasis in original). The thinking around protected areas is therefore undergoing a fundamental shift to what has been referred to as a new paradigm (Beresford and Phillips, 2000). This new paradigm appreciates the central role of local communities and partners, in addition to that of government,

widens the goal of conservation to include socio-economic objectives, and seeks to establish networks and systems of protected areas. There has been increased attention to the participation, rights and roles of indigenous peoples and local communities with respect to protected areas (Kothari, 2008). These views have also been reflected at the largest global protected area gatherings such as the World Parks Congress (Brosius, 2004) and in international policy processes (Balasinorwala, Kothari, & Goyal, 2004).

Within this changing paradigm there is a new concern for social equity in conservation (Borrini-Feyerabend, Kothari, et al., 2004; Campese et al., 2009). The shift from the protectionist paradigm to a more socially responsive approach in international law and policies has involved an integration of biodiversity conservation and human rights as being mutually supportive (Campese et al., 2007; Shrumm & Campese, 2010). Discussions of a rights based approach to conservation have also forged linkages between conservation, people's rights and justice (Campese et al., 2009; Greiber, 2009). Conservation based on a respect for the rights of indigenous peoples and other bearers of customary knowledge (Adams, 2005; Colchester, 2004) and the appreciation of their cultures, practices and roles in conservation have been advocated (S. Stevens, 2013). In my own observations during global conservation gatherings since 2008 such as the IUCN World Conservation Congress and the Conference of Parties to the CBD, among others, issues pertaining to indigenous peoples' roles and rights in protected areas and conservation in general have been raised, discussed and negotiated.

The discussions on the understanding and value of *governance* of protected areas, as distinct from the concept of *management* have grown in the past decade or so, especially since the World Park Congress, 2003 (Borrini-Feyerabend, 2003; Borrini-Feyerabend, Johnston, & Pansky, 2006; Lockwood, 2010). Various types of protected area governance such as that by indigenous peoples and local communities, private actors and shared or collaborative governance across different IUCN management categories of protected areas have also appeared in contemporary discussions (Borrini-Feyerabend et al., 2013; Dudely, 2008). There has been increasing attention paid in the international policy processes to areas and territories conserved by indigenous peoples and local communities, collectively referred by the

acronym of *ICCAs*, as one of the governance types of protected areas or as an effective areas based means of conservation (Borrini-Feyrabend et al., 2010; Secretariat of the CBD, 2012).

### ***Social science and natural science debates***

Scholars have noted difficulties in the relationships between anthropologists and other social scientists and conservation biologists and ecologists in the domain of nature conservation (Brosius, 2006). The divisions and differences between disciplines are particularly stark in the domain of protected areas (Blaustein, 2007). A contention over the very concepts of nature and environment as socially produced has also been pointed out by scholars while echoing the need for positive relationships and collaboration between the two fields of study (West & Brockington, 2006). Noting the problematic engagement between social researchers and conservationists in a generic sense, also call for a revival of engagement based on constructive notions of politics has been called for (Büscher & Wolmer, 2007). A need for convergence amongst conservation and human rights advocates in the face of destructive development or economic forces has also been pointed out (Kothari, 2008).

While Mascia et al. (2003) call for the mainstreaming of social science in conservation policy and practices, Redford (2011) is critical of the anti-conservation orthodoxy in social science literature and of the generalisations made by some social scientists about conservation practice. It is argued that social science needs to better understand conservation practice and thereby to sharpen its critique of conservation (Redford, 2011). However, in response, Lele (2011) also finds the positioning of activists and scientists under one category as problematic, and stresses the need for clarity in the definition of categories, values, and interest groups in order to achieve better collaboration.

## **1.5 Key debates on people and protected areas in Nepal**

A state induced modern conservation movement has developed in Nepal since the 1970s through the creation of protected areas. This has been institutionalised and developed into a national system. Different types of protected areas encompassing mountains, hills and the lowlands currently constitute 23.23% of the total area of the country (DNPWC, 2012). These developments have to be contextualised in historical and ecological terms, and in relation to various drivers, including national and international conservation discourse, and the presence of various powerful actors who have encouraged the conservation of wildlife in their natural habitats and, later, the creation of protected areas. (See Chapter Four for a consideration of the genesis of protected areas in Nepal)

### **1.5.1 Park-people conflicts in Nepal**

The Nepalese literature depicts numerous park and local people conflicts ranging from local hardship resulting from reduced or restricted access to natural resources and interference with their customary usufruct rights and practices, to tensions between locals and protected area authorities, and damage and loss to property and person by the wildlife (e.g., S. B. Bajracharya & Thapa, 2000; Heinen, 1993; S. Jana, 2007a; Kollmair, Muller-Boker, & Soliva, 2003; Mishra, 1982; Nepal, 2002; Paudel, 2002; Sharma, 1990; B. N. Upreti, 1985; Wells & Sharma, 1998). As noted by Campbell (2007), several studies since the 1990s have documented the socio-economic, political and cultural impacts of nature conservation regimes on various communities in Nepal. They have focussed on conflicts with the security forces over customary entitlements to forest produce as well as interference with local resource management systems through state intervention.

The earliest protected areas in Nepal were set up in the 1970s by the state through centralised and exclusionary processes which privileged the scientific paradigm and western conservation ideology. They were imposed upon the local inhabitants and ignored their concerns (see Chapter Four). The authority of the state to declare and designate protected areas, to impose restrictive rules, to regulate local people and their actions, and to curtail local access to environmental resources are all enshrined in the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (NPWC) Act, 1973 (Paudel et al.,

2012). A fence and fine approach to conservation is inherent in this national legislation (Heinen & Shrestha, 2006). Its strict nature preservation ideals thus provided legal justification for the resettlement of local residents, granted semi judicial power to park wardens, established state control over the land, banned human use of the park resources and allowed the deployment of the state military to achieve its aims (S. Stevens, 1997 ).

### **1.5.2 Protected Areas and their impacts on indigenous peoples in Nepal**

There have been several examples of indigenous people in Nepal<sup>2</sup> being adversely impacted by the state policies and practices of protected area management. Creation of protected areas has “led to the loss of rights of access to forests, water bodies, and land, and the displacement of indigenous peoples from their traditional lands” (ICIMOD, 2007, p. 30). S. Stevens (2013) argues that national parks in the Nepalese Himalayas were imposed on customary territories and collective lands without the consent and participation of resident indigenous peoples.

The report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples specifies that some protected areas in Nepal were created at the expense of indigenous peoples and the Himalayan protected areas cover their customary lands. The UN report states that the national law also fails to recognise “...indigenous peoples’ right to consultation or to access their traditional lands and resources....” (Anaya, 2009, p. 11). It also points to the livelihood impacts on indigenous and traditional communities who have been displaced to park buffer zones, and essentially rendered landless without any livelihood alternatives, for instance, by the establishment of the CNP. The report also mentions examples of ill-treatment and arbitrary detention of villagers and sexual abuse of indigenous women by the park authorities (Anaya, 2009).

As argued by Paudel (2005) state conservation in the protected areas ignores the varied relations of disadvantaged groups to the national parks’ natural resources for their livelihoods and therefore induces conflicts with marginalised groups. Paudel’s

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<sup>2</sup> In Nepal 59 distinct ethnic groups are legally recognized by the government as indigenous nationalities referred to as Janajati. Also see Chapter Nine.

work also highlights that, despite the resistance of indigenous fisher folk to the regime of the CNP, their concerns continue to be marginalised. The detrimental impacts of these restrictive conservation policies and other interventions upon traditional and indigenous fishing communities and their livelihoods in lowland Nepal are also documented (e.g., Bhattarai, 1999; S. Ghimire, 2012; S. Jana, 2007b; Neupane, 2007; Paudel, 2005; B. R. Upreti, 2009).

Likewise, Muller-Boker (2000) reveals how the Tharu indigenous people in the south-central lowland were victimised by the state's national park policies and practices. These practices curtailed their access to the resources of natural environment, infringed upon their livelihoods and rights, and hence enacted injustice. The Chitwan Tharus experienced several socio-economic and cultural impacts as a result of the national park induced relocation (McLean, 1999; McLean & Stræde, 2003). Likewise, Lam (2011) demonstrates how resettlement triggered by the creation and expansion of a wildlife reserve affected the social networks and socio-cultural connections of the Rana Tharu to their land in the far west of Nepal.

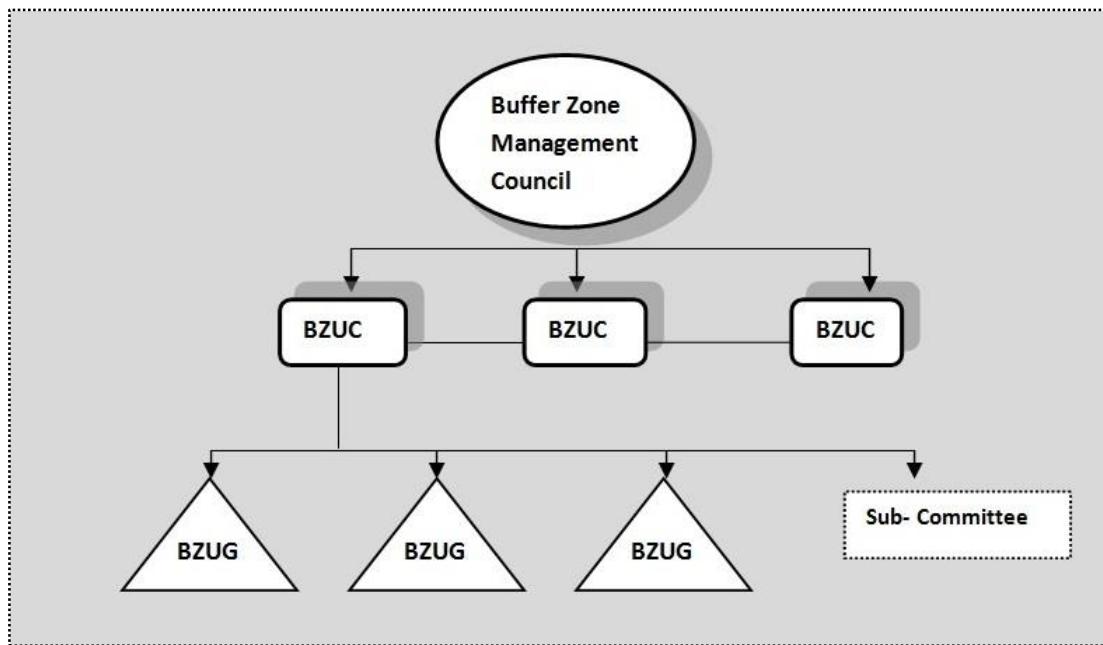
In the Nepalese Himalayas, scholars also explored conflicts between Sherpa indigenous peoples and the national park authorities in the Mt. Everest region, and the ways in which the park interventions have served to hinder indigenous resource management and cultural practices (Brower, 1991; S. Stevens, 1997). Brower (1991) contends the imposition of scientific conservation regimes aided by western conservation ideology on the Sherpa. S. Stevens (2013) is critical of the state's lack of respect and appreciation to Sherpa's conservation values and practices. For the Tamang indigenous people in the mid-hills, the national park regime curtailed access to resources and generated discontentment. It eroded the ways in which the Tamangs understand their environment, and it altered their local human-environment relationships and engagement (Campbell, 2005a, 2005b, 2007).

### **1.5.3 Participatory conservation approaches in Nepal**

As a result of these conflicts and tensions between local population and protected area authorities nationally as well as of the influences of the emerging international discourses on conservation, the need for participatory management regimes was articulated in the major national policy and strategy documents on forestry, conservation and environment in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Since then, there has been a major policy shift from the earlier fortress conservation to a holistic approach involving local people as conservation partners (S. B. Bajracharya & Dahal, 2008; Wells & Sharma, 1998). In practice, this represents a shift from a centralised and strict wilderness preservation ideology towards community engagement for conservation at the ecosystem-level (Keiter, 1995). In this process, we see the beginning of efforts to balance conservation and human needs (Bajimaya, 2003) and towards landscape and trans-boundary conservation (Heinen & Shrestha, 2006).

After nearly two decades of exclusionary and centralised government management of protected areas, two key legislative provisions became milestones in the rise of participatory conservation in Nepal, see Appendix B. (See Budhathoki, 2012 ; H. B. Gurung, 2008 for detailed accounts on the shifting conservation approaches and policies in Nepal.) The first is the provision of Conservation Areas, a type of protected area with community based arrangements for conservation and sustainable resource use. The second is the provision for the participatory management of Buffer Zones (BZs), areas peripheral to national parks and wildlife reserves or settlement enclaves in some mountain national parks. Three tiered local people's institutions and structures (see Figure 1.1) were set up to oversee the conservation and management of the BZs. This also includes the provision of 30 to 50% of protected area revenue for conservation and development in the BZ. These progressive policies, as part of a broader integration of conservation and development, were also intended to ameliorate local conflicts (Heinen & Shrestha, 2006), to reduce the adverse impacts of the protected areas on the local inhabitants (Budhathoki, 2004) and to help local people in community development as well as to meet their subsistence needs for forest resources from the BZs (Bajimaya, 2003).

Nepal is often portrayed as a leader in conservation among developing countries on account of its progressive conservation programs (Heinen & Kattel, 1992; Heinen & Shrestha, 2006). There have also been innovative experiences in reconciling conservation interests and local livelihoods through the community managed Kanchenjunga Conservation Area (G. Gurung, 2006) and in generating socio-economic benefits for local inhabitants through the collaborative management of the Annapurna Conservation Area by the local population and the conservation agency (S. B. Bajracharya, Furely, & Newton, 2005, 2006). The Nepalese experience of BZ management has also been presented as a win-win situation that is mutually beneficial to both the local people and the protected area (Bajimaya, 2003). BZs are also held to provide for the improvement of forests and biodiversity while at the same time fostering a positive attitude of locals towards protected areas as well as engendering feelings of empowerment within the local communities (Budhathoki, 2012).



**Figure 1.1 Three tier structure of local people's institutions in the Buffer Zone.**

Note: Several Buffer Zone User Groups (BZUGs) and subcommittees such as BZ community forest user groups are constituted within a Buffer Zone Users' Committee (BZUC). The Buffer Zone Management Council (BZMC) is an apex body of several BZUCs in each BZ and operates under the aegis of the protected area administration.

#### **1.5.4 Criticisms of Nepalese participatory conservation policies and practices**

The policies and practices of the BZs have also come under heavy criticism. As argued by S. Stevens (2013), in several Nepalese Himalayan national parks, BZs were declared without the effective participation of resident indigenous peoples – as had previously occurred with the original designations of national parks. The legislation for the BZs (see Appendix B) has been perceived as a further extension of state authority through the imposition of restrictions on resource use and as the mere devolution of participatory roles to the local people where the management authority remain top-down (Heinen & Mehta, 2000). It does not guarantee the usufruct rights of the BZ residents over natural resources as locals simply have access to these resources but without ownership or management rights (Agrawal & Varughese, 2000).

The development of the BZs has also been critiqued for its failure to benefit poor, marginalised and disadvantaged groups since the benefits have been largely captured by local power elites (J. Adhikari & Ghimire, 2003; Agrawal, 2005; Paudel, 2005; B. R. Upreti, 2009). Furthermore, it is argued that the BZ program has not adequately addressed the inequities among local communities in terms of the distribution of the costs and benefits of conservation (Spireri & Nepal, 2008) and that rather it has reinforced local social inequalities (Paudel, 2006).

Others have argued that poor and socially disadvantaged groups, including women, have been adversely affected by the BZ program which has failed to improve their livelihoods (M. K. Gurung, Khadka, & Darjee, 2008). The problems of achieving equity, inclusion or representation for those disadvantaged groups, identified as Special Target Groups, have also been noted (UNDP, 2004, p. ix). Campbell (2005b) argues that these participatory reforms including the BZs are rhetorical since they have not transformed the relationships between the state and the people and have failed to address peoples' relationship with the environment. Hence, there have been calls for greater attention to poor and marginalised populations (Jones, 2007) and for the further incorporation of inclusion, equity, and empowerment in the BZs (Budhathoki, 2012).

Despite the changing approaches and participatory reforms in conservation, local resistance and resentments have also persisted. They are sometimes articulated in the form of occasional mass protests or organised civic actions. Characteristically these are made by poor and marginalised groups or by locals in the BZs resenting the protected area authorities and their restrictive policies, or by social and political activists and rights NGOs advocating reforms in protected area management, laws and policies (S. Ghimire, 2009; S. Jana, 2008; Paudel, Budhathoki, & Sharma, 2007; Rai, 2011).

## **1.6 The rationale of this study**

The literature from Nepal discussed above largely portrays park-people conflicts as issues of resource use and human-wildlife conflicts, in which the erosion of local livelihoods and rights violations of the local inhabitants occur in the villages adjacent to or inside the protected areas. While these are important aspects of the tensions, rigorous, critical and robust analyses of park-people conflicts and state-community contestations emphasising their socio-cultural dimensions are lacking, with few exceptions (Brower, 1991; Campbell, 2005a, 2005b, 2007; S. Stevens, 2013; S. F. Stevens, 1993). There is a need to question the dominant narratives and assumptions of park-people conflicts with regard to access to or use of park resources and the inadequacies of the prescriptions currently offered to address them, such as linking conservation and development in the BZs. An understanding and consideration of the realities and worldviews of those marginalised and poor cultural groups who are still embedded in, dependant on and interacting with the natural environments of these protected areas and BZs, is largely lacking in the Nepalese park-people conflict literatures in Nepal.

As also noted by Paudel (2005), there has been scant attention paid to the socio-political and economic dimensions of protected areas in Nepal since the literature is mostly focussed on the technical and scientific aspects of conservation. This study therefore seeks to provide a critical ethnography of park-people or state-indigenous community interaction and relations through the experience of the Sonaha ethnic minority group. This thesis will provide a focused and nuanced treatment of the socio-cultural-spatial dimensions of the contestations between the protected area

authorities and the Sonahas as a case study by problematising the current park-people discourses and debates in Nepal. It undertakes a critical social science inquiry of the state controlled and military deployed Bardia National Park (BNP) and the execution of participatory conservation and development in its BZ. It will critically examine the implications of modern state interventions and of the related conservation discourse upon the lives of the Sonahas. Through this case study, the thesis attempts to contribute to a critical understanding of the democratic governance of protected areas and of the possible links between conservation practices and social-spatial justice.

There are few scholarly works concerning the in-depth study of the consequences of protected area interventions and policies upon indigenous peoples other than the Tharu people in the context of the Nepalese lowlands. With few exceptions (Paudel, 2005; B. R. Upreti, 2009) little scholarly attention has been given to indigenous peoples' interests in freshwater and aquatic resources, and to their river based way of life and livelihoods in the context of state conservation intervention. The cultural dimension and spatial politics of these issues have been inadequately explored although Paudel's (2005) work examines the struggles and responses of marginalised groups, including indigenous fishing communities, around the CNP.

Brown (1997, 1998) provides a useful analysis of the diverse conceptualisations of biodiversity, values and land use conflicts in the BNP. Although Brown's study encompasses indigenous Tharus and their access to and use of grassland resources, the minority Sonahas were not considered. Neither do the Sonahas surface in the social scientific and political ecological analysis of Kollmair et al. (2003) on the BNP and its BZ. The Sonahas' access to aquatic resources and the cultural and symbolic values and meanings underlying their livelihoods, and their relationships with the river/landscape have not been dealt with by any research investigations to date.

Even when referring to resource use conflicts, the park-people conflict literature in Nepal places greater emphasis and focus on peasants' land-based agricultural resources or on local peoples' access to forest and grassland products. Inquiries into the dynamics of river based local livelihoods and aquatic resources are scarce. Likewise, attempts to employ discursive analysis to park-people contestations or to

academic inquiries into power structures, politics and the implications of mainstream conservation discourse with respect to the protected areas in Nepal are lacking. There has been insufficient scholarly consideration of the responses and resistance of marginalised social groups in the context of protected areas in general, and of those in Nepal, in particular. This study will therefore generate a critical ethnography of the contestations and resistance of the Sonahas against the state conservation regime and its interventions by paying attention to the material and symbolic aspects and the cultural and spatial politics of this dispute (see section 3.7).

The Sonahas are a largely understudied autochthonous and ethno-linguistic group. There is no published scholarly contribution or literature about them extant other than my own work (S. Jana, 2013). A study by Neupane (2007) focuses on traditional livelihoods in relation to the Park whereas that by G. P. Adhikari (2009) explores the social-cultural life of the Sonahas entirely missing its relationship to the dynamics of the Park. These omissions have also encouraged me to document their unwritten history, their customary and cultural practices, their unique associations and connections with the river and riparian landscapes and environments, and their stories, worries and struggles in relation to the Park regime. I have been further motivated to understand, capture and document their experiences since, during my prior interactions to this group (see Chapter Three), I had noticed that they had been undergoing cultural changes including those to their customary livelihoods. The group is yet to be officially recognised as one of the indigenous peoples of Nepal, yet it (still) possesses a unique cultural identity and way of life.

Tensions between migrant artisanal gold miners and a national park in Costa Rica were explored by Naughton (1993) but in a very different context from that of the Sonahas. Such a scenario opens up the possibility for a wider academic contribution by exploring and examining an indigenous people's interests in fresh waters and a river/landscape and the use of aquatic resources in the context of an inland protected area. The topic of protected areas and indigenous people's contestations, struggles and politics has yet to be explored through the application of social theories of space, though this has been called for (West et al., 2006), see section 2.7. There is also an immense opportunity to contribute to contemporary geographical discussions on space and the political ecology of conservation through this case study.

## **1.7 Thesis Overview**

Chapter Two presents an overview of discussions in the broad field of the political ecology of conservation. I discuss the notion of people's resistance to the state, particularly their resistance to nature conservation as well as the approach of cultural politics. I then introduce key concepts of high relevance to this thesis such as discourse and its linkages with power, power and subjectivity, governmentality, hegemony, and a perspective on dwelling. This is followed by a consideration of social theories of space mainly following the work of Henri Lefebvre, and linkages of space with power. Finally, based on these theoretical discussions, I develop the framework and epistemology that has guided my inquiry and analysis.

Chapter Three provides my methodological approach, based on an interpretive and qualitative research paradigm. I dwell upon the inherent reflexivity and relationship between researchers and researched. I discuss the ethnographic and case study approaches of this study and the research process adopted. I present and discuss the multiple methods, tools, and processes used for the collection of empirical information. I then discuss the processes and approaches of my analysis.

Chapter Four provides a historical review and analysis of the inception and genesis of protected areas in Nepal mainly focussing on the period between the 1950s and 1970s. It presents the unique socio-political and ecological context of Nepal, and considers the drivers that and key players who provided the impetus for the modern conservation and protected area movements. The early protected areas were very much a response to narratives of ecological crisis, and particularly mega fauna crisis in the Nepalese lowland Tarai in the 1950s-70s (and, later, to the degradation of the Himalayan environment). They were also shaped by the hunting legacy and the interests of the ruling elites since the Rana regime, including the powerful monarchy in post 1950 Nepal, and national and international conservation actors, in part through the medium of foreign aid. It therefore provides a broader national context for the BNP and conservation discourse considered in this thesis.

Chapter Five, offers essential background information to situate and contextualise the river delta, the ethnic group and the national park under study. I introduce the region of Bardia including, in its historical context, the Tharu dominant ethnic group, and

the related land tenure issues. I then describe the historical contexts and the creation of the BNP and its BZ, and the various participatory conservation and development projects in the study area. This is followed by information on the geographical, socio-ecological and demographic setting of the lower Karnali River delta where the Sonahas reside and where most of my ethnographic fieldwork was carried out. I also present hitherto undocumented population figures for the Sonahas and a glimpse of the various natural resource management regimes in the delta.

Chapter Six, then documents the history, customary way of life and ancestral riverine territory of the Sonahas who claim to be among the indigenous peoples of the delta. The customary practices of fishing and gold panning in the rivers are detailed together with their cultural and economic significance. I reveal the Sonahas largely undocumented customary practices of governing and managing the gold panning areas, associated cultural practices that have recently been eroded but which still remain in the memory of the Sonahas. I then map and portray their past and current mobility patterns within the delta. I discuss the status of limited landholding or landlessness among the Sonahas. I then depict the Sonahas' relationships, emotional attachments and lived experiences with the rivers and riparian areas in the delta, and their associated understandings and meanings through which I conceptualise and argue this riverscape as a biocultural space over and above its natural entity.

In Chapter Seven, I show how the lives of the Sonahas have been significantly altered and constrained through the imposition of state bureaucracy controlled and military deployed strict management of the national park and its regulations since the 1970s. I examine the various impacts of this conservation intervention and the coercive enforcement of these rules upon the lives of the Sonahas, including the recent tensions stemming from community based anti-poaching operations. I present my argument that the negative impacts of these initiatives upon the Sonahas are complex, extend beyond customary livelihoods and resource use, and entail the loss of access and control over ancestral territory, the dismantling of customary gold panning commons, and even the triggering of the Sonahas' outmigration and their resulting push into exploitative bonded labour systems. I argue that this is a case of state conservation violence against the marginalised Sonahas.

In Chapter Eight, I demonstrate how the BNP was discursively created, including the discursive construction and representation of the Karnali-Geruwa riverscape by state as well as non-state conservation actors in a way which ignored the historical interaction and presence of the Sonahas. I go on to contend that the Sonahas were largely invisible in conservation circles from the creation of the Park in the 1970s until 2000, and their visibility thereafter included the misrepresentation of the Sonahas and their customary occupations. I then discuss a scenario of how mainstream conservation discourse (national-global), through a network of actors and institutions, percolates and is reproduced at the grassroots. The Sonahas encounters and appropriation of the mainstream discourse through BZ and ICDP projects is presented. I argue the mainstream conservation discourse that the Sonahas are subjected to is a means by which power is exercised against them with multiple consequences. As the Sonahas are governed by this hegemonic discourse, it reinforces and legitimises violence against the Sonahas, and marginalises their own discourse and worldviews.

In Chapter Nine, I demonstrate how the Sonahas have been exercising their agency to resist the Park regime through various means and forms of direct and indirect, individual and collection actions. I trace the trajectory of the social movement of the Sonahas which has been backed by civil society organisations as well as their involvement in a counter discourse of rights and ethnic identity. I demonstrate how the Sonaha organised resistance against the national park restrictions on fishing and gold panning has been increasingly fused with their collective ethnic consciousness, and the assertion and reconstruction of their cultural and ethnic identity.

In Chapter Ten, I provide a summary of key findings and discuss the insights emerging from this analysis. I address the research questions of the study, present its theoretical and practical implications; and summarise the contributions of the thesis.

# **Chapter Two: Political Ecology and Social Theories of Space; perspectives, concepts and an analytical framework**

## **Part - One**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter is divided into two inter-related parts. Part one introduces the field of political ecology, recognises shifts in research practice in this field, and considers relevant literature on the political ecology of conservation. It then discusses the concept of resistance in general and peoples' resistance to nature conservation in particular. It relates this to a conception and framework of cultural politics. The chapter then briefly dwells upon the theory of discourse and its links with power. This is followed by a consideration of the key theoretical concepts that have informed this thesis, namely power, subjectivity, governmentality, hegemony and a dwelling perspective. Part two then presents a perspective on social theories of space and their relevance to this thesis. The final section illustrates the framework of this study.

### **2.2 The terrain of political ecology**

The term “political ecology” was first coined by Eric Wolf in 1972 (Scoons, 1999). The origins of the political ecology approach can be traced back to the 1970s when it developed as a response to the hitherto largely apolitical nature of research on environmental problems. It could also be seen as a critique of traditional methods of ecological anthropology and cultural ecology. In the 1980s, concerns over ecology were increasingly related to those of political economy; for example soil erosion in developing countries, hitherto seen as a technical problem, was approached through the lens of political economy. Environmental problems were increasingly seen as social in origin and definition rather than as a matter of over-population, technology or management (Bryant & Bailey, 1997; Peet & Watts, 2003).

Robbins (2004) suggests that the field represents an alternative to “apolitical” ecology on which he outlines three key criticisms (p. 5). First, a critique of the Malthusian notion of eco-scarcity and the limits to growth thesis that views environmental crises as demographic problems existing at the sites of resource use, amongst the poor, and for which population control is advocated as a solution. Hence, it critiques simplistic neo-Malthusian explanations of global loss of biodiversity associated with population pressure and overexploitation by humans (Brown, 1998). Second, there is the scepticism of any techno-managerial and scientific fix of ecological problems which favours modernisation and market forces. Third, political and economic forces are prioritised with an argument that apolitical ecologies are implicitly political despite their claims of objectivity (Robbins, 2004).

The linkages and an understanding of the relationships between social, political and environmental processes, using a framework of structural relations of power and domination over the resources of the environment (i.e., a structuralist perspective), were increasingly sought in early work in the field of political ecology (Scoons, 1999). For example, the early theoretical outlines of political ecology were applied in the contested frontiers of the southern Brazilian Amazon, to analyse the contestations between multiple actors over definitions of access to and control over natural resources as well as in ethnographic analyses of grassroots struggles between farmers and ranchers over land and water which were influenced by wider political and economic forces (Little, 1999). Political ecology broadly defines the relations of power and difference in interactions between human groups and biophysical environments (Gezon & Paulson, 2005).

A third world political ecology was advocated as a new research field developing an integrated understanding of how environmental and political forces interact to mediate social and environmental changes and outcomes (Bryant, 1992). It dwells upon the problems and politics of third world environmental change, crisis and conflict. It posits a politicised environment, and hence a connection between environment, ecology and politics. Environmental problems in the third world are viewed as manifestations of broader political and economic challenges. Hence, they require changes and struggles at all levels and scales of political and economic activity, and the transformation of unequal power relations. The actions and interests

of place and non-place-based actors in environmental conflicts are also integral to this field (Bryant & Bailey, 1997). The idea of the disproportionate distribution of the costs and benefits of environmental change between actors of unequal power is generally accepted among political ecologists (Robbins, 2004).

The four key narratives of political ecology, as captured by Robins (2004), are relevant to this thesis. First, the degradation and marginalisation thesis perceives environmental change, degradation and deforestation as being induced by marginalised and poor people, producing a nexus between degradation, overexploitation and poverty. Second, the environmental conflict thesis views heightened conflicts between different social groups as resulting from scarcity induced by the enclosure or appropriation of environmental resources. Conflicts and struggles over natural resources are also analysed as economic, ecological and cultural distribution conflicts (Escobar, 2006). Third, the conservation and control thesis discusses the erosion of local control over resources, and the negative impacts of environmental conservation by state and other actors. Fourth, the environmental identity and social movement thesis postulates linkages between the political and social struggles as well as actions across class, ethnicity and gender lines over the issues of livelihoods and conservation (Robins, 2004, pp. 14-15).

### **2.2.1 Criticisms of political ecology**

The field of political ecology has experienced various criticisms. Peet and Watts (2003) questioned the analyses of political ecology in the 1970s and 80s that viewed poverty as the main cause of environmental deterioration, for what they perceived as its undue emphasis on poverty and poor peasants. This was seen as blaming the victim while neglecting the power of capital and as exhibiting a bias against the rural, the agrarian and the Third World. The privileging of the land as compared to other resources and also the focus on poverty centred analysis was also criticised.

Research on the third world political ecology was therefore criticised for its structuralist legacy and its lack of attention to the micro-politics that condition environmental resource conflicts (Moore, 1993). It is acknowledged that such a critique was valid for the 1970s- mid 1980s period when economic determinism

prevailed in political ecology (Bryant & Bailey, 1997). Scholars emphasising symbolic aspects and the cultural domain beyond the material dimension are likewise critical of this economic determinism (Baviskar, 2008; Moore, 1999). Likewise, Bryant (2000) is critical of the inadequate attention to questions of discourse, and hence to the multiple facets of cultural politics surrounding the discourses in the context of environment conservation debates in developing countries.

An anthropological critique by West (2005) on several aspects of political ecology also informs this thesis. First, in its rush to demonstrate how extra-local forces or external structures impact on social-ecological lives, political ecology generalises social-ecological agency as well as local environmental understandings and actions. Second, there is an inadequate appreciation of how different peoples understand, know, produce and become part of their environment. Third, an actor centred approach fails to acknowledge that actors are a composite of relations which interact with the environment and with other actors, creating themselves, others and their environment in a dialectic manner which is central to the comprehension of the relationship between peoples and their environments. Fourth, it fails to take indigenous epistemologies into account. However, political ecology's strength lies in its focus on issues of equality and justice in the context of conflicts relating to natural resources as well as in the analysis of unequal and unjust power relationships (Baviskar, 2008).

### **2.2.2 The discursive turn in political ecology**

Scholars have noted a discursive turn in political ecology mainly since the 1990s (Bryant, 2000; Escobar, 1996; Fletcher, 2010; Neumann, 2004a). This indicates a shift from a structuralist to a post-structuralist political ecology. Geographers have postulated a more robust political ecology that integrates politics centrally but also incorporates a theory of discourse, which includes the politics of meaning and the construction of knowledge, thus drawing upon post-structuralism's concerns of power, knowledge and discourse (Peet & Watts, 2003). Escobar (1996) also calls for the consideration of discourse and practices around nature as historically produced and known.

Bryant (2000), while examining the discussion of conservation as a moral geography and discourse, claims that the socio-cultural complexities surrounding discourse formation and its associated material practices have not been explored adequately and thus he calls for a discursive political ecology. A shift from Neo-Marxist Political Ecology to Post-Marxist Political Ecology has taken place since the 1990s with discourse becoming central to these analyses (Bryant, 2001). One of post Marxist political ecology's main contributions is to point out the significance of discourse not only to explain complex human-environmental interactions but also in specifying "the cultural politics of resistance" (Bryant, 2001, p. 168), which is an important aspect of my inquiry.

Goldman and Schurman (2000) identify two major strands of what they term the "new political ecology" that encompasses a range of scholarship on peoples' interactions with their environments (p. 568). These strands are made up of those studying environmental struggles as both material and symbolic; those looking at discursive practices that embody power relations and analysing alternative discourses on nature, environment, and environmental degradation. Examples of this would be exploring power dynamics and power relations inbuilt in conservation discourses and agendas. These are relevant with respect to the struggles and discourses surrounding the Bardia National Park in this thesis.

### **2.2.3 The political ecology of conservation**

The field of political ecology has the potential to enhance our understanding of the political dimensions of conservation issues (Neumann, 1992; Peet & Watts, 2003; Robbins, 2004). As outlined by Adams and Hutton (2007), scholarly works on the political ecology of conservation tend to address three areas of concern (as discussed in Chapter One) all of which inform my study. These are: first, considerations of the state's exercise of control, power and violence in the name of conservation (Neumann, 2004a; Peluso, 1992a, 1993); second, the creation of protected areas in colonial and post-colonial contexts (Brockington et al., 2008; Neumann, 1998); third, critical inquiry into the roles of NGOs in conservation (Bryant, 2002). Adams and Hutton (2007) also identify major issues and trends in the political ecology of biodiversity conservation. First, is the hegemonic position of conservation science as

a means of understanding and therefore protecting nature; second, is the growing recognition of the social impacts of conservation (see Chapter One); third, is the technical improvement and reform of conservation policies; fourth, is the growing power of international conservation agencies; fifth, is the growing influence of neo-liberal thinking in conservation.

Examining the problems of wildlife conservation, and based on his historical analysis, Neumann (1992) demonstrates that states exercised increased control over resource access following the legacy of British colonialism and, in the process, impacted the customary rights of local populations. Neumann (1998) argues that imported Anglo-American wilderness aesthetics were being imposed onto African landscapes, thereby inventing environments that had not existed previously. This aesthetic notion of nature facilitated the removal and disempowerment of local inhabitants who had created the very natural landscapes that the colonial and post-colonial officials aimed to preserve.

Escobar (1998), in his inquiry into the discourses of sustainable development and conservation, proposes an alternative framework for rethinking biological diversity conservation from the perspective of “a political ecology of social movements” (p. 76). While Escobar acknowledges the biophysical aspects based on a discursive perspective, *biodiversity* is treated in a non-absolute sense, as discursive inventions, formations and constructions, and thus as a cultural and political discourse. Such a perspective also informs understanding of protected areas in this thesis. Likewise, in another poststructuralist analysis, Sletto (2002) uncovers hegemonic discourses of nature and conceptualisations of local fishermen’s practices by influential conservationists and agencies. In another work, Sletto (2005) explores how two groups of fishing populations appropriated hegemonic conservation discourse to legitimise their own fishing practices and claims.

Referring to the notion of the “tragedy of enclosure” (The Ecologist, 1993, 1994) in the context of the third world environmental crisis, Bryant and Bailey (1997) argue that state control over resources imposes disproportionate costs on the poor, women and indigenous minorities, as well as increases the marginality of these groups by reducing or denying them access to the resources necessary for their livelihood. In a

similar vein, Neumann (2004b) uses the notion of “conservation enclosure” to demonstrate how protected areas function as enclosures<sup>3</sup> with restrictions on access to a variety of communal resources (p. 201). Neumann argues that the common patterns of conservation between the 19th and the early 21st centuries have to be seen in relation to the characteristics of modern state and its territorial sovereignty as well as in the expression of modernity (through progress and development). The states’ assertion of their ownership and control by dismantling and enclosing the commons can be seen as fulfilling the claims of the modern state (Neumann, 2004b). A range of scholarships on peoples’ resistance to modern conservation, as discussed in the next section, are also integral to the literatures on political ecology of conservation.

## **2.3 Resistance and peoples’ resistance to conservation**

### **2.3.1 Everyday forms of resistance**

Scott (1985) expresses his dissatisfaction with the enormous amount of attention given to open revolts by peasants in comparison to the scant attention paid to resistance in peoples’ everyday lives and its associated symbolic and ideological underpinnings. Therefore, Scott argues for a deeper appreciation of “everyday forms of symbolic resistance” that also articulate the “everyday acts of material resistance” and a consideration of the meanings and values associated with these acts and, hence, of a culture of resistance (p. 33).

Also referred to as “commonplace forms of resistance”, in Scotts (1985) view these seemingly simple and ordinary, but constant, struggles of peasants at the grassroots do not attain the status of collective defiance (p. xvi). They avoid direct and symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms and rather resort to “ordinary weapons” of the weak (p. 29). These not so apparent, sometimes unnoticeable, silent, indirect, anonymous actions are important as these kinds of resistance are effective

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<sup>3</sup> Enclosure originated historically in the 15th to the 19th centuries in England as a process of transferring land and resources from communal ownership to private ownership. This practice was later exported around the globe as European colonial powers made claims of ownership to all land they considered wastelands or uncultivated and seized control of forests, grazing lands, water sources and other “commons”(Neumann, 2004b, p. 201; The Ecologist, 1993).

and significant in the long run. Scott shows that everyday resistance by subaltern groups demonstrates that they have not consented to domination. Hence, his notion of ideological resistance defies, or at least calls into question, Gramsci's pronouncement of ideological hegemony (see subsection 2.5.3).

Scott (1990) also maintains that subordinate groups do not contest their subordination openly but through "hidden transcripts" of subordinate groups. They create a social space, a "backstage discourse", in which offstage dissent to domination and power relations is voiced. Thus, they operate behind the back of dominant authority. These hidden transcripts are also expressed openly but in a disguised form. This low profile and disguised form of resistance or dissent by subordinate groups is referred as "the infrapolitics of subordinate groups" (Scott, 1990, pp. xiii, 19). Scott argues that this conceptualisation provides new understandings of resistance to domination

Holmes (2007) acknowledges a criticism that Scott's theory of everyday resistance might contribute to or help to justify strict measures by conservation actors to repair damage done in the course of resistance. Likewise, that there is a social distance between resisters and those making decisions about conservation. The identity of the key players could be fluid and complex, and it may not be clear who decides and who enforces conservation regulations given the multiplicity of conservation actors. However, the concept of everyday resistance provides insights into the relationships between protected area authorities and local people, and reveals the frequent discontents and contested politics therein (Holmes, 2007). Paying attention to hidden transcripts as well as to everyday acts of resistance of subordinate groups provides an alternative understanding of resistance. This is of particular relevance to this thesis in understanding everyday resistance of a minority ethnic group to national park regime.

### **2.3.2 Resistance as struggle and opposition to power**

In his discussion of power relations, Foucault (1982) depicts resistance as "struggles and oppositions" (p. 780). For example, he refers to various oppositions such as the power of men over women, of parents over children, of psychiatry over the mentally ill, of medicine over population, of administration over peoples' lives etc.

Considering the forms of resistance against different forms of power, he uses resistance as a catalyst to interrogate power relations and to locate positions, points of application and methods used. To understand power relations, one needs to investigate the forms of resistance and related attempts to dissociate or disconnect the relations of power (Foucault, 1982).

Foucault (1982) argues that these struggles are more than anti-authority struggles and that they have several common features. First, they are not limited to one country or any particular form of “government”; second, they are concerned with the effects of the exercise of power over people; third, they are immediate struggles in that they relate to the nearest or immediate enemy and seek immediate solutions (rather than a revolution); fourth, they assert individuals’ rights to be different, to oppose the separation of the individual from community life and links with other community members and construction of his/her own identity in a constraining way; fifth, they are in opposition to the effects of power and are also linked to the struggle against the privileging of a knowledge which imposes representations on people; sixth, the question of “who we are” is at the core of these struggles, which resists abstractions by the state, science, or the administration that ignore who we are individually and that determine “who one is” (Foucault, 1982, p. 781).

In Foucault’s (1982) view, these struggles attack not the institution of power (a group, a class, elite) but the technique or form of power. Therefore this resistance is against the form of power that creates individual subjects. Three types of struggles are discussed: against forms of domination (ethnic, social, religious); against forms of exploitation (that which separates individuals from what they produce) and struggles against subjection, forms of subjectivity and submission of the individual (Foucault, 1982), also see subsection 2.5.1. The mechanism of subjection is also related to other forms of domination and exploitation. Foucault’s views on forms of resistance against the form and effects of power contribute to a better understanding of the relations and exercise of power in the context of marginalised ethnic groups’ struggles against state conservation interventions.

### **2.3.3 Peoples' resistance to conservation**

A wide range of scholarship suggests that there are various forms of local peoples' resistance in the context of conservation. Guha's (1990) seminal work on local resistance by forest based peasants in the context of state forest management in the Indian Himalaya (Peluso, 1992b) describes local struggles over access to state controlled forest resources that also saw the development of grassroots ecological movements (Neumann, 1992).

Peluso (1992a), in her inquiry into the history of state scientific forestry and the responses of forest based communities against this in Java, develops a theory of resource access and control and related forms of resistance. Peluso argues that peasant resistance to forest conservation emerged because of the criminalisation of their customary rights over adjacent lands. It is often an outcome of confrontations between the coercive state and rural peasants over the control of resources. Peasants' acts of resistance constitute "forest based cultures of resistance" as well as "repertoires of resistance" (p. 12).

Neumann (1992) also describes the everyday forms of peasant resistance against the Tanzanian state and its conservation measures in a national park, in order to defend their access to natural resources. The silent and anonymous struggles of peasants are the only option for subordinate groups seeking to reclaim and maintain their customary rights. Neumann thereby emphasises the relevance of looking at micro-politics or local politics and informal political structures to advance the analysis of the political ecology of resource conflicts and environmental problems.

Campbell (2005b, 2007) discusses the discontent and resistance of Nepalese Himalayan communities to the environmentalist state and its related surveillance procedures. Campbell (2007) argues that modernist separations (nature-society) in conservation programmes are resisted through various everyday practices and counter discourses. Campbell emphasises the practical realities of hill ethnic groups based on their ecological engagement and relationships with their environment and sees their historical memory as contesting the current regime of nature protection. People's non-compliance with park rules suggests their resistance. Resistance to conservation interventions in human-environmental relationships can be understood

as being not only about the appropriation of material resources but also “.... as displacements to particular dwelling ontologies....” (Campbell, 2007, p. 97).

In their analysis of the politics of nature conservation, Brechin et al. (2003) explore local conflicts and resistance. Supporting the prevailing scholarly arguments (Bryant & Bailey, 1997; K. B. Ghimire & Pimbert, 1997; Neumann, 1998; Peluso, 1992a) they also maintain that the reactions of communities affected by conservation initiatives are articulated in the form of violent as well as non-violent responses. Their analyses indicate that local resistance to conservation initiatives (and notably to the designation of protected areas) will intensify if communities are marginalised by these conservation interventions. However, as others argue, powerful conservation regimes can prevail even over local resistance (Brockington, 2004; Holmes, 2013).

A much more focussed treatment of local resistance against conservation interventions in protected areas is offered by Holmes (2007) based on theories of subaltern politics. Holmes discusses various forms and facets of local resistance: first, the continuation of banned livelihood practices; second, the symbolic dimension of who owns and controls the resources; third, the popularity of fire as a response to the protection of resources where there has been a long history of its use; and fourth, protests and struggles over natural resources. For instance, also examines the resistance of the local Oromo Arssi in Ethopia against the state wildlife sanctuary and its policies, was mainly to maintain their access to their land (Nishizaki, 2004). Struggles over protected areas are not isolated but are often part of a larger political struggle or a wider political landscape and it is important to understand and assess the political contexts of these forms of resistance in order to explore possible solutions and to address each issue or challenge appropriately (Holmes, 2007).

Covert and overt responses of marginalised and poor groups to conservation and development interventions have been explored in a Nepalese national park (Paudel, 2005), see subsection 1.5.2. Norgrove and Hulme (2006) examine the use of hybrid forms of resistance by people neighbouring a Ugandan national park in order to challenge hegemonic conservation initiatives. They invoke Scott's (1985) critique of the Gramscian notion of hegemony by demonstrating how hegemonic conservation ideology was resisted and challenged by people near the park in their counter

hegemonic struggles. Interestingly, Sletto (2005) shows that that same dominant conservation discourse can be used for both exercise of power against and resistance to power by fishing communities. In his discussion on national parks as contested state spaces, Dunn (2009) notes that local residents may resist state making practices, as well as official discourses of state, sovereignty, and human–nature relationships and the post-colonial state’s discursive authorship of sovereignty and stateness.

#### **2.3.4 The framework of cultural politics**

The framework of cultural politics provides a useful means by which to approach and examine acts of local resistance to conservation initiatives and contestations over space among competing actors and interests. From a social movement perspective, cultural politics is understood in an “enactive and relational” sense, thus “a process enacted” when different “social actors shaped by or embodying different cultural meanings and practices come in conflict with each other” (Alvarez, Dagnino, & Escobar, 1998, p. 7). In their view, meanings and practices for instance by those considered marginal, oppositional and alternative in relation to a given dominant cultural order can be the source of political processes. Culture is political since meanings are constitutive of processes that seek to redefine social power. When social movements forge alternative conceptions such as those of nature, democracy etc., they challenge dominant cultural meanings and enact cultural politics. The cultural politics of social movements also strive to challenge or unsettle the dominant political culture and enact cultural contestations (Alvarez et al., 1998).

Engagement in cultural politics helps to determine the meanings of social practices and, moreover, it determines the power (or lack thereof) of groups and individuals to define these meanings. Therefore, cultural politics is about redefining the meanings and practices, and the conceptions, of the politics of representation as well as the power of interpretations. Besides a consideration of movements that are clearly cultural, or with culture based claims, cultural politics are also enacted when cultural actors intervene in policy debates in attempts to unmask dominant cultural interpretations of politics, and to challenge prevailing political practices (Alvarez et al., 1998).

Given the perspective of viewing the environment as a cultural construct, uncovering the cultural dimensions of environmental politics has been advocated as a form of cultural politics (Fischer & Hager, 1999). They aver that to examine environmental discourse as cultural politics is to reconstruct ways in which the cultural power effects (of discourse) operate, to identify their broader social and cultural implications, and thereby to recognise the issues of cultural identity and our relationships with nature. Peet and Watts (2003) also stress the cultural aspects of politics as central to the new political ecology that is sensitive to “environmental politics as a process of cultural mobilisation, and ways in which such cultural practices - whether science, or traditional knowledge, or discourses.... or property rights- are contested....and negotiated” (p. 6).

While mapping the struggles of subaltern groups, in the highlands of Zimbabwe, Moore (1998) viewed resistance as a spatial practice, linked to the politics of place, and referred to it as the “cultural politics of place” (p. 347). This struggle over territory is treated as being simultaneously material and symbolic (Moore, 1993, 1998). Referring to such an approach as cultural politics, the symbolic aspects and the material aspects of these conflicts have been linked, thereby embedding resource struggles within a larger symbolic economy (Baviskar, 2003, 2008).

From the discussions so far, it can be seen that we are now arriving at an understanding that the politics of resistance has symbolic and cultural dimensions, and cannot be limited to material dimensions or material struggles. Therefore, local peoples' resistance to modern conservation initiatives is not only about access to resources but is also associated with multiple meanings and identities in relation to landscapes (Brockington, 2004; Holmes, 2007; Neumann, 1998).

Nygren (2004) examines the conflicts over wilderness preservation and local livelihoods of a population on the fringes of a Nicaraguan biological reserve, as struggles over both resources and meanings. Nygren approaches this through the lens of the political ecology of struggles over resources by combining the frameworks of post structuralism and structuralism. This framework of cultural politics thus offers a route to synergise structuralist as well as post-structuralist political ecology, in the treatment of politics and cultural contestations in the domain of conservation. It

therefore offers a means by which to unpack local struggles and offers a framework for this study (see section 2.7).

## 2.4 Understanding discourse

In his examination of environmental discourse, Hager (1995) offers a definition of *discourse* more broadly:

.....a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categorisations that are produced, reproduced, and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities (p.44).

Three key features of discourse are inherent in this understanding: first, it is an assemblage and a collective whole and totality of ideas and concepts; secondly, it is produced, reproduced and transformed through practices; and thirdly, it shapes meanings attached to realities. Discourse allows people to construct meanings and relationships in order to make sense of their social and physical surroundings (Durand & Vázquez, 2011). Consequently, a constructivist as well as a poststructuralist line of thought is immanent in the understanding of discourse.

Discourses are also understood as “frameworks that embrace particular combinations of narratives, concepts, ideologies and signifying practices, each relevant to particular realms of social action” (Barnes & Duncan, 1992, p. 8). Hence, discourse provides a framework for understanding contexts, processes and realities. As a structure they are both enabling and constraining. Discourses both frame and carry knowledge and therefore they shape social understandings (Fischer, 2003).

The theory of discourse also owes much to Foucault’s study of knowledge, power and representations (Barnes & Duncan, 1992). In Foucault’s (1980) view discourse is produced and formed. Discourse circulates from one instance to the next. He also refers to the ensemble of discourses as well as to the forms of discourses. In Fischer’s (2003) reading of his work, Foucault focuses on the role of discourses as they have functioned in specific historical contexts; the discursive construction of subjects (how discourse makes people) and knowledge; and on the inter-dependence of discursive practices (the multiplicity of discourses) in bringing about social

change. Changing discursive practices are therefore important in the process of social transformation. Hager (1995) notes Foucault's view that rather than seeing discourse merely as a medium through which individuals can manipulate the world, is in itself "part of reality, and constitutes the discoursing subject" (p. 49).

Escobar (1996), referring to the poststructuralist analysis of discourse in the sense of Foucault and Deleuze who deny material analysis, avers that "it is a social theory, a theory of social production of reality which includes the analysis of representations as social facts...." (p. 326), that is, discourse is not separated from material reality since materiality is mediated by discourse. This approach acknowledges the crucial role of language in the construction of social reality not simply as an articulation of reality but as being constitutive of reality. Escobar (1996) views discourse as "... the articulation of knowledge and power, of statements and visibilities, of the visible and the expressible.....process through which social reality inevitably comes into being" (p. 326). It is therefore constitutive of reality. Hence, Phillips and Hardy (2002) highlight the importance of discourse:

...without discourse, there is no social reality, and without understanding discourse, we cannot understand our reality, our experiences, or ourselves...Social reality is produced and made real through discourses....(p. 3).

Hager (1995) introduces a concept of "discourse coalitions" that also aids in the understanding of the functioning of a discourse. These are defined as the ensemble of (1) a set of story-lines (2) the actors who utter these story-lines; and (3) the practices in which this discursive activity is based. Story-lines are viewed as "...the discursive cement that keeps the discourse-coalition together" (p. 65). Actors can agree and group around a particular story line (although they may have different interpretations of it). Discourse coalitions of protected areas (conservation) also encompass global story lines, sets of actors and related practices (Hoath, 2005). Likewise, Escobar also examines, how discourse (i.e., of biodiversity) fosters a complex network of actors (local to global) that he refers to as the biodiversity production network based on actor-network theory. This network is composed of a chain of sites (not merely local) that are characterised by varying processes, practices and actors with diverging perspectives and political stakes.

#### **2.4.1 Discourse-Power**

Discourse-power nexus is crucial to this thesis. Scholars have noted Foucault's constitutive view of discourse (Fischer, 2003; Hager, 1995) which sees discourse as constitutive of power and knowledge. For instance, Hager (1995) also notes Foucault's understanding that the "...power of an institution is permanent in so far as it is a constant feature of the discourses through which the role of that institution is being reproduced" (p. 49) Hence, power is not a feature of an institution rather it is relationally defined, in the way in which institutions and actors are implicated in discourses. Hence, institutions are only powerful insofar as they are constituted as authorities over other actors through discourse.

Drawing a connection between discourse and power, Foucault (1980) remarks that, in a society

...there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse (p. 93).

Foucault (1980) raises the question of which types of power produce discourses of truth and considers the effects of this on society. Stressing the effects of the power linked to the institution and the functioning of organised scientific discourse that is embodied in various institutions (e.g., universities), he contends that inquiry into knowledge must wage its struggle against "...the effects of the power of a discourse that is considered to be scientific...." (p. 84).

Some discourses can become socially dominant, and are therefore seen as natural and truthful, while others are suppressed or silenced. Which discourse is accepted as being correct, and by whom, is the result of social struggle and political power relations, with material and symbolic consequences for the people involved (Bryant, 2000; Durand & Vázquez, 2011; Neumann, 2004a). This suggests that the contestations between dominant or powerful discourses and alternative or marginalised discourses are integral to politics. Castree and Braun (2001) contend that discourse does not reveal or hide the truth (of nature) but creates its own truths.

For example, discourses of “nature” are so deeply entrenched in both lay and expert ways of thinking that they appear natural. A discourse thus constitutes a naturalising power. However, the power of discourse comes not so much from the abstract ideas that it represents but from its material basis in institutions and practices that constitute the realm of micro-politics (Barnes & Duncan, 1992). In fact, Fischer (2003) also views discourse as a powerful meta-category of politics that shapes practices in both a subtle and a recognisable manner.

It is on these understandings of discourse-power nexus that I approach politics or the power of mainstream conservation discourse and discursive practices in the context of this thesis (see section 2.7).

## **2.5 Key concepts of relevance to this thesis**

### **2.5.1 Power and subjectivity**

An analysis of power is integral to political ecology. Wilshusen (2003) discusses three perspectives on power in the political ecology literatures. In his view, the first two, Marxian political economy, and actor centred political analysis (also referred as action-centred), are largely materialist understandings of power. The third, post structuralism, stresses the symbolic and discursive realms and practices (the symbolic aspect of power), and, in my view falls within the realm of cultural politics.

Foucault is critical of political theory that pays excessive attention to institutions and macro power rather than to micro practices, and therefore his investigations focus on micro power (Hajer, 1995). His notion of power as relational rather than as something operating at the micro level of social relations, conceives power as being omnipresent and embodied in society. Importantly, power is seen as not simply repressive but also as productive (O'Farrell, 2005). “Power exists only when it is put into action” (Foucault, 1982, p. 788). Rather than concentrating on the institution of power (and its retention by a group, elite or class) his approach is to look at the technique or form of power and the points of application of power.

But Foucault (1982) does not deny the importance of institutions in the establishment of power relationships. Rather Foucault claims that one should analyse institutions

from the point of view of power relationships rather than the other way round. While he maintains that power relationships can be the result of prior or permanent consent, they are not simply a function of consent. He acknowledges the role of violence and consensus in the exercise of power but views them as instruments or results. They do not constitute the principle or basic nature of power. He therefore claims that power relationships have to be sought, not in the domain of violence, struggle, or consent, but in the mode of action of *government* (see subsection 2.5.2 on governmentality).

Beyond the notion of power based on the law and the institutional (state) model Foucault (1982) expands his understanding of power by studying the process of “objectivizing the subject”. Human beings are made or transformed into *subjects* through various “modes of objectification”, e.g., speaking subjects-language; labour-economy; life in natural history–biology (p. 777). Foucault refers to the objectivizing of subjects as a dividing practice (inside an individual or divided from others). He attends to the form of power: that applies to immediate, everyday life; that imposes a law of truth; that categorises people; that marks individuality; that is attached to one’s identity. It is this form of power which makes subjects. He points out two meanings of the subject, and thus of subjectivity, first, “Subject to someone else by control or dependence” (to an external influence, for example state authority); second, tied to ones’ own identity by “a conscience and self-knowledge” (internalised subjection by the subject) (p. 781). Both of these suggest the external form of power which subjugates and “makes subject to” (p. 781).

### **2.5.2 Conservation governmentality**

Foucault extends the use of the term “government” beyond its conventional meaning to encompass the ways in which the “conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed....To govern....is to structure the possible field of action of others” (Foucault, 1982, p. 790). Hence, in his view it is in this form of government that power relations are to be sought. According to Goldman (2004), Foucault’s understanding of the “art of government” is decentred, and is characterised by multiple and dispersed forms (p. 167). Foucault argues that there are three types of government, each connected to a particular science and discipline; self-government or morality/ethics; the proper way to govern the family that led to the growth of the modern science of economy; and the science of state rule and politics.

Various scholars have engaged with Foucault's notion of government. Goldman (2004) discusses the concept of eco-governmentality in the context of the greening of the World Bank, and claims that the green neoliberal project has a commonality with neo-colonial conservationist ideas of preservation and the neoliberal notions of market value and optimum resource allocation. Fletcher (2010) also analyses the interplay of four distinct 'environmentalities' (governmentalities) which operate within or embody conservation debates, namely: disciplinary; sovereign; neo-liberal; and truth environmentality (deep ecology). In his view, state centred protectionism in the defence of the non-human and fortress conservation can be seen as 'sovereign governmentality'.

Likewise, Bryant (2002) critically examines governmentality in the context of the increasing role of NGOs and of the conservation agenda that pressures indigenous peoples to internalise state control through self-regulation. Following Foucault's work, Robbins (2004) also refers to the view that conservation reflects a form of "hegemonic governmentality" in which consent of the governed is generated through social technologies (e.g., protected area designation) and rules are self-imposed by individuals through social institutions (p. 150). Campbell (2007), examining environmental governmentality, discusses the role of expert knowledge (the "politico-epistemic configuration" of the state) as an authoritative environmental actor (p. 107). Campbell considers the influence of non-state actors in the regulation of the environment as well as in generating "conservation-minded subjectivities" which internalise environmental goals (p. 107). Agrawal (2005) introduces the notion of environmentality while discussing the making of rural communities who care for and govern the environment into environmental subjects.

### **2.5.3 Hegemony**

The popularisation of the concept of hegemony owes much to Antonio Gramsci (Gramsci, 1971). This concept can be compared to that of domination, referring to "...the process of getting legitimate consent within the functional universe of civil society, as opposed to simply holding it together through a monopoly on the means of violence" (Adamson, 1980, p. 10). However, in contrast to domination, it hints at a consensual basis existing within the political system of civil society. Gramsci

averred that, in advanced capitalism, the realms of civil society and government were inextricably intertwined. Based on this, he reasoned that economic crises would not be experienced as political crises, because strong government could refract the impacts of economic crisis through “ideological and cultural hegemony”. Indeed, the state’s hegemonic apparatus and position may gain further strength through such a crisis. Gramsci recognised that hegemonic rule, as “a predominance of hegemony over domination as the form of political control”, is a normal form of government in industrial societies (Adamson, 1980, pp. 11, 173).

The concept of hegemony also implies “...political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularisation of the world view of the ruling class” (Bates, 1975, p. 352). Gramsci’s notion of hegemony can also be understood as a process of ideological domination. The central idea is that the ruling class dominates not only the means of physical production but also the means of symbolic production. This symbolic hegemony allows the elite to control ideological sectors such as the media, culture, religion and education and thereby to engineer consent for their rule. Therefore, the basic premise of the theory of hegemony is that “...man is not ruled by force alone, but also by ideas” (Bates, 1975, p. 351). Gramsci believed that the primary obstacle to radical change is to be found at the level of ideas (Scott, 1985). Hegemony is exercised “over society as a whole including culture and knowledge.....over institutions and ideas” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 10). The concept of hegemony is therefore pertinent to the functioning of conservation and national park discourses, related practices covered in this thesis as well as to examine their implications upon the ethnic group in the study.

#### **2.5.4 Ingold’s Dwelling Perspective**

Ingold’s dwelling perspective on human-ecological engagement offers a powerful alternative to the dualistic objectification or the separation of nature (biology) and culture (society). It denies the existence of an objective material environment that is detached from human involvement and interaction, and privileges mutualism and the embedding of people within the environment (Campbell, 2005a; Ingold, 2000). This perspective “...treats the immersion of the organism-person in an environment or lifeworld as an inescapable condition of existence” (Ingold, 2000, p. 153) and sees

the human organism as being situated in the context of active engagement with his or her environment. Ingold (2000) argues that humans do not dwell on the other side of a boundary between nature and society, but in a single world inhabited by humans and non-humans. Ingold avers that human beings must simultaneously be constituted as organisms within the system of ecological relations (ecological or biological beings), and as persons within the systems of social relations (social beings), and thus he envisages a reciprocity between social and ecological systems.

This perspective moves beyond the notion that we simply construct the world before we act in it or that worlds are made before they are lived in; hence it is a critique of constructionism. Therefore, in his view, we do not simply live in the world (environment) or import ideas or mental representations into the world, we create an environment for ourselves as we dwell in the environment. We build forms in our imaginations and on the ground. These forms come about only with the flow of our life activities, activities of dwelling (Ingold, 2000). The verb “to dwell” means a conception of “the production of life as a task that has continually to be worked at” (Ingold, 2005, p. 504). Hence, it goes beyond the notion of the cultural construction of the material world or environment and rather emphasises that knowledge of the world is gained through direct biological and cultural interaction, engagement and skills, and from the knowledge generated from one’s immediate and practical experience. Therefore, the understandings that people derive from their lived, everyday involvement in the world are emphasised in this perspective (Ingold, 2000).

### ***Landscape and taskscape***

There are different ways of conceptualising landscape. In Ingold’s view, landscape is neither a naturalistic, material space nor a cultural construct. Rather he emphasises the historicity of dwelling (temporality) and views the landscape as being constituted as a long-lasting record of the lives and works of past generations, of humans and non-humans, who have dwelt there and left their traces on it. Landscape is viewed as a domain of dwelling. By living it, the landscape becomes part of us and we are part of it, thus indicating its inseparability from us and its embeddedness within us (Ingold, 2000). A similar idea that “landscape is implicated in the people and people in the landscape” is offered by Gow (1995, p. 55).

*Task* is the constitutive act of dwelling. A *taskscape* constitutes an array of various activities through which people carry forward the process of social life. It refers to ensemble and mutual interlocking of tasks. The temporality of the taskscape is essentially social. The taskscape exists only so long as people are actually engaged in the activities of dwelling. It has to be performed. The landscape is understood as a whole as the taskscape in its embodied form: a pattern of activities collapsed into an array of features (Ingold, 2000). Landscape is made meaningful through tasks performed. The taskscape also signifies lived practices that make “space, place and landscape” (Robertson, 2012, p. 2). Ingold’s perspective of dwelling provides a framework within which to consider the relationship between the cultural groups and the natural environment or the landscape they are part of, and associated everyday practices and activities of their lives.

## **Part Two**

Part Two of this chapter deals with social theories on and the problematic of space, mainly based on my reading and understanding of Henri Lefebvre's work which informs the conception of space in this thesis. Linkages between space and power are then discussed. The final section presents the theoretical and conceptual framework of this study diagrammatically, linking the theory and concepts discussed in Part one and two of this chapter, in order to approach the case study of contestations between a minority ethnic group and a national park authority in Nepal.

### **2.6 Social theories of Space**

Lefebvre's (1991) important contribution to the problematising and theorising of space has radically altered conventional notions of space through his attempt to integrate various dimensions of space hitherto understood as exclusive domains. He conceives of space as produced and as being integral to everyday life in all its real (physical), mental (constructs) and symbolic (lived) complexity. Lefebvre, maintains that he is striving for a “science of space”, and for a “unitary theory” between fields that are often understood separately: first, “the physical – nature, the Cosmos”; second, “the mental, including logical and formal abstractions” and third, the social (p. 11). These are referred as the space of social practice; the “logico-epistemological space”; and the “practico-sensory realm of social space”, the space occupied by sensory phenomena including products of imaginations, symbols and utopias (p. 11).

Lefebvre (1991) is critical about the philosophico-epistemological notion of space, in which the mental realm subsumes the physical and social, thereby allocating primacy to mental space and giving less attention to the social and the physical. He is thus critical of how social space and physical space are reduced to an epistemological (mental) space – the space of discourse and of the Cartesian *cogito*, as well as of the primacy of the written text, readable, visible, and intelligible over the non-verbal signs and symbols.

### **2.6.1 The notion of a space as a produced entity**

For Lefebvre “Space is not a given static field in which human relationships and actions take place but, rather it is always produced by social relations, actions, ideas and imaginaries” (West, 2005, p. 633). “Every society produces a space, its own space....” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 53). If space is produced; it possesses a history, therefore the dimension of time. Within this there are social relations of production and reproduction, including their representational aspects. Therefore, rather than ‘*things in space*’ or a discourse on space, Lefebvre’s (1991) emphasis is on ‘*the actual production of space*’ (p. 37, emphasis in the original), space in its totality, and on uncovering the social relationships inherent in this process. Therefore, space entails, inseparably, both the process (of production) as well as the outcome (the product). In his view “Space is at once result and cause, product and producer”; it is produced and it reproduces (p.142). The “coming-into being” of space is therefore postulated (Lefebvre, 1991).

The idea of social relation is integral to Lefebvre’s (1991) understanding of space. Social space consists of and assigns appropriate significance to the interrelated social relations of reproduction (e.g., the biophysiological relations between sexes, age groups, family members etc.) and those of production (e.g., the division of labour and its organisation). It also contains representations of social relations. In Lefebvre’s (1991) view “(Social) space ....subsumes things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity” (p. 73). It cannot be relegated to the status of a simple object because it contains a diversity of objects (both natural and social), networks and pathways that facilitate the exchange of material entities. These objects and their relationships are possessed of noticeable features and form. In fact, the “foundation of social space is nature - natural or physical space” (p. 402). Social labour transforms these objects and relationships without affecting their natural states.

Social space is at once a precondition and a result of social superstructures. It permits actions to occur (or prohibits or suggests them). Lefebvre (1991) views social space as a social relationship that is inherent in property relations (i.e., earth, land) and bound up with the forces of production, and that impose form on that earth or land. Though it is a product to be used or consumed, it is also a means of production. This

means of production cannot be separated either from the productive forces (including technology and knowledge), or from the social division of labour which shapes it, or from the state and the superstructures of society. In Lefebvre's (1991) view:

We are confronted with not only one social space but many – indeed, by an unlimited multiplicity or uncountable set of social spaces..., they attain ‘real’ existence by virtue of networks and pathways, by virtue of ... clusters of relationships (p. 86)

Lefebvre (1991) views the multiplicity of social space (intertwinement) and thus treats space as networks, as diversity (rather than homogeneity) and as relational. Likewise, space is viewed as a social reality, with a set of relations and forms. Social space “...incorporates social actions, the actions of subjects both individual and collective who are born and who die, who suffer and who act” (pp. 33-34). Hence the various dimensions and features of space can be outlined based on his conceptualisation (see Figure 2.1).

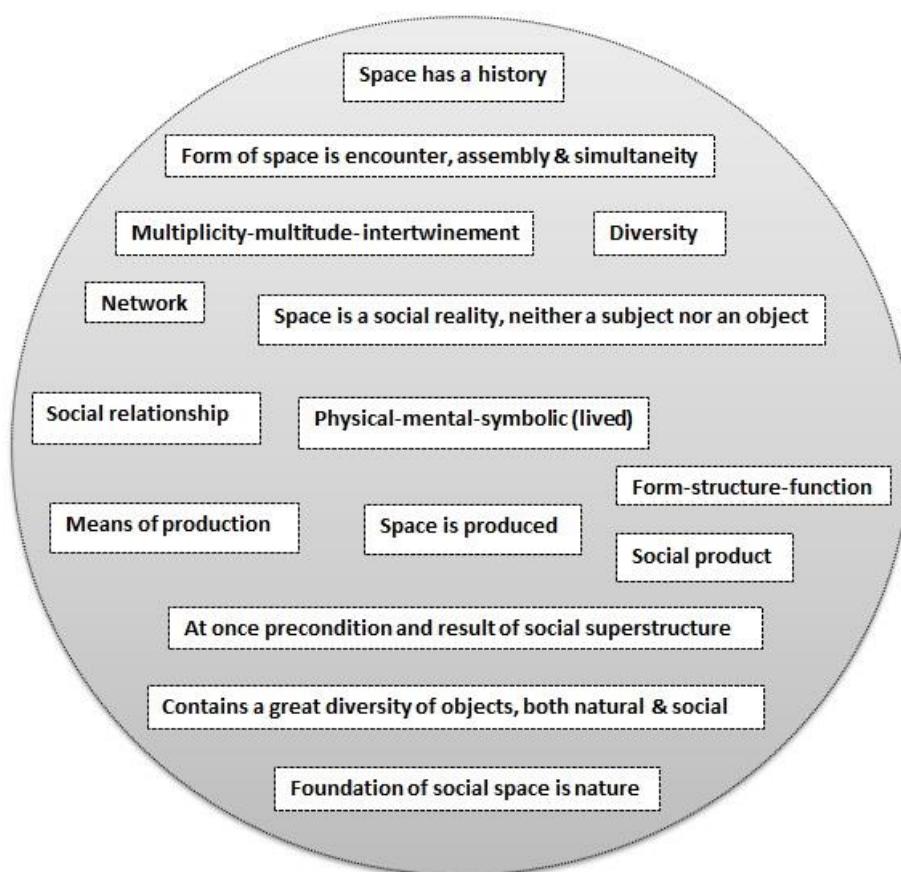


Figure 2.1 A diagrammatic presentation of Lefebvre's understanding of (social) space, after (Lefebvre, 1991)

### **2.6.2 A conceptual triad and the three dimensions of space**

In Lefebvre's conceptualisation, space is produced through three dialectically interconnected moments and processes, and thus space can be viewed in three ways, as illustrated below (see Figure 2.2). This has also been referred to as a conceptual triad (Elden, 2004) as a three dimensional dialectic (Schmid, 2008) or as the trialectics of spatiality (Hubbard, 2005).

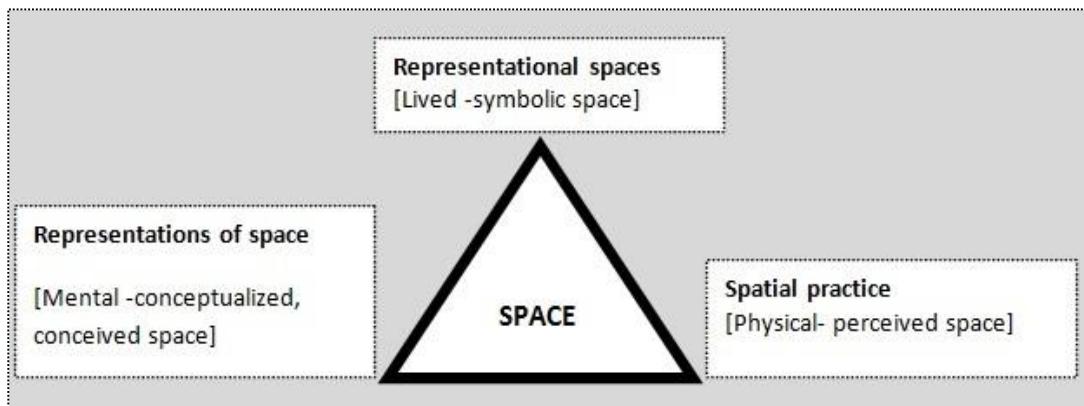
“Spatial practice of a society secretes that society’s space.....in a dialectical interaction....” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 38). In Lefebvre’s view, in the case of neo-capitalism, spatial practice embodies a close association, within perceived space, in amidst every day lives and realities. It “...embraces production and reproduction, particular locations” (p. 38). Practices that result from the perceived space ensure continuity, cohesion, competence and performance in society. Material space and its associated social practices are termed real space.

“Representations of space” are interpreted as “conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers, as of a certain type of artist with scientific bent – all of whom identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived....”(Lefebvre, 1991, pp. 38-39). They constitute a system of verbal, intellectually worked out signs and codes. They are tied to relations of production and knowledge. This is a dominant space in any society and has a significant role in and influence on the production of space. Representations of space have practical impact; they intervene and modify spatial textures. This can also be referred as conceived or ideal space.

Representational spaces are described as:

...space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of ‘inhabitants’ and ‘users’, but also of some artists ...writers and philosophers, who *describe* and aspire to do more than describe. This is dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects.....though with certain exceptions, to tend towards more or less coherent systems of non-verbal symbols and signs (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39, emphasis in original).

Representational spaces embody "...complex symbolism sometimes coded, sometimes not, clandestine or underground side of social life" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33) and can be referred to as lived space. They have their source in the history of people and individuals in belonging to that history. This may include childhood memories, dreams, images and symbols. It is relational, dynamic and qualitative.



**Figure 2.2 A diagrammatic presentation of the three interrelated dimensions of space and moments in production of space after Lefebvre (1991).**

Lefebvre (1991) argues for the existence of a dialectical relationship and of interconnections between perceived, conceived and lived space. All three aspects contribute in different ways to the production of space according to their qualities & attributes, according to the society and mode of production in question and according to historical period. Lefebvre emphasises the importance of the lived aspect and the experience of spatial (social) practice since spatial practices are lived before they are conceived. Therefore he is critical about the priority characteristically given to what is known or seen (visible) over what is lived.

Lefebvre (1991) gives centrality to the body in the understanding of the relationship between the three different moments in production of space. Bodily experience of space as lived, he argues, is different from that which occurs when it is thought of or perceived. It is by means of the body that space is perceived, lived and produced. Lefebvre states "The whole of (social) space proceeds from the body.....The passive body (the senses) and the active body (labour) converge in space" (p. 405).

### **2.6.3 Other scholars' engagement with Lefebvre's notion of space**

Although in my view, the most intense intellectual engagement with the conceptual triad offered by Lefebvre can be found in the work of Schmid (2008), various scholars have made use of his ideas in their analyses (e.g., Elden, 2004; Harvey, 2008; McCann, 1999; Merrifield, 1993; Soja, 1989; West, 2005). Massey (1993) credits Lefebvre's work for its emphasis on the importance of considering not only "the geometry of space but also its lived practices and the symbolic meaning and significance of particular spaces and spatializations" (p. 67). Harvey (2008), while advancing various modalities of spatial and spatiotemporal thinking based on the conceptual triad, reaffirms that "space is neither absolute, relative nor relational in itself, but it can become one or all simultaneously depending on the circumstances" (p. 275). Merrifield (1993) argues that Lefebvre's framework of a spatialised dialectic provides a useful route to reconcile the interactions between place and space, and therefore to overcome the place-space problematic and to assist in the formation of a vigorous politics of place.

### **2.6.4 Socio-spatial dialectic**

The socio-spatial dialectic is embedded in Lefebvre's social theory of space in which space is inseparably connected with social reality and this provides a route to understanding the interconnections of indigenous groups with their natural environments, for instance, the river and riverscape in my study. Soja (2008) considers the socio-spatial dialectic, in which the spatial shapes the social as much as the social shapes the spatial, to be one of the key principles of critical spatial thinking. In his reassertion of space in social theory, Soja (1989) credits Lefebvre with introducing a notion that is a fundamental premise for this thinking in which social and spatial relations are dialectically inter-reactive and interdependent.

Massey (1993) also points out the inseparability of the social and the spatial as a key issue in radical geography. In human geography, the recognition that the *spatial* is socially constituted, a debate that raged in the 1970s was followed by the recognition that the *social* is likewise necessarily spatially constituted. She argues that all social and physical phenomena or activities or relations have a spatial form and a relative spatial location. Like Lefebvre, Massey (1993, 1999, 2005) also conceptualises space as being constructed out of interrelations (interactions), given their simultaneous

coexistence at all spatial scales from the most local level to the most global; as a sphere of possibility and of multiplicity which is always in the process of becoming and being made. Therefore, Massey goes beyond a hegemonic conceptualisation of space as a static, and an absolute, surface.

### **2.6.5 Space, power and politics**

Space-power nexus is central to this thesis. Lefebvre (1976) contends space being defined as an objective and neutral object, or being treated as a scientific object devoid of politics and ideology. He avers that space has always been political and strategic. He maintains that space has been shaped and moulded by historical and natural elements. This is always a political process. “Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies”, “there is a politics of space because space is political” (Lefebvre, 1976, pp. 31, 33). Lefebvre (1991) highlights that, once produced, space “....also serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power” (p. 27). He also sees the role of space as integral to exercise of hegemony by a ruling class.

Massey (1993) is also critical of notions of space that divorce it from politics, and rather views space as “...full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and cooperation”, what she refers as a kind of “power-geometry” (p. 81). Keith and Pile (1993) also demonstrate that “...all spatialities are political because they are the (covert) medium and (disguised) expression of asymmetrical relations of power” (p. 38).

Foucault (1980) recognises the devaluation of space and is critical of treating space as “the dead, the fixed, the undialectical, the immobile....” and suggests that space is to be understood as “fundamental in any form of communal life” and “fundamental in any exercise of power” (p. 70). Foucault outlines his notion of “heterotopias” as spaces of the modern world, heterogeneous and relational spaces of sites and relations constituted in society (Soja, 1989). Foucault’s work treats space as a vital aspect in the battle for control and surveillance. For Foucault, “space, knowledge and power were necessarily related” (Elden & Crampton, 2007, p. 9). Through his

analysis of the human body, its spatial arrangements and architecture, he also deals with spatial tactics, space used as technique or strategy of power and social control, wherein the relationships of power and space are examined (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003).

## **2.7 Theoretical and conceptual framework for the thesis**

Figure 2.3 depicts the theoretical perspectives and epistemological paradigms adopted for this study. The various theoretical approaches, perspectives and concepts discussed so far in this chapter, converge in the ethnographic case study of the Sonaha ethnic minorities and the BNP in lowland Nepal. This theoretical framework is also informed by the grounded realities and ethnographic works undertaken within the purview of this study.

I share a constructivist view of nature conservation as based on the construction of nature (Galvin & Haller, 2008) and consider “nature” in protected areas to be a contested social construction (West et al., 2006). Without disregarding its materiality, I take a moderate position on the views of the school of socio-cultural constructionism in which social reality (e.g., the natural environment, the forested and riverine landscape and conservation) is socio- culturally mediated and constructed. I recognise the social dimension of nature and the society-nature nexus (Castree & Braun, 2001). I acknowledge the existence of embedded power relations and that the material effects of knowledge of nature are socially constituted, and that society physically engages and interacts with nature, even reconstituting or reproducing it (Castree, 2001). This view of nature is also political (Ingold, 2005). The field of political ecology attempts to understand these complex relations between society and nature (Peet & Watts, 2003), hence culture-nature, in the context of power (Escobar, 1996).

Based on these understandings I approach the Sonaha people, who are historically embedded and inextricably linked with the natural environment in and around the lower Karnali River delta, and the BNP. I also examine the river-landscape, which

has been historically transformed by the state, rulers and local inhabitants, as well as viewing it as a natural entity of conservation constructed by powerful actors through their knowledge, representations and discourses. Hence I identify and examine a discursive construct of the river-landscape as well as the Park. I inquire into and document the marginalisation of the Sonahas' own cultural constructs, worldviews, lived experiences and practices. I problematise the unjust separation of the Sonahas from nature (river-landscape) in the name of modern conservation. Although, as mentioned earlier, the dwelling perspective (Ingold, 2000) is critical of cultural constructionism, it provides a useful direction for my inquiry into the engagement, interaction and relationships of the Sonaha people with the natural environment, and into how their lives and everyday practices are embedded in the environment in which they dwell yet which the conservationist state seeks to protect from them.

I have taken a complementary approach to both structuralist and poststructuralist political ecology, attending to the material as well as the symbolic, cultural and discursive dimensions of the politics of conservation and of the struggle of the Sonahas. I examine the cultural politics of the struggle in the context of conflicts as well as contestations of competing discourses and practices in the management of the Park. Exercise of various forms of power is central to the lived realities of the Sonahas. I recount stories to demonstrate how the state authorities have exercised direct power and perpetrated structural violence of various forms against the Sonahas in the name of nature conservation.

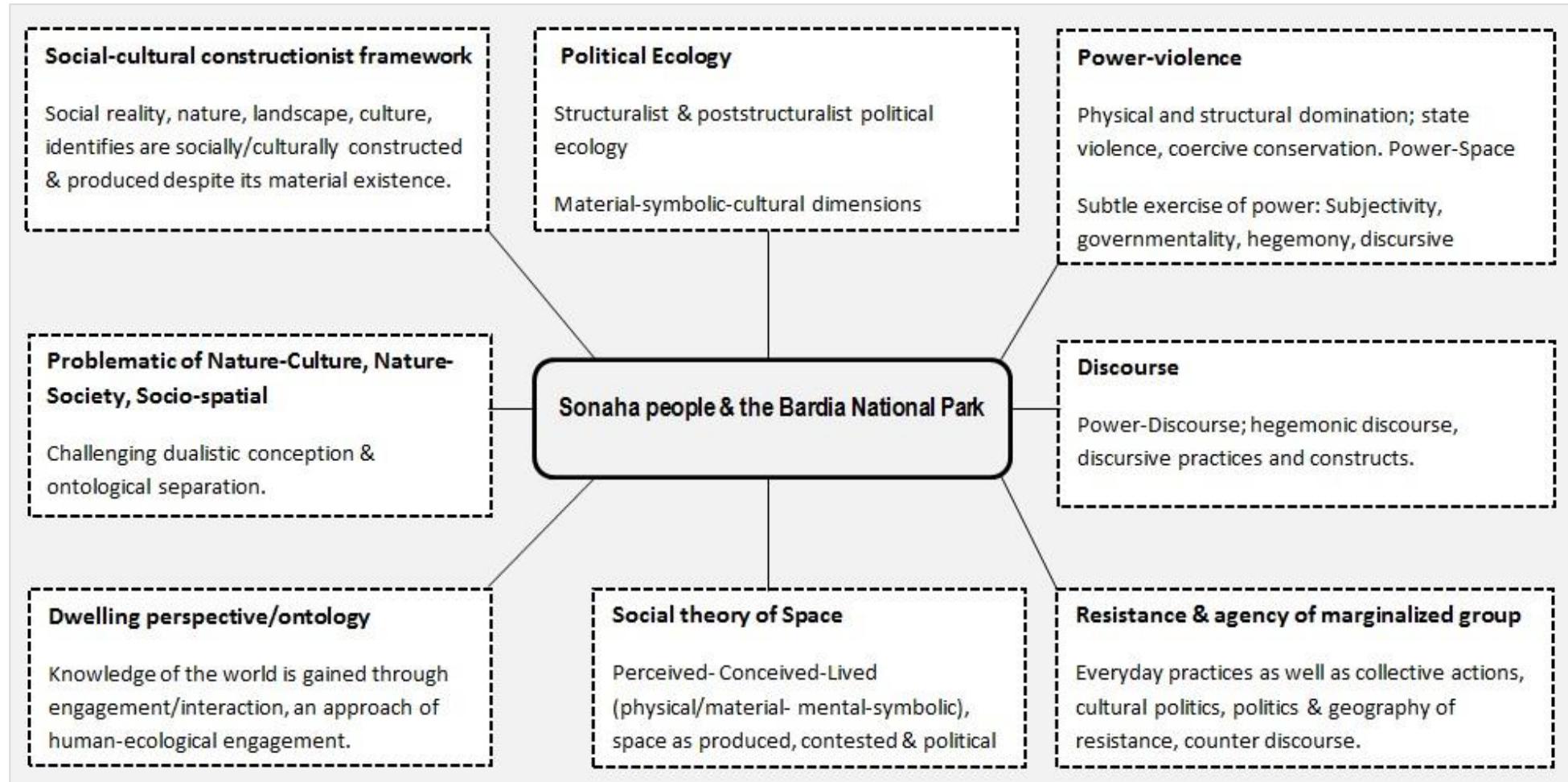


Figure 2.3 Theoretical-conceptual framework & epistemological paradigm of the thesis.

Examination of the powerful and hegemonic discourses of the national park, of conservation and of development that influence the lives of the Sonahas is central to this thesis. I attempt to problematise the mainstream conservation discourse that has impacted on and penetrated the everyday lives of the Sonahas. Therefore, I also pay attention to the indirect and subtle mechanisms and forms of exercising power, a power diffused across actors and institutions, a power constitutive of the mainstream conservation discourse. Lukes (2005) refers such non-coercive forms of power as the third dimension of power. I examine, through the concepts of subjectivity, governmentality and hegemony of conservation, their impacts on the lives of the Sonahas. I inquire how the Sonahas, as residents in the state created national park buffer zone, are subjected to conservation initiatives, and how they are encountering the discourse of participatory conservation and development, while facing the pressures of state's coercive conservation (Peluso, 1993).

However, against these scenarios, I also examine and strive to unpack the Sonahas' ongoing struggles and various forms of resistance to the state, to the national park regime and its policies and practices. I attempt to make sense of and to understand the cultural politics and the politics of contested space embedded and unfolding in the experiences of the Sonaha resistance to the state conservation interventions. Their social movements are also presented as sites of counter discourses (Escobar, 1998) to the mainstream conservation discourse and practices.

West (2005), in the context of the Gimi people and a protected area of Papua New Guinea, and drawing from Lefebvre's understandings of space, argues that the mountain and the village and other spatial productions "are not a given, not locations that come into being with ecology and environment, but rather, they are produced by the social and material relations between peoples" (p. 28). She argues that the wildlife management area is a spatial production in which the mountain, the village, and the people have been made and folded into each other, through a conservation and development project (West, 2005, 2006). Likewise, Sletto (2002), following Lefebvre, also views landscape as being produced and constructed in the context of resource conflict and environment protection. In addition to these studies, various other scholarly calls for further analysis on how protected areas produce space

discursively and materially (West et al., 2006) have informed the application of social theory of space in my case study.

I therefore treat the Bardia National Park, a conservation territory of the state (Zimmerer, 2006), and the ancestral riverine territory of the Sonahas, part of which has been enclosed by the state for nature conservation, as my reference points in my analysis of this space and its related politics. The production of the riverine landscape, the space, by several forces, actors, discourses and practices is of particular importance to this inquiry. Space as such in this study is not a neutral backdrop or a limited natural physical entity in itself but a space of power and hegemony as well as of resistance (Pile, 1997) by the Sonahas; a site which is produced and contested; constitutive of politics, discourse and practices; and co-constituted with social relations (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005). The question of how space is conceptualised matters and relevant to this inquiry. Without limiting myself to the physicality of space and its associated discursive realm, I recognise its complexity and multiple features by appreciating it's lived, symbolic and socio-cultural dimensions as conceived of by Lefebvre (1991). I approach the contestations around the Sonahas' lifeworlds and practices, and state conservation interventions and mainstream discourse, by engaging with a politics of space.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **3.1 Reflexivity**

I ascribe to the general view that my own world views, beliefs, paradigms, history, culture, knowledge, ideologies, values, identities, discourses, mental constructions, personal feelings and emotions reconstruct and produce myself, my endeavours and the associated meanings and knowledge partially emanating from them. As a researcher, I have been confronted by these important facets of the *self*, both consciously and unconsciously, during my research. It is both critical and crucial to acknowledge, rather than to ignore, my psychological and socio-cultural self that is embedded and implicated in the conception as well as the execution of this research. “Doing fieldwork is a personal experience. Our intuition, senses, and emotions.....are powerfully woven into and inseparable from the process...” (Madison, 2002, p. 9).

The significance of reflexivity in research practice and ethnographic writing has been widely discussed and debated in academia (England, 1994; Foley, 2002; Rose, 1997). England (1994) argues, “...reflexivity is self-critical sympathetic introspection and the self-conscious *analytical* scrutiny of the self as researcher” (p. 82, emphasis in original). I see this as a process of self-critique and of critical reflection, awareness and a consciousness of our positionality and situated knowledge. The researcher is socially and historically situated (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Being self-reflective or reflexive about one’s own positions and situated knowledge is both essential and imperative over the course of a research but it is an extremely challenging task. Critical reflexivity is both rewarding and difficult (Dowling, 2005). Our positionality and biographies as researchers play an important part in the process of our research as well as in the fieldwork and writing of this research (England, 1994). I have attempted to be reflexive and critical to my knowledge and experiences prior to the commencing of this research.

### **3. 2 Researcher-researched**

The relationship between the researcher and the researched provokes ethical as well as methodological questions. Rather than being one way - authoritarian and unidirectional - I see fieldwork, in harmony with England (1994) as “....a dialogical process which is structured by researcher and the participants” (p. 80). I share the view that research is also a constitutive negotiation between both the researcher and the researched (Rose, 1997). I do contend that the researcher’s position is also privileged at times, by their authority and control over the inquiry and its outcomes, given their symbolic identity as an academic researcher and, on some occasions, by the power of academic and disciplinary knowledge, discourses, institutions and financial resources over others. Nevertheless, the relationship between the two is political, since there are inherent power relations in research. Relationships with the researched can thus be reciprocal, or asymmetrical as well as potentially exploitative (England, 1994). Given the politics of research, I have attempted to be sensitive to the voices, knowledges, perspectives and discourses of the researched in the context of this study while also acknowledging my own.

However, despite the difficulties of executing reflexive methodologies, I also recognise that the researched, or the subjects of inquiry, possess equally important knowledge and power. Therefore the production of knowledge in the course of an inquiry is mutually reinforcing, and is co-constructed, constituting both the researcher and the researched. The co-creation of understanding through the interaction between the knower (inquirer) and the known (inquired) is termed an interpretive or subjectivist epistemology. Interactive and dialectical relationships with the researched as well as with a researcher are important since both are multi-cultural subjects (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The Sonaha people in relation to the Bardia National Park (BNP) is the major focus of this inquiry. My very first encounter with Sonahas in their village was in 2006, as an NGO researcher participating in their very first national gathering in the village of Rajipur, Bardia, Nepal’s mid-western lowland. Even then, I sensed the Sonahas’ conflicts and tensions with authorities of the BNP. Over the years I had also developed a working relationship with some of their community leaders (2006-2009). Hence, for the purpose of this study, I sought to revive my earlier working

relationship with their leaders, to forge a strong relationship of trust and companionship with this group and to renegotiate my own identity and position as a research student. This was important in order to gain an entry to and social acceptance within their *Samaj* (community, society). Given the extreme difficulty as well as impossibility of maintaining full objectivity, entering into a subjective relationship with the Sonahas (the researched) both my own and their subjective experiences are implicated in this research. Likewise, I also had professional acquaintance with some of the key non Sonaha informants of this study prior to this research.

This study is not a full ethnography of Sonaha culture; rather it uses an ethnographic framework in order to investigate the Sonahas' relationship with the Nepalese national parks regime insofar as it concerns matters connected with their socio-cultural and economic practices, and their embedded lives in their ancestral riverine territory. Knowledge about their worldviews, lives and cultures can never be complete and is always partial. My understandings of the risk of encountering and confronting armed national park patrols while fishing on the fast flowing river, or of their everyday hardship in having to make a living from river, forests, of their land, nominal daily wages or the precise significance of their cultural practices are also limited. However, with this awareness, I have attempted to explore, venture into and understand their realities and everyday lives, and to derive meanings as much as possible by paying attention to their worldviews and lifeworlds.

Representing “others”, their lives and stories, is equally complicated and contentious (Madison, 2002). I do not claim to represent the Sonahas, their views, voices and standpoints, but to attempt to understand them and their meanings and to articulate them with sensitivity and awareness. Voices and narratives of the research participants including the Sonahas are accorded in the ethnography. While the subjective experience inherent in this research project is acknowledged, it was also complemented with “intersubjectivity” mainly between the Sonaha and the researcher, “...meanings and interpretations of the created, confirmed, or disconfirmed as a result of interactions...with other people within specific context” (Dowling, 2005, p. 25).

### **3.3 Methodological paradigms**

Paradigms entail “the basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator...” not only in their choice of methods but also in their ontologies and epistemologies (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 105). Hence they are basic belief systems based on methodological, ontological and epistemological assumptions. They shape how a researcher views the world and acts on these views (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Under the interpretive paradigm, “All research is interpretive: guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 13).

Four major competing paradigms inform or guide our inquiry as positivism, post-positivism, critical theory (including feminism, post structuralism, post modernism) and constructivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative research is structured by four major interpretive paradigms outlined as: positivist and postpositivist; constructivist-interpretive; critical (Marxist, emancipatory), and feminist-poststructural. These approaches cut across disciplines, fields and subject matter. They entail a multiplicity of theories, paradigms, methodological practices, methods, approaches and techniques, and empirical materials (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

This research is informed by the interpretive tradition as well as by the paradigm of qualitative research. I sympathise with the general critiques of positivist and post-positivist science (realist, objective, experimental), also regarded as a received view (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Therefore this research is situated within the continuum of multiple paradigms (see Figure 3.1). I do not subscribe entirely to one school of thought, but rather take a moderate stand forging complementarities between various epistemologies and theories, giving attention to both agency (individual, collective, experiences) and the social structure (processes, context), see section 2.7, Figure 2.3. Likewise, I do appreciate the value of the addition of key quantitative facts, albeit placing them under my broader qualitative paradigm.

## **Structural, Critical Theory-Post structural, Constructivist-interpretive Paradigm**



**Ontology:** Materialist-realist, historical realism, multiple realities (relativist), dwelling

**Epistemology:** Subjective, knowledge emerging from inquirer-inquired, interactive

**Methodology:** Naturalistic, dialogic, dialectical, reconstruction, theory-practice

**Figure 3.1 Research paradigm adopted for this thesis.**

### **3.4 Methodological approaches and strategies**

#### **3.4.1 Ethnography**

Ethnography is the primary research method, used in this study. It is more than the recording of human experience and is guided by subjectivist epistemology and naturalistic methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Conventionally ethnography is the work of describing a culture. As well as '*studying people*' it also means '*learning from people*' which involves an attempt to understand a way of life from the point of view of the researched subjects (Spradley, 1979, p. 3, emphasis in original). It also means obtaining an understanding of a people's culture and society, in this study, Sonaha socio-cultural practices, relationships and interactions with the natural environment and the state. Ethnography is also understood as "...the art and science of describing a human group - its institutions, interpersonal behaviours, material productions and beliefs" (Angrosino, 2007, p. 14). Ethnographic description, or writing ethnography, also is referred to as "translation" and ranges from the inclusion of insiders' view, the researched, to the dominance of the outsider's view, the ethnographer (Spradley, 1979).

#### ***Critical ethnography***

I consider this thesis to be a critical ethnography. This refers to the act of conducting ethnography, to the research process as well as its outcomes. Doing ethnography is a process of producing knowledge and generating a knowledge product. Critical

ethnography is both a pedagogical and a political project. In fact, the requirement of a problematic, the intent of critique and transformation of conditions and situations (such as structures of oppression, inequity, injustice, hegemonic cultures) and the reflexive considerations afford ethnography its critical dimension (Simon & Dippo, 1986). “Critical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular *lived domain*” guided by a moral obligation towards making contributions to greater freedom and equity, emancipatory knowledge and social justice (Madison, 2002, p. 5, emphasis in original) which thus adds a political dimension to any such study.

This thesis is a critical ethnography of the Sonahas in the context of a national park and its discourse and practices. It has been generated from ethnographic fieldwork and critical epistemologies. I have paid close attention to the everyday lives and realities of the Sonaha, and their socio-cultural and livelihood practices in their natural social settings. Although difficult, I have attempted to explore the social reality of Sonahas from their own points of view. As noted by Chene (1996) listening and learning from people, in my case from the Sonaha people, is imperative while doing ethnography. This has been applied throughout the fieldwork of this research.

### ***Multi-sited ethnography***

I conducted a multi-sited ethnography which differs from traditional ethnography. Marcus (1995) notes a move in contemporary ethnography away from the conventional ethnographic focus on a single research site which had been the basis of traditional ethnographic fieldwork. Ethnography was moving from its single-site location to multiple sites of observation and participation, and multiple sites or various domains of cultural production or formation, in order to consider multi-sited spaces of investigation within a single research project. Marcus (1995) maintains that “...fieldwork as traditionally perceived and practiced is already itself potentially multi-sited” (p. 100). As a mobile ethnographer, the researcher traverses through multi-sited spaces of research, between sites and groups of differently situated individuals (West, 2006). Necessarily however, there must be connections among these multiple sites and locales.

As noted by West (2006), although actions may occur in a particular village, in or near a protected area, sites of mental, material and social productions which work to constitute that protected area and implicate related conflicts and politics, are necessarily diverse and scattered. They are therefore not limited to one particular geographic location. I have shared this view while inquiring into the Sonaha predicament in relation to the BNP, its Buffer Zone (BZ) and associated discourses. Hence, I have not limited myself to a traditional fieldwork in a single field site (see subsection 3.4.4).

### **3.4.2 Case study**

This study is an example of in-depth ethnographic case study research. Adopting a case study approach, the inquiry is largely based on analyses of the experiences of a cultural group, the Sonahas, in a river delta, adjoining the BNP, in mid-western lowland Nepal. Empirical information was generated mainly from the experiences of the Sonahas but also from managers of BNP and its BZ; members of government bureaucracies and other key informants. As is demonstrated within this thesis, the study is theoretically informed, adequately contextualised in the national scenarios of the country in which the study takes place and located within the global debates on park-people interaction. It is triangulated through information from multiple sources and sites.

### **3.4.3 Sampling**

The field site, in the conventional ethnographic fieldwork sense, was purposively selected. This choice was informed by the location and distribution of the Sonaha population. Given the nature and focus of my inquiry, I selected the four major Sonaha hamlets located in the lower Karnali river delta, adjacent to the BNP. My ethnographic fieldwork was mainly undertaken with the local Sonahas in these hamlets in three major respective villages –Rajipur and Sarkhol at Patabhar Village Development Committee (VDC)<sup>4</sup>, see Map 5.7 and Saijana at Manau VDC – all of which are located in the BZ, see Map 5.3. It became clear fairly early in the research process that, given the history, internal mobility, kinship and internal dynamics of

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<sup>4</sup> VDC is the lowest political and administrative unit of governance in Nepal. Each VDC is made up of nine wards (ward level village). Several hamlets (toles) and settlements constitute a single ward.

Sonahas in the delta and their broader social organisation, I also needed to carry out fieldwork in several other Sonaha hamlets located in the VDC outside of the Park BZ but in and around the river delta. (See Maps 5.6, 5.7 and 5.8, Chapter Five for a detailed history and description of the study area).

### **Theoretical sampling**

I adopted the practice of theoretical sampling which refers to the selection of participants according to the needs of an emerging analysis contrary to conventional methods of sampling in a quantitative research. This constituted an important part of the research process (see Figure 3.2). This is a method of data collection based on concepts derived from the data. It is responsive to information gained during ongoing data collection rather than to conceptions preceding the research process. The information a researcher receives as part of the research process identifies places, persons, and situations that will provide further information about the concepts that one seeks to understand and to learn more about. The researcher is not sampling persons but concepts. This circular process (data, analysis, concepts, questions, and data) continues until one reaches a point of saturation, with data collection and analysis going hand in hand (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Saturation here means that the researcher has reached the point at which the data received from the research participants becomes repetitive and there is little more to be learned on these topics, during the research.

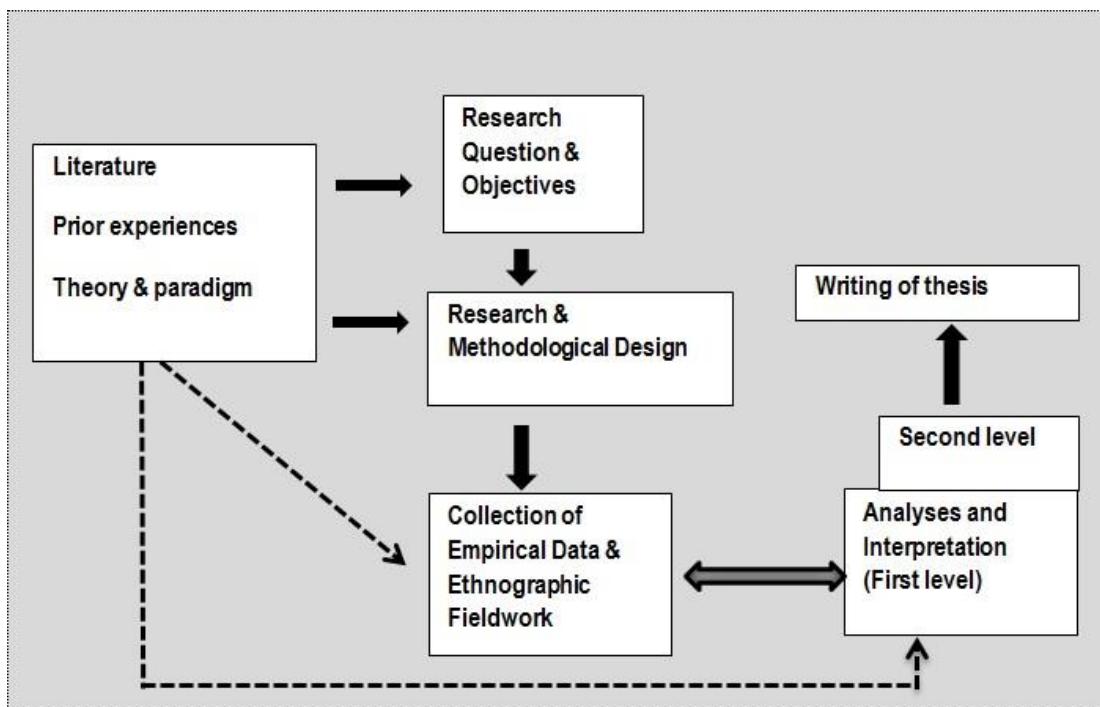


Figure 3.2 The research process adopted for this thesis.

### **3.4.4 Processes of data collection**

#### ***First period of ethnographic fieldwork (February-June, 2011)***

In the first phase of fieldwork in Nepal, there were three different and related stages. In the first stage, I carried out preliminary fieldwork at three Sonaha hamlets in the village of Rajipur and Sarkhol. I was already familiar with these villages on account of my prior NGO work. My primary aim was to revive my former working relationships and reconnect with key members of the Sonaha community. I renegotiated my own identity as a student researcher from my prior role as an NGO researcher. This initial phase was exploratory, during which I acquainted and familiarised myself with the field settings (location and geography of relevant villages, the river, forests, the BNP and its BZ) as well as with the local people in the field sites. I began building rapport with the local Sonahas, conveying and clarifying my purpose, intentions, objectives of the research project and funding sources, while seeking their consent and cooperation to become involved in this research.

In the second stage, as I built up my trust and acquaintance levels with members of the community, and as I began to learn from the Sonahas, I gained a greater understanding of their everyday lives. I carried out extended fieldwork including the villages in the delta with Sonaha hamlets apart from those during the preliminary fieldwork. I participated in some of their key events, such as festivities, rituals, cremations, feasts, community meetings and collective protests. I routinely withdrew from the field to return to my field notes, and wrote up my experiences fresh from the field, while revisiting the key questions and themes of my inquiry.

In the third stage, I returned to the field sites to address some of the gaps in my knowledge and data. I interviewed key informants in the delta field sites and beyond including Kathmandu. I accompanied and followed the Sonahas' encounters with NGOs, bureaucrats, politicians, and journalists during their trip to Kathmandu. I also interacted with the Sonahas who had been living in Kathmandu for seasonal wage labour.

#### ***Second period of ethnographic fieldwork (February-April, 2012)***

While collection of data from secondary sources (e.g., books, reports and official documents) was continuing, after seven months I returned to the field site to collect more primary data. This focussed on specific questions based on my reading and a

review of the information collected during the first period of fieldwork, and from the first level of interpretation from the preliminary findings, which fed into the evolving theoretical framework and refinement of the research questions (see Figure 3.2). This provided me with an opportunity to inquire further and more deeply into a few specific and key themes and topics, to address gaps from the previous data collection and to update myself on the new developments in the field. Some important quantitative information was also collected at this time. Finally this visit provided me with an opportunity to interview key research participants in the field for a second time.

During this visit, I also carried out a series of interviews with a few more key informants and several non-Sonahas both at the field site as well as in Kathmandu. Most of the information collected through these interviews was recorded with the use of a recording device which was only considered once a suitable degree of trust and familiarity had been achieved and consent gained. During the first period of fieldwork, information was simply noted in a field diary.

#### ***Final short term fieldwork (June/July, 2013)***

As I was nearing the end of thesis writing, I capitalised on an opportunity to carry out two further weeks of fieldwork in the delta. This was undertaken for three important purposes: first, to share and seek inputs from the Sonahas on key inferences, arguments and insights emerging from my analysis; second, to discuss and gain their consent for the sketch maps and figures representing their ancestral territory and mobility in the delta and, third, to experience collective gold panning practices during the monsoon and the Sonahas vulnerability to monsoon floods.

### **3.5 Methods and tools of data collection**

Depending on the problem being investigated, there is a choice to be made between obtaining one or various sources of data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). It is imperative for any good ethnography to apply triangulation – “the use of multiple data collection techniques to reinforce conclusions” (Angrosino, 2007, p. 36). I have therefore employed diverse methods and tools for collecting data depending upon the precise nature of each inquiry in order to enhance the validity and reliability as well as the quality of the data. All of these methods as documented below provided a basis for empirical data inquiry and analysis.

#### **3.5.1 Interviews**

I conducted a series of individual interviews (26) and group interviews (12), both unstructured in-depth interviews and semi-structured interviews, guided by checklists (see Appendix K). These interviews were carried out with diverse members of the Sonaha community across all age groups (young people at the age of 18 and above, adults and elderly), gender, religion (Hindu and Christian), and settlements both inside and outside the BZ, in hamlets relatively close to as well as relatively far from the Park boundary. These interviews were conducted either in the villages in informal settings or on some occasions in the temporary makeshift camps on the river islands away from the village. I also carried out group interviews as well as facilitated focussed group discussions among Sonaha men and women as well as in a group involving both genders. Casual and friendly conversations (Spradley, 1979) also provided important information on many occasions. Depending upon the situations, information from the interviews was sometimes tape-recorded, and in numerous occasions obtained by taking notes at the time of an interview or afterwards.

#### ***Oral histories***

The gathering of oral histories differs from the technique of the interview (George & Stratford, 2005). It is a practice of reconstructing and recasting the past, through the experiences of the participants who had been there (Angrosino, 2007). I employed this technique mainly with eight Sonaha elders in the field sites as well as with one veteran and one retired members of the forest bureaucracy in order to gain insights into the historical contexts, events and situations which had fed into the present

conflicts and tensions. This was important in order to capture the unaccounted, undocumented and unofficial histories, memories and claims of the Sonahas. This also provided me with the opportunity to reconstruct and highlight their stories, historical accounts of the Sonaha that have often been marginalised, untold and ignored. The Sonaha people do not have a written script despite their distinct language and cultural practices. Listening to the Sonaha elders, their life stories, recollections and memories, helped me to venture, at least partially, into their history and to make sense of their memories, perceptions of and situations in the past.

### ***Key informants***

Information was also collected from interviews with non-Sonaha residents in the villages within the delta, such as the dominant Tharu ethnic group and *Pahadey/Pahadi*-hill migrant locals, given the multi-ethnic composition of the villages containing the Sonaha and the recent ethnically shared history of the delta. Leaders and representatives of the key peoples' institutions in the villages of the BZ such as the Buffer Zone Users' Committee, members of community forest user groups, and group members of the anti-poaching youth campaign were also interviewed guided by checklists.

To capture and accommodate the diverse perspectives, perceptions and contesting opinions of the important actors and institutions impacting on the lives of the Sonahas in this field setting several individuals in key positions in the protected area bureaucracy and management were interviewed. These included former and current chief conservation officer (warden) and assistant wardens of the BNP; a park ranger, a game scout and an army officer from the range post. Beyond the field sites, officials of the Department of National Park and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), retired members of the forest and wildlife bureaucracy, and relevant officials of UNDP Nepal and conservation organisations such as NTNC and WWF Nepal were also interviewed. Likewise, social activists and leaders of civil society organisations and groups advocating for the rights of local people in the context of protected areas in Nepal, those working closely with the Sonahas, political party activists and activists of indigenous peoples' movements in Nepal and critical scholars were also interviewed. Therefore, interviews covered a wide range of key informants at multiple sites, scales and institutions (local-national, micro-macro). In all 31 key informants (non-Sonaha) were interviewed.

### **3.5.2 Participant Observation**

During my fieldwork I also employed the technique of participant observation. I sought to balance my collection of data by acting as an observer participating in the everyday lives of the Sonahas. I have tried to balance the etic view that of an outside observer, and the emic view, that of an insider, of the research participants (Morris, Leung, Ames, & Lickel, 1999), and of the Sonahas in particular. My role was both observer-as-participant as well as participant-as-observer (Angrosino, 2007). I employed all the three processes of descriptive, focused and selective observations (Kawulich, 2005).

The understandings that I obtained from the Sonahas about their way of life were enhanced when I accompanied Sonaha men and women fishing and gold panning in the river, and when they foraged in the forests for wild vegetables or collected firewood. To better understand their culture, their sense of place-space, and their geographies of the river and riparian areas, in several instances, I spent days and nights in their temporary shelters, camping on river islands, adjacent to the BNP. I was also an active participant attempting to contribute my labour while living on the river islands. On many occasions I also travelled for hours with Sonahas in a canoe on the river, or on local bicycles or on foot through the delta area.

Sometimes, the period of my fieldwork coincided with some important Sonaha events, such as festivities, rituals, ceremonies, collective village feasts and songs. I was able to participate in these which, while they were peripheral to the primary theme of my research, enabled me to understand more deeply the fact that the Sonaha are a distinct cultural group. More pertinent to my data collection, were the community meetings and discussions, and NGO supported local gatherings of the Sonahas. I also had opportunities to observe their mass rallies and demonstrations, and to observe Sonaha dialogues with the Park authorities, members of the state bureaucracy, government and politicians in the course of their social movements. I attended important meetings and gatherings organised by NGOs in which the Sonahas participated and voiced their concerns.

### **3.5.3 Auto-ethnography**

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically report on one's own personal experiences in order to understand a culture and, as a method; it is both a process and a product (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). In some of the finest works of auto-ethnography, a researcher engages with their own vulnerable self and their emotions, including their heart, reflecting upon their personal experience as an emotionally open and vulnerable observer and produces creative autobiographical and artistic texts (Behar, 1996; Ellis et al., 2010).

Although this research is not entirely an auto-ethnography, I have used this approach in this study as a method of recollecting, critically reflecting and articulating my own prior personal and professional experiences on the topic of this inquiry, as I have described in sections 1.2 and 3.2, as well as in the context of my ethnography of the Sonaha-Park authority contestations. I have also attempted to make sense of my own experiences and ethnographic encounters in the course and the context of this project. This provided me with a meaningful space in which to place and pay attention to my relevant personal feelings and experiences in the course of this research. As well as being an important source of relevant information, it also provided me with an opportunity to engage in introspection and reflexive ethnographic practices.

### **3.5.4 Participatory mapping**

Participatory mapping of indigenous lands and territories has become a powerful tool, which is increasingly being practiced throughout the world *inter alia* in the context of claims for Indigenous rights (Chapin, Lamb, & Threlkeld, 2005; Peluso, 1995). It has also been argued that ethnographic mapping provides a counter hegemonic perspective on space and land-use systems, which therefore entails alternative views of space (Sletto, 2002). Various mapping techniques are being applied by or with communities at the grassroots level for the conservation and restoration of local landscapes (Corrigan & Hay-Edie, 2013).

I practiced this participatory technique mainly to obtain a sense of Sonaha mobility in the delta, to recast their ancestral riverine territories, their relationships and emotional connections with their territory and the natural environment (see Photo

3.1). This proved to be extremely useful given the undocumented nature of the history of the Sonahas and of their mobility in the river delta, and contestations with the Park authorities. The researcher, together with the Sonaha leaders, facilitated a participatory mapping exercise with the Sonahas at the village of Rajipur. Prior to this exercise, I had experienced and acquired a sense of the area's physical geography by travelling to different Sonaha hamlets, ferry points and locations in the riparian areas; to their fishing grounds and gold panning sites as well as to some of their important temporary shelters. Through interactive dialogues between Sonaha youth, leaders and elders and the use of simple locally available tools and materials, a map, a miniature of the delta, was plotted on the ground. This was photographed, documented and converted to a sketch map (See Map 5.8).

The knowledge and memories of the elders were key assets in this process. I also partially applied a technique of memory mapping with elders and adults (Hoole & Berkes, 2010), which was supplemented by the oral histories discussed earlier. Coordinates based on Global Positioning System (GPS) recordings of some of the important locations were later ascertained by physically going to those points. These coordinates were later incorporated in a map that was created with the participation of the Sonahas (see Map 5.8; and Figures 6.3, 6.4 and 6.6).

### **3.5.5 Photography**

Photographs have been commonly used in ethnographic research, both as a methodological tool and as a means of presenting research, where the photographs are treated either as data or as data generators (Schwartz, 1989). Numerous photographs of the Sonahas and places and activities of significance to them were taken mainly to document and record (possibly) disappearing socio-cultural practices; the material aspects of the Sonaha way of life, and to represent their activities and social agency. Photographs taken in the field site during the fieldwork were shared with local Sonahas in order to arrive at shared understandings of the meanings constructed or emanating from the images captured in the photographs. Some of the photographs also served the purpose of visual-documentary evidence. These photographs also became a means by which to trigger deeper conversations and discussions on some occasions.



**Photo 3.1** Sonaha young leaders preparing the map of the river delta, juxtaposing their ancestral riverine territory with elders at Rajipur. Credit: Author

### 3.5.6 Secondary sources

Other than the primary sources of information, empirical data was also generated from various relevant secondary sources. Reference to these secondary sources provided data that was absent from the ethnographic fieldwork, such as historical facts, complemented primary information, and diversified empirical information and evidence. These secondary sources can be categorised as: first, articles, reports and news in the national daily newspapers in Nepal such as The Rising Nepal, The Himalayan, The Kathmandu Post, The Republica, The Kantipur and The Gorkhapatra; second, relevant books, journal articles, dissertations and other literatures; third, official reports by organisations and government institutions, published newsletters, booklets and informational materials; and fourth, audio-visual documentary and website information.

## **3.6 Data analysis and interpretations**

### **3.6.1 Processes and steps**

I have followed the steps outlined below in the process of analysing and interpreting the information collected that were iterative in some occasions. Steps in the analysis and collection of information were complementary, and were also informed by theory (see Figure 3.2).

***Managing and organising data:*** Audio records of the interviews carried out in Nepali vernacular were transcribed in English and interview notes (for those interviews not tape recorded) were expanded and described. In addition, I wrote detailed descriptive narratives of my fieldwork experiences as well as observations based on my field notes, immediately after each major fieldwork period.

The descriptive writing was organised chronologically, on the basis of key events, interviews with key informants, and sometimes on the basis of key topics and issues relevant to the inquiry. These were stored in a computer folder under different files. Notes of information collected from secondary sources were also arranged according to the subject matter under various potential themes.

***Reading, reviewing and scanning:*** Thorough readings of the data thus organised and stored were carried out several times to make sense of the data, and to identify gaps, discrepancies and lack of clarity.

***Categories and classification of data:*** Under the broader research questions, and the subsequent questions generated through the inquiry, various themes and categories, both major and minor, began to emerge from repeated readings and considerations of the data. These were also informed by key concepts from my epistemological or theoretical frameworks. The data arranged in these categories were then classified and indexed by specific themes. These were given identifiable codes. In some cases, the data texts were also marked with specific key words as codes.

***Analysis, Interpretations and inferences:***

Then, based on the classification and indexing, coherent and related categories of data were assembled, synthesised and summarised. Some of these were presented

and discussed in the form of tables and figures as well as by analytical themes. In the course of grouping categories of data under several sub-themes some items were reshuffled several times. Patterns, trends, relationships and connections between categories of data and sub-themes were also identified and captured. Emerging analyses and interpretations were synchronised in the form of key insights, and inferences were drawn and discussed in reference to key theoretical concepts. The interpretations of the preliminary findings from the first field trip provided a basis for the second period of fieldwork and, ultimately, for a second level of analysis and interpretation.

Qualitative research is interpretive and interpretations from it are subjectively constructed. The “interpretive practice of making sense of one’s findings is both artistic and political” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 15). The subjective experiences of both the researcher and the research participants and, more importantly, of the inter-subjectivity between the two (Dowling, 2005) have also generated key interpretations of some of the major themes. Some of these insights and interpretations actually emerged during the fieldwork, through engagement in conversations, dialogues and deliberations on specific topics.

### **3.6.2 Approaches**

Three complementary approaches to data analysis were used in this study are as follows:

#### ***Content analysis***

This employs both written and transcribed interview materials, texts. It can be used for description or inference. In analysing and interpreting these data, text comes from various sources and from people as well as documents. The contents of both primary sources of information, mainly interviews and group interviews, as well as important information from the secondary sources were analysed in this way.

#### ***Narrative analysis***

“Narratives represent storied ways of knowing and communicating...” as well as the reinterpretation of the past (Riessman, 2005, p. 1). Accounts and stories of peoples’ subjective experiences and their recollections of events, incidents, memories and articulations of socio-cultural constructs and perspectives are important narrative

data. Meanings, interpretations, representations, knowledge and worldviews are also embedded in these narratives. I have attempted to analyse the oral narratives of my research participants' life experiences and past events from their perspectives. Narratives of research participants are also treated as meaningful expressions and as evidence, and have been incorporated in my analysis and descriptions.

### ***Discourse analysis***

Phillips and Hardy (2002) note that discourse analysis is a methodology more than a method and provide a three-dimensional approach to the study of discourse as the interplay between discourse, text and context (social and historical). Discourse is understood as "...an interrelated set of texts and the practices of their production, dissemination, and reception, that brings an object into being...." (Phillips & Hardy, 2002, p. 3). Thus social reality is mediated by discourse (see section 2.4 on discourse). It is embodied and enacted in different kinds/forms of texts (written, spoken, visual and symbolic). It has been argued that narrative analysis, conversation analysis and ethnography only uncover meanings of social reality for participants but do not reveal how social reality comes into existence through the constructive effects of discourses and texts (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). Nevertheless, they can be an important part of discourse analysis.

The approach adopted for this study can be located in the continuum of constructivist and critical discourse analysis (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). This is an approach that addresses the relationship between discourse and power and demonstrates how relations of power and domination are enacted, reproduced and resisted through discourse (van Dijk, 2008). The dominant discourse of conservation in the context of the national park and its BZ as they impacted on lives of the Sonahas were examined and analysed. I have analysed how the Park and the river/landscape under its jurisdiction in which the Sonahas have had historical presence and interactions have been discursively created. This was done by examining history and trajectories of the Park creation, by paying attention to their context, influential actors as well as by critically reviewing relevant dominant representations and texts that embody the mainstream conservation discourse (also see section 2.7).

### **3.7 Summary**

This critical ethnographic case study was carried out under the interpretive and qualitative research paradigm. Integrative methodology and multiple paradigms suitable to the nature of the inquiry have been adopted. The multiplicity of approaches, methods, techniques, tools, strategies and processes undertaken to acquire required information which makes the methodology innovative, original to this research and systematic. The fieldwork was carried out at the different stages of the research. Multiple approaches and appropriate processes for analysing the data have been adopted accordingly.

The next chapter will unfold interesting history and a genesis of Nepalese protected areas. This historical perspective and contexts have a direct relevance to the Bardia National Park under this study, the mainstream stream discourse and stories of contestations with the Sonahas which are the central to this thesis.

## **Chapter Four: The Genesis of Protected Area Designation and Management in Nepal**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In Nepal, the discourse and practice of state induced conservation through the creation of protected areas since the 1960s has operated under a protectionist and centralised paradigm, and a top down and techno-bureaucratic approach. This is very much rooted in the historical context of wildlife protection (particularly that of mega fauna) and their forested habitats in the Nepalese Tarai, the flat plains which stretch over the southern lowlands of Nepal from east to west as an extension of the Indo Gangetic Plains. This chapter examines the genesis and development of protected area intervention in Nepal by reviewing the existing literature on the Nepalese state and ruling elites' appropriation, control of and stake in wildlife and its protection. It discusses the drivers, forces and key players behind the initiation and institutionalisation of protected areas in the period up to the 1970s, during which Nepal experienced the onset of modern (Western) conservation ideas. The chapter traces the antecedents and origins of the mainstream discourse on and practices of protected areas in Nepal. This historical perspective has an important bearing on the development of the Bardia National Park (BNP) under this study and the conservation interventions impacting the Sonahas.

### **4.2 The period of Gorkha (1769-1846) and Rana rule (1846-1950)**

Historical accounts of Nepal in the late 18th century, based on the oldest Panjigar documents, which date back to 1783 CE, suggest that elephants were highly prized as royal property. The state regarded all elephants captured in Nepal as the property of the ruling monarch. State-sponsored captive elephant management in Nepal dates back to the 6th century (Locke, 2011). Similarly, a letter from the Shah monarch, to an official in the Tarai in 1798 indicates concern of the rulers on rhinoceros conservation:

There is a great need of rhinoceros (here). Rhinoceros are being killed in large numbers in the Tarai. You are therefore directed to prohibit everybody.... from killing rhinoceros (Regmi, 1971, p. 121).

This correspondence affirms that early efforts of the ruling elites to prohibit the killing of rhinoceros in the Tarai date back to (at least) the late 18th century. In 1791, the Nepali export trade to India included rhinoceros horns and timber (Regmi, 1980b) which reflects the rulers' economic interests in the rhinoceros of the Tarai.

The Nepalese Tarai had been a strategic as well as a resource rich landscape from which economic and political benefits were reaped by rulers during both Gorkha (1769-1846) and Rana (1846-1950) rule. In the autocratic and hereditary Rana rule, during which the Rana prime minister exercised state power and the monarchy was merely ceremonial, trade in forest and agricultural products from the Tarai to neighbouring British India accelerated (K. Ghimire, 1992). The Ranas also introduced bans on and punishments for tree felling and controlled timber sales through provisions in the Civil Code [*Muluki Ain*] (Regmi, 1981b, 1981c). Forest resources were privatised under the patronage of the feudal ruling elites during Gorkha rule and this continued during Rana rule (J. Adhikari & Dhungana, 2010; H. R. Ojha, 2008). The preservation of forests in forested and malarial Tarai maintained a natural barrier against potential external invasion (Guthman, 1997; Locke, 2011) at times of perceived threat of incursion from colonial British India. Therefore, forests in the Tarai were controlled, exploited and protected by the feudal ruling elites for both economic and political purposes.

**4.2.1 The Ranas' authority over wildlife and the legacy of big game hunting**  
The first powerful Rana Prime Minister, Jung Bahadur Rana, who founded hereditary Rana rule in 1846 that lasted for 104 years, was fond of hunting. Jung began a luxurious tradition of game hunting through winter hunting camps during which state affairs were managed and discharged (Cox, 2010). This hunting legacy was later sustained by the ruling elites into the late 20th century. Jung also declared the rhinoceros as a royal animal in 1856 (Shah, 2002). Since then, this animal and its habitat have received protection in the Chitwan valley, in the south-central lowlands. The Ranas also introduced the first hunting bans in the mid 19th century to exercise

their monopoly over trophy hunting. Royal game such as tiger, leopard and rhinoceros could not be hunted by the local population and their poaching was met with harsh punishments and fines. Therefore, wildlife, and particularly rhinoceros, was protected for royal and aristocratic hunts (Kollmair et al., 2003; Muller-Boker, 2000). The 1918 Civil Code contained legal provisions whereby forested areas used by rhinoceros and elephants could not be cut down without official permission. In exceptional circumstances only old, mature trees could be felled so long as this did not destroy the forest (Regmi, 1981c).

During Rana rule, the dense Tarai forests were exclusive big game hunting sites for the ruling elites, aristocrats and their foreign guests that included members of the British royal family, foreign dignitaries, and military and high ranking officials from colonial British India (Cox, 2010; Kollmair et al., 2003). Smythies, the Forest Conservator of British India, described the valleys of Chitwan, the south central Nepal, as a “sportsman’s paradise” with rhinoceros and big game, in a relatively “unspoilt habitat” (Gee, 1959, p. 61). Records of game hunts by Rana prime ministers and their foreign guests detail excessive numbers of big game killings, particularly of tiger and rhinoceros (Cox, 2010; Mishra & Ottaway, 2010; Shaha, 1970). Big game hunting generated personal (psychological), political (diplomatic) and economic gains for the Nepalese rulers (Cox, 2010).

Mishra (1990) opined that, although the figures of big game kills appeared shocking, wildlife in the Tarai were not endangered precisely because of the exclusive and occasional nature of access, and the controls over destruction of the forest in order to protect the hunting areas. For instance, the Chitwan and neighbouring areas were “shooting preserve of the rulers” that were strictly guarded (Gee, 1959, p. 59). It was therefore noted that forest and wildlife in the Tarai were effectively protected by the ruling Rana regime (Blower, 1973). However, K. Ghimire (1992) argues that that were carried out not so much for wildlife conservation but rather “...to satisfy and protect the game and recreational interests of the aristocracy...” (p. 190). H.B. Gurung (2008) also claims that protection of, in particular, the one horned rhinoceros, was for hunting and that it pandered to an exclusive minority of elites.

#### **4.2.2 Land tenure and state induced settlement/migration in the Tarai before 1951**

The ruling elites maintained privileged forms of land ownership up until the fall of Rana rule (1950) and this gave rise to feudalistic and exploitative agrarian relations which restricted the ownership of land and forests in the Tarai to the hands of the few. The expansion of state control and appropriation of land and forest resources by local elites continued throughout the periods of Gorkha and Rana rule. In post-unification Nepal (from 1769), the monarchy began the practice of providing land grants, both cultivated and uncultivated as well as land tax collection rights to individuals and institutions, who were also entrusted with judicial and administrative rights over the land granted to them (Regmi, 1976).

##### ***Birta Tenure***

Among the various forms of land tenure, *Birta* was a tax free land grant afforded to individuals such as chieftains in return for their service, or to members of the royal family, the nobility, Brahmins (a higher caste group close to the court), higher government officials and generals as a symbol of patronage. This practice secured the support and loyalty of the elite as well as facilitated the conversion of forest into agricultural land (Regmi, 1961, 1976). Jung acquired productive lands in the far-west Tarai region as Birta. This included the Bardia region and the contemporary Bardia National Park (see Chapter Five).

Given the potential for generating land revenue and agricultural output, the productive lands of the Tarai were steadily appropriated (under Birta grants) by the Rana family and others. Significantly, these land grants also included forested lands. By the mid 20th century, the ruling elites possessed half of the cultivated land in Tarai (K. Ghimire, 1992). Almost three quarters of the Tarai forests were also under private ownership and had been secured through Birta grants (K. P. Acharya, Adhikari, & Khanal, 2008).

##### ***Land reclamation and settlements in Tarai***

K. Ghimire (1992) noted that the process of land reclamation and settlement as land colonisation in the Tarai was encouraged by the Nepali state throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries. Previous attempts to achieve this by the Gorkhali (Shah) monarchs had failed. The Gorkhali rulers, and later the Rana rulers, had followed an

alternative “policy of incentivisation” in the form of privileged land tenure to their loyal followers and to the chieftains of conquered principalities (Locke, 2011, p. 72). The appropriation of both productive land and forest lands throughout the Tarai was driven by the economic interests of the rulers.

Attempts during the period of Rana rule to encourage hill farmers to settle in the Tarai also proved ineffective given the unfavourable hot weather and risk of malaria. Nevertheless, state sponsored land colonisation during this period continued. Landlords relied either on the original population of the region or on imported labourers from neighbouring India to clear and/or cultivate the land (Agergaard, 1999). Hence, there was a large-scale, state encouraged in-migration from nearby India into the Tarai at the beginning of Rana rule (in the late 1840s). Jung also invited traders, businessmen and landlords to move from India to the Tarai.

In the course of reorganising their administrative systems the Ranas introduced the *Jimidari* system by which non-official revenue collection functionaries were employed to collect land and crop taxes at the village level (Regmi, 1976). *Jimidars* were mainly people of hill origin, who were thus able to become influential landlords in the Tarai. They also facilitated the migration of cultivators into the Tarai from neighbouring India (Locke, 2011). The development of the Tarai, under Rana rule, continued in the 1920s that facilitated the settlement of landless people and meet the growing need for food grains. This encouragement to reclaim lands in the Tarai led to forest clearance (Kansakar, 2001), and thereby altered its socio-ecological landscapes.

### **4.3 The Tarai southern plains from the 1950s**

The ecological history and demography of the Tarai has an important bearing upon state directed conservation efforts in the second half of the 20th century as Nepal strived towards modernisation and development under foreign aid after the end of Rana rule in 1951. The period of the 1950s and 60s has been labelled as the “Decades of Destruction” of the “Terai’s wild places” (Mishra, 1990, p. 14). At this time, the image of the Nepalese Tarai as a dense forested area infested with fatal malaria began to shift. The popular narrative is that of the influx of hill migrants,

signifying a population boom in the Tarai and subsequent clearing of and occupation on Tarai forests for new settlements and cultivation. Population of Tarai increased from 2,389,417 to 2,885,190 between 1952/54 and 1961 (Kansakar, 1974) and from 4,013,603 to 5,752,117 between 1971 and 1981 (H. Gurung, 1981). Also see Ojha (1983) on the migrant settlements, and their populations in the Tarai in the 1950s.

This was aided by the control of malaria in the Tarai with the support of USAID in the 1950s. During King Mahendra's reign, the planned settlement in the Tarai, initially under the Rapti Valley Multi-Purpose Development Project (1956-1964), was supported by USAID and WHO. In addition to ameliorating economic plight of the victims of landslides in the early 1950s, this planned resettlement of hill famers in the Tarai in the 1950s and 60s was driven by demographic, economic and socio-political objectives (Agergaard, 1999). The hill migration has had serious consequences upon the native populations of the Tarai such as the Tharu and the Sonahas (see Chapters Five and Six).

#### **4.3.1 Legal changes in the 1950s**

Two important pieces of legislation emerged during this period. First, the Private Forest Nationalisation Act, 1957 was enacted, by which all forested and fallow lands that were previously private or communal property but without title, or those remaining fallow for more than two years were to be appropriated by the state (Muller-Boker, 2000). The Act intended to end feudal elite control of resources, and specifically the use of the Tarai forests as the personal property of Rana rulers, as well as to check forest degradation in the Tarai (D. Bajracharya, 1983).

Second, the Wild Life (Protection) Act 1957, also mentioned as Wildlife Protection Act, 1958 (Shaha, 1970), became the first national law to protect wildlife and regulate hunting, thus state legal control over wildlife. Its amendment in 1964 rationalised wildlife protection and regulation of hunting as: "...to ensuring order, tranquillity and satisfactory public behaviour..." (Shaha, 1970, p. 66). Rhinoceros and their habitat received legal protection (Aryal, 2009). However, the government retained the power to regulate the hunting of protected wildlife, prevent hunting

without a license and impose penalties for the killing of protected wildlife<sup>5</sup>. The government also had the power to declare “....any areas as forest reserve, camp, hunting preserve, national park, reserve ground, or otherwise.....” and to impose rules to regulate “...entry to these areas ” (Shaha, 1970, p. 76).

#### **4.3.2 The first unofficial national park**

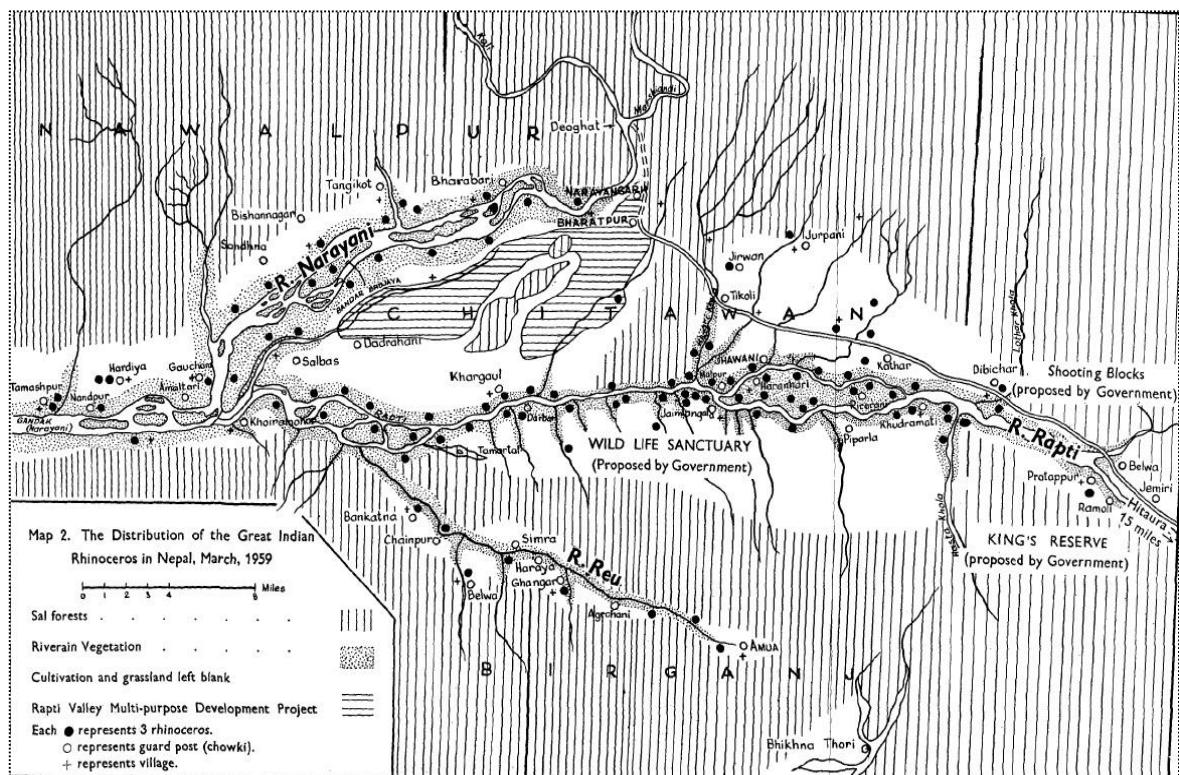
The context and experience of the first Nepalese protected area in Chitwan is representative of the stories of other lowland protected areas then. In January 1959, 68 square miles in the north of the Rapti valley in Chitwan, was declared the Mahendra Deer Park (also known as the Mahendra National Park, See Map 4.2) and placed under the control of the forest department. King Mahendra formally opened it (Gee, 1959). The first usage of a term “national park” in the published literature on Nepal referred to this park (see Appendix A). That this exclusive area was set aside under the name of the ruling monarch as a hunting preserve, demonstrates his strong influence over the very first attempt by the government towards allocating and declaring an area as a park. At that time, a wildlife sanctuary was also proposed by the government immediately south of the Park as well as designated shooting blocks and the King’s reserve in the adjacent areas (Gee, 1959), see Maps 4.1 and 4.2.

The first Director General (DG) of the national parks and wildlife conservation department of Nepal, B. N. Upreti (Interview, February 15, 2012), described the situation of declining rhinoceros numbers and the growing settlements in Chitwan at that time, as follows:

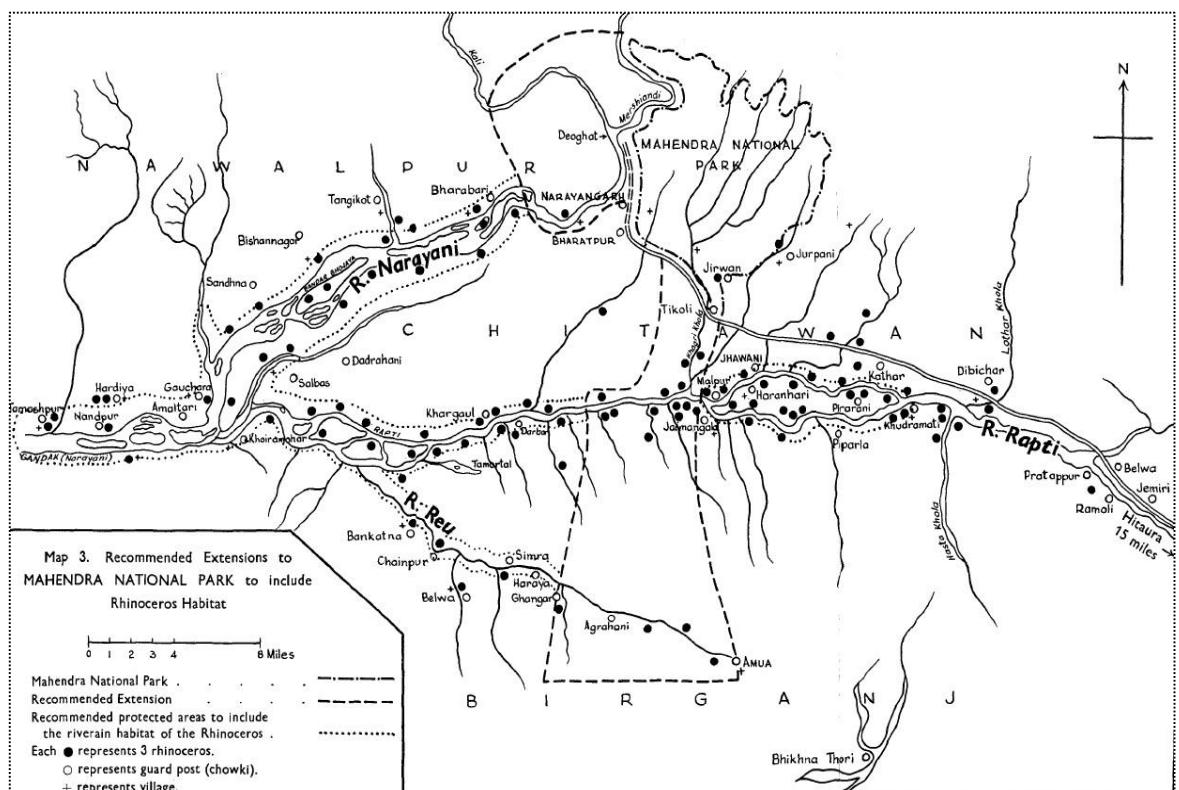
Rather than conservation, the thrust was for agricultural development....There were vast grasslands....habitats of rhinoceros in Chitwan. They did not see that, rather they saw the opportunity for agriculture there...there was a project, with the tractors, bulldozers.

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<sup>5</sup> The protected wild animals list then included rhinoceros, elephants, wild buffalo and others. Tiger and other species were removed from the list in 1962.



Map 4.1 Proposed wildlife sanctuary, king's reserve and shooting blocks in the Chitwan Valley. Source: Gee, 1959



Map 4.2 Mahendra National Park in the Chitwan Valley. Source: Gee, 1959

B.N. Upreti's impression of the Mahendra Deer Park then (1958 CE) was that, while it was simply declared, enclosed and demarcated it lacked adequate legal enforcement to check forest encroachment. The context in the 1950s in which the socio-ecological landscape of Tarai was significantly altered by state induced in-migration; clearing of forests for settlements and agriculture; and the developmentalist state under a powerful monarchy that was consolidating its legal control over forests, wildlife and hunting, is important to note.

## **4.4 The Crisis of the endangered rhinoceros and the development of early hunting preserves**

### **4.4.1 International concerns over rhinoceros numbers**

The discourse of the rhinoceros crisis was crucial for the genesis of the first protected area in Nepal. In the midst of political instability, immediately after the fall of Rana rule in 1950, increased poaching and the declining population of rhinoceros triggered international concerns. This situation inspired 1959 mission of E.P. Gee, a noted naturalist, to investigate the status and distribution of rhinoceros and to suggest measures for their preservation. It was carried out under the Survival Service Commission, now referred as the Species Survival Commission of the IUCN, and was supported by the Fauna Preservation Society (FPS) (Gee, 1963).

Gee (1959) noted functioning of a special Rhino Protection Department under the then Divisional Forest Office of Chitwan for the past two years (1957/58). This department comprised one commander (Captain) and one assistant (Lieutenant), four *Subedars*, 24 *Havildars* and 122 Rhino guards, deployed in 42 guard posts in Chitwan for the protection of rhinoceros, tiger and other game species (see Maps 4.1 and 4.2). This suggests the state's investment in the protection of rhinoceros as well as the delegation of authority in this area to the military prior to the creation of an officially declared wildlife sanctuary. Thus an armed and militaristic approach by the state is rooted in the early efforts of wildlife protection in Nepal.

Gee also reported declining numbers of rhinoceros from 1000 in 1953 to 300 in 1959 (See Table 4.1) and argued that the development and population settlements in the Rapti Valley were a far greater threat to the rhinoceros than were poachers. Given the

threatened situation of rhinoceros in Nepal, Gee (1959) recommended that: “.... strict protection and the allocation of living space in riverine and grassland tracts are needed...” in Chitwan (p. 60). Gee (1959) suggested enlargement of the prevailing Mahendra National Park for the conservation of rhinoceros and stated:

.....the riverine tracts ... rivers which contain rhinoceros be designated as National Park Extension Areas or Protected Areas, with rights of local villagers for grazing, cutting firewood and cutting thatch to continue as before, but to remain free of settlement and cultivation (p. 84).

This is the first instance of the term “Protected Areas” being used in the context of conservation in Nepal (see Appendix A). While Gee (1959) acknowledged that there would be challenges related to human habitation in the establishment of such protected areas, the quote above indicates his consideration of local peoples’ access to the resources therein. However, it could be argued that the ideals of strict conservation for the protection of rhinoceros embedded in Gee’s proposals provided an opening for the very denial of access to resources for those inhabiting such a region prior to its designation and the conception of a protected area without human habitation (also see subsection 4.5.5).

Given the international concern over its possible extinction, the Indian rhinoceros was listed on the IUCN List of Animals in Danger of Extermination. The seventh General Assembly proceedings of IUCN notes that Gee’s report was presented to King Mahendra as a call for action (IUCN, 1960). In December, 1960 King Mahendra seized supreme political power by dissolving the parliament. Boyle (1961) gives an account of the proposed shooting of a rhinoceros, in February, 1961, during the Royal visit by Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Phillip to Nepal. The FPS, through its patron, had urged the authorities in Nepal to refrain from the shooting of rhinoceros. The IUCN president then, Professor Baer, had cabled the King to the same effect. Despite this, a female rhinoceros was shot on Monday, February 27, 1961. On March 6, 1961, the IUCN president wrote to the King condemning the killing of a rhinoceros. This letter also drew the King’s attention to Gee’s report concerning the situation of rhinoceros in Nepal and to an offer of technical assistance from the IUCN in conservation efforts of Nepal.

In the same year, national legislation on forests further consolidated state control over the forests. The following year, the forest bureaucracy alerted the government to a substantial increase in illegal settlements and their encroachment on the Chitwan forests (Willan, 1965). During Gee's second mission in 1963, he drew further attention to the decreasing rhinoceros population in Chitwan, from 300 in 1959 to 160 in 1961, (see Table 4.1). The Rhino Patrolling Unit was also being reformed to control poaching of rhinoceros (Shah, 2002) with increased numbers of armed rhinoceros guards being made responsible for the protection of the animals under a wildlife officer (Gee, 1963).

**Table 4.1 Declining trend of rhinoceros in Nepal between 1950s and 60s.**

Year	Rhinoceros population
1953	1000
1957	600
1959	300
1961	160
1968	100

Source: Gee (1959, 1963); Martin & Vigne (1996).

The issue of illegal settlement had begun to gain prominence in what was at the time the only declared protected area (Gee, 1963; Willan, 1965). Gee (1963) claimed that the southward extension of the Park, proposed earlier in 1959, was primarily "unspoilt and uninhabited by settlers" (p. 70). Gee recommended that this area should be designated as a new national park (earlier proposed as a wildlife sanctuary), with the rationale:

For the preservation of the country's flora and fauna, as well as for the development of tourism.....it is necessary to constitute national parks and sanctuaries both in the *terai* [sic] for low elevation fauna and also in the Himalayas for high elevation fauna (p. 68).

In addition to flora and fauna protection, the discourse of tourism was also inherent in Gee's (1963) recommendation creating an opening for future commodification of protected areas. In 1963, Gee marked three proposed parks or sanctuaries in the

Tarai, one in Chitwan, one in the far west and one around the River Karnali, which is now the BNP, see genesis of the BNP, Chapter Five.

#### ***The first declared wildlife sanctuary***

Under the instruction of King Mahendra, 4000 people were displaced from the Mahendra Deer Park including the proposed rhinoceros sanctuary area to the south (Willan, 1965). In 1964, a rhinoceros sanctuary in Chitwan, to the south of the River Rapti (as envisaged by Gee), was created under a royal decree of the King. More than 22,000 people were resettled (Shah, 2002).

During the 1960s, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) began its operations in Nepal through the Rhino Conservation Program in Chitwan (WWF Nepal, 2009). Despite the state's efforts in protection of rhinoceros, by 1968, only 100 rhinos remained there (Martin & Vigne, 1996), see Table 4.1. By the end of the 1960s, the population of tigers, rhinoceros and other wildlife in Tarai was on the "brink of extinction" (Mishra, 1990, p. 14). As will be detailed in the next section, foreign wildlife advisors had also sounded alarms in the early 1970s regarding the potential extinction of rhinoceros in Nepal. Discourse around the rhinoceros crisis therefore provided a strong rationale for the establishment of the first designated protected area in Nepal and thereby legitimised state conservation intervention.

#### **4.4.2 The monarchy's hunting reserves**

In 1969, under the existing wildlife protection law, six Royal Hunting Reserves in the Tarai and one in the mountains were gazetted as game reserves under the aegis of King Mahendra (Shah, 2002; Mishra, 2008). These areas were enclosed in the interest of hunting by the monarchy and the royal family. Locals were however permitted to use the reserves but strictly prohibited from hunting (Kollmair et al., 2003). Such designations, including the earlier creation of the exclusive rhinoceros sanctuary in Chitwan, further consolidated the power that the ruling elites and the state had gained over the control, access and use of spaces enclosed for wildlife. The battles to define the meaning of these places in the 1960s, and subsequently over which uses were to be legitimised and which were not, were also being waged and would continue to be fought out, as the hunting zones of the monarchy began to be transformed into official protected areas during the 1970s.

#### 4.4.3 Summary

Deployment of armed guards for the protection of rhinoceros in the late 1950s and the declaration of hunting reserves of the monarchy aided by the wildlife law provided a pretext for the declaration of protected areas. But it also highlighted the point that state control of space for wildlife protection predated its designation. The crisis narrative of the Nepalese rhinoceros and the national and international attention that it triggered led to the proposition of protected areas by a foreign naturalist which gained the support of the monarchy. This provided a strong rationale for the state's moves to designate exclusive areas for wildlife protection (see Figure 4.1) However, this top-down and centralised approach to wildlife protection legitimised state conservation intervention by setting up exclusive conservation territories of the state ignoring the interests of the local inhabitants.

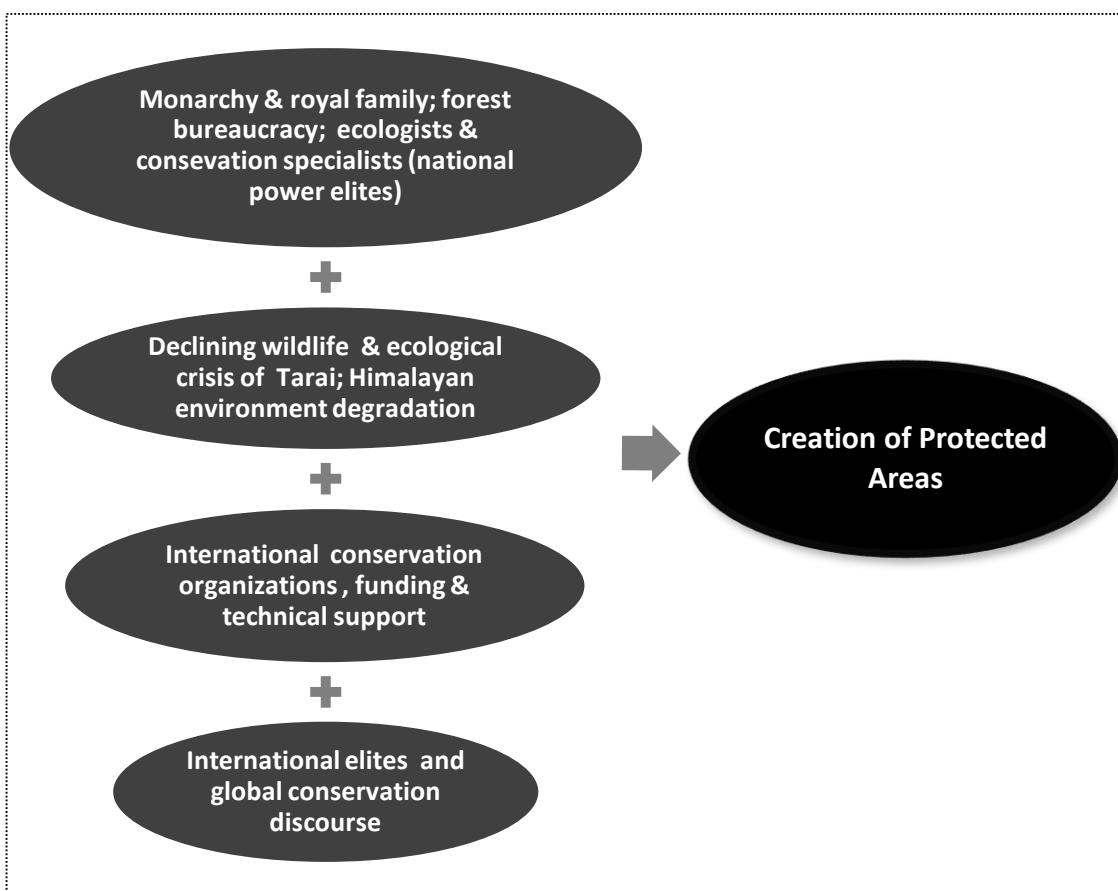


Figure 4.1 Forces leading to the creation of Nepalese protected areas.

## **4.5 International involvement in the 1970s, the first official protected area**

### **4.5.1 The 1968 ecological survey**

In 1968, the Trisuli Watershed Project, supported by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the UN and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), employed Graeme Caughley, a prominent conservation biologist, to conduct scientific surveys in Nepal including a census of rhinoceros. This was perhaps the first involvement of the FAO and the UNDP in wildlife conservation in Nepal. Caughley's recommendations also reinforced growing concerns about the declining wildlife populations and habitat destruction in Nepal (Heinen & Kattel, 1992; Heinen & Shrestha, 2006). This study report also triggered a sense of urgency by predicting the extinction of the rhinoceros by the late 1980s. The alarming status of the rhinoceros, positioned as an icon with important national symbolism in Nepal, attracted the attention of the national media, top level political leaders and bureaucrats (Mishra, 2008).

In 1971, the Nepalese government requested the FAO for help in creating a network of protected areas in Nepal. The FAO assigned a team of technical advisors, many of whom were British with experience in creating wildlife reserves in Africa (Mishra & Ottaway, 2010). Ecological surveys were carried out before the government proposed four national parks and wildlife reserves in the Tarai (among others it included the Chitwan National Park and Karnali, the current Bardia National Park) and the mountains. The region of Mt. Everest was already a high priority for the government at the time. In the early 1970s, in addition to the UNDP, the WWF was also providing technical and financial assistance to the government (Blower, 1973). By 1972, a separate section of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation was constituted within the Forest Department since prior to this the department had only Wildlife Officers and guards.

### **4.5.2 The National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (NPWC) Project**

In 1973, the NPWC Project, the first large scale project for wildlife conservation in Nepal was launched with the foreign aid of the FAO and UNDP which lasted until 1979. The objectives of the project included: elaboration of management plans for

protected areas; wildlife surveys and management proposals; improvement of administrative and organisational structures, and the development of conservation legislation and ecological planning for protected areas (FAO, 1997). The initiation and subsequent development of a national system of protected areas in the 1970s, as well as the emergence of a specialised department in 1980 – the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC) – can be attributed to this project. Several protected areas were surveyed by foreign ecologists for the first time under this project. The first national legislation of protected areas in Nepal, the NPWC Act 1973, was based on extensive surveys in the country (Blower, 1973) and was one of the achievements of this project (Heinen & Kattel, 1992). Nepalese wildlife biologists were also trained in Nepal and abroad, while technical expertise, field equipment and vehicles were also provided to Nepal under this project (Bolton, 1977).

#### **4.5.3 The FAO's technical wildlife advisors in the 1970s**

John Blower, the first FAO wildlife advisor to the Nepalese government under the technical assistance of the UNDP in the early 1970s, had also recommended the creation of the national park in Chitwan, similar to the one proposed by Gee, a decade earlier. In the face of depleting wildlife, destruction of habitat and population pressures, Blower (1973) predicted that, if the trend of forest clearance continued in the Tarai, the *Sal* (*Shorea robusta*) forests would disappear in two to three decades time and, if poaching of the rhinoceros was not curbed, the species would be exterminated in a few years' time. Blower advocated for broader environmental planning and management in the country and highlighted the urgent need for wildlife conservation measures.

While visiting the Mount Everest area in 1971, Blower recommended that it be immediately declared as the first national park and that it should cater to both conservation and the long term needs and interests of the local population, and hence, Blower supported the idea of an inhabited national park (S. Stevens, 1997) in the mountains. Blower, who had helped the government to draft the NPWC Project, was also involved in drafting the NPWC Act 1973. His inputs into the legislation, as well as those of subsequent British wildlife advisors under the NPWC project, concerning

management plans in the early stages of the protected area movement in Nepal were of “African style” as recalled by B.N. Upreti referring to a strict model (Interview, May 20, 2011).

Melvin Bolton, the FAO Ecologist with the NPWC project in the 1970s had also proposed strict criteria and exclusion of human settlements for the very first designated national park in Nepal (Bolton, 1977). Likewise, Frank Poppleton, another wildlife advisor in the 1970s, held a belief that “Protection is 99 percent of conservation” and believed “in wild animal conservation with guns, guards, and barbed wire” (Mishra & Ottaway, 2010, p. 20). These FAO advisors were influential in the setting up of early protected areas in Nepal and had a significant impact on their management style (see Figure 4.1). Such strictly managed protected areas lacking local people’s role in their management or access to resources, had repercussions on the local inhabitants’ dependence and interactions on the natural resources of these areas (see Chapter Seven).

#### **4.5.4 The influence of Tiger conservation**

By the early 1970s, the prevailing laws protected rhinoceros and other animals but as per the Hunting Rule of 1970, tigers and leopards were still able to be hunted provided a license was acquired (Shaha, 1970). However, this scenario soon changed given the increasing level of global concern for tigers. Advocacy of Dilon Ripley, an American scientist with the Smithsonian Institution, during the 1969 IUCN general assembly in Delhi, was particularly influential in the banning of tiger hunts across the Indian-subcontinent as well as in heightening global recognition of tigers as an endangered species. This also encouraged the WWF’s Operation Tiger which was launched in September, 1972 by Prince Bernhard, then president of the WWF. This emerging international campaign for tiger conservation also had a significant impact on Nepalese rulers and bureaucrats. It triggered the banning of tiger hunting in 1972 as well as encouraged the creation of tiger sanctuaries in Nepal (Mishra & Ottaway, 2010).

The two member delegation, of Birendra Bahadur Shah (of royal descent), head of the newly formed national parks and wildlife unit in the Forest Ministry and

government ecologist Hemant Mishra, attended the second World Conference on National Parks, 1972, at Yellowstone, USA. This was an opportune time for Nepal to generate international support for wildlife conservation (Mishra & Ottaway, 2010). Mishra's visit to the famous Yellowstone National Park worked to import western ideals of national park management and influenced the vision of the first official national park to be established in Nepal (Mishra, 2008).

There was also a debate as to whether Nepal's priority should be anti-poaching and wildlife habitat protection or research on wildlife and ecology. Hence, despite initial reluctance from the FAO, the Tiger Ecology Project, funded by both the Smithsonian Institution and the WWF, was finally launched in 1973 in the Chitwan National Park (CNP), to undertake long-term ecological research on tiger. The findings of this tiger research were also instrumental in enlarging the CNP. Likewise, two other wildlife reserves were formally established in Nepal by 1975 under the Operation Tiger scheme in the western lowland. Both these protected areas, one of which was the BNP, were known for their high densities of tigers (Mishra, Wimmer, & Smith, 1987). Hence, the emergence of protected areas in the Tarai during the 1970s can be linked with state's efforts to save the tiger (Mishra, 1990) and related conservation discourse. Influences of tiger conservation discourse on the BNP are discussed further in subsection 8.2.3, Chapter Eight.

#### **4.5.5 The first designated protected area**

The precursors to the establishment of the CNP, as the first official protected area in Nepal, in 1973 therefore included prior state initiatives towards the protection of rhinoceros and the related recommendations of foreign naturalists and wildlife experts. The experience of the creation of the CNP is symptomatic of the dominant conservation model and thinking then, and pertinent to other lowland protected areas during the 1970s including the BNP. H. B. Gurung (2008) based on the oral accounts of T.M. Maskey, the first warden of the CNP, claims that the instigation of preliminary work to create the CNP came from royal directives. Protection of endangered rhinoceros and tiger provided the key rationale for its creation. This was prioritised over the welfare of the local inhabitants of the region. The process of designation of the CNP involved eviction of the local population, appropriation of

land by the state long before the legal status and extent of the park were clarified and a lack of public consultation.

B.N. Upreti, during an interview (2012) also recalled local people's dissents against state wildlife policy during the early days of the CNP establishment as their access to the forests were curtailed. Its designation process and demarcation was a top-down exercise emanating from royal orders and carried out by the forest bureaucracy (H. B. Gurung, 2008; Paudel, 2005). Nevertheless, the designation of the CNP led to the top-down and techno-bureaucratic designation of several other protected areas in different parts of the country including the BNP in the 1970s.

#### **4.6 The Nepalese Monarchy's stake in wildlife and conservation**

The historical legacy of the Nepalese monarchy and royal family in nature conservation offers important insights into the genesis of Nepalese protected areas. As was evident in foregoing discussions, this legacy relates to their interests in big game hunting and wildlife, their subsequent influence on and support of the state's attempts to regulate hunting by setting aside exclusive areas for this purpose, which were later converted into designated protected areas. Their particular focus on mega fauna could also be said to have been influenced by international conservation discourse surrounding endangered species and their close ties with European royals who were actively engaged in conservation movement. The "worldwide craze for national parks in the 1970s" as a former bureaucrat and conservation expert, U. R. Sharma termed it had also influenced monarchy (Interview, February 15, 2012). Scholars have noted a conversion of the hunting legacy of ruling elites into conservation initiatives (Locke, 2011; Paudel, 2005), suggesting a re-invention of traditional hunters as conservationists (H. B. Gurung, 2008).

The monarchy and the royal family provided legitimacy and impetus to the early establishment of Nepalese protected areas (Figure 4.1). During the 1960s and 1970s when protected areas were being conceived, initiated, institutionalised and legislated, the authority of Nepalese monarchy was dominant in the national polity. The role of King Gyanendra on wildlife conservation has been acknowledged (Mishra, 2008) as:

...it would be wrong and an injustice to the history of nature conservation not to credit him with saving the rhinos from becoming extinct in Nepal.....His leadership and dedication were instrumental in generating political will in Nepal and in gaining international support to create a network of national parks and wildlife reserves... (p. xviii)

Mishra (2008) argues that the tradition of royal hunts contributed to wildlife protection as the hunts were infrequent and highly organised, and they were held on the conditions that an area not be exhausted and that the population of animals not be endangered. The stake of the Shah monarchs on the rhinoceros was associated with a traditional ritual called Blood Tarpan, which involved the monarch having to perform a sacred ceremony with mandatory offering of blood from a newly slaughtered rhinoceros to a Hindu god (Martin & Vigne, 1996). Martin (1985) also opines this as "...a small price to pay in return for the protection granted to the rhino population as a whole..." (p. 16). Likewise, U.R. Sharma expressed a similar view despite not being a royalist, "... we have to acknowledge their good contribution. Yes it is true that they may not have done so for a love of the nation or people at large, but out of their own interests for hunting grounds" (Interview, February 15, 2012). He further claimed, "Had there been no will from them [the monarchy] it would not have been possible because of the situation of Chitwan", referring to the crisis of Tarai forests and wildlife habitats in 1950s and 1960s (discussed earlier).

#### **4.6.1 King Mahendra's reign (1955-1972)**

The reign of King Mahendra, a keen hunter and a great lover of game (Shaha, 1970), who approved of modern conservation programs in the 1970s (B. N. Upreti, 1985), is also referred to as the age of conservation (Locke, 2011). In addition to the rhinoceros sanctuary and the early work towards establishing the CNP, Mishra et al. (1987) credit the King for his vision in creating hunting reserves which provided protection for tigers in the 1960s. The King had attended the opening meeting of the WWF in Switzerland (Mishra & Ottaway, 2010). This was the conservation organisation in which royalty, such as Prince Bernhard of Holland and Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh were actively involved. H. R. Ojha (2008) suggests that the King's stake in conservation and his engagement with international conservation agencies suited his plan for securing political legitimacy for his undemocratic move

to dissolve the parliament in 1961 and to consolidate political power to himself under a party-less political system in the early 1970s.

The influence of John Blower's expert advice to the forest bureaucracy that was initially ignored was later mediated by the King, as B.N. Upreti recalled:

Blower wrote a letter to Prince Bernhard.... Prince wrote back to the King, hinting that it was imperative to take Blower's advice. Then the King granted him an audience and asked his ideas in writing. Then Blower prepared a brief report....the forest ministry took him seriously only after King issued a royal order to implement his recommendation (Interview, February 15, 2012).

#### **4.6.2 King Birendra's reign (1972-2001)**

King Birendra who authorised the creation of the first protected area in Nepal was influential in the approval of the NPWC Act 1973. B.N. Upreti during the interview (2012) stated that, the pending legislation was approved upon a royal directive in a matter of one week. This was also triggered by the planned visit of Prince Bernhard. Mishra and Ottaway (2010) praise the King's political will in the 1970s "...to save tigers from becoming extinct in his kingdom" (p. 74), while B.N. Upreti (1985) applauds the King for his support and credits progress in the wildlife sector to his personal interest. Martin and Vigne (1996) also commend the King for his commitment in protecting the rhinoceros in the 1990s.

In my interview with him, B.N. Upreti (2012) also mentioned the King's visit to Annapurna region and a subsequent royal directive initiating the famous touristic Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA) in the 1980s. Croes (2006) discusses the King's influence on the establishment of the ACA, the management of which has been entrusted to the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC), a conservation agency with King as a patron and Prince as its chairman until the 2006 republican Nepal. Croes (2006) argues that the royal family appropriated the discourse of environmental conservation to enhance monarchical legitimacy in the 1980s. Close ties existed between the royal family and international conservation circles (Keiter, 1995).

#### **4.6.3 King Gyanendra's reign (2001-2006)**

The Wildlife Times published this summation of King Gyanendra:

.... a passionate conservationist.....contributed in the 1001 Club: A Nature Trust in response to the plea made by late prince Bernhard ....to lay foundation for the creation of WWF. By permitting world's first ever wild tiger's study in jungles of Nepal [1970s]...., he made sure wild tiger should not be extinct.... He created web of protected areas in Nepal.... Nepal's existing conservation areas, policies....are result of his unchallenged, effective leadership in the country (Wildlife Times, 2011, p. 7).

King Gyanendra, "...a former hunter and an ardent conservationist..." was active in the conservation affairs of Nepal from the 1970s (Mishra & Ottaway, 2010, p. 48). At that point in time, he was a prince. In fact, King Birendra, his elder brother, had assigned him the responsibility of creating a network of protected areas in Nepal (Mishra, 2008). Mishra et al. (1987) commend him for his role in relation to tiger sanctuaries and wildlife reserves in Nepal. The fact that he announced the decision to establish a Sagarmatha (Mt. Everest) National Park for the first time in October 1973 at the WWF's congress in Bonn and led Nepal's delegation to the Third WWF International Conference (Schilling, 1997) suggests his ties with the WWF.

As a Prince, he chaired a high level wildlife committee of the royal palace that was set up in 1973 which "made virtually all of the policy and operational decisions on wildlife conservation in Nepal" (Mishra, 2008, pp. xxi-xxii). The exclusive committee, which existed until the 1990s, comprised members from the top echelons of the state bureaucracy including forest and wildlife officials. The committee was responsible for preparing various important policies including the creation of the protected areas. The committee also sanctioned the establishment of the NTNC in 1982, to generate donations and support for wildlife conservation (Aryal, 2009).

#### **4.6.4 The nexus of wildlife science, the forest bureaucracy and the royals**

In the late 1960s, Caughley's scientific report (as discussed above) that heightened a crisis of rhinoceros had also noted inadequacy of King Mahendra's earlier efforts towards setting up a rhinoceros sanctuary. This report was tactfully passed directly to

the King by wildlife bureaucrats with an aim to expedite necessary actions under the King's influence (Mishra, 2008). In the early 1980s, the findings of the research on tiger in Chitwan, by the Smithsonian Institution and their Nepalese counterparts, provided a strong rationale for the expansion of the CNP boundary. The study findings were reported to Prince Gyanendra in 1981. In the following year, King Birendra and the Prince visited the project site in Chitwan. In the same year the King issued a directive for the creation of additional wildlife reserve adjoining the CNP to the west. In the 1984 implementation of this directive, the roles of the wildlife bureaucracy, notably the then DG of the DNPWC and the then CNP warden were crucial. The wildlife reserve was created especially to extend tiger habitat based on the recommendation of biologists (Mishra & Ottaway, 2010; Mishra et al., 1987). Referring to this instance, Mishra and Ottaway (2010) contend, "...good science results in good political decisions..." (p. 48).

#### **4.6.5 Summary**

The roles and interests of the three successive monarchies since the 1960s, in wildlife conservation and thereby, in the designation of protected areas throughout Nepal, were crucial. The foundations and realisation of state wildlife protection measures through the creation of protected areas progressed when the power of the monarchy was at its greatest. Their support was critical to Nepal's adoption of the international discourse on nature conservation that triggered the growth of protected areas. The nexus between wildlife and natural science, wildlife bureaucracy and monarchy were therefore crucial in this regard.

## **4.7 Summary and conclusion**

Historically, ruling elites and the state exercised control over the Tarai frontiers, its forests and wildlife, driven by their multiple interests such as economic, political, aesthetic and hunting. As highlighted in this chapter, and as argued by others (e.g., J. Adhikari & Dhungana, 2010; H. R. Ojha, 2008; Satyal, 2009; Sinha, 2011), the Tarai forest has historically been an inequitable domain, primarily benefitting the modern Nepalese state, its ruling classes and their regime. In this chapter, I identified historical contexts and drivers; both domestic and international which have combined to underpin and provide a thrust to the conservation efforts and protected area designation in Nepal (see Figure 4.1). The Tarai forest lands and wildlife had been of particular significance to the genesis and discourse around lowland protected areas.

The historical backdrop of the 1950 and 1960s, during the rise of the developmentalist Nepali state; the dominant narrative of ecological crisis in the Tarai, marked by rapid in-migration from the hills, forest destruction and clearance for agriculture and settlements that threatened forests and disappearing rhinoceros, were later coupled with concerns for the endangered tiger. These factors triggered the designation of the first formal protected area in Nepal. The genesis of the CNP was presented here since it also informs the experiences of lowland protected areas in the 1970s including the BNP.

The ecological and wildlife science and knowledge; the policy influence of foreign experts and specialists; international concerns for endangered mega fauna and subsequent foreign aid were instrumental in the creation and institutionalisation of protected areas and their associated scientific discourse in Nepal. The domestic power elites, mainly the ruling monarchy's influence and backing, were also critical to the movement of protected areas. The roles of Nepalese bureaucrats and ecologists in the wildlife domain were equally influential to these ends (see Figure 4.1). The Himalayan environmental crisis theories (popularised during the 1970s) and tourism discourse also influenced the creation of protected areas in Nepal (Brower, 1991; Paudel, 2005). This unique genesis of protected areas to Nepal and the dominant conservation discourse articulated in this, inevitably have bearing upon the BNP and its discourse; its local inhabitants, including the Sonahas.

## **Chapter Five: Background to the Study Area**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The Sonaha ethnic minority group living in the Karnali River delta adjacent to the Bardia National Park (BNP), here after the Park, is the focus of this study. This chapter aims to provide a general background to the area and the Park supported by illustrations, relevant maps and figures. I introduce the region of Bardia, providing a brief historical context on land and forest tenure and on the Tharu ethnic groups who comprise the majority of the local population. I then provide a time line of the development of the Park and its BZ, including the most significant conservation and development initiatives. A description of the physical characteristics of the delta is followed by a consideration of its demographic situation and an overview of its natural resources, their management and tenure arrangements. Specific attention is then given to the frequently overlooked Sonaha population and their settlements in and around the delta.

### **5.2 The region of Bardia**

The popular perception of Bardia, also spelled ‘Bardiya’ (CBS, 2011), in contemporary Nepal is that of a region of sweltering heat and humidity characterised by the presence of Tharu people; the practices of bonded labour systems that were once common among them and the presence of resettlement camps of freed bonded labourers. It also includes the forested BNP with its magnificent wildlife such as rhinoceros and tigers. Occasional coverage by the Nepalese media has also portrayed encroachments on the forests by *Sukumbasi*, a term for landless squatters illegally occupying public land, and the fact that it was once a stronghold of Maoist rebels who confiscated huge plots of land and the agricultural produce of the big landlords.

Located in the mid-western Tarai, the low lying region of Nepal, the district of Bardia (from here on Bardia) covers an area of 2065 square kilometres ( $\text{km}^2$ ). Topographically, 68.76% of Bardia exhibits features of the Tarai. The rest, 31.27%

of Bardia, is covered by the Chure hills. Almost half of Bardia is within the boundaries of the BNP (43% of the district); followed by agricultural land (33.5%), forest areas (17%) and river, river banks and rocks (6.5%) (CBS, 2006/07). It contains 31 VDCs and one municipality. It shares administrative and political boundaries with the Kailali district which lies to the west, marked by the Karnali River. It borders the Banke district to the east, as well as Surkhet and a small portion of Salyan district to the north. To the south it borders with Uttar Pradesh, a state of India (see Map 5.1).

### **5.2.1 The Tharu ethnic groups in Bardia**

The name of the region as “Bardia” is believed to have emerged from a Tharu vernacular term, *Balibarda* (healthy cattle) or *Bardawa* (cow and ox) since there were ample grazing areas in the region. Bardia also means herdsmen in the Tharu dialect and traditionally the area was a preferred place for herdsmen (Chaudhari, 2002; Lal, 2013). Although this study primarily concerns the Sonaha people in the delta, the Tharu people<sup>6</sup> are the predominant demographic group in Bardia (CBS, 2006/07). The interactions between the Sonahas and the Tharus in the delta are important to this thesis (see section 6.3).

Several scholars have described the Tharus as the autochthonous or indigenous people of the Tarai (Gunaratne, 1998; Krauskopff, 1995; Muller-Boker, 2000) contending that, historically, they co-existed with the dense forests of the Tarai. In fact, several culturally and linguistically distinct groups of people in the Nepalese Tarai are collectively known as Tharus (Gunaratne, 1998). Despite the intra-ethnic variations of the Tharu, there is a commonality in terms of their interaction with and access to the resources of the natural environment, including land (Gunaratne, 2002).

There are various Tharu subgroups. The western Tarai region is predominantly inhabited by two subgroups known as the *Kathariya* Tharu and the *Dangaura* Tharu. The term “Dangaura” is derived from their original home in Nepal’s Dang Valley

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<sup>6</sup> The history of the Tharu people and its subgroups, in Bardia is complex and is beyond the scope of this study; however, relevant information on the Tharu has been drawn from existing scholarly work.

(Gunaratne, 2007)<sup>7</sup>. According to Krauskopff (1995) the Dang and the Deokhuri vallies in the inner low lying region of the Tarai, in mid-western Nepal (adjoining Banke district, see Map 5.1) is claimed by the Tharus to be their original home. Krauskopff (1995) maintains that the Dangaura Tharu migrated from Dang to the east but mostly to the west, and settled in the Bardia and Banke districts as well as the inner Tarai valley of Surkhet in the 19th century. After the land reform measures of the 1960s Dangaura Tharus moved further west, coming into contact with the Rana Tharu, another Tharu subgroup who is predominant in far-western Nepal.

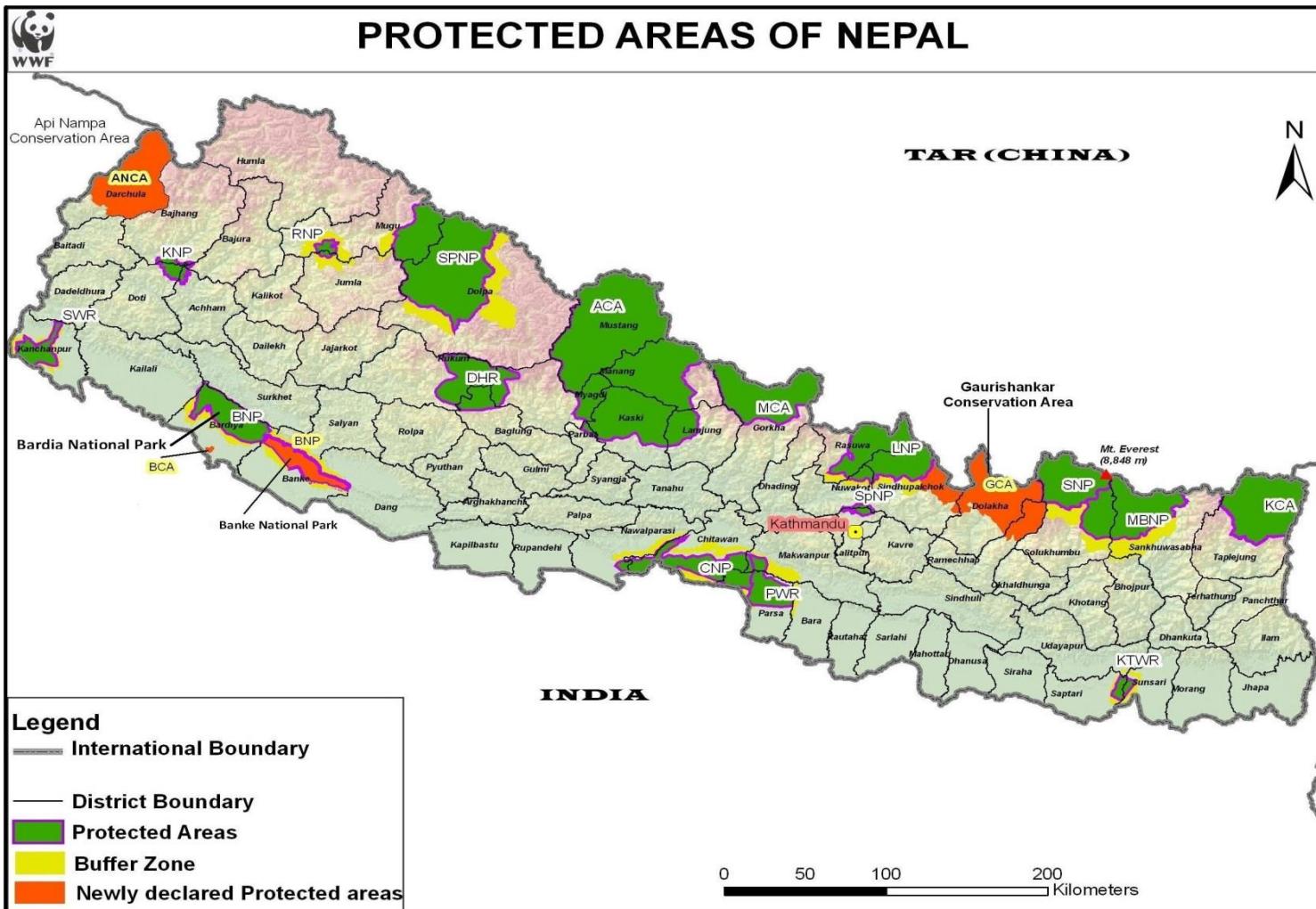
Krauskopff (1995) notes that the Karnali River, which forms the river delta in my case study, is a boundary between two cultural entities of the Tharu, the Dangaura Tharu in the east and the Rana Tharu in the west. Krauskopff (1995) also notes the presence of another Tharu subgroup known as *Katharya* (Kathariya) living mostly in India, south of the Dangaura Tharu's habitat as well as in the Kailali district where it adjoins that of Bardia (see Map 5.1). Krauskopff (1995) also mentions yet another Tharu group known as the *Deshauriya* and presumes that their culture is close to that of the Dangaura Tharu, and hence that it is an "...offshoot of an earlier wave of migrants from Dang or, at least, may testify to an ancient closer relation with Dang that was broken..." when the region was under British India's control, 1816-1860 (pp. 187-188). Hence, although the Dangaura Tharus are the predominant group, other subgroups of Tharu are also found in Bardia.

However, Chetri (2005) also takes note of scholarly contentions that a pristine Tarai was originally inhabited by the Tharu before the migration of hill people since the 19th century. With the influx of migrants from the hills as well as from India since then, Bardia now has a multiethnic; multi-lingual and multicultural character albeit with the Tharu population still comprising the majority (52.60%)<sup>8</sup> (CBS, 2006/07). It is now a densely populated region with a total population of 426, 576 (CBS, 2011).

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<sup>7</sup> There are other subgroups of Tharu such as Rana Tharu, Desouriya Tharu and others in the central and eastern Tarai.

<sup>8</sup> As per the 2001 National Census, out of the total population of 382,649, Tharu were 201,276.



Map 5.1 Protected Areas of Nepal. Bardia [Bardiya] contains the Bardia National Park (BNP) and Blackbuck Conservation Area (BCA). The newly created Banke National Park adjoins the BNP. Courtesy: WWF Nepal.

### **5.2.2 History and Land Tenure in Bardia**

Before the Gorkhali conquest and the political unification of modern Nepal in 1769 CE, the Tarai region was under the jurisdiction of several petty hill states and principalities (Ojha, 1983). Bardia was under the influence of a Dailekh hill kingdom (located north of Bardia across Surkhet, see Map 5.3) before it was defeated and annexed by the Gorkha rulers in the late 18th century (B. N. Upreti, 1994). Dailekh is also mentioned with reference to a class of 22 chiefs in several petty kingdoms, stated as “Dang, Chilli -*Baisi Rajas*-Dalu Dailek-Duti-Yumila-Taklakot ...” immediately to the west of then “Nepal Proper” in the 18th century (Hamilton, 1819, p. 237, emphasis in original) that were later conquered by Gorkha rulers in 1789-1790 (Pinhorn, 1988). The unification drive that the Gorkhali King, Prithivi Narayan Shah had begun, was extended later by his youngest son, Bahadur Shah who expanded Nepal’s western territories by conquering principalities in the Karnali and Gandaki basins and beyond (Whelpton, 2005).

However, as discussed by Michael (2011) historically the Tarai was a contested frontier between hill kingdoms (in Nepal) and the northern kingdoms of India, and formed a part of shifting frontier with frequent territorial disputes. In the late 18th and early 19th century, the low lying frontiers of Bardia came under the influence of the *Nawabs* (Muslim rulers) of Awadh. Awadh was known as Oudh – an area north east of present day Uttar Pradesh (India, adjoining southern Nepal) that was under Mugal rule. The Tarai west was under the domain of Awadh and territorial disputes between the Gorkhalis and the British East India Company on behalf of Nawab of Awadh led to Anglo-Gorkha war, 1814-1816 (Lal, 2002).

#### ***The Bardia region under colonial British India***

By the early years of the 19th century, the expanded territory of Nepal included parts of the modern component states of India (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Himachal Pradesh), but it was reduced to the area of present day Nepal during the Anglo-Gorkha war. Four current districts of Nepal, Banke and Bardia, and, Kailali and Kanchanpur in the far west were ceded to colonial British India according to the terms of the Sugauli Treaty in 1816 which also delineated the India-Nepal border (Kansakar, 2001). These annexed territories of Nepal were entrusted to the “*Nawabs* of Awadh” (Regmi, 1981d, p. 21) and landholdings in Babai-Karnali region of

Bardia were ceded to Muslim landlords from India (Lal, 2013). These territories of the Tarai were later restored to Nepal in 1861, in recognition of Nepal's assistance to British forces during the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny. The Nepali forces were led by Jung, the first Rana prime minister of Nepal (Kansakar, 2001; Whelpton, 2005). These recovered territories were then referred to as *Naya Muluk* (the New Country). Regmi (1975) indicates that these newly acquired territories contained valuable forests and extensive tracts of cultivable lands, which therefore, hints at the ecological condition of Bardia and surrounding districts in the 19th century.

#### ***The Birta tenure and feudal landlordism in Bardia***

After Bardia was regained from British India, the Nepalese monarchy granted Bardia to Jung, as Birta, a form of privileged land grant to individuals (see subsection 4.2.2). Wasteland and forest lands in the region were often granted as Birta to the Rana Prime Minister and members of the extended Rana family (Regmi, 1976). Regmi, (1981a) notes that "The entire district of Bardia was under Birta tenure" (p. 111). Jung tried to develop Far Western Tarai including Bardia as his family property and encouraged large-scale immigration of people from India into the Nepalese Tarai to reclaim forest land for agriculture, trade and commerce (Kansakar, 2001; Regmi, 1975).

Tharu peasants in Bardia served the Indian landlords and, subsequently, Nepalese landlords from the hills (Chaudhari, 2002). When the territories annexed to British India were restored to Nepal, the traditional *Talukdars* -revenue collectors also designated as *Rajas* (Kings) were displaced. The Talukdars had held land in neighbouring Oudh in India prior to its annexation by British India in 1856 (Regmi, 1981d). Chaudhari (2002) also notes that, before the geodetic survey of Nepal, Bardia was divided into 11 land revenue divisions known as *Tappa* and 175 *Maujas* (further units of land with several villages and hamlets). Following this, the rulers in Kathmandu, consequently, needed to deal only with the *Chaudharis* (state functionaries) who were responsible for the collection of revenue in each Tappa (Regmi, 1981d, p. 22).

Phena, one such Tappa in Bardia was under the jurisdiction of the Bardia *Mal* office, collecting revenue on behalf of the Birta holders. The collection of revenue at Phena was the responsibility of a *Chaudhari* (revenue collector) named Sheo Prasad Tharu, who was imprisoned in 1880 for failing to pay a due amount. His son, Raghu, then submitted a petition requesting his appointment as a Chaudhari of Phena in 1884. This petition indicates the existence of a Tharu elite engaged as state functionaries in the 19th century Bardia.

Our family has been functioning as Chaudhari of Phena for four or five generations past from the time of the *Nawabs* and the British. After the far-western Tarai region was incorporated into the Kingdom of Nepal, my father..., was reconfirmed as Chaudhari (Regmi, 1980a, p. 153, empahsis in original).

### ***The exploitative Jimidari system***

The Rana rulers introduced the Jimidari system in 1861 by which Jimidars, often high caste hill people, were employed as state functionaries for the collection of taxes and revenues from several villages. Regmi (1980a, p. 152) gives an account of government instruction to the Bardia Revenue Office on June 1884 in which, according to the Administrative Regulations, neither revenue-collection officers (*amali*) nor their relatives were entitled to be appointed to the position of a Chaudhari (revenue collector at the level of the Tappa). Instead, the regulations prescribed that hillsmen be appointed as Chaudharis and Jimidars so long as they were available<sup>9</sup>.

This suggests the Jimidars (often non-Tharu) began to displace Chaudharis, who were mainly Tharus, in Bardia. In the late 19th century, these Jimidars became big and powerful landlords who exploited the local peasants and tenants (Cederroth, 1995). As revenue collecting functionaries of the Rana rulers they also acted as agricultural entrepreneurs and money lenders. They became an important channel by which to extract revenue by removing surplus agricultural production from the

<sup>9</sup> Rana rule marked the shift from “semi-feudalistic Gorkhali Empire to a centralised agrarian bureaucracy” and during the early 1860s, there were reforms in revenue administration and re-organisation of the revenue collection functions in Tarai by salaried functionaries of the government (Regmi, 1975, p. 106).

peasantry. They were responsible for employing settlers or tenants to cultivate land and thereby generate an agricultural surplus for the state revenue system (Regmi, 1976).

In discussing the unequal agrarian relations and landownership patterns that characterised the domination of landlords and the helplessness of the peasantry in Bardia, S. Thapa (2000) argues that the possession of land by Tharu peasants declined between 1910 and 1947. In the western Tarai, 82% of land was cultivated by Tharu farmers until 1910. But they gradually lost ownership of their land. The situation in 1910 when individual landowners possessed 52,000 *bigha* (1 *bigha* = 0.6773 hectares) and Jimidars possessed 24,000 *bigha* was reversed by 1951 (Regmi, 1976). These figures strongly indicate a trend of growing disparities in land ownership between peasants and landlords. The Jimidari system was only abolished in 1964.

### **5.2.3 Summary**

This section described the location and biophysical features of Bardia and described the Tharu (and their various subgroups) as the dominant social demographic group. Under the influence of hill based petty kingdoms in Nepal and small kingdoms of north Indian plain to the south in pre-modern times (before 1789), later under the Gorkha empire and then under the colonial British India influence (1814-1856), the region had an interesting history in the context of modern Nepal. This section also provided a history of the feudal agrarian structure, and of the unequal relations and land ownership structures imposed by the ruling elites. The land and forests in the region were under the privileged form of land tenure known as Birta which was exercised exclusively by the feudal Rana ruling elites, who also aided non-local landlords as well as settlers in the region to further their economic interests. They thus fostered unequal, exploitative and feudal agrarian relations and structures to the detriment and dispossession of native populations in Bardia. Both Birta and Jimidari systems were abolished as part of post Rana rule modernisation of Nepal.

### **5.3 The Bardia National Park and its Buffer Zone**

The Bardia National Park is the largest protected area in lowland Nepal covering a core park area of 968 km<sup>2</sup> and an area of 507 km<sup>2</sup> surrounding the Park, known as the Buffer Zone (BZ). The southern slopes of the Churiya hills to the north, the extended *Sal* forests, rivers, river islands and flood plains, wetlands, riverine forests, tall grasses and grasslands maintain the Park's richness in floral and faunal diversity. It is a unique ecosystem and a home to rare and endangered species (B. N. Upreti, 1994). Therefore, biologically, the Park "offers a special opportunity to conserve the rich biological diversity of the Tarai and for long term survival to large charismatic species..." such as tiger, one horned rhinoceros and elephants (DNPWC/MoFSC, 2007, p. 27).

The Park claims to host the second highest number of the endangered Royal Bengal Tiger in Nepal. The pleasant and beautiful natural scenery of the Babai valley; the rivers such as Karnali-Geruwa and Babai; and the presence of several protected species add to it's the Park' attractions (Bardia National Park Office, 2011). The ecological significance of the Park is considerable because it contains two major eco-regions, namely the "Tarai-Duar Savannas and grasslands", and the "Himalayan Sub-tropical Broadleaf Forests". The Park also conserves the fragile Churia hills ecosystem, thereby benefiting to the Tarai alluvial plain and the agricultural lands therein, through water regulation and protection from siltation and desertification (DNPWC/MoFSC, 2007).

#### **5.3.1 A historical perspective on the inception of the BNP**

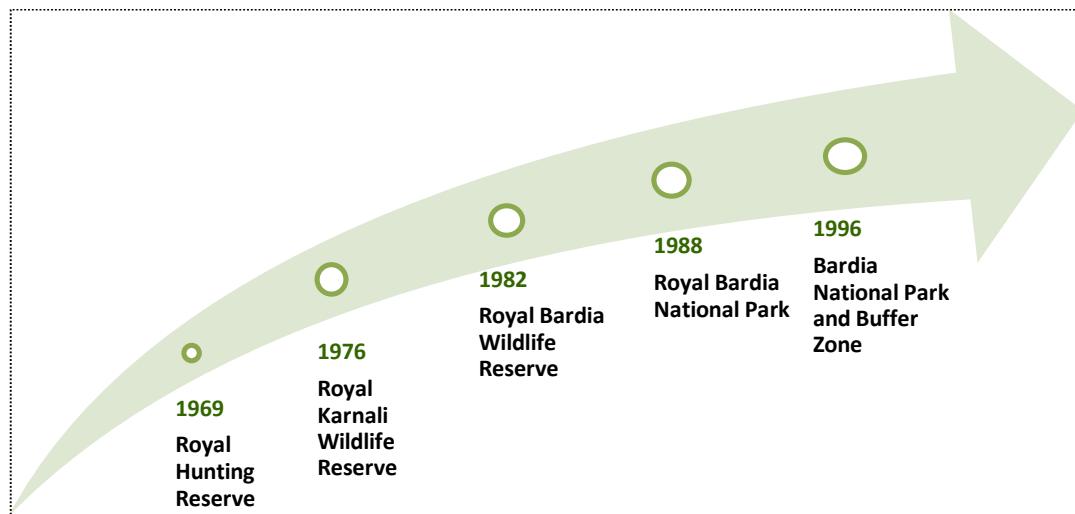
Under British India control, the Bardia area was also used as a game and grazing site during the dry season (Conway, Bhattacharai, & Shrestha, 2000). Later, as a Birta (forest and land) of the Rana prime minister and his family members, it became a prime site for big game hunting by the Rana rulers (Kollmair et al., 2003). Before the nationalisation of Nepalese forests (in 1957), most of the forests in the Bardia were under Birta tenure (B. N. Upreti, 1994). There are accounts of a hunting trip by Albert, Prince of Wales to the forests in western Tarai organised by Jung in 1876. Around 800 elephants were mobilised and the prince himself was reported to have bagged five tigers in just two hours (DNPWC/MoFSC, 2007).

In 1921, a railway line extending north from the Indian border was built for the purpose of timber extraction and its supply to British India. In the immediate vicinity of the Bardia wildlife reserve then (see Map 5.2), logging dramatically altered the landscape. The timber from the forests of Bardia was used for railway sleepers under contracts to British India during World War One (B. N. Upreti, 1994). Development of the Tarai after 1923 also took place for settlements and agriculture, under the aegis of Rana Prime Minister, Chandra Shumsher (Kansakar, 2001). The commercial forestry development during the late 1920s also led to serious destruction of the forest (Bolton, 1976). Forest clearance therefore served two purposes, firstly, the provision of land for agriculture and settlement, and secondly, the supply of timber for Indian railway sleepers.

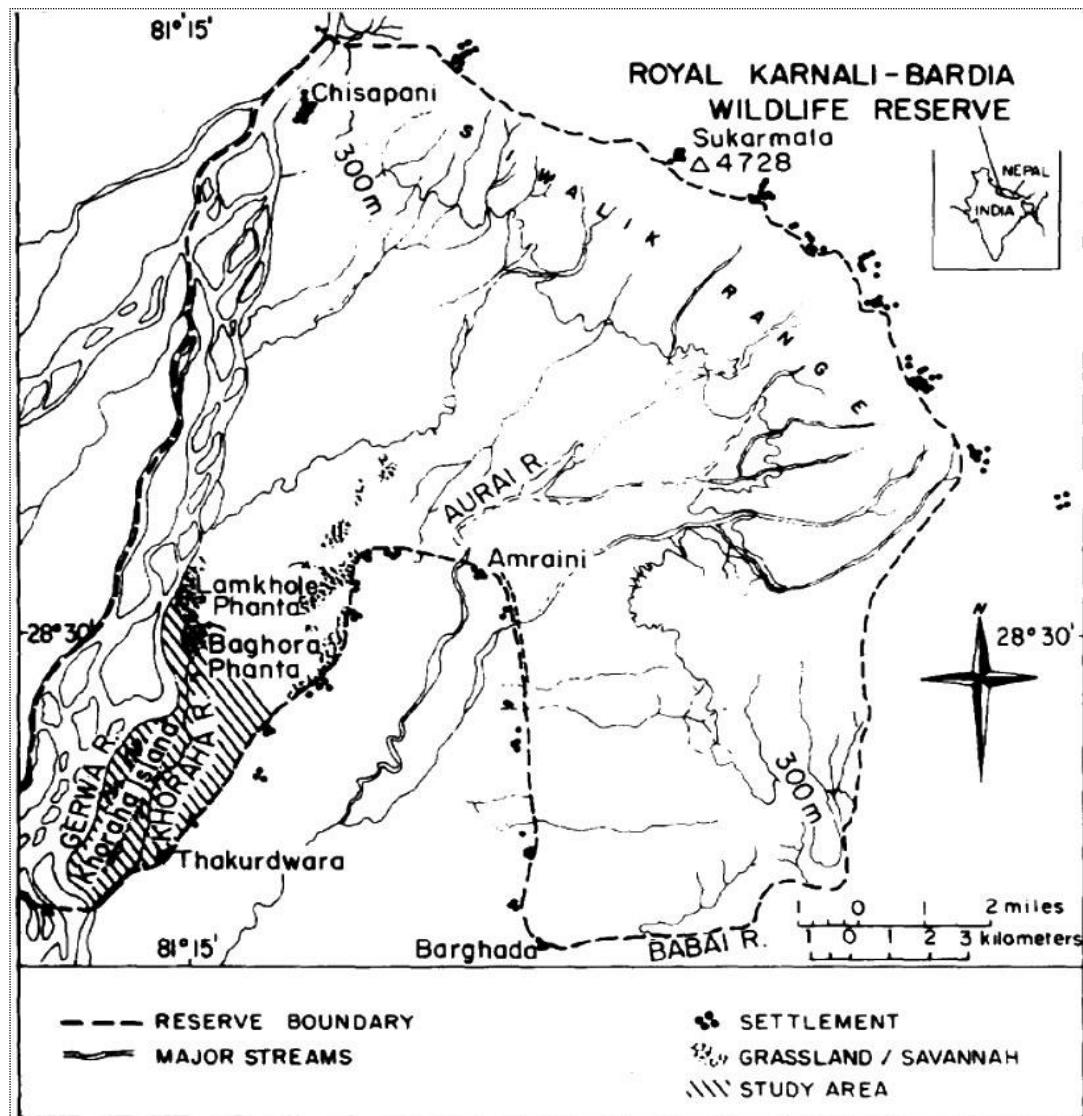
However, the forest and the original vegetation in Bardia is claimed to have been restored over subsequent years despite the history of deforestation under the aegis of the ruling elites, mainly because of the inaccessibility to the region and the risk of malaria. This risk had also prevented large scale agricultural development and settlement in the region. Prior to 1954, the period of malaria eradication, the malaria infested hot and humid region of Bardia was reported to have been avoided by hill people (Conway et al., 2000). However, the Tharu people have been portrayed as resilient and well adapted to these conditions. They were dependent on forest produce and farmed in pockets cleared amidst the forests (Dinerstein, 1979; B. N. Upreti, 1994).

Although the development of the Tarai and migration there had occurred under the aegis of the state, mainly at the time of Jung Bahadur Rana (1846-77) and Chandra Shumsher (1901-29), the size of the post 1954 migration was unprecedented nationally (as discussed in Chapter Four). The influx of settlers from the hills expanded rapidly across the Tarai including the “potentially arable, malaria-free flat land in Bardia district” (Dinerstein, 1979, p. 147). Migration to Bardia as to other parts of the Tarai increased from the late 1960s, as forests were cleared, and land was reclaimed for widespread settlement (Conway et al., 2000). The population of western Tarai grew from 400,357 to 830,303 between 1961 and 1981 (Kansakar, 1974; H. Gurung, 1981). B. N. Upreti (1994) contends that increased migration to Bardia resulted in encroachment into the forests, open areas and grasslands.

An account of a royal hunt by King Mahendra in Bardia in 1964/65 (Bhatt, 2003) demonstrates the continuity of the hunting legacy of the ruling elites (discussed in Chapter Four). However, after 1968, an FAO/UNDP aided Forest Development Project was launched in Bardia under the Forest Department. Boundaries between Babai to the east of the current Park and Thakurdwara – the Park headquarters, were delimited (see Map 5.2). This area was set aside under the wildlife management working circle of the government (B. N. Upreti, 1994). This was the beginning of bureaucratic control of the state that has been taking place ever since forest nationalisation occurred in 1950s. This was also the time when the alarming decline of rhinoceros numbers prompted their protection in the Chitwan valley (see Chapter Two).



**Figure 5.1 Evolution and changing legal status of protected area designations in Bardia.**



Map 5.2 Map created by Dinerstein (1979a) based on his study in 1975.

Note: Dinerstein's study area was south-west of the (then) wildlife reserve and included the Karnali and Geruwa Flood Plains. The villages in his study area had been resettled when it was declared a Royal Hunting Reserve in 1969.

### ***The Monarchy's Hunting Reserve***

In 1969 a portion of the area (see Map 5.2) was protected as a Royal Hunting Reserve (Shah, 2002), one of several in the country resulting from King Mahendra's hunting interests (see Chapter Four). Armed forest guards were deployed for its protection under the Ministry of Forests (Bolton, 1976). While, at that time, the local people still had access to the reserve area for firewood and fodder, villages with grasslands that were under cultivation (Dinerstein, 1979) such as at Bagaura Phanta and Lamkauli Phanta (north of the present Park headquarters at Thakurdwara see the study area in Map 5.2) and that predated the hunting reserve were relocated though

there is no documented evidence on the number of people involved (B. N. Upreti, 1994).

#### ***Early moves towards an official wildlife reserve***

By 1970, the Nepal Settlement Company had commenced a settlement project which was launched in the Bardia and Kanchanpur districts (Conway et al., 2000). Meanwhile, moves towards establishing an official wildlife reserve also began in the early 1970s, at a time when the establishment of protected areas was seen as a part of Nepal's entry into the modern era of conservation (see Chapter Four). The first office for the proposed wildlife reserve in Bardia was set up at Thakurdwara, in 1972 (see Map 5.3). FAO wildlife advisors had also proposed the official wildlife reserve at this time.

In 1974 a park warden and officials of the forest bureaucracy, in addition to forest guards were appointed to the wildlife reserve (Bolton 1976). However, until 1975, the local people still had unrestricted access to firewood, timber and other forest products from the reserve area as well as to the resources of the river. While grazing in the reserve was uncontrolled, poaching also went unabated. Since the mid-1970s, however, the grazing and gathering of forest products by villagers inside the reserve has been controlled. Fishing practices by locals, including the Sonahas, were also constrained (see more in Chapter Seven).

#### ***The institutionalisation of fortress conservation***

In 1976, Michael Bolton, an ecologist appointed under a FAO/UNDP supported project, was providing technical support for the establishment of protected areas across the country. In the same year, an area of 386 kilometres, roughly the area earlier set aside as the royal hunting reserve, was gazetted as the Royal Karnali Wildlife Reserve (see Map 5.2). Protection of the endangered tiger and its prey species was crucial to the early stages of setting up the protected area in Bardia. As was the policy of the government for all protected areas at that time, military personnel replaced the forest guards (Bolton, 1976).

At the time of the declaration of the wildlife reserve, two villages, Chisapani and Auraini (Amraini) were inside the reserve boundary (see Map 5.2). The village of

Chisapani, with a population of 101, was later relocated (Bolton, 1976) but Auraini remained. Dinerstein (2005) had suggested the relocation of these villages in the 1970s, contending that the cultivable fields could potentially become good habitats for wildlife.

Bolton drafted the first technical management plan for the Bardia wildlife reserve in the 1970s. This was an important document for the scientific conservation planning and management of the protected area. The restrictive rules and policies that the plan embraced and recommended, gradually limited locals' access to the resources of the forest, and followed strict national legislation for protected areas that was already in place by this time (Bolton, 1976). The reserve was also considered to be a model of control by international conservation bodies, since all hunting, agricultural practices and livestock grazing had been stopped (IUCN, 1993). In the same year (1976), the royal palace hunt of King Birendra (King Mahendra's son) took place in the reserve (Bhatt, 2003).

In 1983, the reserve was renamed as the Royal Bardia Wildlife Reserve. Its boundary was extended eastwards to the Babai valley in 1984. This extension now constitutes half of the current core area of the Park (see Maps 5.3 and 5.4). On this occasion a much larger population, totalling 9500 people (1572 families), were resettled from their original homes inside the extended reserve area to Taratal further to the south (DNPWC/MoFSC, 2001). This resettlement was the third in the history of park creation and extension in Bardia.

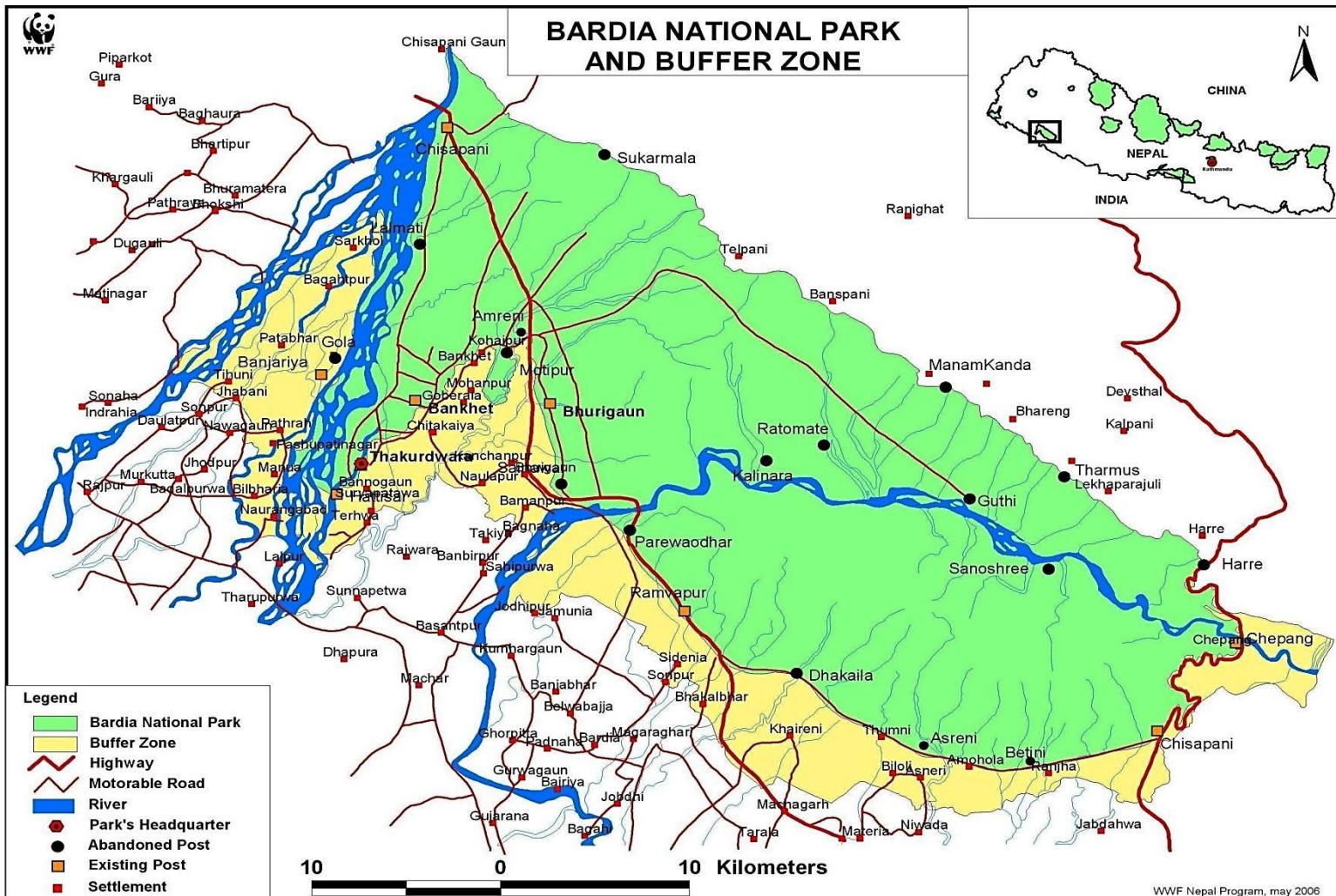
In 1986, for the first time in the history of Nepalese protected areas, 13 rhinoceros were translocated from the CNP to the western side of the BNP, in the Karnali River flood plains, across the river delta (see Map 5.3). In the same year, a rhino monitoring station was also set up in the Babai valley. A similar translocation of 25 rhinos took place in the Babai valley later in 1991 (Martin & Vigne, 1996). Along with the protection of tiger, concern for the translocated rhinoceros demanded further vigilance and strict enforcement of the rules by the Park authorities. The ecological importance of the Karnali flood plains, across the river delta area was therefore perceived to have been heightened in order to monitor and protect the translocated rhinos (the politics of this are discussed in Chapter Eight). However, it was only in

1988, that the area gained its present status as a national park, when it was formally redesignated as such. (See Maps 5.3 and 5.4; Appendix C for detailed chronology of events in the Park)

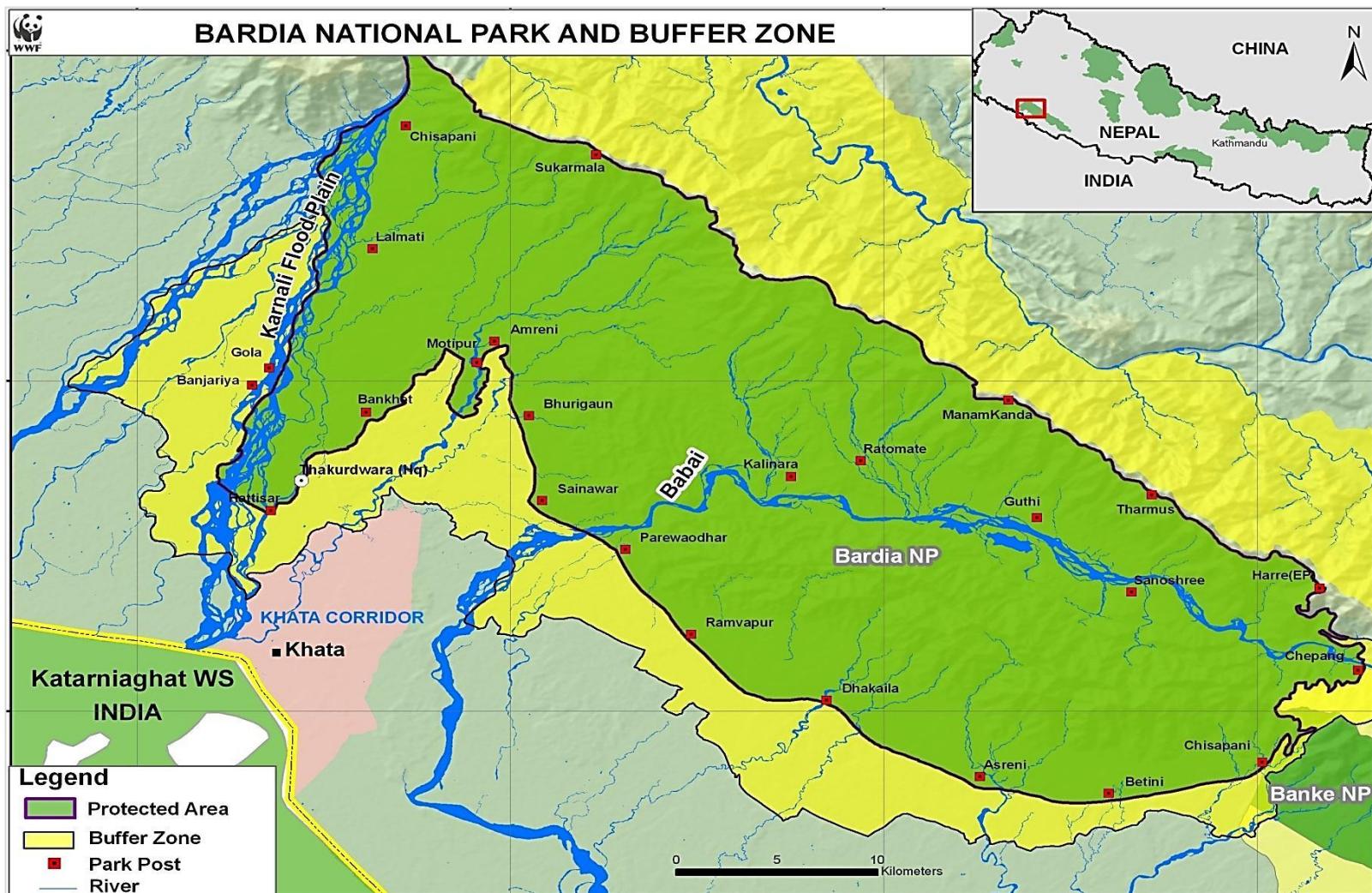
### **5.3.2 The Park Buffer Zone**

The peripheral Buffer Zone (BZ) of the Park was first demarcated and declared in 1997, after almost two decades of strict management of the Park's core area by the government. It initially extended to the west, south and east of the Park, covered 327 km<sup>2</sup> and included 17 VDCs with a total population of one hundred thousand (DNPWC/MoFSC, 2001), see Map 5.3. 33% of the area was under forest cover, 17% under grassland and degraded forest and over 43% was agricultural land (DNPWC/MoFSC, 2007). With the recent extension of the BZ in 2011 to include an area of 180 km<sup>2</sup> to the north, in the Surkhet district (see Map 5.4); the BZ now covers a total area of 507 km<sup>2</sup> that extends over 20 VDCs. This includes one VDC in the Banke district (east), four VDCs in Surkhet (north) and the remaining 15 VDCs in Bardia (west and south).

Currently, a total population of 117,633 from 16,618 households form a constituency of BZ residents known as the BZ users. They interact with the Park administration through a three tiered structure of BZ management (see Figure 1.1). There are 262 village level user groups of BZ residents known as Buffer Zone User Groups (BZUGs). They come under the jurisdiction of 19 VDC level Buffer Zone Users' Committees (BZUCs) at the second level (Bardia National Park Office, 2011). These are federated into a peak body known as the BZ Management Council at the Park level.



Map 5.3 The BNP and its BZ from 1998 until the extension of the BZ to the north in 2011. The Karnali and Geruwa rivers form the delta west of the Park, and the Babai River is in the middle of the Park. Source: DNPWC/MoFSC, 2007



Map 5.4 The BNP and its BZ in 2011. The areas of the Park east of the River Babai were extended in 1984. The northern periphery of the Park ( $170 \text{ km}^2$ ) was included in the BZ in 2011. Courtesy: WWF Nepal

In order to achieve sustainable forest management and conservation in the BZ by fulfilling the forest resource needs of the BZ residents and reducing local pressure on the Park resources, community forest user groups have been promoted in the BZ. There were a total of 81 BZ community forest groups as of financial year 2010/11. A total population of 89,956 benefit from 59 community forests whose management has been entrusted to the local forest users in the BZ. Twenty two such forest areas potentially benefiting 19,476 local people were in the process of being handed over to the local communities by the Park administration (Bardia National Park Office, 2011).

However, landlessness is a common problem in the BZ of the Park. Half of the households live below the poverty line or at the level of subsistence. Farming is the main source of livelihood; more than 90% depend on subsistence agriculture and less than 10% of the population is involved in off farm occupations (DNPWC/MoFSC, 2001). This indicates the high level of dependence of the local people on the resources of the natural environment. Local people "...depend heavily upon forest resources for their subsistence livelihood" (DNPWC/MoFSC, 2001, p. 14).

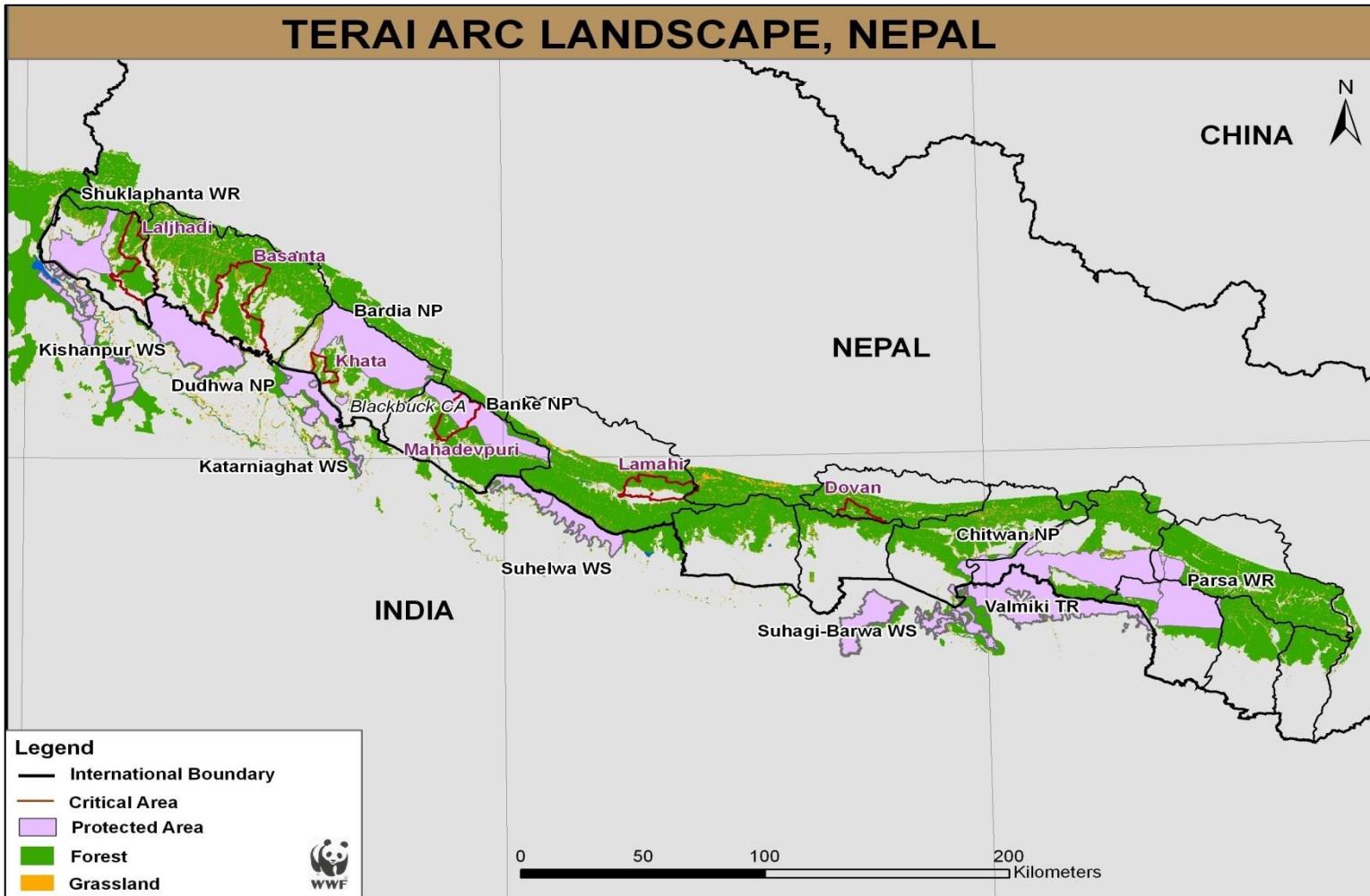
### **5. 3.3 Integrated Conservation and Development Projects in the BNP**

A series of initiatives under the Integrated Conservation and Development Program (ICDP) have taken place in Nepal since the early 1990s (Brown, 2003). They foster and institutionalise the concept of BZs and are backed by participatory legal reforms (see Chapter One). Several projects have been important in initiating and institutionalising BZ management around the Park (see Table 5.1). They have contributed to an expanding discourse of conservation at the grassroots. The Park administration has carried out and coordinated several projects under the ICDP with the cooperation and engagement of diverse actors, organisations and donors since the mid-1990s (see Table 5.1). These were intended to improve the socio-economic conditions of local people in the BZ and reduce existing conflict levels between the protected area and the local people (UNDP, 2004). These initiatives seek to forge amicable relations between the Park and the local people, and to motivate the BZ residents to work towards conservation of the Park's biodiversity (DNPWC/MoFSC, 2001).

In 1994, a large-scale national project known as the Park and People Programme (PPP) was launched. This was jointly executed by the government and UNDP Nepal in the villages surrounding the Park. This took place when the initial concept of the Buffer Zone and the approach of the ICDP were being piloted in the country. The second phase of the PPP project continued under the Participatory Conservation Program from 2002 to 2004. The PPP was implemented in the southern BZ villages of the Park (see Map 5.3). The program was instrumental in mobilising local communities in conservation and development activities, in the sustainable management of natural resources in the BZ, and in helping the local people's institutions to achieve these goals (UNDP, 2004).

The National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) has also been active in the BNP ever since the first rhinoceros translocation from the CNP in 1986. It is one of the important national conservation actors working in the Park and its BZ. Its projects on wildlife research, monitoring and conservation and its development works in the BZ under the Bardia Conservation Program (BCP) have been ongoing since 1994. The BCP was initially executed in the BZ villages west of the River Geruwa, and therefore in the delta study area of this thesis (see Map 5.3).

Furthermore WWF Nepal, another major national conservation actor, initiated the Bardia Integrated Conservation Project (BICP) from 1995 to 2000 as one of the collaborators in the implementation of the BZ policies in the BNP. The BICP was focussed on southern BZ villages close to the Park headquarters (see Map 5.3). Conservation of biodiversity in and around the Park and the promotion of sustainable natural resource management practices in the BZ were two major goals of this project. The NTNC was also one of the partners in this project. S.R. Bhatta, a former official of the Park, who coordinated these projects in and around the Park at that time, believes that this was one of the most successful and innovative ICDPs in the world (Interview, May 29, 2011).



Map 5.5 The Tarai (Terai) Arc Landscape Complex. Bardia National Park (NP) in Nepal and the Katarniaghata Wildlife Sanctuary in India are connected by the Khata Corridor in Nepal. Courtesy: WWF Nepal

### ***The Tarai Arc Landscape Complex and Western Tarai Landscape Complex Project***

The Park and its BZ fall within the western section of the Tarai Arc Landscape (TAL) Complex. This covers an area of 49,500 km<sup>2</sup> comprising 11 protected areas and forest corridors in the Nepalese and Indian Tarai area and stretches along the Indo-Nepal border from Parsa Wildlife Reserve in central Nepal to India's Rajaji National Park (see Map 5.5). The idea of the TAL is to expand and enhance biodiversity conservation initiatives at a landscape level, to create connectivity between several protected areas through wildlife corridors and to conserve areas of biological and ecological significance outside the protected areas, and thereby to contribute to the livelihoods of local people (MoFSC, 2004). The TAL project, which commenced in 2001, is mainly a joint venture of WWF Nepal, the forest ministry and a number of donors and other organisations including the government of the Netherlands (see Table 5.1). The project, under a ten year strategy (2004-2014), marks a shift in conservation approaches through protected area connectivity and landscape level conservation taking it beyond the designated protected areas in Nepal. This is very much in line with current international views on the optimal scales and patterns for conservation management.

In 2005, a separate and focussed project constituting the western area of the TAL, referred to as the Western Tarai Landscape Complex Project (WTLCP), was launched under the collaboration of the Nepalese forest bureaucracy and the UNDP and several other national and international organisations and donors (see Table 5.1) to further advance the landscape approach to conservation in this region. The area extends from the BNP and its BZ to the Suklaphanta Wildlife Reserve, in the far west of the country. It also includes various wildlife corridors across forests managed by local communities and the government (see Map 5.5). The WTLCP implemented and supported several conservation and community development activities, through community institutions in the region including the Park and the BZ (WTLCP, 2012), and this includes villages in the delta, study area. The WTLCP was thus crucial in expanding the discourse of national park and participatory conservation and development in the Park BZ in particular.

**Table 5.1 Integrated Conservation and Development Projects in the BNP and BZ.**

<b>Projects</b>	<b>Core components</b>	<b>Implementers/Donors</b>
Park and People Programme (PPP): 1994-2001	Institutionalisation of BZ management; conservation and development	DNPWC, UNDP Nepal/UNDP
Participatory Conservation Programme (PCP): 2002-2004	Continued institutionalisation of BZ management; conservation and development.	DNPWC, UNDP Nepal/UNDP
Bardia Integrated Conservation Project(1995-2000)	Conservation and development; collaboration for PPP and BNP Buffer Zone.	WWF Nepal, DNPWC, and NTNC/Government of the Netherlands
Bardia Conservation Program:1994 onwards	Wildlife research and monitoring; conservation and development	NTNC/ Norwegian Agency for Development (NORAD)
Tarai Arc Landscape (TAL): 2001 onwards	Conservation and development in TAL	WWF Nepal & MoFSC/ USAID, Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Netherlands), US Fish & Wildlife Services, Save the Tiger Fund (World Bank); WWF (Netherlands, International, UK and US)
Western Tarai Arc Landscape (WTLCP): 2005-2012	Conservation and development in the western region of TAL	DNPWC & DoF, GoN/GEF, SNV, UNDP, WWF Nepal and others

#### **5.3.4 Summary**

We can obtain insights into the ecological condition of Bardia in general and of the forests, under the control of the state in the form of protected areas, in particular, from these historical accounts. The forested lands had been a hunting ground of the ruling elites since the time of the British Indian Empire and the Rana rule. This hunting legacy was continued by the Shah monarchs into the post 1950 era of modern Nepal. Forests under the feudal control of the Rana ruling elites were later appropriated and controlled by the state. Over time, the landscapes of the region had been historically influenced and altered by hunting, by reclamation of land for agriculture and settlement, and by the commercial exploitation of forests in line with the economic interests of the ruling elites and the state. The ecosystems in Bardia have also been altered historically by the original inhabitants as well as by migrant settlers (mainly since the 1950s). These historical impacts challenge the idea of Bardia as a pristine wilderness that the state has been attempting to protect.

The hunting interests of the monarchy, the more recent national conservation drive, and growing population pressure on the forests prompted the state to set aside exclusive areas for the protection of mega fauna and their habitats (see more discussion on this in section 8.2). Even armed guards were deployed for this purpose. During this process local populations were displaced on several occasions. The consolidation of state control and of the protection of wildlife and forests within the Park gradually restricted local peoples' access to the forests and other natural resources, especially since the mid-1970s. Since the 1990s, state and non-state actors, both local and national, have been engaged in initiatives linking conservation and local development in the BZ and the surrounding landscapes of the Park.

## **5.4 The River-landscape of the Lower Karnali River Delta**

### **5.4.1 The River**

The Karnali River, one of the four major rivers in Nepal, is the longest and widest perennial river in the country, with a total drainage area of 43000 km<sup>2</sup>. It is one of the four major rivers in Nepal. It originates near sacred Mount Kailash and holy Lake Mansarovar in western Tibet, forces its way out of the Tibetan plateau and the Himalayas, travels across the hills of mid-western Nepal through canyons and gorges, and is joined by tributaries such as the Humla Karnali, Mugu Karnali, Seti Karnali and Bheri rivers upstream of the BNP. It debouches from the deep Chisapani Gorge slashing through the Churia hills and makes its mighty way across the Tarai plains before it becomes a tributary of the famous and sacred River Ganges in India. It is known as *K'ong-ch'iao Ho* in China and *Ghagra* in India. A travel writer described the river as the wildest and an untamed river, carrying holy water from the sacred mountains (Singh, 2009). Given the socio-cultural, economic and ecological significance of the river and river corridor, it has also been proposed as Himalayan River Heritage (Ale, 2011).

### **5.4.2 The Karnali River Delta**

As the river forces its way out of the Chisapani Gorge and under the iconic Chisapani suspension bridge (located near the north-western edge of the Park), the main channel of the River Karnali bifurcates and diverges near the Lalmati complex to form the Geruwa River (a branch of the Karnali) to the east adjacent to the Park and

the Karnali River proper to the west. The two rivers reconverge after crossing the Nepal-India border and the Katarniyaghat Wildlife Sanctuary to the south and the single river is dammed at Girjapuri barrage (Kailashpuri, India), 20 kilometers downstream from the border (see Maps 5.3, 5.4, 5.6 and 5.7).

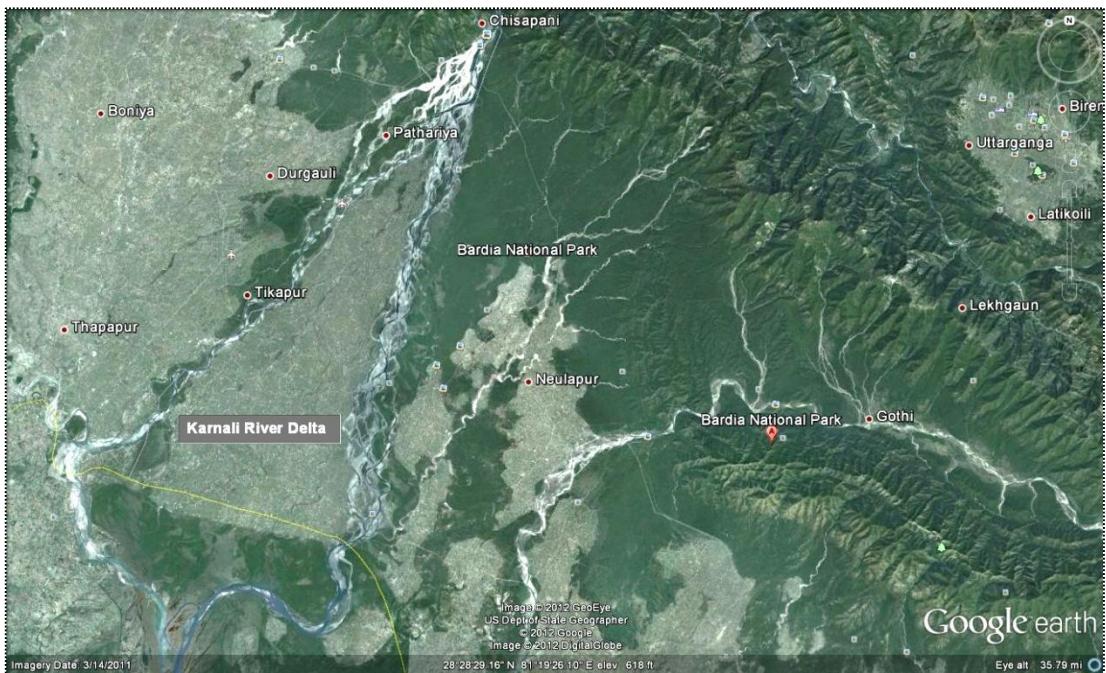
In Nepal, a flat triangular shaped island complex is therefore surrounded by the two rivers amidst the river and forest ecosystem. This river delta and basin is hereafter termed the Karnali River delta or the delta. The southern tip of the delta extends into India and constitutes the north-western section of the Katarniyaghat Wildlife Sanctuary (see Map 5.4). The delta is also locally known as “Bhanwara Tappa” and has also been referred to as Rajapur Tapu (Island). Until the construction of the East-West highway that runs through the middle of the national park (Map 5.3) in the 1990s, the delta was not easily accessible and this was a rather isolated area of Bardia. Several *Ghats* (ferry points) on the two rivers had been significant historically to provide access to the villages in the delta. Cederroth (1995) in the 1990s described it as “the most isolated and traditional area of the Tarai” (p. 5).

The delta contains eleven VDCs. However, only the north-west of the delta, containing Patabhar, the largest VDC in Bardia, and the north and eastern portion of the delta that stretches from Gola VDC and Pashupatinagar VDC to Manau VDC, fall within the BZ of the Park (see Maps 5.3, 5.4 and 5.7). These four VDCs in the BZ of the Park constitute a significant portion of the delta<sup>10</sup>.

The delta hosts the Rajapur irrigation system that comprises six farmer managed irrigation subsystems. These originate upstream of the delta and irrigate an area of 15,800 ha. The irrigation system is claimed to be one of the largest farmer managed systems in the world (ADB, 2003; Cederroth, 1995). The canals in the delta draw water heavily from the Geruwa branch of the Karnali River. A journalist once portrayed the area as the grain basket of far west Nepal given the fertile soil of the island complex that yields three crops a year (KC, 2002).

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<sup>10</sup> Daulatpur, Naya Gaun, Rajapur, Badalpur, Bhimapur, Manpur Tapara and Khairi Chandanpur are the remaining VDCs in the delta that fall outside of the Park BZ.



**Map 5.6** The triangular shaped Karnali River Delta is surrounded by the Karnali and Geruwa rivers, adjacent to the BNP. The Nepal-India border is marked by the yellow line. Courtesy: Google Earth

### ***The Geruwa River in the delta***

The River Geruwa (the eastern branch of the main Karnali River, hereafter the Geruwa) flows to the west of the Park marking its western boundary and it separates the four western BZ VDCs from the Park itself (see Map 5.3). The river flows approximately 37 kilometers (km) from the Chisapani Bridge in the north to Kothiya Ghat near the Indian border in the south, with a stretch of 10 km falling beyond the Park boundary (WWF Nepal, 2006). Both river banks possess subcourses of the river and small eye shaped islands, sandbanks and boulders, tall grasses, grasslands and riverine forests. This area has also been identified as the Karnali Flood Plains, an ecologically significant and important wildlife habitat (see more on this in Chapter Eight). Human settlements, crop fields and community conserved forests stretch out along the western banks of the Geruwa.

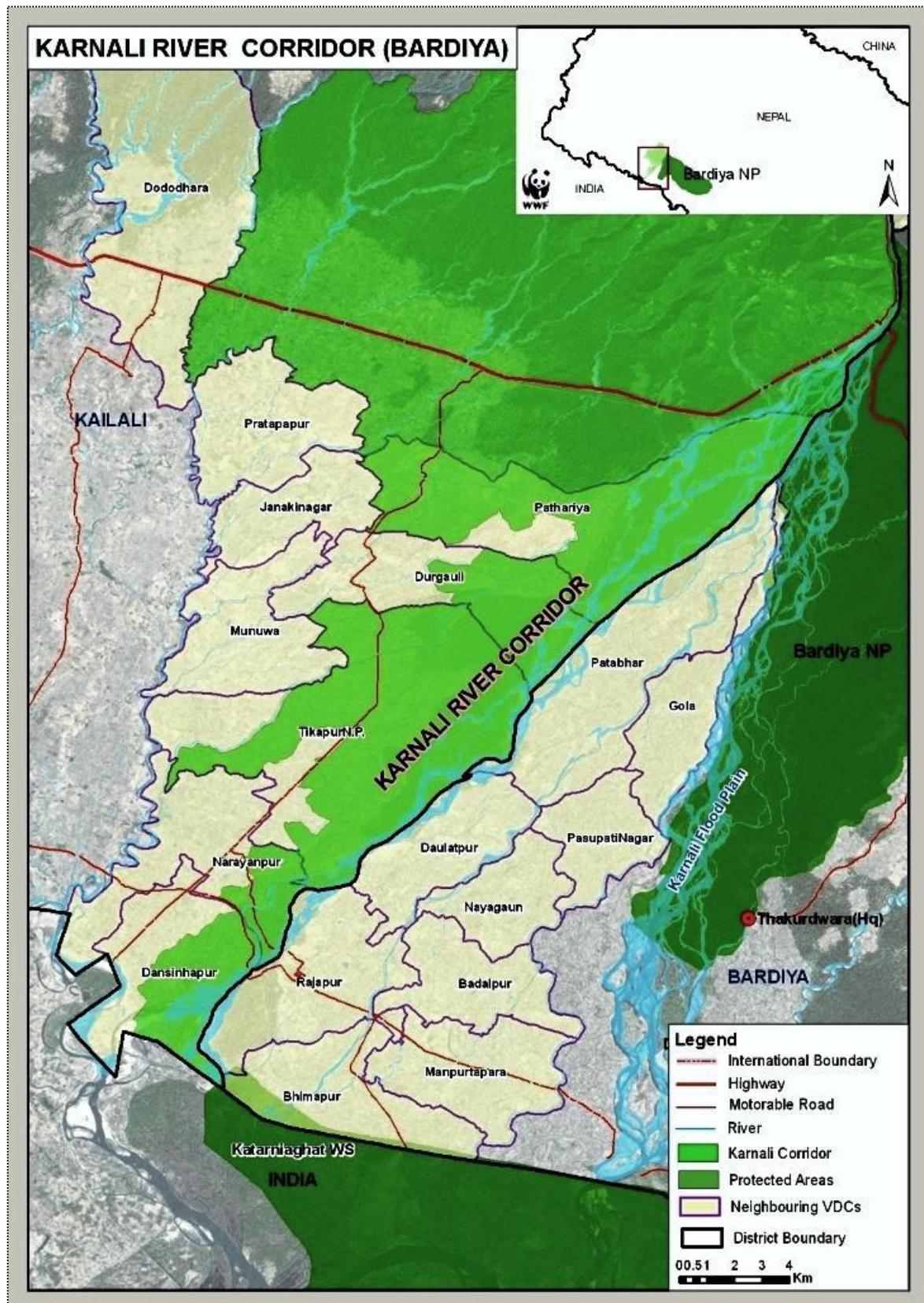
On the eastern bank, adjacent to Manau, is a forest area in the south-western section of the Park as well as a few patches of community conserved forests in the BZ. Further downstream, south-east of the river, across the Kothiya Ghat, lie the forests of the Khata Wildlife Corridor that connect the southern boundary of the Park and the BZ with the nearby Katarniyaghat Wildlife Sanctuary in India (see Maps 5.4 and 5.5). The forests in the wildlife corridor including those managed by villagers were

declared as Protected Forest (under the jurisdiction of DoF) in 2011. Several traditional ferry wharves on the Geruwa such as Gola Ghat to the north-east of the delta, located in Gola and eastern Manau Ghat, in Manau (see Map 5.8), have eroded over the years since the establishment of the Park. The Kothiya Ghat further south on the Geruwa (outside the BZ area), however, is still in use, and provides a connection to the delta.

### ***The Karnali River in the delta***

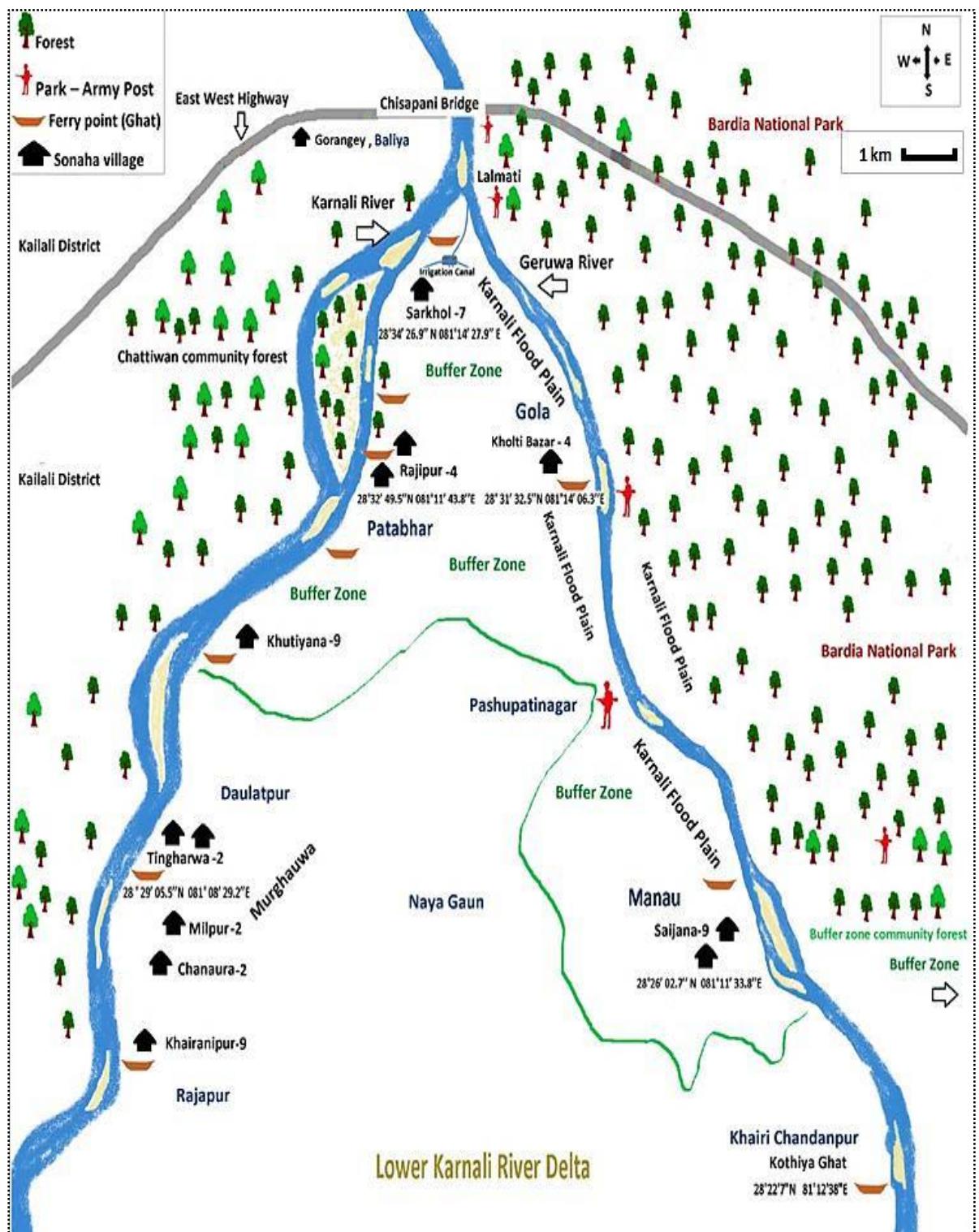
To the west of the delta, the course and routes of the Karnali River mark the political boundary between Bardia and the adjoining Kailali district (see Maps 5.7 and 5.8). Three irrigation canals (Rani, Jamara and Kurhariya) in the Kailali also form one of the largest farmer managed irrigation systems in Nepal. They have been operating for a century. The three canals leave the river at different locations, and draw water from the western subcourse of the main River Karnali. The feeder canal begins approximately 1.5 km downstream of the river from the Chisapani Bridge (DoI/MoI, 2010, 2011). The biophysical features of the riparian areas are similar to those of the Geruwa. The western channel area of the river mainly consists of a network of community managed forests, the largest being Chattiwan Community Forest (see Map 5.8), and human settlements. Likewise, the eastern channel area mainly contains riverside settlements, cropped fields and forest patches conserved by the local population.

Several locally popular ferry points operate on this stretch of the Karnali River (see Map 5.8). These ferry points provide connections between the delta and the towns and villages of the adjoining Kailali district. Most of the ferry services are operated by private contractors under permits granted by the District Development Committee (DDC), the district level government administration. However, the contracts of smaller ferry service points such as Samiti Ghat and Janaknagar Ghat across from Patabhar VDC (to the north-west of the delta) are operated by the community forest user groups in the vicinity.



Map 5.7 The Karnali river delta, the Karnali River Corridor and the BNP. Courtesy: WWF Nepal.

Note: The delta is surrounded by the BNP to the east and the Karnali river corridor to the west. The Sonsahas reside in Gola, Patabhar and adjoining Daulatpur VDCs. Two VDCs in the delta, Manau and Khari Chandanpur are not shown in this map. Bardiya is spelled as Bardiya.



Map 5.8 A sketch map of the lower Karnali River delta and the ancestral riverine territory of the Sonahas. Credit: Author and Sonahas from Rajipur.

Note: Only hamlets/settlements of the Sonahas are marked in this map.

### **5.4.3 Socio-ecological terrain**

#### ***The people***

Anthropologists who have carried out studies in the delta have noted the Tharu as the dominant ethnic group in the delta (Cederroth, 1995; Chetri, 2005). The accounts of Cederroth (1995) suggest that, in the early 1990s, the Tharu constituted two thirds of the population in the delta<sup>11</sup>. In 2002, when the entire population of the delta was 92,908, the Tharu still constituted 69.8% of this population. This was the highest spatial concentration of the Tharu people in the whole country (Chetri, 2005). Chetri (2005) mentions that most of the Tharu people in the delta are first and second generation migrants from the Dang valley, further north-east in the adjoining Banke district (see Map 5.1). Both these scholars have discussed landlordism and the prevalence of the *Kamaiya* system, a practice of bonded labourers which continued in the delta until it was officially banned in 2000. There were a total of 23 Jimidars (landlords), of which only four were Tharu and the rest belonged to ethnic groups of hill origin. The descendants of the former big landlords held large plots of agricultural land, and were believed to have become the political and economic elites of the area (Cederroth, 1995).

#### ***Locating Sonaha people in the delta***

This thesis focuses on the longstanding existence of a minority ethnic group called the Sonahas and their claims to be among the original inhabitants of the delta (see Chapter Six). The Tharu people, who are generally considered to be the indigenous peoples of the lowland Tarai, as mentioned earlier, are the dominant population in the delta as well as in the entire Bardia district in which the delta is located. However, this thesis underscores and acknowledges the longstanding history of the Sonaha and of their occupancy of the delta, without contesting the position of the Tharu as the indigenous peoples of Tarai<sup>12</sup> (see section 6.3).

The presence of Sonahas in the delta has largely gone unaccounted in the national census to date. Although the latest census reports a total of 579 people with a mother

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<sup>11</sup> The Chettri and Brahmin ethnic groups (hill origin peoples) constituted about 15% and 14% respectively and the remaining Gurung, Magar, Damai and Kami constituted between 1 and 3%.

<sup>12</sup> The history of arrival of various sub-groups of Tharu, as discussed in subsection 5.2.1, in the delta is complex and beyond the scope of this study.

tongue *Sonaha*, 503 in the mid-western Tarai and 76 in the far-western Tarai (CBS, 2011), it fails to recognise this population of Sonaha as a distinct ethnic group (since the group is yet to be listed as such by the government, see section 9.4). The population of Sonahas generated in the course of this study challenges the latest figures by the national census as inaccurate and questions the underenumeration of the Sonahas in the national census (see Appendix D on the Sonaha population).

The Sonahas have a minority status in the delta as well as in the BZ. Of the entire population of 1249 found by this study, 64.89% (810) of Sonahas currently inhabit the delta. The minority population status of the Sonahas is also evident from the fact that they constitute less than one per cent (only 0.68%) of the entire population in the delta. Almost half of the Sonahas in the country (559) reside in various BZ villages in the delta (see Maps 5.7 and 5.8, Appendix D) where they constitute only 1.56% of the total population of the three BZ VDCs with Sonaha settlements in the delta. A significant population of Sonahas (21.03%) also reside in various other villages in Daulatpur VDC outside the BZ such as Tingharwa, Milpur, Chanaura and Khairanipur. A small number (13 households) of Sonahas live in several settlements in the adjoining Kailali district. A larger number of Sonahas (67 households, i.e., 5.66%) are also found in several settlements across the Mahakali River in the Kanchanpur district, in the far-western Tarai (see Appendix D).

#### ***Ecological terrain***

The terrain of the delta provides a unique river-landscape with rich cultural and biological diversity, in both the aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems. The delta is uniquely positioned in the Tarai Arc Landscape as well as within the Western Tarai Arc Landscape (discussed earlier). In addition to its riverine ecology, its physical location, within the mosaic of the BNP (to the north and the east), its BZ; the Khata Wildlife Corridor (to the south-east) which includes two VDCs: Suryapatuwa VDC (in the BZ) and Dhodhari (outside the BZ); the Indian wildlife sanctuary (Katarniya) to the south across the national border (see Map 5.4); the network of national forests and community forests to the west and the surrounding riparian areas heighten its biocultural and socio-ecological significance.

**Table 5.2 Governance of land and natural resources in the delta.**

Categories	Governance	Institutions	Roles
<b>Bardia National Park</b>	By government/ forest bureaucracy and guarded by the national army	BNP administration and Nepal Army	Management and governance of the Park, control over resources and wildlife.
<b>Buffer Zone (BZ) of the Park</b>	By residents of the BZ and the Park administration (collaborative)	BZ User Groups, BZ Users' Committees, BZ Management Council & BNP administration	Local level planning and execution of conservation and development works; right to form local institutions for BZ residents.
<b>Buffer Zone Community Forest</b>	Governance by local forest users or BZ residents, but under the jurisdiction of the Park administration.	Community Forest User Group (CFUG) in the BZ.	Members of the forest user group in the BZ are entrusted with collective management and use rights over the forest in the BZ.
<b>Community Forest (outside the BZ)</b>	Community governance	CFUGs	Members of the forest user group are entrusted with collective management and use rights over forest. More autonomous than Community forest groups in the BZ.
<b>River and river banks</b>	By government authority  (National, district and local government)	DDC, VDC, CFUGs	Government property as government or public land. DDC and VDCs have legal rights over resources such as sand, boulders, gravel. Ferrying service contracts are mostly operated under the DDC. CFUGs also control and exercise rights over smaller ferrying service contracts, as well as riparian resources.
<b>River and river banks (The Park &amp; BZ)</b>	By the Park administration (government)	BNP, BZ Users' Committees	Regulated by the Park administration.
<b>Agricultural lands</b>	Private governance	Individual households	Private/individual property of farmers and landlords. (Absentee landlordism; share croppers).
<b>Irrigation Canals</b>	Community governance (farmers committee and water user associations)	Water users' groups and association.	Collective use and management rights.

As illustrated in Table 5.2 above, there are various types and levels of governance arrangements (by government, by community and in collaboration) in place for the conservation and management of natural resources in the delta. The forested and riparian areas, north-west of the delta across the River Karnali are also proposed and are being considered for further protection as a wildlife corridor connecting the network of national forests and community forests to the west and the Park to the north-east. This view of the conservation landscape in the context of the Sonahas will be considered further in Chapter Eight.

#### **5.4.4 Summary**

In this section I attempted to introduce the population, mainly the Sonahas and the Tharus, of the lower Karnali River delta and to describe the delta's biophysical geography. I also sought to detail the ecological and conservation significance of the delta as well as the existence of various types of management and governance regimes for natural resources with which the local people in the delta interact. I located the hitherto officially unaccounted Sonaha people and their habitations within this framework. In the subsequent chapter I provide a more detailed and in-depth treatment of the customary and contemporary lives of the Sonahas in the delta.

## **Chapter Six: The Sonaha territory and way of life**

### **6.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I portray the river delta as the ancestral riverine territory of the Sonahas. I attempt to trace the Sonaha history in the delta and discuss their interface with the dominant Tharu ethnic group. I then describe the Sonahas' livelihood practices of fishing and gold panning, including the recent disappearance of their unique customary and collective cultural practices of gold panning. I also discuss the past and present mobility patterns of the Sonahas in the delta. I present a scenario involving their current landholding situation and key factors contributing to their loss of lands and landlessness. Finally, I depict the Sonahas' constructions of the river and their riparian landscape, their lived experiences and the implicit meanings of these places. The empirical information used here is largely drawn from the fieldwork which was outlined in Chapter Four.

### **6.2 The Sonahas, the river delta and their mobile way of life**

The Sonaha elders can trace the lives of their *Purkha* (ancestors), as far back as the 18th century. Their claims to being native to the lower Karnali River delta stems from their longstanding presence at, and interaction and ties with the *Laddi* (river) and the riparian areas of the delta (see Maps 5.7 and 5.8). While this has been neither officially disputed nor recognised to date, the Sonahas consider the river and riparian areas in the delta as their ancestral territory. Although no political or ownership claims as such have been made collectively by the Sonahas either on the land or on rivers therein, it has important significance to their ongoing struggles (see subsequent chapters).

The Sonahas' ancestors led a semi mobile life fishing and panning gold dusts, and dwelt in temporary shelters on the river islands, river banks and in forests in and around the delta. They maintain that their ancestors always preferred such ways of life and livelihoods rather than a permanent and settled agrarian peasant role. Although the ancestors of the Sonahas had occupied lands in and around the delta by

clearing the forests, they never settled at one location for more than a year. A popular saying among local Sonahas today is “*Jaha Soon, Macha ra Laddi, Tyahi Sonaha*” (where there is gold, fish and the river, there are Sonahas) which signifies a simultaneous sense of mobility, historical ties and emotional connections with this territory.

The Sonahas’ everyday lives and practices, constructed collective identities and cultural practices have thus been historically constitutive of and integrated into the natural environment of the delta. The Sonahas have historically co-existed with and adapted to the river and forest ecosystems (including its wildlife) in and around the delta. Therefore their lives sustained in close affinity with the river and riparian areas around the subtropical hot and humid Tarai forests, relying on aquatic and forest resources, including yields from seeds sown in cleared patches of forest for subsistence but largely without tilling the land. Their culture, knowledge, wisdom, skills, technologies and customary livelihood practices have therefore evolved in the course of their occupancy of, and survival in and around the river delta. These qualities of their way of life include their skills and knowledge as expert small scale fish hunters, canoeists and gold dust panners.

Sheltering on river islands and river banks, although less common today, characterises their unique riverine and semi-mobile way of life. The temporary shelters on river islands and river banks where Sonahas live while they are away from the permanent villages are known as *Dera* or *Dyara* and *Basahi*. “Dera/dyara” also refers to items required for spending a night on the river bank or the river islands while fishing and gold panning. This normally includes essential food, clothes, utensils, shawls or blankets and other necessary items. The Sonahas used to construct a *Bukri*, a temporary makeshift shack or hut, for refuge. The location and time spent at a *Bukri* is dependent upon the availability of gold and fish, and the changing courses of the rivers. Families and households were likely to remain collectively in such temporary shelters to protect themselves from threats from wild animals as well as dacoits. As one Sonaha adult described:

Earlier we lived a *firanney jindagi* [nomadic life] but now there are registered lands [legal land titles]. We used to construct our hut at one place, and then

abandon it and make a new one again elsewhere, never staying at one place for a long time. We were just like Raute [a forest dwelling nomadic group], they wandered in the forests and we lived in the river (Interview, April 9, 2011).

With regard to the Sonahas' adaptation to and affinity with the river and riparian areas, another Sonaha at Rajipur explained:

Tharu in the village used to remark that the Sonahas are just like *Tittihar/Huttityaun* [the red wattled lapwing], since Sonahas stay just like that bird on the sands and rocks on the river banks and islands. The bird also prefers open areas without trees to lay its eggs (Interview, March 27, 2012).

### **6.3 Tracing the origins of the Sonaha in the delta**

Although there is no written evidence to confirm the Sonahas' historical roots and origins, the Sonahas state that they are among the original inhabitants of the delta. In the absence of any recorded history, oral accounts from the Sonaha elders become essential for tracing their presence in and occupancy of the delta. All of the Sonaha elders (above the age of 80) with whom I spoke stated that their forefathers had already been in the delta for several generations. The eldest living member of the Sonaha in 2011 lived at Tingharwa in Daulatpur VDC and was 108 years old. He was born in the early 20th century during the Rana rule. This elder informed me that he migrated to this village from Sonaha Phanta, a former Sonaha settlement near Manau Ghat across the Geruwa, adjacent to the Park (see Map 5.8 and Figure 6.4). He recalled that Sonahas had lived at Sonaha Phanta long before the time of his grandfather (in the 19th century).

The Sonahas in the delta still talk of the times when their ancestors were foot soldiers of the Kings of petty kingdoms in vicious battles. The elders also spoke of the times of the *Nawabs*, Muslim ruling elites from India, when Bardia was under their jurisdiction (1815-1856) under the state of Awadh/Oudh in British India (see subsection 5.2.2). They referred to it as *Lawabi din* (Nawab days). The Sonahas also commonly remember their elders carrying *Raja ko doli* (the King's *doli* - a traditional

litter used to carry and transport queens and princesses), for the big landlords locally also referred as Rajas (Kings). A Sonaha elder at the village of Sarkhol recalled:

Our ancestors used to carry kings' doli. They were not allowed to consume alcohol while carrying. But they were well fed and were given money for their services (Interview, April 6, 2011).

Likewise, the Sonahas also stated that their ancestors provided ferry services to the petty kings. They discharged this service during the wars, ferrying equipment, soldiers and the wounded. At that time, the kings lived and took refuge on fortified hill tops, in higher and safer locations upstream of the river delta. These strongly held memories of their ancestors underline the length of their presence in the region.

### **6.3.1 The Sonahas and the Tharus**

The repetition of the phrase by the Sonaha elders, “*Pahila yaha Tharuwa , gair Sonaha haru ko hi pani thiyanan*”, meaning in the past Tharus and non-Sonahas were absent here, helps to reinforce, for the Sonahas, their claim as one of the original settler groups in the delta. In their memory and claims, the Tharu and non-Sonahas (mainly hill migrants) were not present in this area before them. The delta was surrounded by dense forests and the riparian areas were only inhabited by Sonahas. Furthermore, they maintain that the *Chaudhari* (a local term for Tharu) had come much later (in the 19th century) to the delta, many of them from the Dang valley, valley further east.

Despite these claims by the Sonaha elders, a young Sonaha leader at Rajipur also explained, “Although Dangaura Tharu [a subgroup of Tharu] came much later, Deshauri or Deshauriya Tharu [another Tharu subgroup] were also there in the Bhawara Tappa [the delta]” (Interview, March 23, 2012). Such a view however indicates the presence of Deshauriya Tharu before the arrival of Dangaura Tharu in the delta<sup>13</sup> (also see subsection 5.2.1 on Tharu subgroups in Bardia). Lal (2013) has

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<sup>13</sup> The arrival of different subgroups of Tharu in the delta is beyond the scope of this inquiry. There are no credible written accounts and evidence of arrival of Deshauriya Tharu in the delta and therefore their history is still uncertain.

also argued that Tharu natives from Bardia were driven out during the Gorkhali conquest in the second half of the 18th century (see section 5.2).

The Tharu peoples' presence in the Bardia region cannot be ignored. The entire Bardia now constitutes part of the broader claims for territory and political autonomy advocated by leaders and activists of various Tharu organisations and political groups in Nepal ("Alliance to Press for Tharuhat State," 2012; Hamal, 2012). However, with respect to this particular delta, the Sonaha elders' oral accounts detail a much earlier history of inhabitation and relations with the river and riparian areas in the delta, at least in relation to the Dangaura Tharu. The Dangaura Tharus who are the dominant population in the delta today migrated into the Bardia in the 19th century (Krauskopff, 1995), also see subsections 5.2.1 and 5.4.3.

The Tharu people are historically known as good peasants and as being resilient to the malaria infested dense forests of the Tarai. The Sonaha elders claimed that the Tharu people in the delta did not possess the skill of fishing from a moving canoe or even of canoeing in the fast flowing River Karnali. The elders still recall the time when Tharu peasants in the area used to rely on and hire Sonahas to ferry bamboo harvested from the hills such as Kachali - upstream on the Karnali River, 10 km north of Chisapani Bridge - into the villages on the plains (see Map 5.8). They also recalled how they used to exchange their fish catch for rice and grains harvested by Tharu peasants in the villages. However, over the years, the local Tharus have acquired canoeing skills as well as those of fishing from a canoe. Interestingly, the Sonahas still claim that the Tharu lag behind when it comes to high order fishing from a swiftly moving canoe in a fast flowing river. Yet, in the delta, the Tharu men and women are now also involved in fishing.

Historically the Sonahas considered their *Jat* (caste) to be superior to that of the Tharu. They regarded themselves as *Jal Thakuri* (associating with Thakuri, a so called higher ethnic group, associated with the waters). Hence, the Sonaha elders did not allow the Tharu to enter their domestic kitchens and served them meals in ordinary dishes at a physical distance from their kitchens. This symbolised the Sonahas' self-claimed superior social status contrary to the present situation in which the dominant Tharu generally enjoy higher socio-cultural and political status. The

Sonahas have always preferred fish as their staple diet rather than the common Tharu potato soup known as *Kapuwa* which is still perceived to be less prestigious by the Sonahas.

The Sonahas continue to recount memories of a big Tharu landlord who harassed the Sonahas as well as other land owning Tharu for whom some of them worked as bonded labourers. Interestingly, the Sonahas' frequent mobility for fishing and gold panning encouraged practices of employing Tharu peasants as share croppers to till the agricultural lands of Sonahas in the villages. The Sonahas also recall times when they visited Tharu homes with fruit and received hospitality with local wine and snacks. Although social relationships between the Sonahas and Tharu people in the villages have been largely harmonious, sometimes there has been acrimony in Sonaha-Tharu marriages. The Sonahas resent the Tharu domination in community and development affairs in the villages and note the suppression of the Sonahas as minority group. They silently resent the Tharu who poison the wetlands and river channels, excessively use and stack firewood at home, chop up green wood, and increase the fishing pressure on the river.

### **6.3.2 Sonahas' interactions with Raji ethnic groups**

The Sonaha elders also acknowledge the occasional presence of Raji people, a hunting and gathering ethnic group from the inner Tarai valleys, in the delta. The Raji originated in the adjoining Surkhet district, north of Bardia, and later moved to other parts of the lowlands nearby. Bardia and Surkhet still hold the highest numbers of the Raji population (Maskey, 2007). They are also engaged in fishing and ferrying upstream on the river Karnali as well as traditionally involved in hunting and gathering in the lowland forests in and around the delta. A Sonaha elder at Rajipur stated:

Rajis were also here [in the delta]. They were cooperative with us while fishing....Even today they do not know how to fish like us from a canoe. They fish by cast nets or fishing hooks. They too never settled down in one place but later shifted to agriculture. They are more dependent on the wild bee [for honey] rather than fishing (Interview, June 10, 2011).

There were two villages with Raji settlements in the delta, Rajipur at Patabhar VDC (see Figure 6.1) and nearby Gola. Although the exact date of the Raji inhabitation is unknown, the Sonaha elders informed me that Raji people had settled initially in these two villages four to five decades ago<sup>14</sup>. A Sonaha leader from Rajipur in his early 30s recalled a time during his childhood when villagers used to remark “when there is a food shortage the Raji forage the forest, whereas the Sonahas approach the river” (Interview, June 10, 2011). This statement reinforces the significance of the river for the Sonahas.

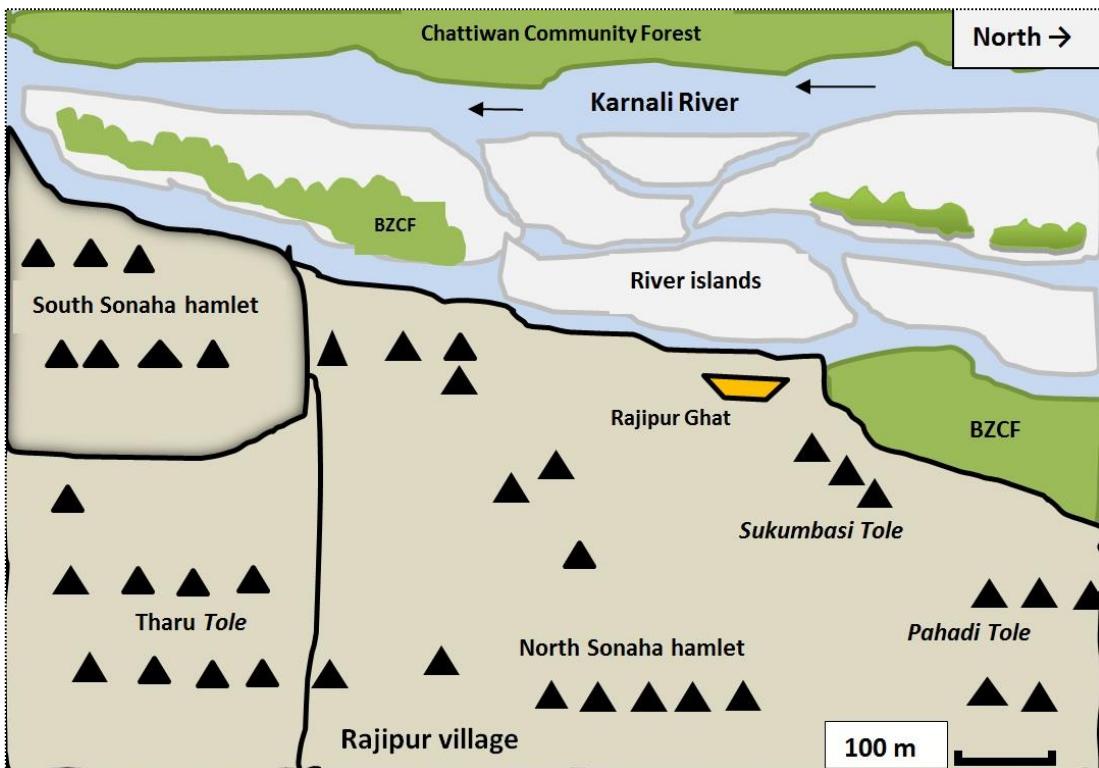


Figure 6.1 Sonaha hamlets at Rajipur ward number four, Patabhar VDC.

Note: Sonaha settlements amidst settlements (Tole) of Tharu, Pahadi (hill people) and Sukumbasi (landless migrants), adjacent to the Karnali river. Locals access forest products from the Buffer Zone Community Forests (BZCFs) as well as from the Chattiwan Community Forest located to the west, outside of the BZ.

<sup>14</sup> Clearly the names of these villages emanate from the word *Raji* (*pur* is a suffix added to denote the settlement or village).

## **6.4 Machhi Marna (Fishing) and Swan Kamaina (Earning Gold)**

The following song by, a Sonaha woman from Rajipur aptly captures the Sonaha way of life:

Going to the river is our occupation! Fishing and gold panning! We Sonaha ethnic group, can't afford formal education [for children]. We take all our girls and boys to wash gold. Gold washing is our ancestral occupation. By carrying our belongings, carrying our sons and daughters, we go to the river...Sonaha ethnic group, gold and fish are our cultivation... (Interview, March 13, 2012). See the Sonaha version, Appendix H, Song One.

“*Swan macchi kheti*” (Fishing and gold panning as cultivation) was a common expression among the Sonahas referring to the sources of their livelihood and their connection to the river. The song articulates the Sonahas’ ancestral occupations as being embedded in their culture and way of life.

### **6.4.1 Fishing**

Traditionally Sonaha men hunted fish with *Saunkhi* (cast nets). The elders still recall the golden past when they obtained plentiful fish catches with cast nets from moving canoes or on foot along the river edges. Traditional nets were woven from strings derived from forest creepers. They also hunted fish with iron spears and fishing hooks and used other traditional fishing techniques, for example fish traps. A Sonaha elder from Rajipur in his 80s lamented:

Earlier we used to fish big ones, canoe filled with fishes. We used to dump the rest if we could not sell and exchange our entire fish catch with the villagers. Fish catch was plentiful then. We used to exchange fish for rice, paddy [with Tharu]. For five kilo of fish we received two rupees [now the price is 500 times higher]. Fish was cheap (Interview, April 4, 2011).

However, given the increasing difficulty of catching fish with cast nets and declining fish stocks in the river this practice is less common today. Improved technologies such as *Chaundhi/Chiundhi*, dragging gill nets of varying sizes from a moving canoe,

have become the most common method of fishing among Sonaha fishermen since the 1980s. The gill net is a nylon woven net designed to float and drift on the river. It has small lead sinkers (*sisa*) attached to the edges of the net. These function to pull the bottom of the net downwards. The net is equipped with an airtight plastic container which is attached to the upper edge of the net and this keeps the net afloat. This improvised fishing gear, mainly the metal and the string to weave the net, is imported from neighbouring India and purchased locally.

A narrow and streamlined *Lau* (canoe) is made out of a single *Simal* tree (*Bombax ceiba*), see Photo 6.1. Often several Sonahas provide labour assistance during the carving of a *Lau* which is a laborious operation requiring precision and skill. These canoes and the act of rowing a canoe demonstrate the Sonahas' skill within and adaption to the riverine ecosystem and also reflect their vulnerability to frequent monsoon flooding. Unlike the wooden boats used on wide rivers and lakes, these narrow canoes are uniquely suited to the narrow yet fast and furious water currents of the Karnali River. Almost all male household heads possess a canoe.



**Photo 6.1** Sonaha men from Rajipur fishing in the Karnali River; Chattiwan Community Forest on the background. Credit: Author

Fishing requires a pair of fishers. The *Aguwa* - the front man - drops, drifts and casts the net, pulls the fish catch, and manoeuvres the canoe with a *Tandi* - a long bamboo stick. The *Pachuwa* - the back man propels and steers the wooden canoe with a *Dabana* - a slightly thicker stick flattened at one end which is used to row the canoe. This is a relatively arduous task requiring strength. It is therefore a common practice for the senior fisherman (in terms of age) to take on the task of front man, and for the junior to be the Pachuwa. Fishing is therefore based on dual roles, one catching the fish and the other steering the canoe (see Photo 6.1). The fish catch and the earnings from the catch are distributed equally between them. However, there is also sometimes a practice of fishing in cooperation using two or three canoes in a given fishing ground or river stretch.

Fishing by men mainly takes place in the dark and sometimes also in the afternoon, based on the timing and availability of fish in a given season as assessed by the fishers. Typically a pair of fisherman would spend a night on the river islands at different locations near a fishing ground. Sometimes several pairs share the same location to spend a night collectively around a fire and have a meal together before departing early in the morning to their respective fishing grounds. The sites where they camp or shelter at night, where they meet, interact and rest, on the river islands, river banks or on the fringe of forests across the river are known as Dera. On both sides of the two rivers in the delta, a series of such customary Dera had existed based on their suitability for fishing and gold panning (see Figures 6.3 and 6.4).

Sonaha women also fish, often in a group on the river's edge or in the shallow rivers where they catch several varieties of small sized fish, originally with their hands and shawls but increasingly by using mosquito nets (see Photo 6.2). The skills required to catch schools of tiny fish known as *Jhimna* are based on cooperation and collective effort. Some splash the river to chase the fish and divert their movement towards the edge of the river while others encircle the escaping fish and trap them in a net. The fish catch is kept inside a *Kanneri* (basket) and divided equally among the members of the fishing team. Sometimes Sonaha couples are also involved in fishing.

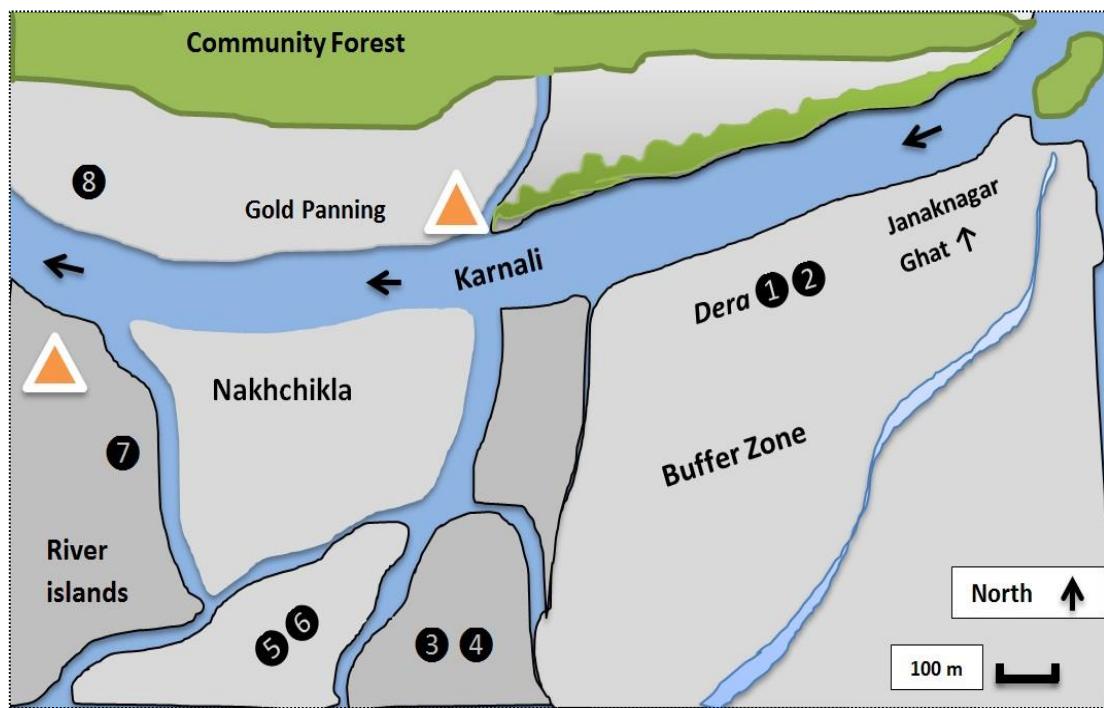


**Photo 6.2 Sonaha women fishing in the Geruwa River at the Park boundary. Credit: Author**

**Table 6.1 Fish catch of Sonaha men at Nakhchikla Dera (Feb/March 2012).**

<b>Male fishers</b>	<b>Number of days</b>	<b>Fish catch in kilograms (kg.)</b>	<b>Earnings in Nepalese rupees (NRs)</b>
Pair one (Rajipur)	6	98	19600
Pair two (Sarkhol & Daulatpur)	8	143.5	28700
Pair three (Gola)	12	76	15200
Pair four (Gola)	6	84	16800
Pair five (Daulatpur)	6	65	13000
Pair six (Saijana & Sarkhol)	5	48	9600
Pair seven (Saijana & Sarkhol)	5	40.5	8100
Pair eight (Rajipur)	6	40.5	8100

Note: In March 2012, the Sonahas were selling their fish catches to the local fish buyer on the river bank at the rate of NRs 200 per kg. At the time of this fieldwork one Australian Dollar (AUD) was equivalent to NRs 80-85.



**Figure 6.2 Location of Nakchikla Dera, north-eastern tip of the delta.**

Note: The riparian areas and community forests on the other side, west of the River Karnali fall outside the BZ. Across from the Janaknagar ferry point to the east is a popular fishing ground adjacent to the national park.

**Table 6.2 Fish-catch of three pairs of Sonaha men March, 2012.**

Male fishers	Days	Fish catch (kg)	Total (kg)	Earning (NRs)
Pair one (Rajipur)	Day 1	11.5	35.5	7100
	Day 2	6		
	Day 3	4		
	Day 4	14		
Pair two (Sarkhol and Daulatpur)	Day 1	35	67.5	13500
	Day 2	4		
	Day 3	12		
	Day 4	6		
	Day 5	10.5		
Pair eight (Rajipur)	Day 1	11	28.5	5700
	Day 2	8		
	Day 3	6		
	Day 4	0.5		
	Day 5	3		

The figures for the fish catches and the earnings of eight different pairs of Sonaha men (see Tables 6.1 and 6.2) give an impression of what is seen as a sufficient fish catch and income by the fishers involved. The fish catch on each day, by each fishing pair varies. The income generated from fishing is generally considered to be similar and on many occasions greater than that from an average day's wage labour locally (NRs 200-250 then) for instance from seasonal work on flood control embankments. Sonahas from different villages in the delta converge and fish in the same fishing grounds and set up their Dera on river islands at the tip of the delta (see Figure 6.2). If the lowest total income (of Pair eight, Table 6.2) is taken, it indicates an individual income for five days of NRs 2850. The net individual income after deducting NRs 1000 for the cost of the fishing gear is NRs 1850. This individual therefore, earned NRs 370 on average, which is considered better than a daily local wage labour rate of NRs 250. This average income per day is higher than that of most rural Nepali citizens.

Although the earnings are seemingly attractive, the income is not consistent throughout the year. In many instances, the men have had to return to the village with very few fish, or at times empty handed. While fishing is a significant source of livelihoods and subsistence yet unpredictable as well as an important cultural practice. Consequently, the livelihoods of the Sonahas are diversified among other activities, notably customary gold panning. Fish is an important source of food for the Sonahas.

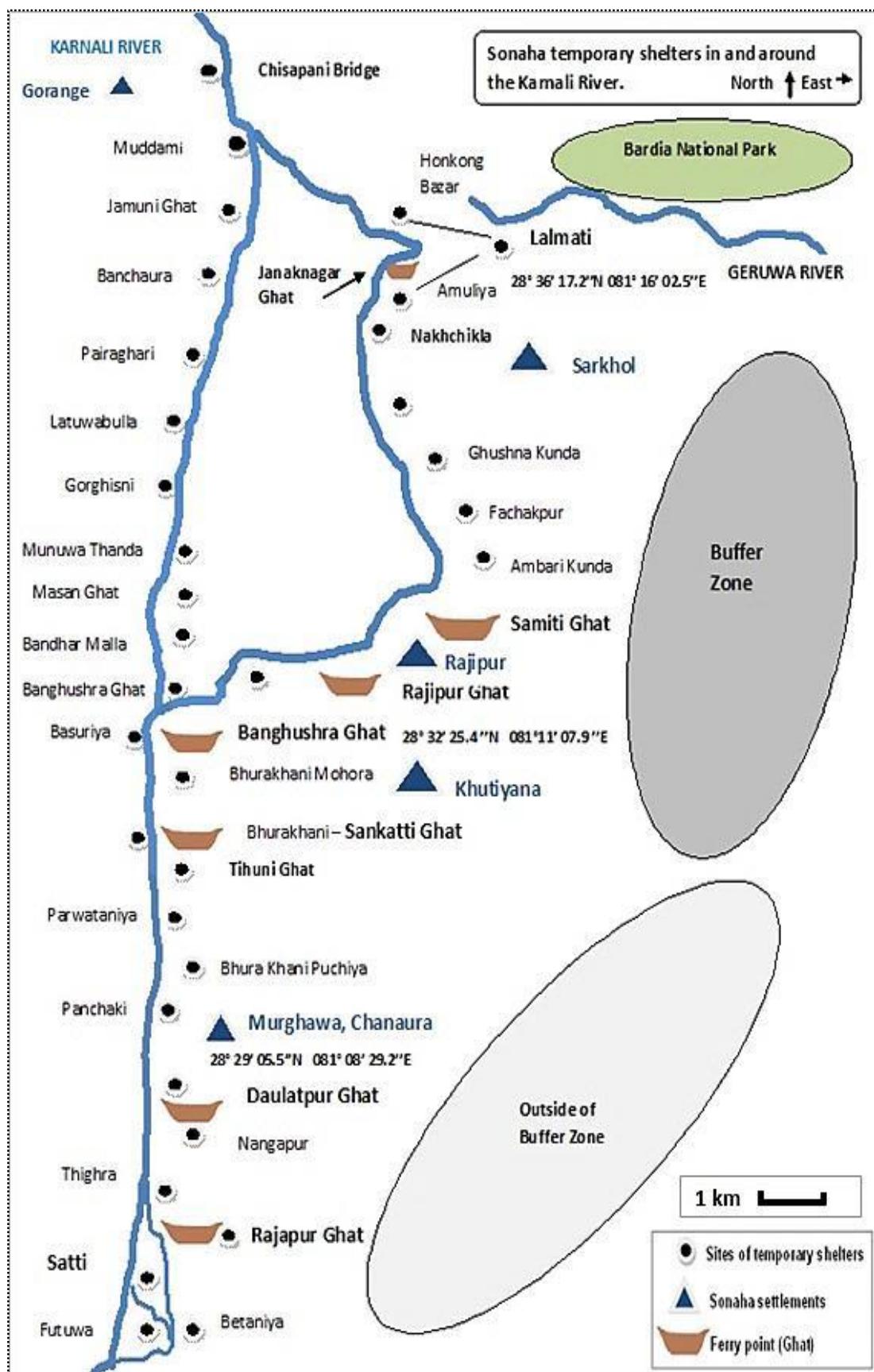
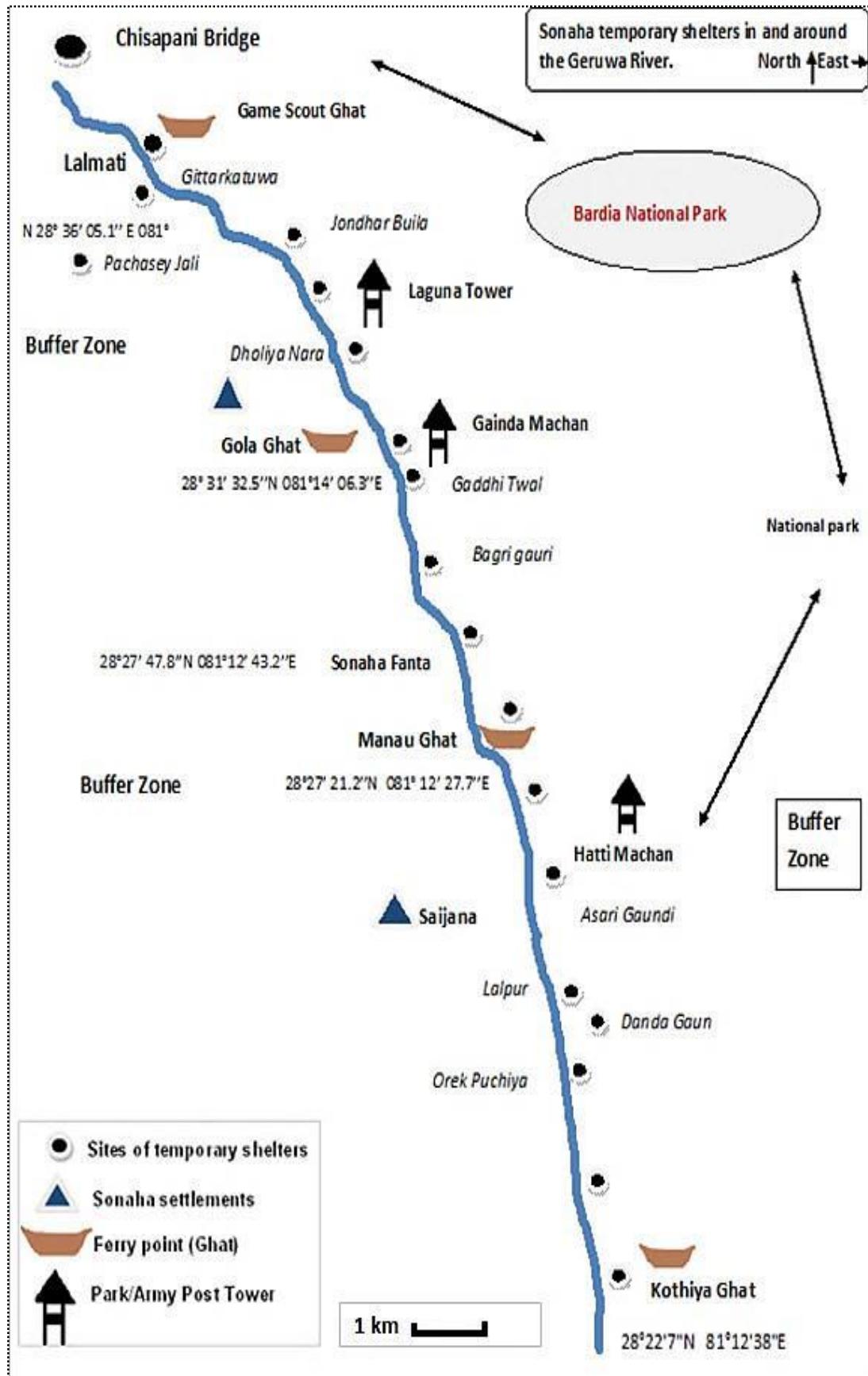


Figure 6.3 Locations of Sonaha Dera in the delta while fishing in the Karnali River stretch that predate the formation of the Park. Credit: Author and the Sonahas of Rajipur.



**Figure 6.4 Locations of Sonaha Dera in the delta while fishing in the Geruwa River stretch that predate the formation of the Park. Credit: Author and the Sonahas of Rajipur**

#### **6.4.2 Customary gold panning**

Gold panning in and around the delta is the second customary occupation of the Sonahas after fishing (see Photo 6.3). Often the peak season for gold washing is June-September, although gold washing is carried out in other months. Sonaha women possess a unique knowledge of the availability of gold and of the process of extracting fine particles of gold dust from the mixture of sand and gravel at the riverside. Women lead the process and the men contribute labour by digging and carrying the material. A practice of assessing the availability of gold in the river and river banks, *bichar garney*, precedes the actual gold panning. Gold panning takes place in groups of at least two individuals, in which one person filters the material while the other carries and unearths the material from the bottom of the river or the river banks. During monsoons, this is collectively carried out by bigger groups of up to 20-30 individuals (see Photo 6.4).

A large and flat wooden device, known as *Dundh/Dhunri* is placed on the river's edge close to the water (see Photo 6.3). A *Chabana*, a piece of equipment made out of small bamboo sticks tied together by threads is placed on top of the Dundh to help filter small particles of sand from the mixture of sand and gravel deposited in the Dundh. Then an *Odhana*, a small wooden tool, is used to churn the water while filtering the mixture. Fine deposits of filtered sand, on the bottom of Dundh, are then carefully placed on a *Sanauta*, a smaller leaf shaped flat wooden device, to separate unwanted particles from the gold dust. Gold dust is safely kept in a *Khoriya*, a small bowl shaped vessel and covered by a black stone. The gold dust is then condensed by burning it with charcoal after adding a chemical called *Suhag* (Potassium Alum).



Photo 6.3 Gold panning by a Sonaha woman in the Karnali River. Credit: Author



Photo 6.4 Collective gold panning by the Sonahas from Rajipur. Credit: Author

**Table 6.3 Gold panning income of the Sonahas from Rajipur North Sonaha hamlet, July-August, 2011 - March 3, 2012.**

<b>Household (HH)</b>	<b>Income in Nepali rupees (NRs)</b>
HH1 - Married couple	80,066
HH2 - Married couple	30,000
HH3 - Married couple	83,120
HH4 - Married couple	60,000-70,000
HH4 - Married couple	142,700-200,000
HH5 - Married couple	90,700
HH6 - Married couple	106,700
HH7 - Mother and a daughter	33,000
HH8 - Married couple	40,000
HH9 - Elderly woman	10,000
HH10 - Elderly single woman	-
HH11 - Married couple	-

Note: During the 2012 fieldwork, one AUD was equivalent to 80-85 NRs.

As can be seen from Table 6.3, there was a wide range of incomes from gold panning over the period of seven months, from a low of 10,000 NRs to a high of 200,000 NRs. This variation in income depended largely upon the frequency and number of days spent by each household in gold panning as well as the number of participating household members at the north Sonaha hamlet. Some households pan gold exclusively while sometimes some pan gold collectively and share the earnings equally. While HH10, a single elderly woman, did not participate in gold panning by choice, HH11 did not do so due to intra-Sonaha friction in the village.

### **6.4.3 Customary practices and the governance of the gold panning sites**

#### ***Lineages and shrines***

Sonaha lineages and sacred shrines belonging to respective lineages have significance for the customary practice of gold panning. There are 12 different lineages that, the Sonahas claim, were named from twelve different lineage based settlements in the past in the delta. Some of the names of the lineages also correspond to the present day villages in and around the delta (see Appendix E).

The Sonahas originally worshipped animistic spirits and now most consider themselves to be Hindus. Each lineage reveres several Hindu gods and goddesses (see Appendix E) and sometimes employs house priests or shamans from the other lineages. Rituals are often carried out by male family members inside the house and at sacred sites in the villages as well as at ferry points and gold panning sites. Each Sonaha house possesses different types of idols of gods based on their lineage. For instance, these include images of a horse, a bird (small with a long tail), a snake, a tiger and others.

In addition, each lineage has its own respective collective shrine known as a *Darshan*. This sacred shrine of a god is hereditarily possessed, hosted and taken care of by a key person (male), often the eldest living member in the lineage in each particular lineage. Darshan are also collectively revered by the fellow members of the respective lineage. One such head of the *Dahitwa* lineage, a Sonaha elder at Rajipur, possessed a shrine that resembles a two headed animistic beast (half tiger and half pig). A shrine of *Makunnaha* lineage has an image of a tiger. A different type of shrine of the *Dalaiya* lineage hosted by a household at Saijana (Manau) was triangular in shape, twice the size of a paw (hand) and with imprints of gold. After the host household at Saijana abandoned the collective shrine, after adopting Christianity, this generated resentment among fellow Dalaiya Sonahas.

#### ***Customary practices associated to gold panning***

The Sonahas' relationship with the river and riparian areas is also embedded in their unique customary practices of managing and governing their gold panning areas although these practices have been largely discontinued in recent times. These collective gold panning sites are known as *Kafthans*. They are referred to as "Sawan

kamai/ kamaina Gaun” (Gold earning locations). Such Kafthans persisted at various points on rivers across the entire delta and formed a major part of Sonahas’ socio-cultural life. Some of these areas fell inside the jurisdiction of the national park. They were allocated among the various Sonaha lineages (see Appendix F). The Sonahas believe that such a lineage based allocation and designation of Kafthan evolved mutually and collectively by their Purkha. A Sonaha woman at Rajipur informed me (Interview, April 1, 2011):

Our ancestors gathered and divided lands among themselves as per their lineage. We heard from our elders that they would release an arrow. The land as far as the bow could shoot would belong to one specific lineage group. Boundaries were therefore crafted to a given area of each lineage

Each Sonaha household could claim a specific plot within a given gold panning site as their *bhag* or *hissa* (de facto share) for gold panning (see Figure 6.5). In fact, a key person in each lineage (also known as *Mul Manche*) who had historical possession of a collective shrine (Darshan) also had de facto authority over a particular Kafthan. This was to regulate the allocation of gold panning plots among their fellow Sonahas and to perform the necessary rituals. This de facto authority was respected by fellow Sonahas. It was also based on a premise that the key person who possessed the Darshan performed important rituals such as worshipping the sacred shrine and *Bhutta* (holy or revered and feared spirits, ) inside his house, and at *Thaan* (a sacred site in the village) as well as at Kafthans.

Specific areas along the riverbanks were therefore referred to and understood as belonging to the key person on behalf of their lineage group, rather than as exclusive private property. A common expression – in reference to Kafthans – from the Sonaha elders during the fieldwork was: “This area belonged to him, that area belonged to another or this area fell within our boundary”.

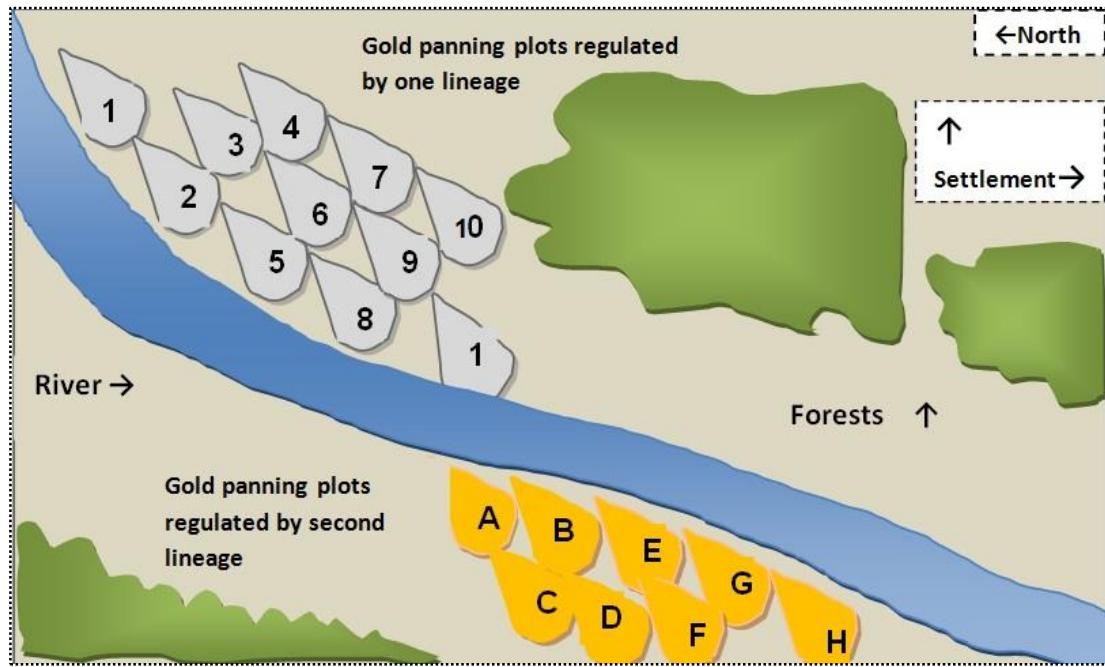


Figure 6.5 A diagrammatic presentation of customary Kafthans on the Karnali River. This figure is not scaled.

#### **Customary rules and rituals**

The foremost customary rule was the practice of performing a ritual at a Kafthan before any given area could be allocated or accessed for gold panning by fellow Sonahas. Gold dusts could be panned only after the key person performed the relevant ritual. The Sonahas at Rajipur informed me (Interview, April 28, 2011):

Gold panning used to take place only after the person to whom the *Gaun* [customary gold panning area] belongs to, performed a ritual; only when the person under whom an area falls [the key person] goes to the area, then could gold be earned.

A Kafthan could be accessed only after making a ritual and an offering to the Bhutta (spirit) of the respective lineage. The key person performed this ritual, in which the Darshan was taken to the Kafthan as well as the spirits being revered at the river. A living key person of Dahitwa lineage at Rajipur, who used to perform the ritual at his Kafthan stated (Interview, April 4, 2012):

We had to worship our own respective Bhutta; offer a chicken in a basket, alcohol along with a miniature canoe, *Khadau/chappal* [slipper of saints]; install a rock [sacred]. We also worship the river to prevent bad spirits from harming us. A

person can die, our canoe can capsize and a person can be drowned because of spirits.

The Sonahas also revered their Hindu gods at the river. A Sonaha of Makunnaha lineage said that they used to perform a ritual, once a year, adjacent to their Kafthan at Gola Ghat (see Figure 6.4). This ritual was performed for *Kalika Mai* (Mother Kali), a female goddess, to protect the Ghat (ferry point) from misfortune and to prevent the capsizing of a canoe while ferrying. An idol of her divine husband, Lord Mahadev was also created at the Ghat. They used to install a rock, offer a chicken or a goat and its blood (the practice known as *bhog dinu*), and place *Sindoor* (sacred red power) and *Dubpatta* (female clothing) at the site. A shaman would also pierce his throat during the ritual.

Likewise, an elder of the Golaha lineage at Rajipur, recalled the time when his people used to perform a similar ritual and worship *Kanya Kumari Mai* or *Mata*, the river goddess, at the Gola Ghat. Sonahas also worship the holy river Ganges as *Kanya*. This elder expressed his strong belief, saying:

We used to offer one female goat, and a chicken along with a miniature canoe, lice and other things. If we do not offer a goat, sometimes our canoe can collide or we can even drown in the river.....We used to pray, ‘Please do not deceive us, and no crisis or danger shall befall upon us while we go fishing. We are protected from tiger’ (Interview, April 2, 2011).

Thus the rituals to appease spirits and gods that were performed at Ghats and river banks therefore had wider significance beyond gold panning. However, these rituals were driven by a strong belief that, unless the rituals were performed, gold would not be available and misfortunes would plague the village. Whenever there was a sense of scarcity of gold at a particular Kafthan or at a time of crisis, the rituals were performed. Often only wooden equipment would be used in the rituals because of a taboo that prohibited the use of metal and the belief that it would harm the gold availability. The wearing of slippers, making unwanted noise, and whistling were also discouraged at the sites because of associated taboos.

After such rituals, the key person would allocate and demarcate sub-units in the given plot of land on a river bank under his traditional jurisdiction based on a customary practice, i.e., “*Jasko gaon tesai ley bhag garchan*” (the person to whom the Gaun belongs also divides the area). The Sonaha elders recall that their fellow Sonahas used to gather and the key person used sticks to measure and allocate plots. The portion on the most upstream section of the area (believed to have higher deposits and availability of gold) would be allocated as the key person’s share. He would then allocate remaining areas to the members of his lineage and non-lineage alike. Therefore, each Sonaha wishing to wash gold in the area, irrespective of their lineage could do so after seeking permission from the key person, and could claim a share in a given plot (see Figure 6.5).

Based on interviews with two Sonaha elders, who once performed the roles of a key person in their respective lineages, two lines of explanation emerge with regard to lineage based gold panning Kafthans. First, since there were only lineage based settlements in the past, only members belonging to the same particular lineage living together could have a share in a gold panning plot. Therefore, Kafthans had the character of common property but exclusive to that particular lineage. Secondly, as members of several lineages began to live together, in a settlement pattern with inter-Sonaha lineages, gold panning spaces regulated by the key person of a particular lineage became available to Sonahas irrespective of any lineage. A key person in one village could also delegate the authority to allocate plots for gold panning to a member of his lineage resident in a village closer to a given gold panning area.

#### ***Erosion of the customary practices***

These customary practices and values of Kafthan to the Sonahas have disappeared today. But their meanings and existence remain in the memories of Sonaha elders and adults. Sonahas in their early 30s still have vivid memories of such practices until the mid-1980s. One elderly man who formerly acted as a key person expressed his frustration:

Now no one follows those practices. People rather question me if I possess legal titles. If there is no King [monarchy] in the country who are you to make such rules? (Interview, June 4, 2011).

A multiplicity of factors has contributed to the disappearance of these customary practices. The Park regime and its restrictions on the rivers since the 1970s are considered by the Sonahas to be among the most significant forces of change in this regard as this prevented access to the lands and waters subsumed by the Park. These practices eventually eroded in the rivers outside the Park's jurisdiction which indicates that there were several other explanations including inter and intra Sonaha tensions concerning gold panning.

As the Sonahas' lives and cultural practices have been undergoing change, the meanings and significance of the key person and their associated cultural practices have likewise changed. There has been a gradual weakening of kinship ties between and among members of the Sonaha lineages. Many Sonahas who have adopted Christianity (for instance the majority of the Sonahas in villages such as Saijana and Murghauwa) have also relinquished their traditional rituals and rites. The de facto authority that sustained these practices based on customary rules has also withered and weakened. There were no coded rules and formal legal titles over the communal spaces which formed the gold panning sites of the Sonahas. With the influx of migrants into the delta and the subsequent upsurge of population since the 1960s, it was increasingly difficult for the minority Sonahas to enforce their customary rules and controls over gold panning areas. In addition, the community forest user groups that have been set up since the 1990s also began to enforce control over forested lands in the riparian areas. Restrictions on customary occupations in the rivers bordering the Park (the northern tip and east of the delta) also triggered increased competition over the remaining gold panning areas on the Karnali River (west of the delta).

### ***Summary***

This section demonstrates that Kafthans, their access and use were governed customarily as common property rather than as an open access resource. This fostered cooperation over the customary use of collective resources, which in turn significantly contributed to maintaining inter and intra-lineage social relations and cultural practices among the Sonahas. The Sonahas often stated that this was a democratic and egalitarian practice and system. Meaningful linkages between the spiritual realm, cultural practices, kinships and gold panning commons were evident

in those practices. Kafthan thus constituted a significant part of their socio-cultural and economic life embedded in the natural environment. Therefore they demonstrate the links between the Sonahas' culture, economy and ecology in the context of the river and riparian areas. Several factors, including state conservation intervention, can be attributed to the gradual weakening and eventual disappearance of these practices. But the Sonahas still have strong emotional connections to and recollections of them.

## **6.5 Past and current mobility of Sonahas in the delta**

As recalled by the Sonaha elders and adults, the Sonahas also had a history of residing at a range of former settlements in and around the delta (see Appendix G). Their mobility, especially in relation to fishing and gold panning can be traced historically on both sides of the two rivers bounding the delta (see Figures 6.3 and 6.4). Some of the Sonaha elders recall fishing upstream of the River Karnali even up to Kachali north of the Chispani Bridge as well as downstream across the Nepal-India border to the Kaliashpur dam.

Their settlements and mobility in and around the delta were largely influenced by the nature of their fishing and gold panning activities. The Sonahas believe that the changing courses or diversions of the rivers, the periodic lack of adequate water in the river (for a healthy fish catch), even to the extent of their drying up, scarcity of drinking water and the presence of malaria, or crop raiding insects all historically influenced their choices of settlement. Beliefs such as misfortune bestowed upon the village due to the effects of Bhutta (spirits) also encouraged shifting to newer locations. However, the Sonahas from Daulatpur stated that a significant minority of their elders had dissented their previous settlements across the Geruwa River and closer to the national park mainly because of the hardships created by the Park restrictions and the activities of the guards in the 1970s and 1980s.

Their former practice of semi mobile way of life living in and by the rivers for extended periods of time has been changing and becoming infrequent. However, their current hamlets in different parts of the delta are in close proximity to the river and indicate their ongoing riparian ties (see Maps 5.7 and 5.8, Appendix D). At the

time of fieldwork, I encountered several Sonaha men spending up to two weeks, and families, including both men and women, living up to one month in temporary camps on the river islands and river banks for fishing and gold panning activities. Significant populations of the Sonahas in the delta, still live a semi-mobile life in the delta practicing their customary occupations, as well as engaging in seasonal wage labour (see Figure 6.6).

A significant population of Sonahas are also found outside Bardia, in the far-west lowland region, along the banks of Mahakali River (see Appendix D). A Sonaha elder at the village of Chanaura, believed to be the oldest settlement of Sonahas in the delta, stated that Sonahas in the Mahakali region had migrated from the delta to escape debts and hardships imposed by the exploitative landlords. However they still maintain ties with the Sonahas in the delta. Likewise, Sonahas who currently live in the adjoining district of Kailai, in the village of Gorangey, north of the delta (see Map 5.8), had also shifted from the delta because of the availability of grazing areas and suitability for raising livestock, and the proximity of a fishing ground on the River Karnali.

At present, two major trends in Sonaha mobility can be observed, i.e., mobility within the delta and mobility outside the delta.

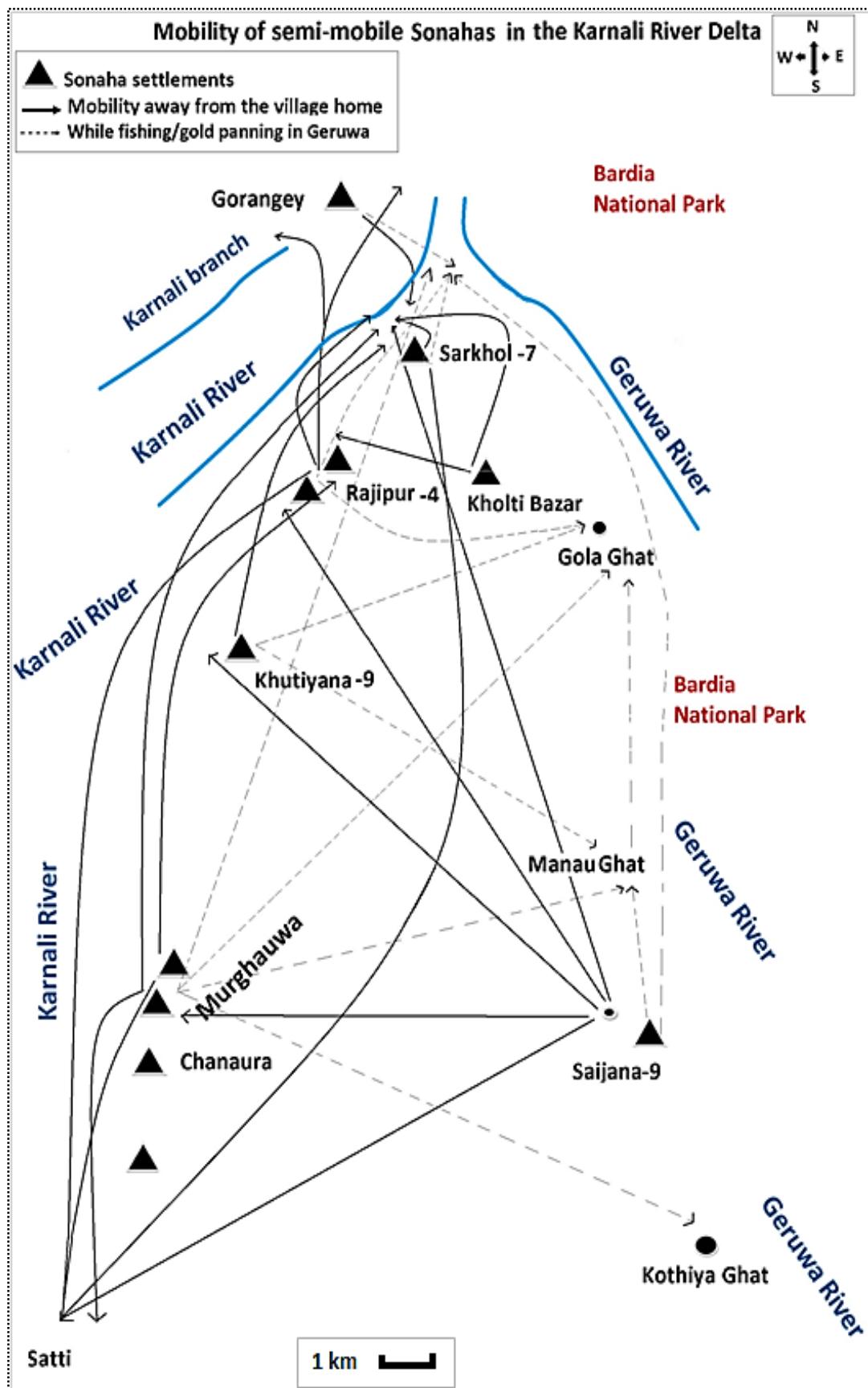
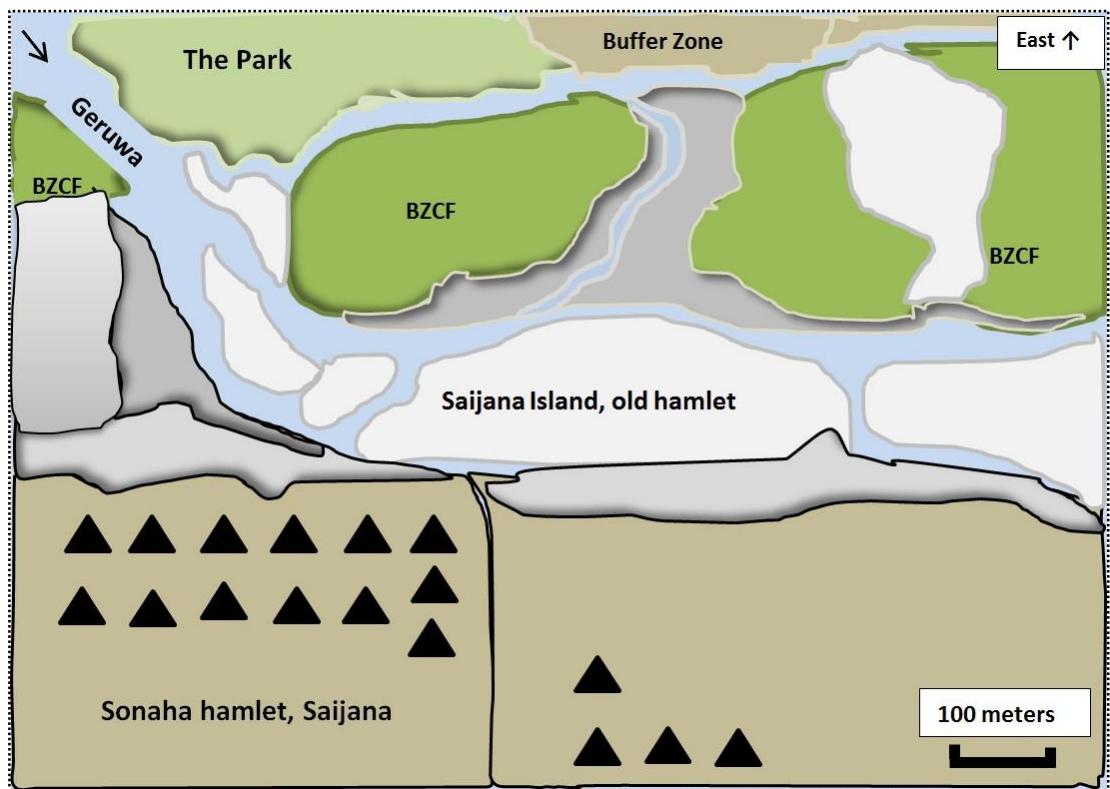


Figure 6.6 Mobility patterns of Sonahas in the delta (2011-2013). Credit: Author

### **6.5.1 Mobility within the delta**

The northern tip of the delta is a popular fishing ground where Sonaha fishers from different parts of the delta congregate. Since 2008, because the water levels in the Geruwa River have declined and because of the Park restrictions noted during my fieldwork in March 2012, fishers from the village of Saijana (Manau) closest to the Park (see Figure 6.7) were accessing fishing grounds north and north-east of the delta near Lalmati and Nakhchikla (see Figure 6.6) in addition to the river stretch across their village. Fishers from several villages in Daulatpur VDC were also accessing these locations, dragging their canoes up the river for around four hours. They were camping on river islands and river banks near the community forests. Although they fish in the river across their village, that fish catch was considered minimal. Fishers from Saijana and Khutiyana villages were also camping on the river islands temporarily staying with their fellow Sonahas at Rajipur and Sarkhol which were closer to these popular fishing grounds. They were fishing in pairs, partnering with local Sonahas from the host villages. Fishers from Gola often headed back to their settlement nearby, after completing fishing trips leaving their canoes with fellow Sonahas at Rajipur. Also see Map 5.8 for locations of Sonaha villages in the delta.

Similar practices occurred when there the Geruwa River was running high and the River Karnali was running low in water. Sonahas from the western sections of the delta used to take refuge at Sonaha settlements across Geruwa such as Gola and Saijana. They used to camp at various Dera across the Geruwa while they fished there. Sonahas from Rajipur also used to park their canoes at the northern tip of the delta or in Gola to access fishing grounds on the Geruwa. Fishers from Daulatpur also used to live temporarily and fish near Kothiya Ghat, further south on the Geruwa or at the northern tip of the delta (see Figure 6.6).



**Figure 6.7 Sonaha settlements at Saijana ward number nine, Manau VDC.**

Note: The Park is across the River Geruwa, north east of the village. The old Sonaha hamlet was on the nearby Saijana Island. Buffer Zone Community Forests (BZCFs) provide forest resources to the locals.

Spending a couple of hours on the river early in the morning before dawn or in the afternoon before heading back to the village, and spending a day or two at Dera while fishing are still commonly practiced especially by the fishers from Rajipur and Sarkhol. The fishing grounds are relatively closer for them. However, in these villages, the Sonaha fishers would still spend up to 10-12 days at Dera. Female Sonahas also spend between a few hours and the entire afternoon fishing in the river, and travelling on foot up to an hour and half to get to the fishing grounds.

Similarly, the practice of sheltering temporarily in the riparian areas away from the village for gold washing is still common. During 2012 fieldwork, I encountered Sonaha families from Gola who had been residing at Nakhchikla Dera (see Figure 6.2) for the past two weeks for gold panning and fishing. Many Sonaha families from Saijana were camping temporarily near Khutiyana village for gold panning (see Figure 6.6). Yet another family from Saijana had been living at Rajipur for both fishing and gold panning. Likewise, I found women from Saijana and various

villages in Daulatpur VDC living with their parental families at Rajipur occasionally panning gold with Sonaha women from the host village. There were few women from Saijana living at Tingharwa (Daulatpur) for gold panning. A few families from Daulatpur had been sheltering on the river banks near Sankatti Ghat (see Figure 6.3) for the past week gold washing. Furthermore, the practice of leaving the homes early in the morning, spending an entire afternoon on the riverbanks travelling up to two hours on foot and heading back home in the evening is also common among gold panning households.

Therefore, mobility in the rivers and riparian areas is still an important part of the Sonahas' lives and livelihoods today. Their mobility ranges from short to extended periods and can involve temporarily moving away from their own village settlements. In the course of inter Sonaha village mobility, as well as while sheltering temporarily away from one's local village, social relations and mutual cooperation based on familial and lineage based kinship becomes crucial. These are important in fostering and maintaining socio-cultural relations among Sonahas as well as enhancing their livelihood opportunities. The mobility of Sonahas away from their villages in the delta is also triggered by seasonal local opportunities for daily wage labour such as the construction of flood control embankments on the two rivers. Interestingly, while they remain in temporary shelters during such work, they also engage in fishing and panning gold.

### **6.5.2 Mobility away from the delta**

There is an increasing trend of labour out-migration outside of the delta, mainly for economic reasons and thus to diversify livelihood options. Sonahas migrate seasonally, to towns and cities in neighbouring India as well as to various hilly regions of Nepal. Several Sonaha men have also spent extended periods of up to seven years in various parts of India (Gujarat, Rajasthan, and several hill states) mainly as manual labourers. At the time of 2011 fieldwork, the majority of the adult population, both genders, at Saijana had either migrated to India, or just returned from India. In Rajipur, with a few exceptions, every adult and near adult male had experienced labour migration to India at some point. Their experiences in India indicate a life of struggles and hardships. Eventually many have returned to their

respective villages and continued their customary occupations and labour on their limited fields.

Although the practice of migrating to neighbouring India was common among Sonaha youth and adults, a trend of labour migration into the bigger cities in Nepal, mainly Kathmandu, and even to middle eastern countries has been occurring recently. Sonaha youth who have recently migrated to the capital city (Kathmandu) under contract labour conditions stated that, while some would stay for a longer period, others would simply stay for a few months to save some money before returning to the village. In 2012, I also encountered two landless Sonaha men who were preparing to migrate to Arab countries by seeking loans and monetary contributions from their extended families for this move. In 2013, eleven Sonahas from Sajjana alone had migrated to Qatar for work.

## **6.6 Landholding and landlessness**

Despite a tradition of revering ancestors and respecting elders Sonahas today are sometimes critical of their ancestors for not foreseeing the value of land and of the retention of land titles. Historically, given their semi mobile way of life and preference of free mobility, most of their ancestors never owned and retained land in one location. A Sonaha from Rajipur informed me that, when earlier Rajas (petty kings and big landlords) had asked their ancestors if they wished to own land, their ancestors responded: “We are fine with this mobile life, we do not want things in one place, if we have land in one place then we cannot go to other places” (Interview, April 28, 2011). On numerous occasions, Sonahas also spoke of how their ancestors declined when Rajas had suggested securing legal titles over gold panning on the river banks. A Sonaha woman averred that their ancestors chose the river when they were offered land: “Our forefathers were never concerned about acquiring land titles. They wandered where they could find fish and gold” (Interview, April 1, 2011).

The Sonahas also claim that the bureaucratic difficulties of acquiring legal land titles from the state administration as well as the imposition of land taxes had also discouraged and inhibited their elders from obtaining land. Another Sonaha leader at Sajjana stated:

*Napi* [land survey team of the government]<sup>15</sup> had also allocated land to some of us but, because there was plenty of fish-catch at that time [in the mid-1960s], we did not care for legal title since our perception was of a life that would be sustained through fishing and gold panning rather than agriculture (Interview, March, 2011).

Some Sonahas also stated that when Napi had come to the village, their elders were either in the rivers away from the village or were misinformed by landlords that the survey officials would arrest or fine them for occupying land. The Sonahas frequently maintained that they considered fishing and gold panning more alluring than cultivation since the fish catch was bountiful then and earnings could be generated instantly. However, the following narrative from a Sonaha elder in his 80s also illuminates the significance of land to the Sonahas in addition to their customary occupations.

In the earlier times, fish was not easily saleable [fish were plentiful and demand was less]; our ancestors used to fish and wash gold less [than in recent times]. We cleared the forest, bushes and thatched grass with *Kodali* [a manual agricultural tool]. We never tilled the land; simply spread the seeds in the forest. Sometimes all our crops were destroyed by insects. One year we settled at one location, and moved to a newer location next year (Interview, July 2, 2013).

### **6.6.1 Loss of lands**

The Sonahas often claimed that their elders had occupied lands in and around the delta by clearing the forests. An adult Sonaha from the village of Chanaura stated:

Had we retained our lands that our Purkha [ancestors] cleared we would have been Raja [landlords] of Bhanwarra Tappa [the delta]. Our Purkha never settled for long at one location; cleared the forest for land at one place and deserted the

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<sup>15</sup> Since the late 1950s there has been state measures and legislation for land reform, systematised land survey, measurement and compulsory land registration, land tax and the ending of absentee landlordism (Regmi, 1961). During the grand land survey under the premiership of Chandra Shumsher Rana (1901-1926), influential people registered large tracts of land in their names, and even bribed surveyors to achieve this (S. Thapa, 1996).

place next year. Sonahas had plenty of lands but later became tenants, and lost our lands to Jamindars [landlords] (Interview, July 6, 2013).

Often the Sonahas pointed to their exploitation by landlords operating under a feudal landlordism that was common in Bardia. Although this practice formally ended in 1960s it still had remnants in the delta (see subsections 5.2.2 and 5.4.3). The Sonaha elders still recall powerful landlords (referred to as Rajas, *Jimdar*, *Kothar* or *Kothiyar*) in the delta who were from Tharu elites or hill people. They often referred to hardships, involuntary labour demands, and loss of lands that their ancestors had occupied. One such Tharu landlord, Gamuwa, is commonly remembered of harassing Sonahas and repossessing their lands, that the Sonahas at Rajipur feared the most.

Furthermore, the Sonahas claim that *Pahadey/Pahadi* (hill people) who migrated to the delta in the late 1970s were often responsible for the loss of their lands, which they took away from the Sonahas by various illicit means. The Sonahas claim that some of their elders had possessed and occupied plots of land until the late 1970s and 80s but that many of them were gradually dispossessed from their legally owned land by the hill migrants. The Sonahas often expressed their resentment of hill migrants in private. A Sonaha elder in his nineties recalled:

Sonahas used to own land. Pahadey and Tharu took away our land. There were Gmuwa Raja, Patabhar Raja, Pir Raja. Earlier there were no Tharu settlements. There were no villages, only forests all around (Interview, April 2, 2011).

A Sonaha woman at Rajipur, recalling the times of her elders, spoke of the dispossession:

.....landlords took away many of our lands. Money lenders also manipulated the debt....our ancestors were heavily exploited. One Sonaha even sold one *bigha* [0.6773 ha] land for just five hundred rupees. Oppressive class [landlords and landed village elites] gobbled our lands. Sonahas were not literate and smart. Hence they looted Sonahas in the past (Interview, April 1, 2011).

### 6.6.2 The current status of land holding

The significant majority of Sonahas in the delta are either landless or possess very little land legally. One study reveals that almost 60% of the Sonaha (50 sample size) did not possess any registered land (Neupane, 2007). My study suggests that almost all the Sonahas in villages in the delta such as Sarkhol and Saijana, in the BZ, and Milpur and Chanaura in Daulatpur VDC, outside the BZ (see Maps 5.7 and 5.8), are landless (without legal titles). All the Sonahas at Sarkhol dwell on unregistered lands. The Sonahas at Saijana as well as those at Milpur had resettled into their current locations with the help of Christian charitable organisations because of the vulnerability of the former sites to floods. They were provided with a nominal land (0.0339 ha) for housing only. Interestingly, the huge majority of the Sonahas in these two villages have converted to Christianity.

**Table 6.4 Landownership by Sonahas at Rajipur, North Sonaha hamlet.**

Household (HH)	Registered land ( <i>kattha</i> )*	Housing
HH1	5	Unregistered land
HH2	7	"
HH3	7	"
HH4	10	"
HH5	7	"
HH6	7	"
HH7	1	"
HH8	1	"
HH9	7	"
HH10	7	Registered
HH11	7	"
HH12	7	"
HH13	10	"
HH14	-	Unregistered

Note: The land size measurement is in *kattha*, 1 *kattha* [Nepal] = 0.0339 hectare (ha), 20 *kattha* = 1 bigha and 1 bigha = 0.6773 ha.

**Table 6.5 Landownership by Sonahas at Rajipur, South Sonaha hamlet.**

<b>Household (HH)</b>	<b>Land possession (kattha)</b>	<b>Housing</b>
HH1	3 Unregistered	Unregistered
HH2	3 Unregistered	"
HH3	1 Registered	"
HH4	5 "	Registered
HH5	5 "	"
HH6	5 "	"
HH7	3 "	Unregistered
HH8	1 "	Registered
HH9	3 "	"
HH10	20 "	"
HH11	20 "	"
HH12	-	"
HH13	50 Registered	"
HH14	5 "	"
HH15	1 "	"
HH16	-	"
HH17	3.5 Registered	"
HH18	3.5 "	"
HH19	8 "	"
HH20	20 "	"
HH21	8 "	"
HH22	8 "	"
HH23	16 "	"
HH24	-	"

In the North Sonaha hamlet at Rajipur, the land ownership of the Sonahas varies between one kattha (lowest) to ten kattha (highest) with one household being landless (see Table 6.4). One Sonaha elder who now possesses only five kattha had previously possessed land over a much larger area (three bigha). Likewise the majority of their housing is on unregistered land. In the South Sonaha hamlet,

Rajipur, landholdings vary between a minimum of 1 kattha to a maximum of 50 kattha (possessed only by one single household, Table 6.5). Two households of former bonded labourers were completely landless and were awaiting land compensation from the government. Only HH 10, 11, 13 and 20 (Table 6.5) have landholdings of 20 kattha and more. With the exception of these households, most of the Sonahas own very little land. The landless Sonahas from Rajipur had also served as Kamaiya (bonded labourers) of the Tharu and, on some occasions, of landowning Sonaha households too. Former Kamaiya families had also obtained land compensation from the government. The majority of Sonahas here occupy houses on unregistered land.

## 6.7 The Sonahas' construction and lived experiences of the river and riparian spaces



Photo 6.5 Nakhchikla Dera of the Sonahas at the northern tip of the delta, March, 2012. Credit: Author

### **6.7.1 *Tipariya ma dyara, basahi* (sheltering on the river islands)**

I have demonstrated in the previous sections that “sheltering on the river islands” and river banks, in customary Dera or Basahi, temporary shelters, characterises the Sonahas’ customary semi-mobile way of life, their spatiality, and their co-existence and adaptation with the rivers and riparian ecosystems. During the fieldwork, the Sonahas indicated and expressed a significant preference for river islands and river banks over forests, although forest resources are essential to their daily lives. The Sonaha ancestors and elders’ inclination for a semi-mobile way of life over an agrarian one was also evident.

On several occasions and at several locations, I experienced and observed Sonahas’ lives by living in temporary shelters on islands in the Karnali River. In one instance, one such Dera known as Nakchikla Dera was set up at the northern tip of the delta, adjacent to the Park (Figure 6.2 and Photo 6.5). It was surrounded by channels of the Karnali River, and hence not easily accessible to strangers without a canoe or even to land based wildlife. The makeshift camp was built on the edge of piles of driftwood and logs deposited on the small island. Sonaha men and women spent chilly nights on the sand with thin blankets or plastic sheets above them, close to the bonfire. Evening conversations around the fire after a meal prepared by women were an important part of social interaction at the Dera. The Sonaha men often went fishing at night and returned back to the Dera for a few hours before returning to the river again prior to dawn. Canoes were beached close to the Dera. Women spent the mornings preparing meals and the entire afternoons panning gold on the river bank nearby. Men spent the afternoon catching up from their sleepless nights, and weaving broken fishing nets under the shed on a sand bank.

In another instance, a young Sonaha leader from Rajipur recalled his childhood experience:

In the evening everyone, men, women and children would gather around the fire after the meal. Those willing to fish would have left. Then among them one who knew how to recite a story, an elder or a knowledgeable [*janney*] person would begin a story and unfold past happenings [*batey/khissa*]. While one would recite the story, and another one would complement saying, ‘Yes! This is right’ (Interview, March 27, 2012).

The leader recalled that such conversations and stories were often about their history, moments in the past, kings, hardships and fish catches among other topics. Another fellow Sonaha then added:

It was just like the stories in the school text books, like teachers reciting stories to the children, since we did not know how to read. Then there were songs of marriage and festivals too in between the stories. It was a fun time too.

Illustrating the value and meaning of a life at Basahi or Dera, another Sonaha fisher then complemented:

Like we are uneducated class; scared to speak to others, did not know how to speak to others properly, so we preferred places of solitude to take refuge, we felt safe too, where we could have our own conversations in our language, talk about our hardships, and also have a feast.

They considered that those were the crucial moments and places where intergenerational learning took place. The Sonaha elders taught the young ones orally. The young ones would also acquire skills of fishing, ferrying and gold panning in addition to the cultural songs.

For the male fishers, being in Dera continues to provide a moment of respite after fishing labour, a resting place. It is also a place to meet and interact with fellow fishers in the river, to vent frustrations, fear and anxiety over the Park patrols. These are also shared collective spaces at times of danger (from both the army and wildlife). Even today, Sonaha fishers describe and construct their life on the river islands as a moment of respite and safe refuge. One Sonaha explained:

Island is very important and blissful place....it is a secure place, no danger. There are rivers all around. Animals cannot come there. Even if they come through, we can easily find out from the noise...we can escape in our canoe. It is very convenient place for us. Otherwise how can we fish and live there? On the riverbed we feel safe and it is also very relaxing" (Interview, March, 2012).

On another occasion, a Sonaha woman reinforced the notion of Dera on river islands as socio-cultural sites and told me:

We used to work the whole day [panning gold] and then in the evening have a meal, and then chat. Men would go to fish and women would engage in conversations around the fire. Conversations were fun, we laughed. We used to talk about past incidents and times of ancestors (Interview, March 29, 2012).

Recalling their earlier lives as being similar to those of Raute nomadic forest dwellers, a Sonaha woman from Gola also mentioned that there were times when they celebrated festivities on the river islands, even the wedding feasts. The elders also remember performing cultural and religious rituals on the river banks and islands in their lifetimes; and they still hold emotional attachments to those places. There were also occasions when women got pregnant and delivered babies at the Dera itself. A boy from Rajipur who is now 15 years old was born at one of the gold panning Dera at Balchaur (north-west of the delta) near Gorangey village.

A Sonaha woman, who had recently returned back to the settlement after spending a month with fellow Sonahas from Rajipur in gold panning Dera, expressed her sentiments of living in Dera, “it is much more fun out there in Dera than here. We celebrated new year feast at Dera” (Interview, June 29, 2013). As described earlier, although less common and of shorter duration, the semi-mobile way of life living in Dera still persists and is meaningful for the Sonahas. Customary Dera is therefore an important aspect of their lives and culture. The lived experience therein shapes and gives meaning to, the stories of the past and to the reproduction of the Sonahas’ socio-cultural life in the present.

### **6.7.2 River banks, river islands and *Gaun* as *Kafthans***

The Sonahas still recall referring to their Kafthans as Gaun although the customary system has disappeared. The understanding and cultural meaning of the term “Gaun” is unique to the Sonahas unlike its wider meaning as a village. In a historical sense it has a connotation of a gold panning area that historically belonged to a particular lineage. The terms “Kafthan” and “Gaun” are thus used interchangeably to indicate customary gold panning practices and locations. A Sonaha explained “We used to

converse by saying - this area falls in his Gaun and that one falls in someone else's Gaun" (Interview, March 27, 2012). A fellow Sonaha then elaborated:

If we go to the river, there are several areas. So we say, from here to there, is Dalaiya's [lineage] Gaun. Their boundary is up to that area on the far end. From this side to that side it is *Banchauriya*'s [lineage] Gaun and so on. Everyone [lineage] used to have their own area.

The first Sonaha added:

When we were kids [two decades back], our elders used to ask us, where were we? We then used to reply '*Phalano ko gaun ma chu*' [I am at someone's Gaun]. When we went back to the hamlets from the river, then elders used to ask us, 'whose Gaun are you staying at in the river'? Elders would immediately understand which location in the riverside they were referring to.

During yet another group interview, a Sonaha woman hinted at a key person who regulated Kafthans (see subsection 6.4.3), as *Gaun-wala* to whom the Gaun belongs to (Interview, March 29, 2012).

### **6.7.3 "For us Tipariya (river island) is also our Gaun", "this is also our home"**

In addition to radically different meanings and understandings of Gaun as customary Kafthans, the literal or popular meaning of Gaun in Nepali as a rural village with human settlements, can be contrasted with that of the Sonahas who also perceive rivers and riparian areas as their habitable villages. With reference to river islands, the Sonahas at Dera commonly expressed "this is also like our village". Therefore, it means a place of refuge during fishing and gold panning, where they set up temporary camps. It signifies the Sonaha cultural way of life with the Dera or the Basahi. "This is our *ghar* [home].....we enjoy being in the river and islands...I enjoy being here more than being in the village [hamlet]" (Interview, March 3, 2012). This statement by a Sonaha fisher from Saijana also articulates the Sonahas' connection with and meaning of a riverine way of life. As anthropologist F. Jana

(2009) has argued elsewhere, just as the forests are home for the Raute so, for the Sonahas, river and riparian areas were lived in and conceived of as their home, and are still perceived, imagined, reconstructed and claimed as such, as a liveable place, with strong emotional attachments and meanings.

#### ***The value of the river***

A strong sense and meaning related to livelihoods is also associated with rivers and riparian environments despite vulnerability to monsoon floodings. One Sonaha stated, “We have been making our living from the rivers. We have everything in the river. Our future.....and our lives rely heavily on the river. River is the biggest property....” (Interview, April 28, 2012). Their meanings are also constructed by the Sonahas as follows:

River, sand, rocks are not only a natural area. For us they are just like land under cultivation. We are deriving benefits from it. We fish in the river..... from the sand we earn gold. They are just like a property [unlike a private property] just like land (Interview, April 28, 2012).

#### **6.7.4 The Sonahas' biocultural space**

A number of key insights into the Sonahas meanings of the river, riparian areas and their lives therein are emerging. As far as the world views of the Sonahas are concerned, the riverine and riparian areas in the delta or the riverine landscape, hereafter, the riverscape, have multiple meanings, significance and dimensions as a part of their lived socio-cultural domain besides being a biophysical and natural landscape. The riverscape symbolises a liveable socio-cultural place integral to the lives of the Sonahas, therefore a “lived space” (Gow, 1995).

The Sonahas' riverscape can also be conceptualised also as socially produced and constructed space over time. It is meaningfully and intricately linked with various inter-related dimensions and facets of space, as perceived-conceived-lived (Lefebvre, 1991). It can be considered as a space where the Sonahas' spatial practices are rooted and have thrived since the time of their ancestors; where their representations of space (conceptions) are reinforced and reproduced. The Sonahas' embodied and lived representational space (sense of place, symbolic attributes and meanings) are

embedded in this space (see section 2.6 on space). Likewise, from the dwelling perspective (see subsection 2.5.4), this natural space is a landscape, in a qualitative sense, a domain of dwelling in which Sonahas have lived and have been performing their life activities. Hence it constitutes Sonahas' taskscape; and the Sonahas have become part of it. Sonahas are thus embedded and integrated in this dwelt environment that is also being created through their engagements, interactions, social-ecological relations and life activities (Ingold, 2000).

Hence, I argue against a reductionist view of this space as being limited to a biophysical entity or a natural landscape with a repository of valuable biological diversity and natural resources. Beyond the ecological and conservation significance of this riverscape, it has deeper, wider and multidimensional connections and meanings for the Sonahas. As an ancestral territory of the Sonahas in which they have had a longstanding presence, it provides them with history, memory and emotions, as well as socio-cultural-economic and ecological interactions and relations, because they have co-existed with the riverine ecosystem. Thus, the Sonahas' everyday lives and practices, collective identity, cultures, knowledge and meanings are produced and reproduced as they are embedded in this space.

While the riverscape is commonly perceived by the Sonaha themselves and others with reference to their livelihoods, it has a wider significance and cultural meaning. It is a space lived, experienced and constructed by Sonahas in material, representational and symbolic senses. It is a nature-culture hybrid constitutive of the Sonahas' epistemology, ontology and cosmology. Hence, based on the Sonahas' world view, their ancestral riverine territory in the delta, which also includes riverine and riparian areas in the national park and beyond, the natural environment, humans and non-humans and socio-cultural-ecological relations, can be conceptualised as a biocultural and socio-ecological space, and related processes. Therefore, this biocultural space cannot be reduced or treated as a conservation or ecological sphere alone.

## **6.8 Summary and conclusion**

This chapter presented the Sonahas, who consider themselves as one of the original inhabitants of the lower Karnali River delta, demonstrating a longer history of occupation and association with the delta than that of the current majority Tharu people (e.g., Dangaura). The river and riparian areas in the delta are considered by the Sonahas as their ancestral riverine territory. The Sonahas' customary mobile way of life dwelling in temporary shelters on river islands and river banks, practicing artisanal fishing and gold panning also demonstrates their historical ties to the river delta and their co-existence with its natural environment.

Customary occupations still significantly contribute to the livelihoods of the Sonahas and are part of their socio-cultural life. Most Sonahas live in the settlements close to the river. Their current mobility patterns in relation to customary livelihoods within the delta suggest their socio-cultural-ecological relations. The Sonahas generally continue to live semi-mobile lives although increasingly this is becoming less common. Nevertheless they still significantly rely on the resources of the natural environment. This is particularly critical given their present situation of landlessness or at least of minimal landholdings. It is perhaps their historical preference for customary livelihoods and semi-mobile lives in the riparian areas which have contributed towards the present situation, notwithstanding the history of exploitative feudal landlordism, the influx of hill migrants into the delta, and the conservation intervention of the state since the 1960s.

The Sonahas' customary ties and relationships, lives on the rivers, river islands and riparian areas, conceptions and lived experiences, and associated meanings and values radically challenge the naturalistic notion and reductionist view of riverine landscapes as a biophysical and a conservation entity. The Sonahas' unique customary practices of governing collective gold panning areas in the river stretch known as Kafthan, tied to their economic, spiritual and socio-cultural practices, although they have disappeared recently still have a strong presence in the emotions and memories of the elders. Although it is becoming less common, life in customary Dera, fishing and gold panning are integral to the socio-cultural and economic lives of the Sonahas. Even though the Sonahas have lost control over their ancestral lands

and riverine territory these are still considered, conceived and imagined by them as a liveable place, where the meanings, practices and collective identities of the Sonahas are rooted and reproduced. I reconceptualise this riverscape and related processes as the Sonahas' dynamic biocultural space.

However, this classical way of life has been undergoing changes. The Sonahas have been diversifying their livelihood options. Their historical ties, relationships and practices associated with their ancestral territory have been withering. It is becoming increasingly challenging for them to retain their connections to their customary territory and simultaneously to derive sustainable livelihoods. Their lives have been increasingly transformed and shaped amidst wider economic, demographic, political and cultural changes. These include: feudal landlordism in the pre-1950 Nepal and its remnants; their increasingly sedentary lives since the mid 20th century; the influx of hill migrants since the 1960s and their minority status. The imposition of the national park regime since the 1970s, outmigration and Christianisation have also altered their way of life. In the following chapters I will present stories and analyses of how the lives and realities of the Sonahas have been further shaped and influenced by state conservation interventions and discourse.

## **Chapter Seven: State violence in the name of conservation**

### **7.1 Introduction**

In recent years both the recognition of the Sonahas' existence in the lower Karnali river delta and the impacts on their customary livelihoods by the actions and policies of the BNP authorities have been documented (D. K. Ghimire, 2007; A. P. Ojha, 2008; Tamang, 2012b; UNDP Nepal, 2008). Some of these studies have investigated the impacts which the Park rules and interventions have had upon the livelihoods of the Sonahas with reference to state violations of their civil liberties and their right to customary livelihoods (S. Jana, 2008; Neupane, 2007). The purpose of this chapter is to provide a deeper and more focussed interrogation of these issues and to present some new findings and insights on the consequences of an exclusionary and coercive national park regime upon the lives of the Sonahas.

### **7.2 Memories of the Sonaha elders and the *Arakshya***

The Sonaha elders routinely recall a period prior to the creation of the Park in mid-1970s, as a time of great freedom and self-governance. When the elders reconstruct those times through their conversations, they contrast this with their changing life situations and hardships, today. As is very common for older people recalling the time of their youth they present a vivid picture of a time of immense freedom and contentment. Common expressions conveyed to me by the Sonaha elders tell of a time when: "Everything was free, fishing, hunting [deer and wild boar], gold panning all were free" and "Rivers meant Raj [reign] of the Sonahas then." The elders' stories are reminiscent of a golden age, a romantic time of bountiful fish catches, less overfishing of the rivers and an absence of Park restrictions.

It was with the introduction of forest guards in 1969 that the Sonaha elders began to experience restraints on their mobility on the rivers and to their use of forest resources. The forest guards, under the state's forest bureaucracy, were initially

deployed for the protection of the royal hunting reserve in Bardia (see subsection 5.2.1). The Sonaha elders even now recall their initial encounters, particularly with “Ban Paley” (forest guards) who were considered less strict than the state military in the 1970s. An elder at Rajipur recalled: “Ban Paley told us that fishing and hunting are not allowed” (Interview, March 19, 2011), while another recalled a forest guard as saying “you will be detained if you come to the forest” (Interview, April 2, 2011). However, in practical terms, these forest guards mainly enforced restrictions on the hunting of wild animals, the felling of trees, and the accessing of timber and firewood from the forest area which had been cordoned off as an exclusive wildlife reserve, but less so on fishing. Another elder at Rajipur also recalled incidences of confrontation and heated arguments between groups of the Sonahas and the forest guards:

Ban Paley used to threaten us by saying why do you come to this side? Then we replied, ‘why? This is free for us, this is our state [realm], you do your work and we shall do ours’. But there was no hostility with him [enforcement of rules were less strict than by army later] (Interview, April 2, 2011).

Nevertheless the Sonahas were still relatively free to fish and pan gold in the river, and to take shelter on the river islands and forest edges since restrictions were enforced primarily on timber extraction and hunting practices. The Sonaha elders also spoke of instances where forest guards were offered their fish catch in exchange for leniency while, on other occasions, forest guards applied the regulations more formally.

However, the Sonahas’ situation within, access to and mobility on the rivers and land under the protected area jurisdiction began to deteriorate dramatically when the armed state military took over from the forest guards in the mid-1970s for wildlife protection. The Sonaha began to experience harsher restraints when they encountered military guards while fishing or gold panning in the river stretches bordering the wildlife reserve. With the imposition of suddenly increased restrictions on their mobility in their riverine territory they sensed a mounting crisis. The military enforced stricter rules and controls on their occupations in addition to restricting local peoples’ access to the forest resources in the protected area.

The discourse of *Arakshya* (a term which not only signified a wildlife reserve, but also an area under the strict control of the government) also penetrated the consciousness of the Sonahas. It enmeshed them and symbolised the presence of and the imposition of restrictions by the state. During my fieldwork many locals and elders still referred to the BNP as *Arakshya*. This implies that there was an associated memory of strict management of the wildlife reserve even before its formal designation as a national park in the 1980s (see subsection 5.2.1). In the interviews, the Sonaha elders often remembered that it was the presence of the army, and the Sonahas' fear of them and the restrictions that they enforced in the rivers that provided Sonahas' first experience of the *Arakshya* regime. Their common expression “*Arakshya lagyo*” (the reserve was in place or enacted), suggests that a regime of state order or rules beyond Sonahas' control, knowledge and wishes descended like a monsoon deluge upon their lives and their homeland.

One elder at Rajipur recalled:

When it became *Arakshya* everything stopped, hunting, fishing and mobility. Army came to tell us, ‘Do not enter the forest’. If they found us there, they would arrest us and take us away. Reserve is for wild animal, we cannot go there (Interview, March 19, 2011).

Another elder recollects:

We came to know about the *Arakshya* when we saw army guarding the forests across the river. We were told we could not fish in the river and enter the forest. If we were caught while fishing, we would be fined and punished. The law of *Arakshya* would prevail (Interview, April 4, 2011).

### ***Encounters with the Monarchy***

The Sonaha elders remembered their encounters with the Nepalese monarch and his hunting teams during royal hunts in the 1970s in positive terms (see subsection 5.3.1). Sonaha elders recalled their memories of royal hunting trips in the BNP as follows:

King Mahendra or Birendra had come to Bardia forest. I had also caught fish weighing 4-6 kg. I also spent a night at Baghaura [grassland in the western section of the Park across Geruwa]. King's hunting camp was set up there ....I expressed my wish to ride a helicopter with King's guards and other officials. The helicopter took off and went around the Chisapani [north-west of the Park]..... I had offered them fish, they were happy, so they gave me a chance. Earlier Kings used to come here to hunt deer and tiger. They [authorities of the reserve] used to call all the Sonahas and ask us to go [to the river], and fish" (Interview, April 4, 2011).

We had to give big *Sahar* [Mahaseer fish]. They [hunting team] used to take photographs of us with the fish. We received only bones with few flesh from their hunted game (Interview, April 2, 2011).

King Birendra used to come to Bardia for hunting. Once, a big crocodile was killed. My water shaman father had to cast a magic to propitiate the killing of the giant crocodile by the hunters. I still remember when the big crocodile was hunted and taken away tied to the helicopter (Interview, April 11, 2011).

### **7.3 The Militarisation of the Park**

During my fieldwork I heard many stories of harassment and physical assaults by guard patrols on Sonahas (of all ages) when they were caught fishing in and around the Park. The Sonaha elders spoke of the ill treatment enacted on them or their communities. On numerous occasions, the Sonahas recalled experiences of their inhumane treatment by the army and the game scouts. Some were threatened at gun point or gun shots were fired at them; stones were pelted at them while they were fishing; on other occasions some of them were blindfolded, their hands were tied and they were physically battered. Sonahas have even been harassed when they were found by the patrolling guards near the Park boundary or harassed in their own villages near the Park. There were numerous instances where the guard patrol army patrols confiscated and damaged Sonahas' canoes, and seized their fish catches and fishing gear or took gold panning equipment from Sonaha women.

A Sonaha adult at Saijana recounted this experience:

My father was once beaten up by soldiers from the Park. He passed away nearly one month after the incident. Even I was also almost deaf for an entire month after I faced an army beating. In those days [the autocratic regime in the 1980s] we could not raise our voice. Once, our fellow Sonahas were arrested by the army in the village. They were forced to swim like a fish in the cold river and harassed (Interview, April 9, 2011).

At Sarkhol, the Sonahas also reported that, in the past, army patrol made a Sonaha elder to apply *Gund* (a locally produced sweet edible substance) all over his body before being exposed to an army of ants and receiving painful bites. Another Sonaha informed me that he and other Sonahas were forced to dive naked into freezing winter river water. Many incidents of harassment also occurred during the late 1990s and early 2000s, at the time of armed conflict in Nepal.

Many Sonaha men have had experiences of being held in custody at the Park headquarters, for several days on charges of contravening Park rules. They were only released from custody when monetary fines (up to 60 AUD) were paid, without trial, but at the discretion of the Park administration. There were instances where they were permitted to fish in the rivers inside the Park provided that half of their fish-catch was offered to the guards and authorities at the local army post, for example to the army post at Chisapani west in the mid-1990s and to the army post that existed in the village of Gola until the early 2000s.

The NPWC Act, 1973 prohibits several activities in national parks, including: hunting wildlife without a license; entry to the park without permits; entry at night; removal of minerals, sand and stones; construction of any form of shelter or structures; making a fire. These are offences punishable by law. The Act also permits confiscation of means of transport and other materials related to the offence and punishments such as monetary fines and imprisonment of those apprehended. The chief warden has semi-judicial authority over cases of violation of park rules and laws (Paudel, Jana, & Rai, 2011; Paudel et al., 2012).

### ***The Army and the Park posts***

A number of army posts as well as combined posts of the army and the Park administration have been set up for the protection of wildlife and forests in the Park (see Map 5.3). In the western section of the Park, across the River Karnali-Geruwa, there are currently five such posts, Chisapani Post, Laguna Machan Post, Banjariya Post, Gaida Machan Post and Helipad Hatti Machan Post. Interestingly, the Banjariya Post, between Gola and Manau, is located in the BZ outside the core zone of the Park. Likewise, another combined post established at Gola (see Maps 5.3 and 5.4) was abandoned during the time of armed conflict in the early 2000s. The physical location of the past and present army posts in the villages also symbolises significant state vigilance, surveillance and the presence of the Park authorities in the BZ beyond the Park boundary.

#### **7.3.1 The context of armed conflict (1995-2005)**

The period 1995-2005 was a time of violent conflict between Maoist rebels and government security forces in Nepal. In the face of growing violent confrontations in the country, a State of Emergency was declared in 2001 and in 2005. The country was placed under the direct rule of the former King Gyanendra and fundamental rights under the constitution were curtailed. Especially after 2000, the vigilance of the security forces in and around the villages in the delta increased because they were perceived as strongholds of Maoist rebels and their sympathisers. The Sonahas informed me of instances where Army patrols harassed mainly Tharu youth in the villages suspecting them of involvement in the Maoist insurgency. The Sonahas also recall instances where the army opened fire on them while they were fishing or taking refuge in the rivers at night. They were also forced by the army to desert their temporary shelters. However, it was Tharu people rather than the Sonahas, who mainly experienced the brutality of the government security forces in the villages. On several occasions, the Sonahas performed important humanitarian roles ferrying rebels and sometimes injured state army personnel on the rivers.

As the conflict intensified two army posts in the western section of the Park (see Map 5.3) were abandoned due to the increased threat of violent attacks from the Maoist rebels. Predictably, during this time, the Sonahas claimed that they had witnessed increased poaching and hunting of wildlife, and illegal logging in the Park by the

local as well as non-local population (presumably non-Sonahas) given the periodic withdrawal of security forces from the guard posts. One Sonaha at Rajipur stated: “Many wild boar and deer were killed. Anybody could penetrate the Park at that time” (Interview, March 25, 2011). Another Sonaha explained: “During the state of emergency although there was a fear of cross fire between the army and the rebels, we were not afraid to enter the park and fish”. Interestingly, the Sonahas described this period, when the army posts were deserted, as a time of respite since they were able to fish and move around the Geruwa River (in and around the Park) without encountering armed guards. However, it is important to note that the incidences of torture and harassment on Sonahas which had been occurring prior to the armed conflict continued when the security forces were back to the guard posts.

### **7.3.2 The cultivation and sustenance of fear among the Sonahas**

The militarisation of the Park management cultivated a fear of the army among the local population including the Sonahas. Notwithstanding the threat of being caught and arrested by the army or of the confiscation of one’s possessions whilst fishing or gold panning, it was the potential loss of life that the Sonahas feared the most. A Sonaha, in his late thirties, recalled his father’s warning: “Army could come, so be very careful while fishing. They stop us from fishing. They may even open fire if they see us here” (Interview, April 18, 2011). It was upon hearing his father’s words that he claimed to fully understand the seriousness of the Park’s rules and policing.

A Sonaha leader from Saijana who had numerous encounters with and arrests by the army while fishing commented: “There is a fear at night. The army might open fire upon us” (Interview, June 11, 2011). He also recounted the perception of a Tharu leader in the village BZ Users’ Committee who acknowledged fishing as the Sonahas’ traditional occupation and the difficulties created by the Park authorities as “...you can fish in the buffer zone. But the other side is the national park. The army can shoot at you if they find you fishing there”. Another Sonaha leader from the same village also expressed this sentiment:

It is risky to fish at night. The army can also shoot at us suspecting that we are poachers....not fisher folks at night. This is the most dangerous. The assistant

park warden once told us ‘... the army can open fire at you if they find you at night in the river’ (Interview, June 11, 2011).

The perception that the army could shoot at fishers if they were found in the Park at night was also shared by an official of the NTNC. During my own observation of Sonahas fishing in a river stretch, on the edge of the Park boundary, they sometimes entered the river secretly and quietly at night, maintaining extreme caution so as not to be spotted by the army patrols. On one occasion a Sonaha fishermen, while fishing on the BZ side of the Geruwa River and being constantly watchful, described the situation by concealing his inner fear through humour:

If we had been seen by the army patrol today, we would have to either run away before they could catch us or surrender our fishing nets and all our fish catch, may be get scolding or even few slaps on our face (Field note, March 24, 2011).

With fresh memories of previous encounters of having been intercepted or of having their gold panning equipment confiscated by the army patrols, at the time of my fieldwork some Sonaha women from Rajipur entered the Geruwa River at the Park boundary both anxiously and with vigilance. They caught fish with their bare hands and small mosquito nets. An army patrol had recently and temporarily seized gold panning equipment from women from the nearby Sonaha settlement at Sarkhol. One of the Sonaha women explained to me, “Yes there is a danger from the Army and the game scouts. That’s why we come here in a huge group. We are scared to come here alone” (Interview, March 22, 2011). Another woman responded while fishing in the river, “We would run and escape immediately if they find us here”. A third woman then added, “They will take away all our day’s fish catch, if they find us here”.

Back in the village of Rajipur after the fishing trip, one woman responded: “Our men discourage women from fishing and gold panning in the national park” (Interview, March 29, 2011). Another woman observed: “It is a shame or insult for our men; if we are caught by the army or the officials [of the Park]. The men often say that they would not come to release us if we were ever arrested”. Another woman reacted:

If all of us go together [to fish or pan for gold in the Park], then the army cannot stop us. If we are only two or three then only they can stop us and create problems. Some soldiers are notorious; they can even rape a woman.

These expressions thus articulate the Sonaha women's perceptions of the Park military that they encounter from time to time. The women also remembered the controversial Banspani incident when two women and a girl child harvesting wild vegetables were shot dead by an army patrol inside the Park in 2010, which was brought to the attention of national and international human rights bodies (NHRC, 2010).

### **7.3.3 A chase by an army patrol**

At the time of my fieldwork, two young Sonaha men from Rajipur were chased by an army patrol at the northern tip of the delta, in the BZ near the Park boundary, while they were fishing in the river Karnali. As they were heading back from Lalmati, the popular fishing ground on the north western edge of the Park (see Maps 5.3 and 5.8), they encountered an army patrol who attempted to take them by surprise. The Sonaha recalled the encounter back in the village as follows (Interview, March 23, 2012):

Soldier: [at the river bank] Hey! What are you doing here?

The Sonaha: We are fishing.

Soldier: [Approached the river] Bring the canoe at the bank.

The Sonaha: Let me pull the floating nets [noticed the army were armed, scared as well as cautious]

Soldier: Hurry up!

The Sonaha: Ok we will come there shortly [intending to escape and continuing to row the canoe forward]

Soldier: Will you come here or should I open fire at you [in a threatening tone]?

The Sonaha: Continued to row the canoe forward with the flow of the river Anxious and alert, thought twice that the army would not shoot at his back.

The army personnel ran into the river to stop the moving canoe and continued to chase them a little further. But the fishers managed to escape. “We were almost caught today” the Sonaha recalled and added, “There have been many such encounters in the river” (Interview, March 23, 2012). The army patrol had also tried to intercept another pair of Sonaha fishers who had also managed to escape. However, on the same day, the army held two Sonaha fishers from Gorangey, confiscated their belongings and sent them to the Park headquarters. They were released later with a fine of 6 AUD, a smaller amount than the usual fine of \$60. The fined Sonaha informed me later that they were given a firm warning from the authorities not to return to the river to fish. The Park administration keeps records of cases of fishing related arrests as acts of ‘other crime and arrests’ and these are often settled with minor punishments and fines (Bardia National Park Office, 2011).

#### **7.3.4 Conclusion**

A Sonaha fisher while fishing in the Geruwa River across from the national park acknowledged that “these days if the army find us they do not beat us like in the past [before 2006]. They catch us, confiscate our items and send us to the Park headquarters” (Interview, March, 2011). During the fieldwork, I sensed that the intensity of army raids, the severity of ill-treatment of Sonahas, and confrontations with the army patrols (S. Jana, 2008) had lessened to a certain extent. This trend can be contextualised in relation to the waves of social transformation and democratic political processes which followed the political changes post 2006. These changes improved the human rights situation in the country. But one prominent factor is the Karnali River outside of the Park jurisdiction held its course and the Geruwa River in and around the Park has been running low in water. Therefore, the Sonahas now mostly shelter in the river islands outside the Park, fish and pan gold in the Karnali. Although, at the time of my fieldwork, Sonahas from Saijana were occasionally fishing and panning gold in the Geruwa, for most of the Sonahas, the Geruwa and its branches were used infrequently and were a less preferred option than they had been a few years ago. It is worth noting that, if the river flow changes, the Sonahas’ problems with the Park guards are most likely to reoccur.

## **7.4 The Sonahas' encounters with community based anti-poaching groups**

...near the Janaknagar Ghat, they caught us. There were five of us resting after fishing.... around twenty five of them approached us with sticks, at three in the morning. They said they are *Chori Sikari Yuva* [anti-poaching youth cadres] and then took away our fish catch and fishing nets. Most of them were drunk. They sold most of the fish catch ....perhaps handed over what remained to the Banjariya Guard Post. They asked us to accompany them to the post. But fearing that we might even lose our canoe if we went there, we remained quiet and gave up our fish catch and nets... (Interview, March 3, 2012).

The account above by a Sonaha fisher from Daulatpur who was sheltering at the northern tip of the delta describes an encounter in 2011 between Sonahas and the non-Sonaha youth cadres from the BZ villages. To make the anti-poaching operations more effective and to control illegal activities in the Park and the peripheral villages, the Park administration has been mobilising local youth in the BZ. The village youth are organised under the banner of the Youth Mobilisation Campaign to Curb Poaching, which is regarded as a Community Based Anti-Poaching Operation. This campaign has been supported by the Park administration and its conservation partners such as the WTLCP, WWF Nepal and NTNC (WTLCP, 2012). I observed during my 2012 fieldwork that the youth cadres associated with the campaign could be identified by their identical t-shirts and half jackets, which were distributed by the Park authorities, and bore the slogan: Participation of Youth in Conservation, Zero Poaching is Our Commitment. The DNPWC and WWF Nepal logos were also visible on the shirts symbolising their close ties with the Park authorities and big conservation NGOs.

Over the past two years around 250 local youth have been mobilised in the four BZ VDCs in the delta, to the west of the Park. The campaign has recruited local unemployed youth, youth involved in the BZ user groups, community forests, and youth clubs as well as school and college students in the BZ. The youth cadres are involved in joint patrolling with the game scouts and the army from the guard posts and in supplying crucial information about poaching and other illegal activities to the

Park administration. They are also engaged in activities designed to raise awareness about the conservation of biodiversity and wildlife in the BZ villages. In recompense for their voluntary actions in controlling and curbing the poaching and illegal logging, they receive several incentives in the form of related training, skills development programs, support for income generation activities, opportunities to obtain paid engagement during tiger census and monitoring, and sometimes even jobs in the Park and on its projects. The group has also received funds from several fines as well as royalties from contractors extracting sand and boulders from the BZ.

During my interviews with the Park officials it was contended that poaching, particularly of rhinoceros, had been prevented in recent years due to the intensive patrolling and the vigilance of these village youth. The experiences of anti-poaching campaigns by local youths in the south-west section of the BNP, and in the north-south Khata Wildlife Corridor (see Map 5.4) are considered to have been highly effective. In March of each year (since 2011) a special day known as Youth Mobilisation Campaign Day against Poaching is celebrated. On a corresponding celebratory day known as International Wetland Day in 2012, I observed the youth group in Patabhar VDC actively involved in hosting a cultural show and stage drama to raise awareness of issues related to human-wildlife conflict and wildlife conservation.

#### **7.4.1 Fraught relationships between the Sonahas and the youth cadres**

The relationship between the Sonahas and anti-poaching youth cadres, especially after the incident described above, is often fraught and tense. The Sonaha leaders claimed that they were intimidated when they complained about the incident, described above, to the Park ranger. They had demanded justice for the Sonahas whose fish catch and nets were confiscated as well as action against those who had carried out the raid. The Sonaha women from Rajipur were also resentful of the youth cadres when they were interrupted while they were heading to Geruwa to fish in 2011. The youth cadres discouraged them from entering the river that borders the Park. It led to minor arguments when the women disagreed and asserted their ancestral rights while the youth cadres warned them of the Park rules.

A Sonaha fisher from Saijana, at a customary shelter at the northern tip of the delta, complained as follows:

They are very strong in our village [Saijana]. The president [of the anti-poaching youth group], who is a Tharu, immediately informs the Park Post over the phone whenever we enter the river to fish. Then later the army patrols the area where we fish at night. We also agree to control poaching....it is also our duty to protect the forests and wildlife, they are also our rights, we also need them. But in the name of this, if they [anti-poaching youth] harass the poor like us then this is not fair and good. Out here they have harassed us even more (Interview, March 3, 2012).

The Sonahas perceive the youth cadres as loyal to the Park administration and often as inimical to the Sonahas fishing in and living off the river. On the contrary the leaders of the youth anti-poaching campaign, during interviews, took pride in their voluntary role for wildlife conservation and perceived their role as serving a good cause. They perceived the ancestral occupations of Sonahas as being unsustainable and incompatible with the goal of the national park. They insisted that the Sonahas look for alternative livelihood options and expected the government to provide them with support to this end. A comment which reflects their conservationist orientations and perceptions about the Sonahas' fishing practices resembles those of the Park officials:

There is a river today but it might not be there tomorrow, it might dry up or it may hold its course and bring back more water to the Geruwa River again. The Geruwa [the Park boundary] is a protected area, where fish are also protected. It has dolphins and crocodiles, protected species...We have to conserve them. When Sonahas fish it may have negative impacts on the dolphins.... So they need fish stocks for the Gharial breeding centre in the Park or the fish stock in the river may decline (Interview, March 21, 2012).

During my fieldwork, I also noticed the active engagement of the Young Communist League (YCL), the youth wing of the Nepalese Maoists in the anti-poaching youth group as well as their close links with Park officials. One leader of the Buffe Zone Users' Committee (BZUC) also indicated to me that there was an ideological

inclination amongst some of the Park officials towards the political party of the Maoists who favoured YCL engagement in the anti-poaching campaign. Testifying to this relationship, an informant from the BZUC also expressed dissatisfaction with the inadequate consultation with leaders of BZUCs when the youth group was organised by the Park administration. A leader of the youth group at Patabhar acknowledged during an interview that they received cooperation from the YCL to mobilise village youths and that many YCL cadres were also members of their group. But he also claimed: “Our organisation is not YCL; this is just like a sister organisation of the national park, to support them, to protect the park” (Interview, March 21, 2012). The group is also registered under the BNP and registered members acquire identity cards from the Park administration, further underlining their close affiliation with the Park authorities.

## **7.5 The erosion of customary livelihoods, practices and territorial controls of the Sonahas**

As noted earlier, from the oral accounts of the Sonaha elders, the demarcation of the western boundary of the wildlife reserve (the Geruwa River) and restrictions enforced by armed guards, increasingly constrained the Sonahas’ free mobility in the delta. Consequently, their fishing and gold panning activities in the river stretch under the protected area jurisdiction also deteriorated after the mid-1970s. The elders’ expressions such as “we used to fish by stealing, after the reserve was set up” or “to pan gold by hiding away from the army” indicate how the practices of the Sonahas, with their longstanding occupancy, relationship and interactions with the delta, were ignored and dismissed by the Park regime.

Significant livelihood and cultural practices (as described in Chapter Six) were bureaucratically reduced to illegal activities in violation of the Park laws. The NPWC Act and the BNP regulations impose restrictions from the conservation point of view which jeopardise aspects of the Sonaha way of life, such as fishing at night and spending nights on the river banks and river islands in temporary shelters while fishing and gold panning. These laws were enforced without Sonaha consent or any form of consultation. Without offering them any alternatives for their river based

livelihoods, this state imposition of a protected area enclosing their ancestral riverine territory and restraining their access to the river engendered and triggered an unprecedented crisis for the Sonahas.

In order to retain their customary lifestyles, the Sonahas had no option other than to continue fishing and gold panning by evading the Park patrols and surveillance, notwithstanding the heightened risk of punishments and even to their lives (also see Chapter Nine). Their hardships were particularly severe when the water level in the Karnali River, outside the Park, receded and the Geruwa River under the Park jurisdiction held its course before 2008.

### **7.5.1 Fishing restrictions**

The Sonahas' accounts of the hardships and crises, brought about by the Park restrictions, contradict claims made by former DNPWC officials during the interview process (2012). They are also at odds with documentation from the 1990s pertaining to fishing concessions for ethnic groups under the prevailing legal arrangements (B. N. Upreti, 1994). None of the Sonaha elders could remember instances of obtaining such fishing permits from the Park authorities during this time. It was only recently (2008), nearly four decades after the establishment of the Park, that fishing licenses were granted albeit temporarily to the Sonahas, by the Park administration. Some Sonahas were critical of those permits that allowed fishing for nine months of the year but restricted fishing to the main channel of the Geruwa River and prevented access to the eastern branches of the river (towards the Park) where a healthy fish-catch is more likely. (See more on this in Chapter Nine)

However, three months after the issuing of these fishing licenses, the process stalled indefinitely. This occurred after two Sonaha youths and one minor from Saijana were arrested during a village raid by the Park authorities for their suspected involvement in rhino horn poaching. This heightened the mistrust of the Park authorities towards the Sonahas. The former BNP warden, who had granted the fishing permits during his tenure, stated:

While issuing the licences we had told the Sonahas that they had to report to the park administration about illegal activities in the area. But the permit [licence] holders ferried hunters [indicating poachers]. They contravened an agreement with the Park administration... (Interview, May 25, 2011).

The assistant park warden also argued "...the licenses were suspended when one Sonaha was found to have been involved in rhino poaching" (Interview, April 24, 2011).

The Sonahas on the other hand, acknowledge that this incident has fuelled distrust and damaged the reputation of their entire community. However they claim that such a case was exceptional. The Sonahas at Saijana informed me that the youngsters had only removed the horn from a dead rhino in the river, which had supposedly been killed by poachers. They sold the horn for a mere 235 AUD. The Sonahas expressed their distress when they described the blunt responses of the Park officials who said "you all have killed a rhino, how can you ask for a license? There has been no killing of rhino ever since the process of issuing fishing license has been stopped" (Interview, March 3, 2012). The Sonaha leaders, while they denounce the act, also argue that punishing entire Sonahas based on the involvement of two Sonahas in poaching is unjust to their community at large.

The Fishing restrictions on the Geruwa stretch of the river have had the immediate effect of increasing the concentration of fishers at the northern tip of the delta, across from Lalmati, adjacent to the Park (see Map 5.3). This location is a popular fishing ground for the Sonahas. Non-Sonahas also fish at this location. Interestingly, this very location has also been claimed by conservationists (who often do not appreciate the longstanding co-existence of the Sonahas with their environment in this stretch of river, see Chapter Eight) as an important site for sightings of rare dolphins.

### **7.5.2 The erosion of customary gold panning commons and practices**

As we have seen previously (Chapter Six), the river and river banks of the delta function as important spaces where the Sonahas' unique customary practices of gold panning have evolved and these hold significant meanings for their current practice.

The riparian areas in and around the river delta, housed numerous Kafthans, collective gold panning spaces (see subsection 6.4.3). Although gold panning is still occasionally practiced in the Geruwa River, the customary Kafthans and their associated cultural practices have gradually disappeared, primarily due to the Park restrictions. As the Sonahas control of and access to these sites were dismantled, the cultural practices, the social relations, institutions and values embedded within these practices have also withered. This demise and dismantling of the collective Kafthans and their associated cultural practices have been largely ignored and discounted by Park managers, planners and researchers. The findings presented in this thesis indicate that these processes of erosion of Sonaha Kafthans can be argued as a tragedy of conservation enclosure (Neumann, 2004b).

Given the direct loss of control over these gold panning spaces, denied access to the river stretch and loss of the associated cultural practices, the cooperative gold panning practices and values have been transformed into a competition for limited resources and viable gold panning sites on the other side of the delta (outside of the Park) in the Karnali River stretch. During my fieldwork, I was told of numerous instances of tensions over gold panning plots among Sonaha women from different villages in the delta. One Sonaha woman from Rajipur argued: “Who would allow others [to pan] at a location where one has already assessed and identified gold availability?” (Interview, March 11, 2012). It is often only after a careful assessment of the mixture of sand that one discovers the level of gold availability at a particular site. Following this process, Sonahas can only access the same site if they are panning gold *milera* (mutually) with the identifier of the site if not the discoverer pans gold individually or with their immediate family members.

#### ***Sonahas' tensions with community forest groups***

Community forests user groups have also obstructed the Sonahas' gold panning operations and constrained their access to gold panning sites on several occasions. During my fieldwork, the Sonahas informed me of their encounters with members of community forest user groups, who hindered their gold panning activities adjacent to community forests, on the suspicion that these practices would encourage soil erosion and river capture of the forested lands at the river banks. Such tensions also occurred with community forest user groups in the BZ villages in the delta. (See Table 5.2, subsection 5.4.3 about community forests)

### **7.5.3 Induced bonded labour and out-migration**

#### ***The push towards bonded labour***

Difficulties in pursuing river based livelihoods under the pressures of the Park and their situation of landlessness or at least of minimal landholding pushed many Sonahas into the Kamaiya (bonded labour) system. This exploitative and feudalistic was abolished by the government in the year 2000. The Sonahas from Rajipur stated that many Sonahas earned their living serving as bonded labourers primarily did so in prosperous Tharu households but also with those few land owning Sonahas, until that date. The accounts of the former Sonaha bonded labourers describe a difficult life where they were required to perform twin labour, both domestic jobs and agricultural work, for the landowning households. Rather than a formal wage, bonded labourers were entitled to either nominal cash amounts or a partial share in the total agricultural yield. This was an undignified experience for them since the Sonaha in the past considered their ethnic status to be higher than that of the Tharu (see subsection 6.3.1).

The former Sonaha bonded labourers, drew a strong correlation during their interviews between the crises over their river based livelihoods and their associated sufferings such as landlessness or limited landholding, and their resulting move towards the oppressive bonded labour system. They maintained that such practices were non-existent at the time of ancestors, but became common among the Sonahas when their traditional livelihoods were threatened by the Park restrictions. A former Sonaha Kamaiya explained:

We could not fish and earn gold freely. There was a fear of the army. To feed ourselves we had to work as a Kamaiya. In those times [late 1980s] the option of migrating to India [for work] did not exist (Interview, April 18, 2011).

Another former Sonaha Kamaiya at Rajipur remarked:

We could not fish and wash gold at the side of the Park. The land some possessed became insufficient as family grew. It was difficult to obtain enough food and clothing. Many had also sold their lands and spent their entire savings. Not everyone could catch fish skilfully under the threat of the army. The only option was to become a Kamaiya (Interview, April 22, 2011).

My 2012 fieldwork suggests that in the two Sonaha hamlets at Rajipur, 22 men and nine women from a total of 38 Sonaha households had a history of working as bonded labourers. After a persistent campaign led by the movement of freed Kamaiya, the government eventually made provisions to compensate the former Kamaiya. Some of the freed Sonaha Kamaiya from Rajipur received land compensation from the government while others still awaiting such compensation.

### ***Out-migration***

Several Sonaha families formerly residing across the Geruwa River adjacent to the Park, in Gola, Guptipur and Saijana shifted away from the Park to reside closer to the Karnali River. Among the factors that historically shaped the settlement patterns of the Sonahas such as less water in Geruwa (see section 6.5), the Park restrictions, the hardships it generated and harassment by Park authorities pushed Sonahas to the other side of the delta. These also later prompted labour migration of the Sonahas to neighbouring India. The Sonahas claimed that migrating to India was non-existent until the late 1980s. During this study, I found that, of the two hamlets at Rajipur, North Sonaha hamlet (consisting of 14 HHs) and South Sonaha hamlet (consisting of 24 HHs), only three and two households in the respective hamlets had never had a family member migrating to India for work.

The situation became challenging when the main river Karnali nearby had almost dried up and they had to rely heavily on the Geruwa River across the Park. One skilled fisherman informed me that he migrated to Gujarat, India and spent several years in menial jobs to escape the difficult life circumstances back in the village. He recalled:

It used to be very difficult back then. The Karnali here [close to the village] was smaller. So we had to drag our canoe up the river and then take it to the Geruwa [until two to three years ago]. We also used to take our canoe to Gola [closer to the Geruwa] in a bullock cart. We used to fish at night and then get out of the river before dawn. There was no time to sleep, we had to be cautious....There was always a danger of an army patrol (Interview, March 2, 2012).

At the time of 2011 fieldwork, migration to India was common given the limited livelihood options for the landless Sonahas at Saijana close to the Park. A Sonaha

youth from Saijana who had recently returned from Uttar Pradesh (India) after working as a daily wage labourer stated “It was not easy to sustain a living through fishing here. We faced difficulties while fishing at the national park” (Interview, March 27, 2011).

A Sonaha leader from Saijana informed me that almost half of the total Sonaha households in the village (20) contained individuals who had migrated to India for manual labour. He claimed, “The Bardia National Park is one of the major factors. They did not give us [fishing] licenses. If they had allowed us to fish and pan gold freely perhaps many would not have gone to India” (Interview, June 11, 2011). A Sonaha woman from Rajipur, with a parental home at Saijana, whose elder brother had also migrated to India, explained that, for many Sonahas, migrating to India was more a case of survival rather than a voluntary choice. The hardships that many Sonahas face despite their nominal earnings are equally compelling. The woman added:

It is not that they wish to travel and have fun, but they had no other option than to earn their living.....Since the park restricts us from entering the rivers how can we earn our living? We now have to steal to survive. Otherwise why would someone go to India...? (Interview, April 1, 2011).

#### **7.5.4 Consequences beyond local livelihoods**

Although it is difficult to ascertain the exact economic value and earnings from fishing and gold panning, it is clear from this study that these practices contribute significantly to Sonaha livelihoods (section 6.4). The magnitude of the economic consequences for the Sonahas and their livelihood security as a result of the Park’s restrictions is both evident and pertinent. Besides acknowledging the significant economic costs to the Sonahas, brought about by the Park’s restrictions I argue that the consequences have wider implications, and therefore should not be limited to the economic sphere. While the perceptions of the crisis for the river based livelihoods of the Sonahas with respect to the Park management are important in economic terms these do not provide an adequate explanation of the Sonahas’ plight.

My fieldwork experiences suggest, that, in addition to the loss of access and rights to livelihood resources, the Sonahas' access, control and mobility in their ancestral riverine territory have also been jeopardised. State conservation enclosures, coupled with the violent bureaucratic and militaristic interventions discussed so far has significantly impacted on the Sonahas' cultural and spatial practices and mobility (as they were described in Chapter Six). The river islands and riparian areas towards the Park, across the BZ where the Sonahas have historically interacted and lived semi mobile way of life (in customary Dera) have been completely enclosed by the Park in the Karnali-Geruwa River (see Figure 6.4).

'Sheltering in the river islands' in and around the river stretch under the Park jurisdiction has been seriously constrained if not all but eroded. Consequently, these shifts and the loss of control and mobility have impacted on the Sonahas' own constructions of their lived experiences, and their associated socio-cultural meanings and connections with the riverscape (see section 6.7). Hence, in addition to the material practices, the Sonahas' space and spatiality which constitute their knowledge, mental constructs, discourse, lived experiences, and their symbolic and cultural realm that are embedded in their ancestral riverine territory have essentially been legislated away from them (see more in section 10.3).

## 7.6 Summary and conclusion

In this chapter, I explored how the state protected area regime and its interventions were imposed on the lives of the Sonahas. The Sonaha experienced the national park rules and the restrictions on their activities in and around the rivers during their direct encounters with the Park guards over several decades. I also detailed the Sonahas' hardships and the crisis over their customary livelihoods resulting initially from the Park restrictions and subsequently from the harassment of Sonahas that accompanied the militarisation of the national park protection systems. In addition, guard posts have been established in the civilian spheres of the BZ further expanding state vigilance over the local population in the BZ.

The mobilisation of local youth in anti-poaching operations and related campaigns has added a grassroots approach to the hitherto state driven efforts to curb poaching and illegal activities in and around the Park with supports from conservation organisations and projects. Although this was considered by the authorities to be an effective conservation approach, its consequences for the poor and marginalised Sonahas are often obscured. The Sonahas' relationships with the youth cadres intercepting and raiding them in the delta are fraught with tension. Furthermore, these tensions provide a platform for the further extension of state coercive measures. I broadened my discussion of the challenges afflicting the Sonahas resulting from the Park related restrictions beyond their livelihood challenges. The restrictive park regime and its rules have contributed to the erosion of the Sonahas' customary and collective practices and systems of gold panning. These restrictions had fostered the rise of oppressive bonded labour systems and have triggered out-migration to neighbouring India. Moreover, I sought to challenge the dominant understanding which treats these effects as merely a case of a crisis of economic livelihoods or resource use conflicts. Instead I argue that the Sonahas' control over their ancestral territory, their ties and mobility patterns have been jeopardised and altered by the Park regime.

I maintain that state violence in the name of conservation, as argued by Peluso (1993) and Neumann (2001), has, in this case, been initiated and sustained through the imposition of militarily deployed and bureaucratically controlled conservation interventions, structures and practices. These have had wider and detrimental impacts on the Sonahas. As indicated here and as will be discussed further in the succeeding chapters, this violence marginalises and delegitimises the Sonaha way of life, practices, meanings, values, constructs, representations and lived experiences of river and riparian space, as the Sonahas encounter mainstream discourse of nature conservation, and that of national park in particular.

## **Chapter Eight: The Sonahas' encounters with the discourse and practices of the national park and the buffer zone**

### **8.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I inquire and examine how mainstream conservation discourse impacted on the lives of the Sonahas through the ideologies, policies and management actions of the national park authority and its conservation partners. The first section of the chapter shows how the BNP was discursively created and the nature of the popular discourse that contributed to this formation. In the second section I provide an analytical critique of conservationist constructions and representations of the river and riparian landscape in the delta, the riverscape. The third section focuses on the etic view of the Sonahas demonstrating their relative invisibility, and the official underrepresentation and, later misrepresentations, of the Sonahas. Following this, I consider how the Sonahas are encountering the conservation discourse and practices, and their socio-political implications for the Sonahas in the delta.

### **8.2 Discursive constructs and the creation of the Bardia National Park**

The Tarai in general and Bardia in particular has a history of game hunting by ruling elites, reclamation of forest lands and commercial exploitation of forests; permitted, if not facilitated, by the state. Yet the dominant narrative has been that of an increased migration into the Tarai and conversion of forest lands with concomitant adverse impacts on the forests and wildlife. This eventually legitimised further state control and rationalised a techno-scientific discourse of protected area in Nepal (see Chapter Four and Five). Following Escobar (1998), I examine discourse of the protected area as historically produced, thereby, the BNP, the Park, under inquiry is viewed as a discursive construct and invention involving a range of powerful players.

### **8.2.1 The construction of the BNP as a pristine wilderness**

B. N. Upreti (1994) claims that, regardless of the loss of forest and grasslands as a result of encroachment by migrants (post 1950s), the forest land between the Babai River in the east and the Geruwa River in the west (core area of the Park, see Maps 5.2 and 5.3) had remained "...pristine and provided a setting for a wildlife reserve" (p. 1). The ecologist, Bolton (1976) also claims that the area until the 1970s was "...relatively rich in wildlife and remains comparatively unspoiled" since, for many years, it had been a protected hunting reserve (p. 1).

This wilderness image is reinforced by the Park's description as providing "an excellent wilderness for visitors. Unique flora, fauna and landscape of the park..." (DNPWC/MoFSC, 2001, p. 4). The DNPWC also promotes that the Park "...offers a variety of experiences in its vast undisturbed wilderness" ([www.dnpwc.org.np](http://www.dnpwc.org.np)). Likewise, the Babai valley that had a history of human settlement until mid-1980s is promoted as "... a majestic place to visit where flagship Rhino, tiger, elephant can be observed in the wilderness site...the pristine valley is characterized by rich biodiversity" ([www.dnpwc.gov.np](http://www.dnpwc.gov.np)). Likewise, a journalist also described the Park as "a forgotten wilderness" and "Eden" (MacEacheran, 2011).

It is difficult to credit such wilderness narratives as correct in view of the fact that the history of the BNP (Chapter Five) provides evidence that the landscape of the region had been significantly altered through hunting by the ruling elites, reclamation of land and the state's commercial exploitation of timber. The original inhabitants, the Tharu and the Sonahas in the delta, as well as other, migrant settlers (from the 19th century) and later hill migrants (from the 1950s), have interacted with and altered the natural environment of the region. For instance, the area around the Geruwa River is in fact a markedly changed landscape that has been historically shaped by its inhabitants. The removal of local inhabitants at various times during the creation and expansion of the BNP, restrictions on local access to forest resources since late 1960s also challenge the constructs and narratives of the Park as pristine wilderness.

### **8.2.2 Initial conceptions and discourse about the Park**

The impetus driving the creation of a protected area in Bardia very much resonate with national scenarios driving protected area development and movement in the mid to late 20th century (see Chapter Four). This is revealed in the initial ideas and conceptions that emanated from the scientific discourse of foreign conservationists and experts from the late 1950s onwards. E. P. Gee who influenced the early initiatives for the establishment of official protected areas in Nepal, was also strongly impressed by the panoramic views and the scenic beauty of the landscape of the Karnali River, north and south of the Chisapani Gorge (see Chisapani west in Map 5.3, Photo 8.1). On the basis of his field experience there in 1963, Gee identified an opportunity to create a sanctuary or national park. In his report on the area, he recommended that areas north and south of the Gorge along the Karnali River, overlapping with the ancestral riverine territory of the Sonahas, as well as “...any other such area found suitable for the purpose, be constituted as national parks or wild life sanctuaries for the preservation of the country's low elevation fauna” (Gee, 1963, p. 74).



**Photo 8.1 View of Chisapani Gorge, Karnali River from the Chisapani Bridge, North-west of the BNP, upstream of the delta. Courtesy: Sangita Thapa**

Despite the history of protecting wildlife habitats in Tarai by ruling elites in Nepal, it was E.P. Gee who first proposed the establishment of a modern wildlife sanctuary in this region of Bardia, in what is now the western section of the Park. Other influential people such as Nepalese forest bureaucrats and experts including the Chief Forest Conserver, R.G. Willan operating under UN Technical Aid Assistance scheme had visited the area in the early 1960s. Like Gee, Willan also proposed the government a wildlife sanctuary around the Geruwa River in the area to south of the Chisapani Gorge (Gee, 1963).

Later in the 1960s, the powerful discourse of *Sikar Arakchya* (Hunting Reserve) was complemented by arguments for the protection of valuable wildlife through the setting aside of exclusive areas for their habitat under the then dominant narrative of a Tarai ecological crisis. This discourse of protection unfolded with the support and interests of then powerful monarchy served to legitimise and consolidate the state's appropriation and control over large areas of wildlife rich forest in Bardia with the focus mainly on valuable mega fauna (also see Chapter Four & Five on historical contexts).

### **8.2.3 Tiger discourse**

The first official proposal for the establishment of a wildlife reserve with restrictions on hunting and exploitation of resources in Bardia was made by an FAO wildlife advisor, in 1971 (Bolton, 1976). The FAO and its wildlife advisors were also influential in shaping the discourse and practice of early protected areas across Nepal (see section 4.5). The discourse of the tiger is implicit in a description of the wildlife reserve proposed by a FAO advisor, (Blower, 1973, p. 280):

...on the east bank of the Karnali River, is mostly *Sal* forest which has been effectively protected for many years as a royal hunting reserve. Wildlife includes the largest remaining population of tiger in Nepal.

The iconic discourse of the tiger and its influence on conservation efforts in Bardia should also be seen in the light of a national and international thrust for tiger conservation in Nepal from 1970s wards (see subsection 4.5.4). The discourse of tiger protection through the establishment of wildlife reserve in Bardia was amplified by a nexus of powerful institutions and actors such as the Nepalese royal family, the

forest bureaucracy, and foreign wildlife advisors. In late 1973, former king (then Prince) Gyanendra had directed the assistant NPWC Officer, to investigate and report on the status of the Bardia reserve and to submit a project proposal on the tiger conservation to the WWF's Operation Tiger (Bolton, 1976). Bolton (1976), who had conducted preliminary wildlife surveys, noted that the rationale for creating a wildlife reserve in Bardia at that time was to conserve a representative example of the flora and fauna of the western Tarai, in particular to protect the tiger together with its habitat and prey.

Ecologist Dinerstein was the first person to carry out an ecological survey on wild ungulates and their habitat in what is now part of the BNP. Dinerstein (1979) noted that the wildlife reserve was created mainly for the protection of one of the largest remaining populations of tiger. This is evident in a letter issued to him by the government in 1975 when he was a student biologist associated with the US Peace Corps which states "You are to census the tiger population in Bardia and to conduct other wildlife inventories as appropriate" (Dinerstein, 2005, p. 15). Likewise, the creation of the reserve has also been associated with WWF's Operation Tiger (Dinerstein, 1980; Mishra et al., 1987). While concerns for the rhinoceros provided a strong rationale for the establishment of the first protected area in the country, discourse around the endangered tiger crucially shaped the early stages of protected area creation in Bardia.

#### **8.2.4 Summary**

This genesis of the discursive creation of the BNP very much resonates with the national scenario (see Figure 4.1, Chapter Four). The discourse of protected area in Bardia, initially in the form of a modern sanctuary with respect to the riverscape of the Karnali River or a wildlife reserve, developed out of the conceptions and propositions of foreign technical experts. This was complemented by the national thrust towards protected area creations and mainstream conservation discourse in the 1970s. The powerful narratives of Tarai ecological crisis as well as the crisis of wildlife, particularly the endangered tiger, were central to the inception of the Park. This was later supplemented by constructs of a pristine wilderness. Crucially, the developing discourse of the Park involved a landscape devoid of the presence of the indigenous Sonahas and the Tharus interacting with the land for many generations.

## **8.3 Discursive constructs and representations of the Karnali-Geruwa riverscape**

### **8.3.1 Naturalists, conservationists and ecologists**

In 1963, Gee (1963) based on his field experience at the Chisapani Gorge, described his impression of the Karnali River thus “...the mighty Karnali river... teeming with mahseer (*Barbus tor*)...and other valuable fish” (p. 72). Recounting this field experience, Gee heighted the value of the Karnali riverscape by proposing the creation of a protected area that would cover “...at least a portion of the hilly area of this river together with a portion of the lower reaches of the river and adjacent forests [now the western section of the BNP]” (p. 72). Gee claimed that the river area and or of the fish and other riverine wildlife were unprotected. Willan, had also conducted a field visit at the River Geruwa, a few miles south of the Gorge. Gee’s reporting to the government on the feasibility of a wildlife sanctuary across the Geruwa River (western section of the Park, see Maps 5.3 and 5.7), an area juxtaposing the Sonaha ancestral territory, was influenced by his impression of it as a natural sanctuary.

Gee (1963), in his report, referred to the river stretch south of the Gorge (i.e., Geruwa) noting its suitability “... as a sanctuary or natural park, because of the added attraction of *mahseer* fishing and beautiful river scenery.....” (p. 74). Clearly this conception of a protected area here can be attributed to Gee’s exposure to the views and scenic beauty of the river and the surrounding landscape (see Photo 8.1) as well as the attraction of first-class fishing in the area. The area was in fact historically used for the fishing of golden Mahseer fish by the former ruling political elites in Nepal (Ranas) and India (Nawabs) (Shrestha, 1995).

A Nepali zoologist who pioneered the study of fresh water dolphins in the Karnali and Geruwa rivers as early as 1979 recommended the establishment of a Fresh Water National Park, a River Park, or a Dolphinarium in the Karnali to provide protection for the dolphins and their habitat (Shrestha, 1995). Shrestha (1995) describes the “Karnali wilderness” and “the intrinsic beauty of the Karnali waterfront, vistas of mountains, array of swamps and wetlands and verdant riverside all teeming with rich and varied river wildlife” and its natural wonders as a “water and wonderland of the Karnali”, in fact “a gem in nature’s necklace” (pp. 72, 73). Shrestha notes that the:

Karnali watershed is a place of diversity.....unique, a dreamlike place, an ocean of grass, azure blue deep water, light shallow feeder streams, endless expanse of sandbank riverine forest flecked everywhere with figures of wild animals. This is a place truly remote from the 20th century (p. 76).

Dinerstein (1979), in the mid-1970s, also described the ecological significance of the south western corner of the wildlife reserve, adjacent to the Geruwa River (see Map 5.2) of containing large numbers of wild ungulates and a wide diversity of habitat types in a small area. Dinerstein (1979) too contributed to the provision of a scientific basis for a wildlife reserve encompassing the river and the river flood plain, by reinforcing its wilderness image:

It's bounded to the west by the Karnali River, the wildest river flowing out of the Himalayas, which is filled with crocodiles and Gangetic dolphins, where wild tigers and their prey populate floodplain islands covered with forest (p. 16).

#### ***Further studies by conservation biologists and ecologists***

Former wildlife bureaucrat, B. N. Upreti (1994) also discusses the importance of the flood plains, riverine forests and grasslands in and around the River Geruwa, for wildlife such as rhinoceros, tiger and hog deer. Several ecological and wildlife studies in the Park have also underlined the importance of the Karnali Flood Plain which constitutes the western section of the Park (see Maps 5.4, 5.7 and 5.8 ), as a critical habitat of wildlife such as rhinos (Jnawali, 1995; K. Thapa, Williams, Khaling, & Bajimaya, 2009) and tigers (Grey, 2009; StØen, 1994). It is claimed that the floodplain was supporting a higher density of tigers than anywhere else in the Park (StØen, 1994).

More recent studies further support claims that the south-western part of the Park (including areas of the flood plain) supports one of the densest tiger populations ever recorded (Wegge, Odden, Pokharel, & Storaas, 2009). Studsrød and Wegge (1995) also maintain that the low-lying part of the Park along the eastern shores of the Geruwa River has the largest biomass of ungulates (including endangered Swamp Deer) per km<sup>2</sup> anywhere in Asia. A similar finding was also made nearly twenty years earlier by Dinerstein (1979). Significantly there were no mention of the Sonahas along the River Geruwa and Karnali in any of these scientific reports and studies.

### ***Constructs of the Park Warden and conservation practitioners***

A former official of the DNPWC and the BNP stated, “The Karnali flood plain (grasslands) is maintained by the river, which also maintains the water table. There is a good amount of grass there, so wildlife is rich” (S. R. Bhatta, Interview, April 24, 2012). The chief warden of the Park also affirmed the significance of the flood plain ecology:

The Karnali flood plain is a major habitat for mega herbivorous and carnivorous animals. Rhino, elephant dwell there, graze there, and they require sufficient food. They cannot survive other than in a floodplain habitat. The flood plain grasses are thus important (T. R. Adhikari, Interview, March 19, 2011).

The ecological significance of the flood plain is also heightened by its perceived role in the connectivity between protected areas and wildlife corridors outside the Park. The warden informed me that the area between Lalmati (in the Park, near the River Geruwa and across the tip of the delta) and the Chattiwan community forest to the River Karnali and beyond (see Map 5.8) is being considered for designation as a wildlife corridor. A conservationist working with NTNC in the Park also highlighted the richness of the floodplain in wildlife and aquatic biodiversity as “The endangered species like tiger, elephant, gharial crocodile, dolphin and rhinoceros are commonly sighted in the flood plain. This is also famous for tiger sightings, rafting and winter birds” (R. Kadhariya, Interview, September 23, 2012).

Kadhariya described the grasses and riverine forests as acting as a natural barrier against bank erosion and flooding in the villages (Interview, September 23, 2012). He also pointed out the livelihood significance of the flood plains for local people such as the harvesting of roofing materials, and irrigation of agricultural land. However, he emphasised the need to maintain the “wilderness of the river” across the Park by setting aside, in his words the “virgin Geruwa River” for the sake of aquatic diversity and the preservation of fish despite the historical interaction of the Sonahas and the Tharu with the river. Kadhaiya rationalised the regulation of fishing to promote controlled and sustainable fishing practices in the River (mainly for the indigenous fishing population) and to maintain a healthy fish stock.

### **8.3.2 The BNP Management Plans**

Management plans for the Park also reinforce a construction of the riverscape without the Sonahas' presence and interactions. The very first management plan prepared by Bolton, in the 1970s describes the conservation value of the Karnali River because it contains a wealth of aquatic species and fauna, such as crocodiles and dolphins, all of which were considered important for national conservation goals. The plan describes why the western bank of the Geruwa River (now in the BZ) and its forested islands were included in the wildlife reserve then. It also portrays the River as one of the finest Mahsheel waters for sport fishing and acknowledges the existence of fishing practices in all the rivers. Breeding of gharial in the rivers bordering the reserve was one of the objectives of the plan. The river island formed by Khauraha river, a channel of River Geruwa, at the south-western tip of the Park today was deemed rich and fragile (see Khoraha Island, in Map 5.2). As a wealth of 'ecological edges' it was recommended as a sanctuary zone with minimum disturbance (Bolton, 1976).

The Park management plan 2001-2005 portrays the Karnali flood plain area as a site of rhino release as well as prime habitat for the endangered tiger and elephants of the Park. In 1986, 13 rhinoceros were translocated from Chitwan to the flood plain area. The plan mentioned that 32 rhinoceros were recorded in the Geruwa flood plain at that time (DNPWC/MoFSC, 2001).

The latest management plan for the Park and its BZ (2007-2011) is an outcome of a collaborative effort between the officials of DNPWC, the BNP administration and WWF Nepal. It also describes the flood plain covering an area of 114 km<sup>2</sup> as a precious part of the Park, which links it with a wildlife sanctuary to the south, in India. The floodplain habitat mainly consists of *Sal* forest (66%), while the rest is covered by riverine forests and grasslands. Emphasising the importance of the south-western 100 km<sup>2</sup> of the floodplain as a "biodiversity hot-spot" it recommended that it be designated as an area demanding special attention by the Park management. The riparian habitats on the eastern bank of the Geruwa are described as supporting viable populations of rhinoceros, tigers and others, and the river as housing several aquatic mega fauna, river birds and migratory birds (DNPWC/MoFSC, 2007).

### ***Tourism discourse in the plans***

Both the plans discussed above ascribe a huge touristic significance to the flood plain area in and around the delta. Promotion of tourism has been prioritised in a comprehensive tourism plan (2001-2006) for the Park and its BZ. The management plan (2001-2005) proposes several zones for effective management of the Park and categorised these as a strict core zone, a facility zone and the tourism zone which, complement the conservation objective. The tourism zone includes Manau Ghat (a ferry point), West Chisapani in the Karnali flood plain area, and the BZ along the southern border of the Park. It rationalises that this tourism zone can co-exist with the facility zone and the Park BZ, but does not give due consideration to the interactions and resource uses of the Sonahas in the riverscape.

The latest management plan also prioritises tourism. Like the previous plan, the current Plan demarcates various different zones for Park management. It recommends that the Karnali flood plains, east of the river be designated as a core zone of the Park, with regulated tourism and recreational activities. The portion of the flood plain area west of the river in the delta (the buffer zone) is proposed for village eco-tourism given the richness of the riverine and aquatic ecosystem, and the presence of settlements of Tharu and Sonaha peoples. These tourism zones along the Geruwa River overlap with the Sonaha ancestral territory are thus strongly constructed as sites with eco-tourism potential.

### **8.3.3 Conservation landscapes as constructs**

The lower Karnali river delta, and the flood plain constitute not only the western section of the BNP and the BZ, but they have also been included in larger conservation landscapes such the Western Terai Landscape Complex of the TAL. Therefore the delta's surrounding landscapes are considered to be highly important from the standpoint of biodiversity conservation, especially or maintaining wildlife corridors and connectivity between protected areas within and beyond the country (see subsections 5.3.3 and 5.4.3).

During my 2012 fieldwork, WWF Nepal had been working towards the identification of the Karnali River and Forest Corridor, west of the delta (see Maps 5.7 and 5.8). Surveys were being undertaken in the area, mainly in the forests and settlements west

of the River Karnali, in the Kailai district. A WWF employee informed me that their idea is to engage the local communities and community forest user groups in the the river corridor outside of the BZ in conservation and development activities. This has also been an important component of mega projects such as TAL as well as recently launched (2011) Hariyo Ban, a USAID funded mega project that works on biodiversity conservation and adaptation to climate change.

These discourses and constructs of conservation landscapes have, since 2000, underlined the ecological and conservation significance of the delta. Hence increased attention has been given to the Karnali River, its surrounding areas and to the forested areas on the western side of the delta (adjacent to the BZ). This extends further into the Sonahas' customary territory. Prior to this, only the riverscape in the delta proper had received attention for biodiversity conservation (see Maps 5.7 and 5.8).

#### **8.3.4 Summary**

This section outlined the ways in which the Karnali-Geruwa riverscape in and around the delta have been perceived, constructed and represented by scientific and epistemic communities such as conservation experts, specialists, technocrats, together with the park bureaucracy, planners and conservation projects. These constructs of the riverscape from conservation point of views embodies a powerful conservation discourse. The riverscape has been associated with biodiversity, and valorised for its conservation and ecological value. For instance, the Karnali flood plain that overlaps with the Sonaha ancestral riverine territory has been constructed as a biodiversity hot spot and increasingly associated with prospects for tourism in this region. These discourses have generated an understanding, meanings and values of the riverscape, which are at odds with those of the Sonahas (see section 6.7). These discursive constructs and representations of the riverscape by conservationists have consequences for the Sonahas. It constructs an understanding of the riverscape, within the dominant discourse of conservation, which excludes Sonahas, their environmental conceptions and their way of life in their riverine territory (see section 6.7). And, since the dominant discourse as well as the Park planning mechanisms consistently ignore the existence of the Sonahas these reinforce their non-presence and invisibility within the official conceptions of the riverscape conservation.

## **8.4 The Sonahas' invisibility and misrepresentation**

### **8.4.1 The invisibility of the Sonahas and the regulation of fishing practices**

After his field experience at the Chisapani Gorge in the early 1960s, Gee (1963) was the first to suggest the regulation of fishing practices on the Karnali River, "...the netting of fish by professional fishermen in the lower reaches of the rivers [towards the delta] needs to be regulated" (p. 74). Since there was no control over fishing in the river at that time, he indicated the need to regulate sport fishing upstream in order to achieve sustained fish yield and fish protection during the spawning season. However, despite these comments on fishing practices, Gee provided no further details about the identity of the professional fishermen that he claimed to be operating downstream.

Interestingly, Dinerstein (2005) describes an encounter with an elderly fisherman near the Chisapani (west) guard post of the Park in the mid-1970s. In his account of this experience, he states that the guards from the post bought fish from local fishermen who, at that time still resided inside the reserve, but he does not reveal who they were. Indeed, in the course of an ungulate survey in the Karnali flood plain and the grasslands adjacent to Geruwa River in the 1970s, he did not make any reference to the indigenous fisher population.

Although Bolton's (1976) very first management plan for the Park makes no specific reference to the Sonahas, it does note that the fishing practices in the rivers in and around the wildlife reserve in the 1970s were mainly for household consumption and small scale sale. It also stresses the need to control fishing and ban commercial fishing everywhere in the wildlife reserve. However, acknowledging the potential hardships that such a provision would bring to the locals it suggests that they should be allowed to continue fishing for subsistence on the rivers bordering the reserve.

B. N. Upreti (1994) while discussing scenarios for the Park in the early 1990s, mentions fishing as "traditional practices of local inhabitants" and claims that fish were an important component of their diet for the Tharu people (p. 37). Two types of fishing are discussed: first, a traditional a fishing method that was carried out by local fishermen, second, a commercial fishing operations under private contracts

granted by the district government. He notes that the private contract fishing served to restrict traditional fishing by the local people.

B. N. Upreti (1994) states, “To maintain the traditional lifestyle of ethnic groups, permission to fish in the rivers within the Park has been granted by the law” (p. 37) on payment of an annual license fee of NRs 25 per person. The Park regulation states, “local Adivasi [indigenous peoples] who earn their livelihood by the traditional way of fishing can fish by paying an annual fee of rupees fifty” (“Bardia Rastira Nikunja Niyamawali, 2053,” 1996). Such legal provisions have had an important bearing upon the Sonaha struggle for fishing rights, as will be discussed in Chapter Nine. Implicitly, according to this provision, seasonal permits could be granted to local fishermen (for controlled fishing) without unduly jeopardising fish population. Although B. N. Upreti (1995) calls attention to the local peoples’ traditional use of the park resources which included fishing, neither the Sonahas’ specific presence nor the details showing how the permits were granted to fishing communities locally are provided.

In a monograph on river dolphins, Shrestha (1995) draws attention to the Tharu people who are referred as “son of Jungle-a part of Karnali ecosystem” and as expert fishermen engaged in fishing as a supplementary livelihood (p. 18). The Sonahas’ primary fish based livelihoods and occupations are however largely undocumented by this. Shrestha (1995) takes note of several ethnic groups:

Siwalik foothills [northern hills] are inhabited by Badis, Rajis or Sunaha [*sic*] (fishermen and cultivators) and Majhi (fishermen). These tribals are migratory by nature they reach different areas for employment. The Rajis’ principal occupation is gold extraction from sand (p. 18).

This is the first published document that mentions the existence of the Sonaha albeit briefly but wrongly refers the Sonaha people as “Sunaha”<sup>16</sup> (Shrestha, 1995). A similar error can also be found in the national biodiversity strategy (MoFSC/GoN,

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<sup>16</sup> There is an ethnic group called “Sunuwar” and a so called lower caste group called “Sunar” in Nepal. Hence the use of the correct terminology “Sonaha” is a sensitive issue.

2002). The reference by Shrestha (1995) to “Sunaha” people, as being similar to Raji people is equally flawed. It also makes an erroneous reference to gold panning in Karnali River as a main occupation of Raji instead of the Sonahas. However, in a picture showing a woman panning gold on a river bank, Shrestha notes “Sunaha a tribal race, living near Karnali riverside searching desperately for fisherman gold” (pp. 18-19). Based on his findings about the declining fresh water dolphins, protection of the prime riverine habitats of dolphins and other river species, through fishing laws and strict legal protection is advocated.

Acknowledgement of the Sonahas as a distinct ethnic group along with their customary occupations did not occur until the mid-2000s. Those researchers who carried out ecological studies in the late 20th century in and around the delta share a general misconception that the Tharus were the only original inhabitants of the Bardia region and ignored the presence of the Sonahas (Dinerstein, 1979; Shrestha, 1995). The Sonahas are also invisible in the 2001-2005 management plan of the Park which suggests the park authority’s failure to recognise the Sonaha as integral to the riverscape.

The Park management plan (2007-2011) mentions the Sonahas for the first time, nearly four decades after the establishment of the protected area. It notes both the Tharu and Sonahas as “Special Target Groups” for the purpose of livelihood improvement and recommends them as “Special Resource Groups” to be mobilised for wildlife and aquatic fauna conservation. With respect to the Park BZ management, it states that “Only fishing communities (ethnic groups) should be allowed to get fishing license” (DNPWC/MoFSC, 2007, p. 46). It emphasises that strict controls be placed on commercial fishing operations using destructive practices such as poison, dynamite and electric currents. The Plan recognises the traditional practices and skills of fishing, and acknowledges that related indigenous technologies among local people that are rapidly changing. It accords special privileges to ethnic groups traditionally engaged in fishing through provisions of fishing concessions.

#### **8.4.2 The crisis over the river dolphins and official representations of the local fishing population**

The late 1970s to early 1980s study by Shrestha (1995) on river dolphins in the delta revealed their endangered status. Shrestha reports that fishing practices by the local population, such as the use of drift nets, gill nets, poisoning the river water, and the use of explosives were having harmful impacts on aquatic life including dolphins and crocodiles, and the Mahseer were overfished. Likewise, shooting of dolphins, otters and water birds, over fishing and even stealing of crocodile and turtle eggs had altered the aquatic ecosystem. These practices were eventually controlled by fencing the southern boundary of the BNP in 1976. As mentioned earlier, Shrestha proposes the concept of a “River Park” to provide better protection of aquatic species including the endangered dolphins.

Likewise, Smith’s (1993) study on river dolphins in the Geruwa River also identifies several threats to the dolphins and their habitats and proposes conservation measures. Smith likewise notes a declining fish stock which is attributed to several causes including dam construction in India, the introduction of modern gill nets and overfishing. Three primary habitats for dolphins, near the ferry points at Kothiya Ghat, Manau Ghat and Ghosti Ghat in the Geruwa River, as highlighted by Smith, fall within the ancestral territory of the Sonahas (see Map 5.8). Smith’s study also identifies increased fishing by the Tharu and other non Sonahas in and around the delta.

A relatively recent study by WWF Nepal (2006), also notes an alarming decline in the dolphin population in the Karnali River and, among other things highlights intensive fishing. It recommended urgent measures to minimise pressure in the river by regulating fishing practices, notably with respect to timing and the use of certain fishing gear, particularly in the dolphin habitats. This study supports the findings of previous ones that gill nets are destructive to dolphins and other fish species since they trap fish of all sizes and therefore threaten breeding. Although this study recognises the Tharu and Sonaha as indigenous communities, it however only portrays the Tharu as a group who have traditionally fished in the Karnali River, and thus underrepresents the Sonahas’ customary fishing practices. Given this state of crisis of dolphins, WWF Nepal has had supported grassroot campaigns for the

conservation of dolphins and other aquatic species in the Karnali and Geruwa rivers (e.g. see Photo 8.2).



**Photo 8.2 A conservation awareness billboard of ‘Save the Dolphin Campaign’ in the village of Dhodhari, the Khata (Wildlife) Corridor across River Geruwa. Credit: Author**

Note: The billboard states, “Fish for the future: Dolfin waters comes alive if it is kept healthy; lets conserve fish, do away with poisoning; nets used carelessly harm the Karnali river; our lives are made from the tourists brought in area by protecting the aquatic species”. The local campaign led by the network of local community forests is supported by WWF Nepal.

Similarly, Malla’s (2007) report however refers to both the Tharu and the Sonaha as ethnic communities traditionally associated with fishing livelihoods, and states that they are both poor and highly dependent on the river for their livelihoods. This report also reinforces the fact that their fishing styles, particularly their use of destructive nets and poisoning, are harmful for the fish stocks and therefore for the dolphins. Both these ethnic groups have unique relationships to and dependence on the river. While the majority of landless Sonahas derive a significant proportion of their livelihoods from fishing in the rivers, attributing the same level of dependence on fishing for livelihoods for land owning Tharu peasants would be misleading.

Likewise, uncritical blame on these two groups for destructive practices of fishing is not accurate. Sonaha people do not engage in the destructive mass fishing practices that are universally condemned. The Sonahas during my fieldwork did not consider

the use of gill net as destructive or any way harming dolphins. In fact, the Sonaha fishermen often claimed that presence of dolphin in the river complements their fishing practice and thus they have always abstained from hunting dolphin. They often perceived their impact on declining fishing stock in the rivers as minimal and insignificant given the larger ecological crisis, and viewed themselves at par with dolphins as victims facing the costs of threatened aquatic ecosystem. (See Chapter Nine on the contestations over traditional versus modern fishing practices of the Sonahas)

In the context of an otter conservation project, Joshi (2009) also groups the Tharu and the Sonaha together, ignoring the distinctions between them and their historical dependence on the aquatic ecosystem for subsistence. In this case, the Sonaha practice of gold panning is characterised as being destructive for otters. Joshi identifies very few populations of otters on the western banks of the Geruwa River, attributing this area being "...disturbed by the traditionally gold mining *sonaha* community as well as fishermen community restricting the otter movements" (p. 13, emphasis in original). Joshi blames "...Traditional method of Gold mining [sic] which involves the movement of temporary shelters of *sonaha* communities along the western banks of Geruwa has almost destroyed the otter habitats on that side..." (p. 16, emphasis in original). The crisis of river dolphins and other aquatic species, and the representations of the Sonahas and their practices by these aforementioned studies and reports contributed to the perception of the Sonahas as antithetical to the conservation.

#### **8.4.3 Scientific mapping and the protected area**

Sophisticated scientific maps of the Park and the BZ are readily available. These maps are produced by the government, conservation organisations, ecologists and experts/specialists. They variously represent the landscape and the delta topographically and provide technical details of the protected area, and the BZ, including its physical boundaries, vegetation and land-uses. The table below provides an evaluation of the contents of some of the common maps that have been used to represent the BNP and BZ from the 1970s to the present. The Sonaha riverine territory is included therein but it is not marked in the areas represented by these maps.

**Table 8.1 Data from official maps of the BNP and Buffer Zone.**

Map	Description	Remark
<b>Bolton (1976)</b>	<p>The vegetation map shows various forest types, as well as one settlement inside the wildlife reserve and others in the periphery. Seasonal flood plain grasslands are marked. The flood plain is identified as constituting the Geruwa, river islands and their vegetation, riverine forests, seasonal grasslands. The delta is shown as largely agricultural terrain.</p> <p>The physical feature map shows the reserve boundary, the rivers (Karnali and Geruwa) and streams, motor tracks, present and proposed guard posts, as well as a series of settlements peripheral to the reserve.</p>	The very first management plan.
<b>Dinerstein (1979a)</b>	The reserve boundary, major streams, grassland and savannah and the study area, a few settlements inside and peripheral to the wildlife reserve. The Geruwa River and river islands are clearly marked.	The first topographical map, see Map 5.2.
<b>B.N. Upreti (1994)</b>	The map shows the Park boundary, guard posts, rivers (including Karnali), roads, and various places inside the Park. It indicates the BZ to the south, and south-west of the Park. The western boundary of the Park is clearly marked as the eastern channel of the Karnali river (Geruwa). The villages of Gola and Rajapur are marked in the delta.	The first comprehensive document of BNP after the first management plan.
<b>Management Plan 2001-2005</b>	Distribution of major wildlife and habitat types of the Park (figures); different proposed management zones (core, facility, tourism).	DNPWC/MoFSC, 2001
<b>DNPWC/PCP 2006</b>	It shows the Park and its BZ, guard posts; settlements in the BZ, roads and highways. The land use types include BZ villages, forests, grasslands, shrub land, water bodies, sand and gravel areas in the Park. Data on the total population, households and villages in the BZ, the area and date of creation of the Park and the BZ.	Topographic Map by Department of Survey, Government of Nepal

<b>BNP Management Plan 2007-2011</b>	Area of the Park and BZ, guard posts (existing and abandoned), BNP headquarters, rivers, motor roads and highways, location of settlements in the BZ.	See Map 5.3
<b>WWF Nepal Program, 2005</b>	BZ Land Cover Map shows several forest types, water bodies, grassland, and degraded forest; the Park boundary and various BZ VDCs.	DNPWC/MoFSC, 2007
<b>WTLCP</b>	The map shows the area of forested and degraded forests, agricultural lands) of the WTLCP and adjoining protected areas in India. The Karnali river delta is shown as agricultural land with few patches of degraded forest, sand and gravels. The Karnali and Geruwa rivers are partially visible but mostly blurred with overlapping of the BZ and political/administrative boundaries.	UNDP Nepal (2010)

These maps show the boundaries of the Park and its BZ. The Geruwa River and the river islands therein are also visible in most of the maps marking the western boundary of the Park. This actually overlaps with the ancestral riverine territory of the Sonahas although this is invisible in these maps. Although some of these maps show human settlements, there are no traces of the Sonahas. Rather, the river and river islands are represented as empty riverine landscape except for the vegetation. These give a sense of an unoccupied or uninhabited riverscape without any visible acknowledgement of the Sonaha customary shelters. These maps therefore reinforce the view of the delta as characterised by sedentary agrarian life, as portrayed by agricultural land and permanent villages with ethnically homogenous populations.

Furthermore, there is a clear territorial separation of the Park and the BZ by the Geruwa River in the delta. The artificial boundaries crafted out of the natural and physical features, and the segregation of a portion of the delta and the riverscape from the core of the Park also misrepresent and ignore the Sonahas' existence, their customary way of life, and their conception of their riverine territory (see Chapter Six). These maps are powerful representations of particular meanings of the landscape as well as reflections of mainstream conservation discourse.

#### **8.4.4 Summary**

The Sonahas were invisible in the mainstream conservation discourse and official documents for nearly four decades following the first establishment of the protected area that overlays a significant portion of their riverine territory. This marginalisation of the Sonahas, by the failure of researchers and Park authorities to appreciate their existence and customary practices rendered the Sonahas socially, politically and economically invisible. The conservation need to regulate fishing practices in and around the Karnali River delta had been advocated and evidenced as early as 1960s. But the Sonahas were largely under represented with reference to fishing population and their practices in the delta, and primary attention was paid to the Tharu people. In spite of their long history and presence in the delta, the Sonaha customary occupations were unrecognised for a long time. The crisis of endangered dolphins and other aquatic fauna and their conservation has been privileged over the historical presence, interactions and river based livelihoods of the Sonahas.

It is only since 2000 that the presence and practices of the Sonahas have begun to receive some attention. Even so, the scientific maps of the Park continue to obscure Sonaha reality and customary practices. Studies and projects concerning river dolphins and other species ignore and occasionally misrepresent the Sonaha realities. Rather their practices and their livelihoods seem often to have been pitted against the conservation of aquatic fauna. These studies have found small scale fishing practices to be a problem and blamed a generalised fishing population for destructive fishing practices and overfishing. They have therefore not appreciated the specificities of Sonaha history, world views or the wider forces and circumstances that have shaped their changing fishing practices nor do they deal with livelihood options for the Sonahas. Non-representation, simplistic representation or misrepresentations of Sonaha reality and customary occupation, coupled with a powerful discourse of aquatic fauna conservation have had severe repercussions for the Sonahas.

## **8.5 Interrogating the dominant conservation discourse which implicate the Sonahas**

### **8.5.1 The discursive network of the Park and Buffer Zone**

Escobar (1998) postulates the idea of a biodiversity production network constituting actors and institutions, with diverging perspectives and stakes, in which the powerful actors occupy dominant sites and through which discourse circulates and truths are transformed. I maintain that the web of mainstream conservation discourse which the Sonahas have been encountering is co-constitutive of several discourses of the national park, the buffer zone, and conservation of wildlife, biodiversity and landscape. Through a discursive network and discourse coalitions (Hajer, 1995), hence, a constellation of diverse actors and institutions at multiple scales from global and national to the local, these interconnected discourses flow, circulate, produce and reproduce, entrench and sustain. Figure 8.1 below demonstrates how the mainstream discourse of conservation travels to and permeates the villages of the BZ, and hence, eventually percolates down to the grassroots where the Sonahas live.

### **8.5.2 Discourse of the national park and conservation in the western Buffer Zone**

Chapter Seven indicated Sonahas' initial exposure to the national park discourse through their encounters with the Park authorities and their strict enforcement of the Park rules. The national thrust towards participatory conservation through management of BZs since the 1990s expanded its discourse in the BNP BZ from the time of its declaration in 1997. The impetus towards the popularisation and institutionalisation of this discourse in the Park BZ can be attributed to the efforts of several ICDPs in collaboration with the Park administration (see Table 5.1, subsection 5.3.3).

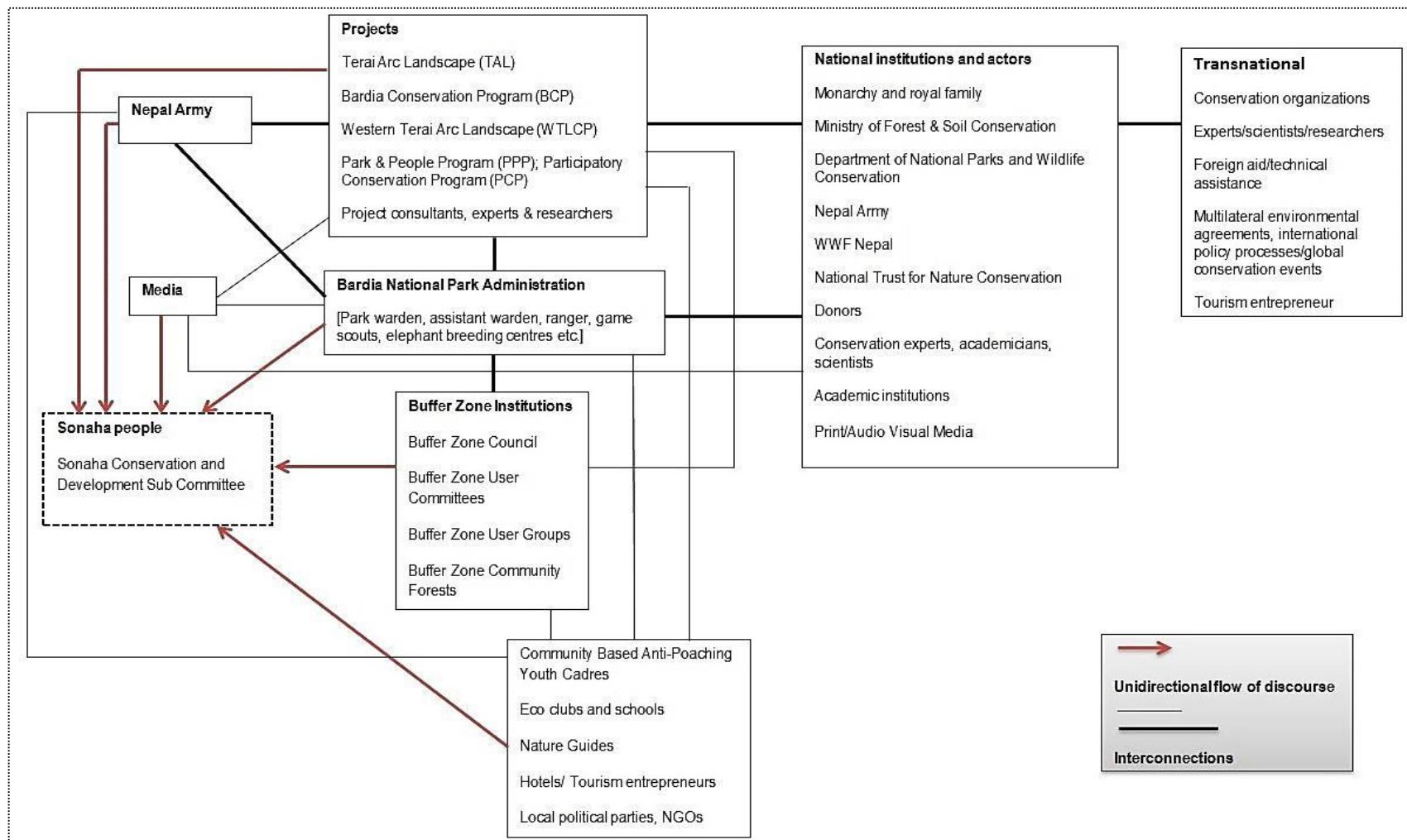


Figure 8.1 Discursive network and flow of mainstream discourse percolating to the Sonahas.

A former DNPWC official who was actively involved with the Bardia Integrated Conservation Project (BICP) and implementation of BZ in Bardia recalled the early days of BZ implementation. A team of the Park officials and project staff used to travel to the villages around the Park and informed in village meetings that “buffer zone has come and it has such and such newer provisions” (S. R. Bhatta, Interview, April 24, 2012). They distributed copies of the draft regulations and apprised villagers of its intent and discussed villagers’ queries. Later they started the process of forming village groups and committees to assist in conservation initiatives. Bhatta also recollects that the villagers initially reacted with suspicion and scepticism, particularly if their villages were being subsumed by the Park’s extension. Locals were worried about their use and access to the natural resources but also curious about the potential development incentives to the villages. Bhatta told me, “We had to convince that the principle behind this [BZ] is conservation through local people’s participation.....” and claimed that villagers’ perceptions were also shaped by projects such as the BICP, see Table 5.1.

Prior to the implementation of the BZ concept in the mid - 1990s, the Park authorities had already begun engaging with the villagers through local meetings and gatherings (“*jana samanwaya gosthi*”), providing timber for village infrastructure and schools. The Park warden also used to invite representatives and leaders from the peripheral villages to the Park, once a year. S. R. Bhatta (Interview, April 24, 2012) described this as an opportunity for the Park administration to convey information to the locals about the regulations and initiatives of the Park, and the need for wildlife and forest conservation, and recalled:

It was a very good system, just like a public hearing. Local representatives used to come to express their grievances; sometimes they even scolded the park authorities. The debatable issue if the status of wild animal is higher than people also erupted then.

The mainstream conservation discourse also reached the villages and influenced the local population through the state enforcement of rules, as well as through the park officials’ interactions with the villagers as mentioned earlier. This discourse has been promoted and intensified through ICDPs since the 1990s. During my fieldwork, I

realised that the formation of the three tiered people's institutions for the management of the BZ (see Figure 1.1) created and facilitated by the Park administration and its conservation partners, was important in gaining local peoples' support and involvement in conservation and community development affairs. These institutions as carriers of mainstream conservation discourse have been important in channelling, institutionalising and localising discourses of national park, wildlife and biodiversity conservation at the grassroots level.

The leader of one Buffer Zone Users' Committee (BZUC) made several references to biodiversity, environment and wildlife conservation; terms commonly used by other such leaders in the villages. This leader repeatedly contended that "people in the buffer zone are aware and sensitive" and that their "awareness or consciousness" of the importance of wildlife and forests has increased (A. Chaudhari, Interview, April 5, 2011). This can be also inferred by reference to ongoing activities of conservation and community development in the BZ. In a BZUC office at Patabhar VDC, this view was expressed by the many conservation posters on display:

There were numerous colourful posters on the walls were conveying strong messages of conservation education. Mostly sponsored by conservation NGOs, they were about wildlife conservation, topographical maps of the Park and BZ. Some posters had slogans such as 'Save the Tiger' and 'Save the Rhino'. The influences of the Park administration and conservation partners in generating awareness for preservation of endangered and flagship species were evident. The WTLCP poster mentioned 'Let's conserve biodiversity at a landscape level' with images of elephant, tiger, dolphin, blackbuck and *Sal* forest. It stressed that the 'western terai landscape is a habitat of globally rare wildlife', 'forests, wildlife and flora in this is our common property' and urged 'let's join hands from today to conserve these' (Field note, June 6, 2011).

#### ***The influences of conservation education and awareness***

The mainstream discourse of conservation has also been popularised and localised through conservation education conducted by the Park administration and its conservation partners. The management plans of the Park also stress conservation education in the BZ as one of its priorities. Strategies of conservation education and

awareness are also an element of the ICDP's work (see Table 5.1, Chapter Five) in the BZ villages including those in the river delta.

The importance of the Western Terai Arc Landscape Complex Project (WTLCP) was evident in the western BZ of the Park during my 2011 fieldwork. The Project had been vigorously promoting and supporting eco-clubs for school children and their networks, and eco-teachers in the schools, and conducted non-formal adult literacy classes for local women (WTLCP, 2008, 2010). WWF Nepal has also been promoting school based eco-clubs throughout the country including in the BZs since 1994. C. Gurung and Shrestha (2004) write about their effectiveness as:

Conservation messages conveyed to a student are passed to people in his/her home.....then through them, the message is passed on to the wider community.....they become the major supporters of conservation and sustainable development and raise awareness against poaching, illegal logging, illegal harvesting.....unsustainable use of resources etc (p. 186).

The ICDPs including the WTLCP had also supported celebrations of global and national environmental events as well as conservation awareness activities in the Park and its BZ. Several events are organised as part of these programs on such occasions as International Wetland Day, World Environment Day, Conservation Day, and Wildlife Week. For example, the slogan of the 14th Wildlife Week was "Natural resource, the sacred gift of nature, Nature conservation, the basis of life" (WTLCP, 2010, p. 37). Referring to their experience of a wildlife week celebration in BNP, C. Gurung and Shrestha (2004) note, "The knowledge participants gain from their involvement in such events is shared among friends, neighbours and wider community members thus increasing conservation awareness among a larger population" ( p. 184).

Likewise, ICDPs have been supporting local youth in community based anti-poaching operations (see Chapter Seven) and in their conservation awareness activities (WTLCP, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012). The Youth Mobilisation Campaign against Anti-poaching Day is marked annually by a mega celebration and mass event hosted by the Park administration and BZMC to which donors, forest bureaucrats,

conservation partners, celebrities and youth cadres are invited (WWF Nepal, 2013). All these activities further intensify the discourse of wildlife conservation in and around the Park BZ.

In addition, mainstream conservation discourse also reaches the BZ residents, including the Sonahas, through the mass media. The WTLCP had supported the production of a weekly FM radio program known as Samrachan Samachar (Conservation News) broadcasted through various local FM stations to convey conservation messages to a wider audience. Audio-visual programs about community based anti-poaching programs and human-wildlife conflicts had been aired on television (WTLCP, 2010). WWF Nepal has been spreading the messages of landscape conservation in the TAL region including Bardia through FM radio programs such as Bhuparidhi (landscape) (WTLCP, 2012).

### **8.5.3 The Sonahas' encounters with and appropriation of conservation discourse**

The Sonahas in the BZ have encountered the mainstream conservation discourse, they have also appropriated the discourse in their everyday lives consciously and unconsciously in order to capitalise from project benefits as BZ residents. During my fieldwork, I witnessed small billboards in the two Sonaha villages in the BZ. The text on these boards (see Photo 8.2 and 8.3) had “Bardia National Park Buffer Zone” on the top, followed by the name of an exclusive Sonaha community organisation, Sonaha Samrachan and Bikas Upasamiti [Sonaha Conservation and Development Sub Committee](SSBU). The Park administration encourages and recognises community organisations and groups under the BZ Users’ Committees within its jurisdiction. The SSBU symbolises the Sonahas’ legal affiliation with the Park administration as well as serving to showcase the presence of the Park authority at the grassroots.

Two SSBU groups were set up with the help of the Park administration and the WTLCP. After their registration with the Park administration in 2007, they are now been eligible to receive monetary support from the Park and projects. To date, the WTLCP had disbursed seed funding of around 3000 AUD as loans to the Sonahas in

the Park BZ. The Sonahas, through the SSBU leveraged support from the WTLCP for alternative livelihood projects either in the form of skills development and income generation training, or for activities such as pig and goat farming, and the cultivation of crops suited to flood prone areas. As part of this funding, the Sonahas received solar lamps for Sonaha hamlets not connected to the electricity grid, and partial support for installing tube wells and the construction of toilets. They were offered literacy classes to increase their awareness of biodiversity conservation. The Sonahas in the BZ have therefore subscribed to and participated in the conservation and development discourse to a certain extent through their affiliation with the SSBU.

The former president of the SSBU at Patabhar, said during an interview (2011) that they had originally named their organisation the Dolphin Conservation Group during a meeting organised by the Park officials and the WTLCP in 2007. There had also been local campaigns on conservaiton of river species and dolphins and (e.g., see Photo 8.2). The meeting was well attended by the Sonahas as well as by leaders of BZUC from the western BZ. The name clearly indicates that this group of Sonaha leaders were appropriating dolphin conservation discourse to leverage project supports as well as to demonstrate their sensitivity to conservation of dolphins. However, they retained the current name, SSBU, at the suggestion of the Park administration.

The Sonahas have also encountered and interacted with conservation discourse through their formal memberships as registered users of the BZ community forest user groups. The Park administration and its conservation partners support community forests in the BZ as a viable approach to forest conservation and as a means of supplementing the forest resource needs of the locals. In this way, local peoples' pressure on the resources of the park is reduced and an extended habitat for wildlife is generated (Bajimaya, 2003).



**Photo 8.3 Bill boards of the SSBU at Rajipur (Patabhar) and Saijana (Manau) respectively.** Credit: Author

#### 8.5.4 Critical inquiry of the WTLCP

The WTLCP (2005-2012), a multi-million dollar government led project with multiple donors and implementers, promoted the conservation of biodiversity and sustainable resource use in the western TAL region (see subsection 5.3.3). The Sonahas gained significant attention within this project as the “Special Target Group”. The Sonahas in the BZ also gave their support to the WTLCP in response its benefits mentioned earlier. This was particularly the case from 2006 onwards when the Sonahas began to gain social visibility through their own grass roots actions for their rights (see Chapter Nine). Several Sonaha leaders recalled a former WTLCP official as sympathetic to their plight. During his tenure, the Sonahas received additional support such as funds to cover the petty costs incurred in the acquisition of fishing permits, and the sponsoring of distinctive hats for the Sonahas (from Saijana) to distinguish those among them who were fishing permit holders. The Project also partially supported the setting up of a small cultural museum for the Sonahas at Rajipur “...with an aim to conserve traditional cultures...” as well as to organise cultural events in Sonaha villages where they “...displayed their traditional rituals, folk dance along with folk lore” (WTLCP, 2009, p. 39).

### ***The Sonahas's grievances***

However, despite Sonahas' acceptance of these benefits from the WTLCP during the fieldwork some were critical and they expressed their grievances against the Project on numerous occasions. The following dialogue which took place at Rajipur articulates one important element among their grievances:

A Sonaha woman: In our village some got toilets and tube wells....some received solar lamps....even if there is toilet, tube-wells our hardships will continue if we are not allowed to fish and pan gold.

Her husband: What are we going to do with those [development] if our occupation is restricted?

Husband's younger brother: This [development] is to deprive us from the Park, from our rights, by offering few things, by consoling and cheering us up with these toilets, tube wells. These are not enough. We need something sustainable to make our living (Field note, March 29, 2012).

Two leaders of the SSBU at Rajipur recalled an activity planning workshop of the WTLCP at the Park headquarters back in 2007/08:

Our initial ideas were about fishing and gold washing. We planned activities such as canoe construction, repair, purchasing fishing gear and others. But they [the WTLCP staff] instructed that such activities would not be compatible to their project. They instead suggested activities such as income generating, alternative livelihoods, skills development (Interview, March 20, 2012).

One Sonaha woman from Rajipur also recollected their dialogue with the WTLCP staff when she questioned:

We told them about gold panning, and we need permits for this in the park. They were ignorant about it.....They say that they have supported us with pigs and goat. What is going to yield by raising one goat? Can we sustain by lighting a single solar lamp they gave us? There is a matter of our food and survival (Interview, April 1, 2011).

In another instance a leader of the SSBU expressed his frustration, saying “activities of the WTLCP are just like chocolates that lure. They give some seed money, help in the construction of toilets and raise some livestock but our most pressing issues [rights] are largely unattained” (Interview, March 13, 2012). During the same discussion, another Sonaha remarked “WTLCP seems to have deceived Sonahas by offering some funds and supporting few activities” and questioned, “How can this make a big difference in our lives?”

***Official claims of success stories of Sonaha involvement***

The WTLCP on the contrary regarded various community interventions and development projects in Sonaha villages as being among its success stories. The Project’s support was portrayed as being well suited to the problem of the Sonahas’ livelihood crisis. For example, its report claims that the SSBU at Saijana “...is leading a local movement for the restoration of their traditional livelihood rights while fully supporting the conservation effort of the park authorities” (WTLCP, 2008, p. 9). This is contrary to the restrictions on the Sonahas’ customary livelihoods enforced by the Park authorities and efforts of the Project to change their livelihood patterns, at the time of my fieldwork. The same report quotes a Sonaha leader, who was actually critical about the Park policy in my interview with him, saying:

....before we were very critical of national park; but now we understand the importance of conservation and their effort of conservation. Besides, they [the project] have also started to help us to earn our living. Therefore, our hard feelings [towards park officials] are softening (WTLCP, 2008, p. 34).

This statement is in direct contrast to the Sonahas’ common perception of the Park management’s actions with regard to their ancestral occupations and livelihood practices documented in this thesis (see Chapter Seven and Nine).

The Project report appreciates the Sonahas’ cooperation noting that the:

WTLCP is proud of ..... Sonaha of Manau VDC for learning conservation friendly new livelihood skills and for actively participating in project’s efforts on biodiversity conservation and improving the livelihoods (WTLCP, 2008, p. 34).

The UNDP, one of the major donors to the WTLCP, also makes particular mention of the Project's interventions with the Sonahas and claims that the group formation and alternative livelihoods support from the Project empowered and "helped lift 32 Sonaha households out of poverty" (UNDP Nepal, 2008, p. 34). The reports from these organisations present one truth, and may not reflect the negative outcomes of the Park's constraints on the Sonaha customary livelihoods. We remain uninformed therefore as to how the relevant organisations propose to address what the Sonahas regard as the damage done to their economic situation.

***The dominant logic of alternative livelihoods and development***

The discourse of alternative livelihoods is prominent in the work of ICDPs such as the WTLCP and was also frequently articulated by the Park officials. In interviews conducted with the Park officials, they deflected discussion of the Sonaha gold panning and fishing rights by presenting a rationale of alternative livelihood options and the development benefits that could ensue from such projects. A Sonaha recalled (Interview, March 29, 2012) a response from one Park warden, "Why do you talk about rights? If you are from a village [BZ] group we will provide monetary support from the project, then you can make a living out of it." In his interview, the Park warden, despite being sympathetic to the Sonahas as poor and minority groups also hinted that the Sonahas were negligent of the support they received from the projects and were often passive during village meetings.

However, there have been encounters between the Park officials and the Sonahas at which the Sonahas have clearly articulated their grievances. During one such meeting followed by mass protests of the Sonahas in 2011, the Park warden hinted that the Sonahas had not been able to capitalise on the project benefits. The warden reminded the Sonahas, in response to their demands, about the development activities in the BZ by referring to the WTLCP. The WTLCP official present then also complemented the warden's advice by lauding the works carried out by the Project and the accompanying benefits. In the end, there was no satisfactory outcome for the Sonahas because the dialogue got derailed by the rhetoric of development and alternative livelihoods (Field note, February 18, 2011).

### ***Summary and arguments***

The Sonahas have been encountering the dominant discourses of conservation and development in their every day lives through BZ institutions and ICDPs such as the WTLCP. Since early 2000s at least, ICDPs and the Park administrations have promoted the practices of participatory conservation and development in and beyond the BZ, thus have expanded the associated discourses. This constitutes a paradigm shift in their conservation approaches (see Chapter One), but without significant modification of the development paradigm under which ICDPs such as the WTLCP conventionally operate. The Project and the Park administration have also been unable to adequately address social inequities and the differentiated relations with and dependence of specific social groups such as the Sonahas on the natural environment.

Predicaments and grievances of the Sonahas against the Park authorities documented during my fieldwork challenge the claims of the Project and its donor organisations that these ICDP projects are improving their lives. They also illuminate discrepancies between the socio-cultural and spatial realities, aspirations and perceptions of the Sonahas and the priorities and provisions of these projects. I therefore argue that there are disempowerment issues for the Sonahas in the official promotion of the discourse and practice of alternative livelihoods, and in the linkages of conservation and development that these efforts foster. They contribute to the reinforcement of the dominant discourse of the national park as a wilderness without people. In this process it results in the legitimisation of the state enclosure of the Sonaha ancestral territory; marginalisation of their relationships with and meanings of the riverscape (see section 6.7), and their counter discourse (see Chapter Nine)

### **8.5.5 Conservation subjectivity, governmentality and hegemony**

Based on the Sonahas' encounters with the conservation and development projects, I continue my examination of the discourse and practices of the national park and BZ insofar as they involve the Sonahas. To this end, I follow Foucault's (1982) notions of subjectivity and governmentality, and Gramsci's idea of hegemony (see section 2.5).

The Sonahas have been subjected to modern conservation measures through the imposition and localisation of the powerful mainstream discourse of the national park and BZ and its associated practices. In encountering and interacting with this discourse, the Sonahas in the BZ can be treated as conservation subjects and not only as the victims of state conservation interventions. This discourse has penetrated the everyday lives of the BZ residents including the Sonahas (see Figure 8.1). As discussed earlier, the Sonahas have appropriated the mainstream discourse insofar as they have become part of modern community organisations under the aegis of the Park administration, for example, the SSBU. As local residents of the Park BZ, they have also been legitimate members of BZ user groups and community forest user groups. (See the three tiered structure of BZ management, Figure 1.1)

The legislation on the BZ also identifies the conservation responsibilities of the BZ residents and their local institutions as actors in conservation. In fact it defines the BZ resident as a "User" whose entitlements are stated as "...to utilize forest resources" and as a "...direct beneficiary from the project to be operated for the community development of local people" (Buffer Zone Management Regulation, 1996). It states that the conservation of wildlife, natural resources, and biodiversity are the chief responsibilities of the protected area warden in the BZ, who can form users' committees to assist in discharging these conservation responsibilities. Similarly, the work plan of the BZ Users' Committees, as prescribed by law, also includes activities concerning the conservation of natural resources and the utilisation of forest resources in addition to community development. They are thus required to prescribe management methods for conservation of forest, wildlife and the environment. The law also recognises the local population's function, duty and power over the management of forests and grazing areas in the BZ. Implicit in their recognition as a BZ user and a member of various BZ institutions under the

jurisdiction of protected area administration, is also their individual and collective commitment and obligation to conservation and, thus, their adoption of the dominant conservation discourse.

The everyday lives of the Sonahas in the BZ are therefore enmeshed and influenced by the regime and discourse of national park. This entails a form of conservation governmentality (Campbell, 2007), see subsection 2.5.2. The lives and actions of the Sonahas since the Park was established have been increasingly governed and regulated by the conservation regime and discourse. The Park management, through various guard posts that enforce park rules, maintain surveillance over the people and govern their actions in the BZ.

The Sonahas' experiences also suggest that, in addition to the Park and state apparatus of conservation, their lives have been governed by the localisation of mainstream conservation discourse and its practice at the grassroots level. With the institutionalisation of structures of participatory conservation and the intensification of the dominant conservation discourse at the grassroots, local peoples' institutions also exercise the Park rules, and reinforce and reproduce its discourse and practices. This is apparent in the occasional tensions between the Sonahas and community based anti-poaching operations or community forest user groups in the BZ (see Chapter Seven).

Moreover, as the conservation and development efforts of the Park administration, conservation partners and local population in the BZ thrive through the local institutions BZ management, the dominant discourse of conservation is increasingly adopted, and powerfully embodied within the local population. These cultivate and reproduce a conservation consciousness, which becomes conservation minded subjectivities (Campbell, 2007) among the locals including the Sonahas. Hence, in addition to state coercion and surveillance, power is thereby exercised among the conservation subjects as they encounter, interact and appropriate the hegemonic conservation discourse and self-impose regulations. The embodiment and appropriation of this hegemonic discourse in the lives of Sonahas can be understood as a form of conservation hegemony that maintains and reinforces the governmentality of the national park management.

Therefore, I argue that beside state conservation violence against the Sonahas (see Chapter Seven) the functioning of the hegemonic mainstream discourse of conservation and practices in the BZ powerfully affects the economic, social and cultural lives of the Sonahas. This results in the naturalised and normalised state imposition of the national park regime including its regulation and associated negative impacts on the Sonahas. This hegemonic conservation discourse also marginalises the Sonaha way of life and their meanings in their customary territory (see Chapter Six), and thereby silences counter discourse and delegitimises the Sonaha agenda of their rights in relation to the national park (see Chapter Nine).

### **8.5.5 Summary**

Through this section, I attempted to provide a scenario of mainstream conservation discourse that reaches and enmeshes the Sonahas through a network of actors and institutions. As well, I showed how the Sonahas have encountered and to some extent appropriated this powerful discourse. Conservation and development projects such as the WTLCP, in collaboration with the Park administration and BZ institutions, expanded and intensified the dominant discourse as the Sonahas associated with and acquired its benefits. Therefore, the Sonahas' dissent and their current predicament contradict the claims of the project in transforming the lives of the Sonahas. The lives of the Sonahas have been increasingly governed both by the state and local institutions in the name of conservation. The Sonahas are also subjected to the dominant discourse embodied and localised among the BZ residents, which helps to sustain the governmentality of conservation. The hegemonic dominant conservation discourse marginalises the Sonaha way of life, worldviews and relationships to their territory; and legitimises state violence against them.

## **8.6 Summary and conclusion**

In this chapter, I attempted to problematise the mainstream discourse of the national park and participatory conservation in BZ, as well as the conservation oriented constructions of the riverscape by powerful actors, mainly through a consideration of the repercussions of these discourses and processes on the Sonahas. In addition to the direct state violence against the Sonahas (see Chapter Seven), the dominant discourse

of conservation, and its related powerful constructs and representations of the riverscape and even of the Sonahas, are equally critical. These needed to be examined as they have serious consequences for the Sonahas.

I began my discussion by revealing the discursive creation of a protected area in Bardia in a manner which in practice ignored the Sonahas. The dominant discourse around the riverscape which constitutes the Sonaha ancestral territory privileged the biodiversity conservation value of the riverscape over the needs of the Sonaha. Indeed, this process occurred without any consideration of the existence and interests of the Sonahas. The crisis of the river based livelihoods of the Sonahas was not regarded in the same manner of the crisis of valuable aquatic fauna (e.g., the Dolphins) and other species. The Sonahas were invisible in the mainstream conservation discourse for the first three decades of protected area establishment in Bardia. Thereafter, their realities and customary practices were frequently under-represented or misrepresented.

I critiqued ICDPs such as the WTLCP for some of their false claims, for the disempowering aspects, perhaps unintended, of some of their initiatives for the Sonahas and for their reinforcement of the dominant conservation discourse. I demonstrated how the Sonahas encountered the mainstream discourse of national park and participatory conservation, and how they have been localised and embodied in the BZ, a process which treated the Sonahas as conservation subjects. I argued that the governmentality of conservation operate and are sustained through dominant conservation discourse and practices in the BZ. I contend that the hegemonic discourse that the Sonahas are subjected to has serious political consequences for the Sonaha. The Sonaha understandings and meanings of riverscape have been transformed and defined largely under the mainstream conservation discourse. This functions to exclude the Sonahas; to reinforce the Sonahas' non-presence in the riverscape and wilderness of the Park. It also marginalises the Sonaha customary way of life. The hegemonic discourse normalises state violence and legitimises state enclosure of the Sonaha riverine territory. The dominant discourse that disregards if not accords little space for the resistance and critique of the Sonahas, is the subject of the next chapter.

## **Chapter Nine: Sonaha resistance and social movements**

### **9.1 Introduction**

The Sonahas have been impacted by the mainstream conservation discourse, as well as by state coercion as discussed in the previous two chapters. In this chapter I present the Sonaha resistance and collective actions against the national park regime based on ethnographic information collected during my fieldwork. I begin with the everyday struggles of Sonahas for survival. I then depict the trajectory of their social movements and the multiple actors and institutions around their movements (see Figure 9.1). Over time, the Sonahas' actions and agency in reclaiming their fishing and gold panning rights have become linked to their cultural and ethnic identities.

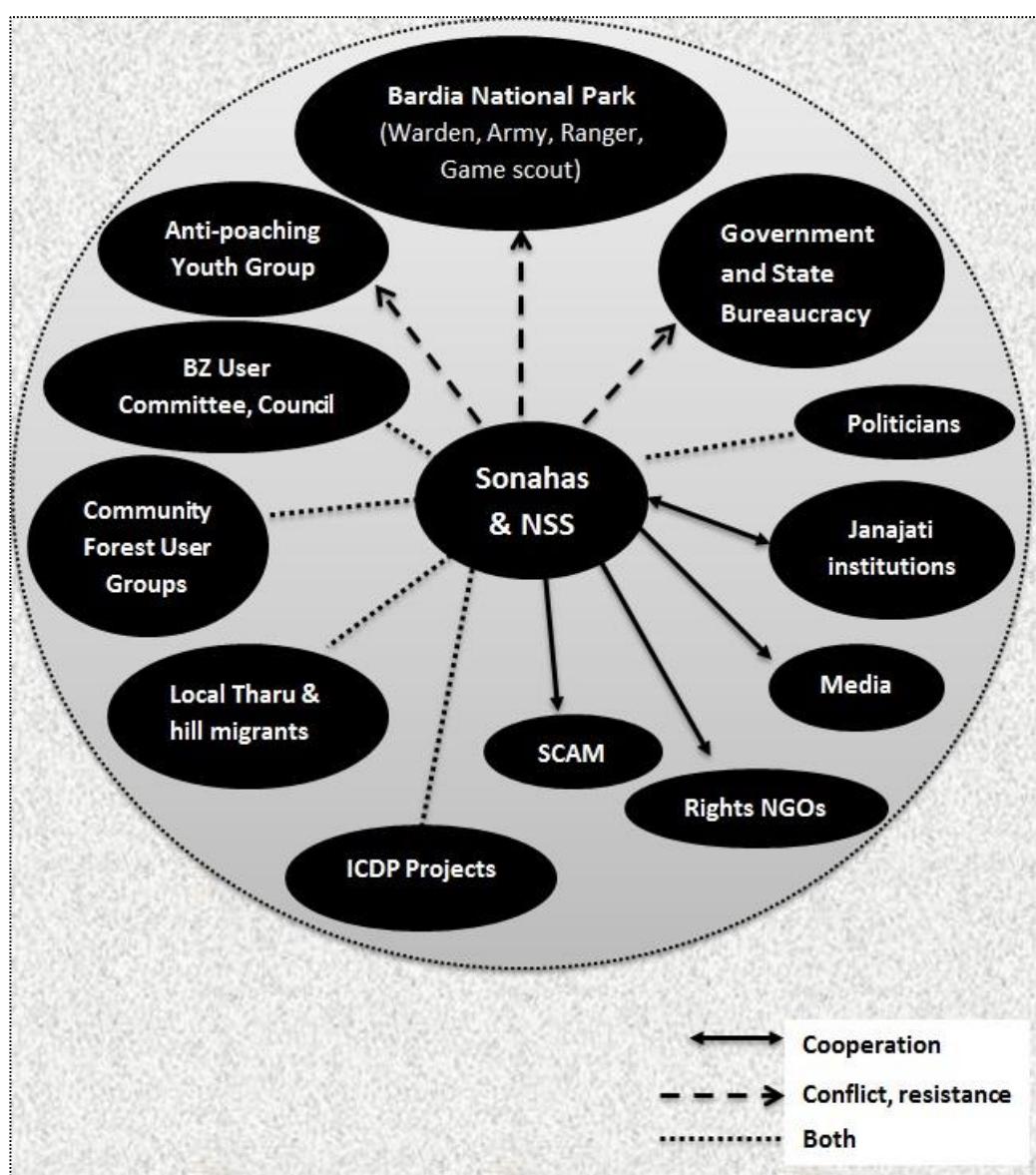
### **9.2 Everyday struggles and the art of survival**

Sonahas' farming is gold and fish! Earn our labour, day and night! We do have enough food and clothes! We can't even read and write, and speak [with literate higher class groups]. We go to the national park to fish. When Sonahas are distressed! YCL [anti-poaching youth cadres] are cheerful! We go to the national park to wash gold! Amidst fights against the park warden and threats of Army! Still deprived of licenses [fishing & gold panning] (Field note, April 1, 2011).

The words of the song (translated and transcribed from the Sonaha version, see Appendix H, Song Two) above by a Sonaha woman articulate the Sonaha way of life and their everyday struggle with the national park authorities. A Sonaha fisherman emphasised how vigilant they are at their Dera:

When Sonahas enter the river [at night], we are the smartest people. We know where the wild animals and the humans are more than the army and the game scouts [of the Park]. We wouldn't have survived if we had not possessed this knowledge. While fishing, we are always cautious about the wildlife and

strangers...we are always alert at our Dera ....We are not scared by tiger and rhino but by wild elephants and humans [armed poachers and park guards]. We never feel sleepy in the river. There is always a danger around us....We maintain silence when we paddle our canoe....even our enemy<sup>17</sup> would not detect it. Sonahas are clever *Jati* [ethnic group], night in the river means day time for us....If not how can we survive rhino, tiger and the army? (Interview, April 25, 2011).



**Figure 9.1 An indicative field of actors and institutions relevant to the Sonaha resistance and social movements.**

Note: See Appendix I for details of the various actors and institutions in the Sonaha struggle.

<sup>17</sup> This refers to the Park guards, whose harassment the Sonahas fear; poachers and illegal loggers whose activities endanger the Sonahas in their temporary shelters at night.

In my fieldwork, I often observed the Sonahas taking refuge at night on river islands in the vicinity of the Park, but outside its boundary such as the Nakchikla Dera (see Figure 6.2). They cautiously and quietly entered the river to fish, hoping to avoid being spotted by the Park guards. Even on the darkest nights, the fishing pairs skilfully synchronised their movements with very little noise, fishing and rowing their canoes in and out of the national park river space. As the dawn approached, they would head back to their shelters (Field note, March 6, 2012). The Sonahas often told me, when they were intercepted by the guard patrols, they escaped in their canoes abandoning their belongings in the process. In addition to obtaining a decent fish catch, this pattern of nocturnal fishing has been a strategy to evade the Park surveillance during the day time.

Until recently, when the Geruwa River was running high Sonaha women panned gold in the rivers inside the Park quietly at night and returned before dawn. A Sonaha woman recollects the situation in the late 1990s, “We used to go there [the Park] at night for gold washing as it was risky in the day time. We used to take our necessary belongings and food items, and pan for gold” (Interview, March 29, 2011). Sonaha women have not panned for gold at night in the national park river in recent times although they pan for gold during the day in the BZ, and sometimes trespass across the Park boundary. There have been numerous instances of women escaping the guard patrols or being intercepted while both fishing and gold panning in the river.

### **9.2.1 Encounters with wildlife**

During my fieldwork, the Sonahas shared numerous stories of encountering wild elephants, rhinoceros and tiger at their temporary shelters as well as in their villages. A Sonaha fisherman recalled, “Living on the river islands is fun but also risky. Once we had to escape from our gold panning Dera when wild elephants raided. We fear elephants the most....” (Interview, March 2, 2012). He also shared the story of his close encounter with a rhinoceros and with a tiger in their fishing Dera on two separate occasions as:

I could not chase the rhino away as I was so frightened, almost speechless and motionless. Later we ran away from there. We swam the freezing Karnali, and

took refuge on the island where we spent the entire night freezing....We once noticed a tiger approaching our Dera at the Park boundary. We tried to scare the tiger away by pelting stones and making loud noises. Then only it finally moved away from us (Interview, March 2, 2012).

Similarly, on numerous occasions, Sonaha women have had encountered wild animals at their gold panning Dera and escaped in their canoes. A Sonaha woman who once sustained an injury trying to escape from an elephant attack recalled this:

Our Dera was near the Game Scout Ghat [north of the delta, near the Park]. It seems our stay was right on the path of wild animals. We had to chase the wild animals away, sometimes even making a big fire [bonfire] to prevent them attacking us...and later we had to flee in a canoe (Interview, March 7, 2012).

All these encounters indicate the risks of the wildlife attacks that they face while living in the Dera and their coping mechanisms for these eventualities. Interestingly, not a single Sonaha was reported to me as having been seriously injured or killed by wildlife in the delta. The Sonahas recalled numerous encounters with rhinoceros and wild boar raiding crop fields, and life threatening situations when wild elephants ravaged their huts. During my 2012 fieldwork, one Sonaha elder was attacked by a crocodile in the river and a calf was killed by a tiger in Rajipur.

### **9.2.2 Contravention of the Park rules for survival**

On several occasions the Sonahas contravened the Park rules by quietly fishing and gold panning in the rivers on the Park boundary. A few Sonaha men from Rajipur at the time of my 2011 fieldwork went fishing in the Geruwa River in the western section of the Park, across the village of Gola, in broad daylight, with the intention of challenging the Park rules and authorities (see Maps 5.7 and 5.8). One of the Sonaha leaders told me that they were determined to be collectively arrested if they were caught while fishing as a gesture of protest against their having been deprived of their fishing permits. But to their chagrin they were not spotted by the armed guards but rather they made a decent fish catch. Further downstream on the river, in Sajana,

Sonaha men told me that, although the Geruwa River was running low, they occasionally managed to get a decent fish catch from it.

In March, 2011, Sonaha women from Rajipur occasionally fished as a group in the day time in the Geruwa River, adjacent to the Park. On one such fishing trip, one and half an hour from Rajipur by foot, I accompanied the women and observed them fishing cautiously with their bare hands and mosquito nets in the river at the Park boundary. An accompanying Sonaha man then indicated “The forest across the river is the Park” and pointing, further north along the river’s edge in the forest, he said, “...that’s Laguna Tower [the guard post]” (Interview, March 6, 2011). Another Sonaha man added, “We have had many encounters with the army in this area.” As the women attempted to head further north along the river, both the men cautioned, “Let’s not go there, the Army can see us from the tower...Let’s not get into trouble”. Then everyone decided to head back to the village with the fishcatch. Few weeks back, Sonaha women from Sarkhol had lost their gold panning equipment to the army patrol near the same area.

### **9.2.3 Expressions of resentment**

During my fieldwork, I frequently listened to the Sonahas’ frustrations and resentment against the restrictions and actions of the Park authorities (Chapter Seven). The Sonaha men often resented the army and game scouts deployed in the guard posts the most because of their frequent unpleasant encounters with them in the river channels. Likewise, the Sonaha women vented their resentment of and anger with the anti-poaching youth cadres and the Park guards (Chapter Seven). For the Sonahas, the Park warden, the highest authority of the Park administration, was perceived as their chief opponent since he forbade the Sonahas from fishing and panning for gold in the Geruwa River.

One Sonaha fisherman admitted his hostile relationship with one game scout from the Park. He stated, “The game scout is a very bad person. He even pelts us with stones. Sometimes I feel like beating him up....” (Interview, March 3, 2012). He recalled a moment when one fisher was furious and was tempted to beat up the game scout but was later calmed down by his fellow Sonahas. He strongly reacted, ‘Had

there been no army then, we would have beaten him to death". This was during the few days of grass cutting access in the Park which is granted annually to the BZ locals. Another Sonaha man also recalled a time when they beat up a game scout from the Park, in their village, near Chisapani Bridge. Prior to this incident he claimed that he had been chased by an army patrol accompanied by the game scout, and that the game scout had even pelted him with stones while he was fishing. "We almost got seriously injured. I was furious and resentful", he responded (Interview, February 28, 2012).

#### **9.2.4 Summary**

Despite the Park restrictions and surveillance, and regardless of the risks of contact with the army and the game scouts and wildlife encounters, the Sonahas contravene the Park rules and regulations by fishing and gold panning in the rivers in the Park. Thus, albeit in a cautious, secretive, indirect manner, they resist the authority and regime of the national park. Their everyday experience and practices therefore encompass resistance and the art of survival. Their anger and antipathy to the Park authorities and the guards are often acknowledged among themselves, and sometimes also find expression in physical confrontations with the guards.

## **9.3 Sonaha social movements and their discourse of ethnic rights**

### **9.3.1 Origins of Sonaha organisation at the grassroots**

The Sonahas from Rajipur recalled that they became exposed to issues of *adhikar* (rights) and its associated discourse in their villages primarily through their interactions in the late 1990s with activists from a non-governmental organisation (NGO) called the Environment Conservation Society (ECOS). This Bardia based NGO was then working on local community empowerment, development and environmental conservation issues. “We were sceptical and ignored the *Sanstha* [NGO] initially when they came to our village. We suspected and feared that they had come to convert us to Christianity”, recalled a Sonaha woman (Interview, June 9, 2011). But, after fostering a working relationship with them, the NGO activists began to organise the local Sonaha women through micro saving and credit groups. This organisation and mobilisation of the Sonaha women by the ECOS also triggered discussions about the Sonahas’ ongoing hardship as a result of the Park restrictions and about how these restrictions and the actions of the authorities constituted “*adhikar hanan*” (violation of their rights).

The Sonahas at Rajipur recalled a time in the late 1990s when a private fishing contract was let by the Chattiwan Community Forest group across the Karnali River near Patabhar, in the west of the delta (see Maps 5.7 and 5.8) and the problems that they faced while fishing in this river stretch outside the Park. The Sonahas had numerous confrontations with the fish contractor who regulated fishing in the river stretch adjacent to the community forest and extracted royalties from the locals for fishing. The Sonahas also confronted the community forest guards then. On some occasions the Sonahas acquired fishing permits by paying the royalty, while on other times they contested the imposed provisions. “I had to run and escape several times when the guard chased us. We feared that they would snatch our possessions and even fine us. We also lost our fishing nets several times”, a Sonaha man recalled (Interview, March 25, 2011).

In 1998, ECOS supported the Sonahas in organising *Aam Sabha* (a mass assembly) at Rajipur. The president of the community forest user group and local journalists were invited to the gathering. It was successful according to the Sonaha leaders because the president publicly committed to resolve the matter and acknowledged the

Sonahas' fishing rights. The NGO also attempted to raise the issue of the Sonahas' fishing right with the Park authorities. However, after the state of emergency was declared during the violent armed conflict in the country (see section 7.3), these initial attempts to launch a Sonaha rights campaign against the BNP withered in the early 2000s.

### **9.3.2 The development of Sonaha social movements (2006-2008)**

In 2006, the political situation in Nepal changed drastically after the people's movement against direct rule by the monarchy. This was followed by a comprehensive peace agreement between the government and the Maoist rebels. In this more favourable political climate and with the country in a democratic transition, rights based NGOs and social activists began to engage with the Sonahas once more. Thereafter, their social movements have gained momentum and have been backed by wider civil society organisations and activists. The crisis of the Sonahas' customary livelihoods as a result of the Park policy has been gaining attention through civil society led dialogues, policy forums, and actions under the banner of the national forum of protected area victims (S. Jana, 2008; Rai, 2011), see Table 9.1.

Another Bardia based NGO called People Centred Development Forum (PCDF) which was working on peace and community development projects forged a partnership with Community Development Organization (CDO), a national NGO advocating and campaigning for the rights of protected area victims. Both groups began to mobilise national park victims in the BNP buffer zone from 2006. Increasingly, NGO activists came into contact with the Sonahas. A Tharu student leader and political activist from Patabhar VDC, who later also joined the PCDF, became instrumental in mobilising the Sonahas from the Park BZ. He told me that the injustices faced by the Sonahas from the Park authorities and the "Sonahas' right to fishing and gold panning in the rivers became key agenda items of the social movement then" (Interview, February 22, 2011).

**Table 9.1 Key collective actions and events by Sonaha social movements.**

Dates	Actions/events
1998	Mass assembly at the South Sonaha hamlet, Rajipur village.
Oct 2-4, 2006	First Sonaha Peoples Conference at Rajipur, Bardia
Jan 12, 2007	Mass rally and demonstration at the Park headquarters.
Feb 15, 2007	Dialogue between the Sonahas, the NPSS, the Buffer Zone Management Council (BZMC) and the Park officials.
March 29-30, 2007	Formation of a national coalition of protected area victims.
June 2007	Application lodged for the enlistment and recognition of Sonaha ethnic identity by the government
June 27, 2007	Padlocking of the office of the Banjariya Post of the Park
Sep 30, 2007	Torching of a copy of the national protected area law by agitating locals in the BZ.
Nov 6-7, 2007	Collective delegation of the Sonahas, park victims in the BZ, and the BZMC members to the forest bureaucracy.
Feb 2, 2008	Fishing permits granted to the Sonahas by the Park.
Feb 18, 2011	Mass cycle rally, demonstration and dialogue with the Park authorities.
March 30-31, 2011	Second Sonaha Peoples Conference at Rajipur, Bardia
June 23, 2011	Sonahas delegation and appeal to the forest minister, the DNPWC in Kathmandu.
April 26-27, 2013	Sonahas participated in the national gathering of endangered indigenous groups, in the district of Kailali.

Note: Updated and adapted from S. Jana (2008).

### ***The Birth of a Sonaha national organisation***

On October 2-4, 2006, a national conference of Sonahas brought together Sonahas from different villages in the delta and beyond in Rajipur which I had attended as an NGO researcher. It was a moment of festivity for the Sonahas, with cultural dances and songs, collective deliberations on pressing issues facing the Sonahas, and a mass assembly with invited representatives of political parties, journalists and civil society organisations. The gathering was the first of its kind for the Sonahas that gave birth to Nepal Sonaha Adhikar Sangh (Nepal Sonaha Rights Association<sup>18</sup>), a national organisation of Sonahas that aimed to maintain their welfare and uphold their rights. It was later (2007) registered as Nepal Sonaha Sangh (NSS). This event was crucial in raising their social status as a minority ethnic group in a Tharu dominated society

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<sup>18</sup> Prior to this, Sonaha men from Rajpur had constituted a Fish Farming Group and had also attempted to self-organize under a Unified Sonaha Struggle Committee but this failed to materialize.

as well as in motivating the Sonahas to launch a collective struggle of their own. As a result of this meeting, the Sonahas produced a formal set of demands referred to as the Rajipur Declaration, 2006. Among the demands was the following:

Guarantee unhindered access to rivers within and beside the national parks....Ensure the traditional rights of the Sonahas over forests and rivers....Identify the Sonahas as indigenous peoples and take the necessary steps to protect their language and culture (S. Jana, 2008, p. 23).

At the same time, the local population in the Park BZ was also getting organised as Nikuja Pidith Sangarsha Samiti [National Park Victim Struggle Committee] (NPSS), a people's organisation which was supported by NGOs such as the CDO and PCDF. Informal membership of the NPSS included local peasants and villagers struggling for compensation for the loss of crops and livestock; physical injuries, casualties, killings, property damage by wildlife; loss of agricultural land as a result of natural expansion of the Park boundary resulting from changes in the river courses; in short those resenting the Park rules and the authorities for their ill-treatment by the Park guards, and the restrictions imposed on them in accessing forest resources. The Sonahas began to participate actively in the NPSS led series of peaceful actions and protests against the Park administration (see Table 9.1). The Sonaha leaders cooperated closely with the leaders of the NPSS and NGO activists to advance their own demands during several dialogues with the Park authorities between 2007 and 2011.

One of the leaders of the NPSS in Bardia claimed, in an interview, that thousands of local people from the BZ gathered in a mass rally on January 12, 2007. This rally placed immense pressure on the Park administration. Hundreds of Sonahas also took part in this rally using slogans such as "you can't kill the traditional occupations of the Sonahas". In the aftermath of the rally, a dialogue between the agitating locals, the leaders of the NPSS, the Buffer Zone Management Council (BZMC)<sup>19</sup>, the Sonahas and officials at the Park headquarters forged an agreement to address the demands of the protestors including those of the Sonahas. The Sonaha leaders also

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<sup>19</sup> This is the peak body of the BZ, and is recognized by legislation (also see Figure 1.1).

became actively involved in the newly formed national coalition of protected area victims, later known as Samrachhit Chetra Jana-adhikar Mahasangh [Protected Areas People's Rights Federation] (SCAM), which provided further impetus to the Sonahas' emerging movement. (See Figure 9.1 and Appendix I for descriptions of the various organisations related to the Sonaha movement)

On June 27, 2007, the Sonahas together with other BZ locals padlocked the office of Banjariya Guard Post, in response to a call by the NPSS (hereafter referred as SCAM-Bardia<sup>20</sup>) when their demands had not been met. They cultivated crops on the guard post land to symbolically protest against the unresponsiveness of the Park authorities. The Sonaha leaders also participated in a mass protest gathering at Bhurigaon, in September 2007. This was organised jointly by SCAM-Bardia and the BZMC of the Park, to denounce the national protected area legislation by torching copies of the Act and demanding a new law in order to redress the plight of the BZ populations. The current legislation is considered by critics to be out-dated and to contain several flaws so far as the rights of local people in the BZs are concerned (Paudel et al., 2012). It has also been labelled as "autocratic" and "anti-people" by activists and leaders of SCAM and NSS.

These actions were geared towards pressurising the Park administration to address the demands which had been submitted to them earlier in 2007. A leader of SCAM in an interview informed me that their earlier relationship with the leaders of BZMC, although it had been legally established, was marked by contestation and rivalry. The BZ leaders who were inimical to SCAM-Bardia were perceived as allying with the Park authorities and therefore of being unsupportive of the protected area victims' struggles. However, in the same year, and in the face of escalating public pressure and local actions, such as the mass gathering mentioned earlier (see Table 9.1), the BZMC began to collaborate with leaders of SCAM-Bardia. This shift was triggered by the SCAM-Bardia's agenda of legally empowering the BZ institutions with more rights and autonomy than they had possessed hitherto (see Figure 1.1).

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<sup>20</sup> The NPSS was later referred as SCAM-Bardia when the national coalition retained its name as the SCAM. Its leaders thought that the term "struggle committee" sounded like and was perceived as having affiliation with the political party of the Nepalese Maoists.

Although this collaboration was short-lived, it produced a delegation team constituting leaders of the BZMC and SCAM Bardia (including Sonaha leaders) who travelled to Kathmandu. The team organised a press conference and held a dialogue with high officials of the forest bureaucracy including the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC). They handed over their appeals in the presence of political party leaders from Bardia. The Sonaha leaders drew the attention of the officials to their demands during the dialogue. The leaders of NSS had been expressing their concerns and highlighted their plight during national meetings and deliberations with diverse actors and stakeholders in the national protected areas system.

### **9.3.3 The granting and halting of fishing concessions (2008)**

The actions and advocacy of the NSS allied with the SCAM-Bardia and the supporting NGOs publicised the plight of the Sonahas. The national print media covered news of their struggles and printed stories of their livelihood crisis as a result of the national park policy (Panhi, 2007; "Sonaha Pratinidhi," 2007). By this time, their actions had been noticed by the DNPWC as well as by the forest ministry.

On February 2, 2008, Sonaha men and women from the BZ collectively acquired individual fishing licenses from the Park administration for the first time as per the existing legal provisions (see subsection 8.4.1). Several conditions were outlined in the licenses such as fishing only in the daytime between dawn and dusk, the type and the size of the fishing nets they could use, fishing only in the main channel of Geruwa River at the western edge of the Park and not in the interior of the Park. As well, fishing was prohibited in areas where dolphins and crocodiles had been located, and in the wetlands used by wildlife. No fishing to be permitted during the four months of the fish spawning season. Applications for fishing licenses would be approved after the joint recommendation of the president of the relevant BZUC as well as the SSBU, a community based organisation of Sonahas registered with the BNP administration (see subsection 8.5.3).

While this was a moment of delight for many Sonahas, some found the conditions listed in the licenses difficult to comply with. The Sonahas from several villages of

Daulatpur, outside of the BZ area, were not granted license. They felt that they had been excluded. The Park officials maintained that, because they resided in villages beyond the jurisdiction of BNP, they were not entitled to fishing permits. Hence, the granting of fishing licences also triggered dissensions between the Sonahas residing in the BZ and those outside the BZ.

This granting of fishing licenses was short lived. Within a span of three months, on May 10, 2008, all fishing licenses were rescinded and further renewal and granting of the licenses was halted unilaterally by the Park administration. As stated in subsection 7.5.1, this was triggered by the involvement of two Sonaha youths in the poaching of a rhino horn resulting in heightened mistrust of the Sonahas by the Park administration. Martin and Martin (2010, p. 50) reported, that a rhino was shot inside the Park by “a gang of Soncha [*sic*] tribal people” and that “a Tharu tribal leader organised a gang of four Sonchas [*sic*] to kill a rhino”. Local Sonaha leaders from the same village of Saijana deny the claim of rhino killing by Sonaha youth outright but acknowledge that Sonahas were complicit in the uprooting of the horn from the dead rhino, and that it was traded to the poacher by these youngsters.

#### **9.3.4 The movement revitalises (2010-2012)**

A Sonaha woman expressed her sentiments on the existing restrictions of the Park as:

If the park does not give us licenses when we are begging [pleading] we will have to acquire them even if we have to seize them [by pressurizing]. If we all approach [confront] the park, maybe one brother will die but another brother will still be alive (Interview, March 21, 2011).

Between mid-2008 and 2010, the Sonahas’ collective actions diminished considerably. The leaders of the NSS provided a few explanations for this. First, the direct support from the NGOs for their movement slackened when the tenure of their project ended in 2008. Second, the leadership of the NSS that had spearheaded the actions earlier weakened because of internal discords and tussles between the leaders from different Sonaha villages. Third, the Geruwa has been running low in water and therefore fishing and gold panning takes place in the Karnali River outside the Park

(see subsection 10.2.4). A Sonaha leader lamented this state of affairs during an interview:

Now the river is big on our side [the Karnali], there is no need for fishing licenses, so the people [his fellow Sonahas] do not see their value now, but when the river goes back to the Geruwa, and when they can't fish freely there then they will realise the importance of our *andolan* [movement, protest] (Interview, April 28, 2011).

From mid-2010, another NGO called the Human Rights and Environment Concern Centre (HURECOC) which was working on the promotion and protection of human rights in the Bardia began to engage with SCAM-Bardia and the NSS in collaboration with the CDO. The revival of NGO support for the NSS triggered further actions (see Table 9.1). In late 2010, the NSS led a delegation to the Park headquarters and submitted an appeal to reactivate the fishing licenses. Later in 2011, Sonahas' fishing issues also surfaced in a joint appeal by SCAM-Bardia and the BZMC on the plight of BZ residents which was submitted to the forest ministry through the Park administration (Rai, 2011).

#### ***Temporary concessions in 2010***

In 2010, the Sonahas from Saijana approached the Park administration for fishing licenses with the support of the local BZ Users' Committee. The Sonaha leaders there had maintained diplomatic and tactical relations with the Park administration and the WTLCP officials although they were resentful of the Park rules. In late 2010, the Park administration issued four hour fishing permits to them and, later, one time week long gold panning permits for the rivers outside the Park. However the local Sonaha leaders regarded such fishing permits as impractical because "... it is a very little time. It takes one hour to reach our fishing ground and another one hour to get back. And we were told to report the nearby post every time we got back after fishing..." (Interview, June 11, 2011). This licence was eventually returned to the Park office. The assistant park warden also informed me in an interview (2011) that such permits were issued pragmatically and that this was not based on any policy decision. Additionally, the Sonahas from Rajipur were discontented that their fellow leaders from Saijana had negotiated for these permits without informing them and the NSS.

### ***Mass rally, demonstration and dialogues in 2011***

A gathering of three dozen Sonahas from several villages in the delta, on 23 February, 2011, endorsed the idea of organising a second Sonaha *Sammeylan* (mass conference), to revive the NSS and to put pressure on the Park authorities for the resumption of fishing licenses. Leaders from Rajipur called on their fellow Sonahas in the delta to take part in a mass action that they called a ‘Cycle Rally’ to the Park headquarters.

On February 28, a rally of Sonahas from all the villages in the delta, leaders and activists of SCAM-Bardia, and the supporting NGOs converged and thereafter marched to the Park headquarters holding placards and chanting slogans. After they were halted at the main gate, the protesters loudly chanted, “Sonaha should be allowed to fish. We need our fishing licenses; fishing and gold washing are our traditional occupations.” When they were permitted entry to the Park headquarters, I observed the following dialogue between the Park warden and the protesting Sonahas (Field note, February 28, 2011), see Photo 9.1:

The Park warden: Now what is the matter?

A Sonaha leader (Saijana): We have come for our licenses

The warden: Haven’t I issued licenses recently? [Temporary permits issued to the Sonahas from Saijana]

A leader: No Sir! We gave it back to your office! How can we take a license to fish for only three or four hours?

A leader (Rajipur): We want license to use *Chaundhi* [gill nets].

The warden: That cannot be done, it is not there in the regulations and only traditional fishing practices with cast nets can be allowed.

A leader: We want this kind of license to be renewed [displaying a copy of the earlier fishing license].

The warden read the license carefully and gave a positive gesture. Copies of the earlier licenses issued by the Park administration acted as evidence for the Sonahas that the current warden found it hard to dismiss. Then a Sonaha leader from Daulatpur VDC (outside the BZ) intervened:

Sir what about us? We are also Sonahas and we also want fishing licenses. We also used to live in the buffer zone in the past but later settled in Daulatpur after the *Nikunja* [national park] was formed. We also fish in the Karnali and Geruwa.



**Photo 9.1 Sonaha leaders in a dialogue with the Park warden after their demonstration. Credit: Author**

The warden responded, “If the village is outside the area of the buffer zone then we cannot issue fishing license for Sonahas there” (Field note, February 28, 2011). The leader reacted again “If that is the case, then your policy will bring divisions among the Sonahas.” Meanwhile, a Sonaha woman from Rajipur raised her voice, “Sir! What about Sonaha women and gold washing?” The warden asked, “What is the problem with gold washing?” The woman voiced, “*Ban Samiti* [a community forest user group]...sometimes creates problems when we wash gold in the river banks. Golden dust is swept away by the river to India downstream. We ordinary people die of starvation.”

The warden then sounded sympathetic to gold panning. In the case of fishing licenses he assured the Sonaha that he would address the matter in another meeting with leaders from the relevant BZUCs. Meanwhile, the dialogue continued. Mistrust of the warden on the part of the Sonahas was evident, especially after the incident of

rhinoceros horn poaching by Sonaha youths. The warden was critical of the modern fishing practices of the Sonaha, the use of gill nets and of their impact on aquatic species. During my interview with the warden, he claimed that issuing the fishing licences would further deplete the fish stocks in the river and objected to the idea of permitting a modern practice. He strictly favoured the traditional fishing method of cast nets.

In the February 28th dialogue, the Park warden expressed his mistrust of the Sonahas as follows:

Since the suspension of the fishing licenses two years ago not a single rhino has been killed. If, after the fishing licenses are reissued to you, even a single rhino is killed, then the fishing licenses will be suspended again....What if a dolphin or crocodile is trapped in your fishing nets since you fish at night, and sometimes the nets are left unattended throughout the night? What if your license is misused by others? We cannot always monitor and check your licenses?

The Sonaha leaders argued that their fishing practices and use of gill nets were not harmful, and they asserted that they are not involved in destructive fishing practices and are rather sensitive to *samrakchyan* (conservation).

### ***Revival of the NSS in 2011***

During my 2011 fieldwork, the issue of which Sonaha village would host the second Sonaha Sammeylan as well as a general convention of the NSS triggered contention among the Sonahas. Sonaha leaders from Daulatpur VDC wanted to host it at the village of Murghauwa, since the first one had already been organised at Rajipur. They were not in favour of a general convention during the planned conference since the president of the NSS at that time was from their own village (Murghauwa). The Sonahas from Rajipur were arguing for a revival of NSS leadership claiming that the current president was incapable of leading their movement. They also opposed the idea of hosting such an event at Murghauwa, a village of Christianised Sonahas. “How can Christian Sonaha demonstrate our sanskriti [culture], Sonaha cultural dances and songs? They have given up all our rituals after their religious

conversion”, was the response of one of the opposing leaders (Interview, March 17, 2011).

The Rajipur Sonahas had stronger ties with the supporting NGOs and therefore organised the second Sammeylan on March 30-31, 2011, at Rajipur. The Sonahas from Saijana (also a Christian dominated) and Daulatpur VDC boycotted the meeting. A new leadership group of the NSS was formed. The new president declared licenses for fishing and gold panning from the Park and recognition of their ethnic identity as the priorities of the NSS. A convention of SCAM among the activists and community representatives from different parts of the country coincided with the Sonaha conference. The two Sonaha leaders from Rajipur also negotiated their representation on the executive committee of SCAM hoping to garner support and continued cooperation with SCAM in their ongoing struggle.

On June 23, 2011, the new leadership of the NSS supported by the NGOs led an eight member delegation, constituting the leaders from Rajipur, and youths from the other villages, to the forest ministry in Kathmandu. During a dialogue with the forest minister, which I observed, the Sonahas handed over a list of demands. These included their demand to be listed by the government as an indigenous people; securing the rights to their ancestral occupations in the national park and community forests; provision of alternative livelihood opportunities, and the conservation of their language and culture. The minister expressed his support for their cause and arranged a meeting between the Sonahas and the Director General (DG) of the DNPWC. The NSS president told me later that the DG suggested that they lodge an application with regard to the fishing licenses and he diplomatically responded “We will speak to the warden... If the warden wishes he can even forbid us entering the park”, in response to their demands (Interview, June 23, 2011).

### **9.3.5 The counter discourse of *adhikar* (rights)**

The collective actions of the Sonahas exhibit a strong sense of counter discourse and the assertion of their rights in the context of nature conservation and the national park. The Sonaha leaders and activists increasingly use the language of andolan (movement) when referring to their collective actions (see Table 9.1) and claim for their rights by using expressions such as “The state has snatched our rights”. They admit that since their andolan there has been increased consciousness about rights and ethnic identity among the Sonahas. “Fishing and gold panning are our rights; we have our rights in Nikunja [the Park]. Nikunja cannot deprive us of our rights”, as one Sonaha leader claimed (Interview, April 28, 2011).

A Christian Sonaha fisherman from Murghauwa (Daulatpur) expressed his sentiments on rights and movement:

We have been waging andolan but this has not yielded any results so far. So now we have to do andolan in Kathmandu. Even if NGOs do not support us.....we can raise voluntary funds from our own homes and villages. This is for the sake of our collective rights (Interview, March 4, 2012).

The Sonahas’ many years of passive as well as active resistance have been fuelled and triggered by their livelihood crisis as a result of the Park restrictions and harassment from the Park authorities (Chapter Seven). A strong political and economic dimension to their struggles in terms of conflicts over resource use and access is evident. However, over the years, and as a result of the Sonahas’ increased interactions and networking with civil society groups and NGOs, their everyday sufferings with respect to the Park, have been increasingly couched and framed within the discourse of *Janajati* rights its violations, and therefore of social justice and democracy in relation to conservation. (In the thesis, I use the term “*Janajati*”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The Janajati people are the distinct ethno-linguistic groups who do not belong either to the dominant high caste hill Hindu (Brahmins and Chetri), the so called lower caste groups (Dalits) in the Hindu caste hierarchy or Madheshi Brahmins, the Chetris and Dalits in the lowland Tarai. These people are speakers of various distinct Tibeto Burman languages. Historically they have faced ongoing inequalities and discrimination by the state. Many of them are classified by the state collectively as indigenous nationalities. (Also see section 9.4)

to mean the ethnic groups considered to be the indigenous peoples of Nepal, also see section 9.4) The counter discourse of the rights of the Sonahas over their customary occupations and their use of natural resources in and around the national park has been advanced through their social movements. This contests the mainstream national park discourse.

### **9.3.6 The mass media as an avenue for counter discourse**

The mass media have also amplified the Sonahas' voices and plights. When the Sonahas lodged their application for listing as a Janajati in Kathmandu, a Nepali national daily, covered the news referring to them as a "minority Sonaha ethnic group" ("Sonaha Pratinidhi," 2007). The news item highlighted their hardships since the creation of the Park and their demands concerning their river based occupations. Another national daily described their livelihood crisis as well as their assertion of an ethnicity separate from that of the Tharu (Panahi, 2007). While one national daily in English portrayed their disappearing ethnic identity ("Disappearing Sonaha," 2011), another, in a featured news item, covered the Sonahas' predicaments as a result of the state's interventions in biodiversity conservation (Tamang, 2012b). Likewise, a former field manager of the WTLCP, who was perceived to be sympathetic to the Sonahas, wrote in the national daily paper about the national park restrictions on the Sonahas and stressed the need to recognise their occupational rights, and the Sonahas' participation in protected area governance and management (A. P. Ojha, 2008). His views in favour of the Sonahas as a former staff member of a government managed ICDP can be seen as a bold statement.

The Sonahas informed me that, Krishnasar F.M 94 MHz, a community radio, aired a dialogue between the Sonahas and the authorities at the Park headquarters, under its public discussion program called Sajha Sawal (Common questions) in the early 2012. The Sonahas who participated in the dialogue claimed that the assistant park warden had remarked that "...fishing licenses were issued to the Sonahas out of sympathy" (Interview, February 26, 2012). Likewise, during my fieldwork, on the afternoon of March 27, 2012, Fulbari F.M radio broadcasted news highlighting the Sonahas' livelihood crisis due to the Park restrictions, their ancestral occupations under threats and their current struggles for recognition of their ethnic identity. The radio also aired excerpts of an interview with the NSS president.

*Ankhijhyal*, a popular weekly video or television magazine produced by the Federation of Environmental Journalists in Nepal (NEFEJ), in its 780th episode featured the lives and struggles of the Sonahas for the second time (Tamang, 2012a). This programme was first broadcasted on a national television on June 13, 2011. The documentary portrays landless Sonahas (in the fertile area), their changing semi-mobile lifestyle and the challenges to their river based livelihoods due to the Park restrictions on the one hand and the growth of community managed forests on the other. It describes the Sonahas' hardships with respect to the BNP. It depicts the Sonahas as an endangered ethnic group at risk of extinction in a few years (Tamang, 2012a).

At the time of my 2011 fieldwork, the Ankhijhyal team visited Rajipur and spent a day interviewing and filming the Sonahas, their occupations, rituals, festive songs and dances. The fact that these would be aired on a national television excited the Sonahas and prompted them to perform Sonaha songs and dances before the journalists. One Sonaha man remarked, “Let’s dance and sing songs; we have to demonstrate Sonaha culture” (Field note, March 19, 2011). The leaders of the NSS perceived this as an opportunity to publicise their struggles and cultural practices to the wider public and the government, and hence as supporting their andolan.

### **9.3.7 Summary**

This trajectory of various forms of organised collective actions by the Sonahas shows how they have been exercising collective agency to reclaim the rights to their river based livelihoods, and increasingly, to their cultural identity (see the next section), notwithstanding the challenges of intra-Sonaha disputes and dynamics especially among those within and outside of BZ, and between those adopting Hinduism and Christianity. Over the past decade or more, they have been resisting the national park regime through a wide range of actions by allying with civil society groups and NGOs (see Figure 9.1) to negotiate and secure their rights over customary occupations. The mass media has occasionally articulated the Sonaha counter discourse of adhikar. The counter discourse embodied in their struggles for fishing and gold panning rights also entail a political economy of Sonaha resistance.

#### **9.4 Sonaha consciousness and assertions of cultural and ethnic identity**

The Sonaha resistance to the national park regime is integral to the broader politics, of the construction, consciousness and affirmation of their cultural and ethnic identity. These issues have to be located in the national context of the growth of indigenous people's movements and ethnic discourse in Nepal. The Sonahas consider and identify themselves as *Adivasi Janajati* native to the Karnali river delta (see Chapter Six). As noted by Onta (2006), there are definitional debates and politics over the term “Adivasi Janajati” which denotes the indigenous peoples of Nepal. In 2002, the government of Nepal passed the National Foundation for the Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) Act which defines indigenous nationalities as:

a tribe or community as mentioned in the schedule having its own mother tongue and traditional rites and customs, distinct cultural identity, distinct social structure and written or unwritten history” (NFDIN, 2003, p. 32).

Collective identity; one's own social structure, traditional homelands (geography); absence of a decisive role in the politics and government of modern Nepal; being a native people of Nepal; and one's self declaration as Janajati are some of their important characteristics. The Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities (NEFIN), a national federation of various Janajati groups in Nepal, defines indigenous peoples as:

- “First settlers prior to the formation of the Gorkha and Nepal states”;
- “Dominated group...and having no representation in state organs”;
- “Not included in the Hindu caste system”;
- “They have their own language, culture and religion different from the ruler”;
- “Listed by the NFDIN Act.” ([www.nefin.org.np](http://www.nefin.org.np))

The NFDIN Act, 2002 also founded an exclusive and semi-autonomous institution also known as the NFDIN to look after the affairs of Janajati and to work for their development and socio-economic improvement relative to the mainstream of Nepalese society. This law currently provides a legal recognition to 59 Janajati

groups listed in the schedule. These are categorised as endangered, highly marginalised, marginalised, disadvantaged and advanced, and they are located over several geographical locations such as the mountains, hills, inner Tarai and Tarai (O. Gurung, 2010; Onta, 2006). The Sonahas are still excluded from this listing.

#### **9.4.1 Attempts towards reclaiming ethnic identity**

The Rajipur Declaration that resulted from the first Sonaha conference back in 2006 appealed to the government among others to:

- “Identify Sonahas as adivasi janajati including both Hindu and Christianised.”
- Take necessary steps “...to protect their language and culture.” (S. Jana, 2008, p. 23)

In the wake of the Sonahas’ emerging movement, in 2007, the leaders of NSS visited Kathmandu, the power centre of Nepal, for the first time in their lives and lodged an application at the office of NFDIN. I witnessed this as an NGO observer. The application sought the recognition of Sonahas’ ethnicity and their listing as a distinct Adivasi Janajati in the schedule of the NFDIN Act. The role of the NGOs supporting the Sonahas at that time was influential in encouraging the Sonahas to engage in this process. The supporting document to the application, entitled ‘Sonaha: Ethnic Introduction’ that the NSS leaders included states the Sonahas’ self-claim as being *loponmukh jati* (an endangered ethnic group). It also articulated their assertion of their distinct ethnic identity, their cultural practices, rituals, festivities, costumes and ancestral occupations as being distinct from those of other ethnic groups in Nepal (Nepal Sonaha Sangh, 2007).

On several occasions since then, on their visits to the capital city, Sonaha leaders have met with leaders of NEFIN. NEFIN has been spearheading the Janajati groups’ socio-political movements and advocating their rights since its inception in 1991<sup>22</sup>. During their meetings with leaders of NEFIN they lobbied in support of their application for government recognition of their ethnic identity. D. K. Ghimire (2007)

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<sup>22</sup> For a trajectory of the Janajati movement in Nepal, see O. Gurung, 2010 and Onta, 2006.

also quotes the president of NEFIN as acknowledging “Sonaha and many other communities are yet to be recognised as indigenous nationalities...We are demanding that the government set up a task force consisting of experts for the enlistment of all excluded communities” (p. 13).

In 2009, in response to the pressure generated from the Janajati movement nationally, the government constituted a high level task force to revise the existing schedule and classification. This task force after field based research and consultations, submitted its report with a recommendation for a revised schedule of 81 Janajati groups, including the Sonahas, to the government in 2010 (O. Gurung, 2010). This awaits a government decision at the time of writing of this thesis.

However, during my fieldwork, I noted immense curiosity and uncertainty among the Sonahas as to whether or not they were included in the revised listing suggested by the task force. Sonaha leaders from Daulatpur held the view that the study team deployed by the task force visited the village of Murghauwa and a Sonaha settlement at Kanchanpur, in far west Nepal. They also claimed to have interacted with the coordinator of the task force during the consultation at the city of Nepalgunj. In a telephone interview (2011), a member of the study team affirmed to me that the study team had recommended the inclusion of the Sonahas in the revised schedule<sup>23</sup>.

The NSS leaders told me that they recently managed to include their demand for Janajati listing in the 11 points joint declaration that came out of the gathering of endangered Adivasi Janajati groups, in the district of Kailali (April 26-27, 2013). This gathering was facilitated by the Lawyers Association for Human Rights of Nepalese Indigenous Peoples (LAHURNIP). Meanwhile the NSS has managed to acquire a recommendation from the offices of District Development Committee and VDC citing their distinct ethnic identity and their habitation in Bardia. Since 2011, Food-first Information and Action Network (FIAN) Nepal, an NGO working on rights to food has been providing occasional support to the NSS leaders advocating the listing of the Sonahas as a Janajati.

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<sup>23</sup> In 2012 several NGOs such as the NGO Federation of Nepalese Indigenous Nationalities and FIAN Nepal were in touch with the NSS leaders to support the cause of Sonahas’ listing as Janajati.

#### **9.4.2 Discourse and consciousness leading to expressions of ethnic identity**

“Our fight is not only with the Park warden, it is with the government [Nepalese state] too for recognition of our ethnicity. We have to pressurise the government” (Field note, April 21, 2011). This statement by a Sonaha leader during a village meeting of NSS articulates their sentiments of ethnic identity. In this meeting another Sonaha leader strongly argued, “There should not be divisions among the Sonahas. We have to unite for our ethnic identity and listing”. In another instance, the NSS president asserted:

Our ethnicity should be put on the official list of recognised indigenous peoples of Nepal. We are a distinct jati [ethnic group], our costumes, culture, rituals, language, religion, food habits, living style, all are distinct, and they do not resemble any other jati (Interview, February 29, 2012).

During my fieldwork I noticed that the Sonahas were increasingly adopting the discourse of rights, and that there was an increasing level of consciousness and affirmation of their distinct ethnic identity, cultural practices and language despite the differences between the Hindu and Christianised Sonahas. Terms such as Adivasi Janajati, *jatiya pahichan* (ethnic identity), *sanskriti* (culture), *sanskritik pahichan* (cultural identity) and *jati suchikrit* (listing of ethnicity) have become common vocabulary among the Sonahas, and, in particular, of their leaders and activists.

Hindu leaders and activists of the NSS often expressed their concerns about the changes and erosion of cultural practices and identity, especially the rapid disappearance of their ancestral occupations and languages. They feared that the younger generations and future generations would be unfamiliar with their traditions and culture which they saw as including language, songs, dances, festivities, rituals and customary occupations. Such concerns and the realisation of their endangered status have motivated some of the young leaders to engage in this evolving cultural movement.

In one village gathering of the Sonahas, in 2011, I witnessed a discussion of cultural identity in addition to that of their livelihood crisis. There was general concern that

the wider population of Nepal was unaware of their distinct ethnicity. One Sonaha leader stated, “Other jati are known today but not us. Our jati is still confounded with other jati”. Encouraged by NGO activists, this leader proposed the creation of a Sonaha *Sangralaya* (museum) in the village and stressed, “Museum would be good for our ethnic identity, we could display our fishing nets, canoes, ornaments, our female and male costumes, gold panning equipment and tools” (Field note, February 13, 2011).

At one gathering of the SCAM-Bardia in 2011, at which the Park warden was present, a leader of NSS stressed the rights of Sonahas in relation to their ethnic identity as a Janajati. The leader used a jargon of “ILO 169”, the ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples (No.169), which among other things, enshrines the rights of indigenous peoples to natural resources and which Nepal had adopted in 2007. This leader later told me that he learnt about this when he attended a gathering of networking among highly marginalised Janajati groups in Nepal which was supported by an international NGO.

#### **9.4.3 The discourse of ethnic and cultural identity: percolation and reinforcement**

Several of the factors which have contributed to the localisation of the Janajati discourse have therefore shaped the collective consciousness and construction of the Sonaha ethnic identity. They have also found expression in their struggle against the national park regime. There has been significant advancement in the debates and agendas of Janajati in the contemporary socio-political transformation and democratic transition in Nepal. Janajati movements nationally have been vigorously advocating political representation, social inclusion, ethnic rights and the empowerment of excluded and historically marginalised Janajati groups especially since the 1990s. Janajati leaders and activists have also been advocating an ethnicity or identity based federal governance structure as opposed to the current unitary and centralised Nepali state. The national political discourse on ethnic identity, ethnic right and related actions have helped to politicise the Sonahas. Likewise, the mobilisations of the Tharu and their political actions in Bardia have also influenced the Sonahas.

State incentives to the endangered and minority Janajati groups such as the Raute nomadic peoples have also stimulated consciousness of the Sonahas. In 2006, a directive issued by the Ministry of Local Development provided an impetus towards the creation of Adivasi Janajati District Coordination Committees that provided an arena for Janajati groups to influence and negotiate the distribution of resources for development projects through the district administration of the government. The government has made provision for allocating development grants to Janajati at both the district and the village level. Based on such provisions, and with the help of political activists and NGO workers, the leaders of NSS have also occasionally managed to negotiate minor grants from the district government for activities related to economic development. Sonahas from Murghauwa village managed to acquire a petty grant from the Daulatpur VDC office through their community organisation named the Highly Marginalised Endangered Sonaha Society.

The NEFIN over the years has also expanded and intensified its networks, structure and popular base throughout the country. Along with its district level structure, it has also been establishing and promoting VDC level structures. Tharu political and social activists affiliated to such bodies have organised village meetings which exposed the Sonahas to the discourses of Janajati and their rights. Moreover, rights based NGOs working closely with the Sonahas have provided support and exposure to the Sonahas to participate in training programs, policy discussions, interaction programs and dialogues with various stakeholders including civil society organisations and politicians. Orientation sessions by the NGOs activists on Janajati rights issues have been influential for the Sonahas.

The NSS has also been instrumental in perpetuating the Janajati discourse among the Sonahas in their struggle against the national park regime. Likewise, mass audio-visual media, mainly F.M radio and television have informed the Sonahas and exposed them to national discussions, issues, and movements as well as to the negotiations of Janajati organisations and political groups and related news and events. The Sonahas have had numerous encounters with journalists on various occasions both inside and outside their villages, and this too has reinforced their ethnic identity and consciousness.

#### **9.4.4 Reconstructing the ancestral occupation-culture-ethnic identity of the Sonahas**

A former NSS president from Murghauwa who has adopted Christianity remarked “It is because of these occupations [fishing and gold panning], that we have not been able to uplift our lives, we are still backward” (Interview, February 26, 2012). He held the view that the Sonahas should move beyond their ancestral occupations in contrast to the sentiments of the NSS leaders from Rajipur. This leader however averred that government recognition of their ethnicity is essential so that they become entitled to claim state incentives and privileges accorded to marginalised ethnic groups in Nepal.

Hindu Sonaha leaders from Rajipur shared similar expectations in relation to the listing of ethnicity but they considered the perspective of the Christiansed Sonaha above to be regressive. One leader asserted:

Our purkhauli pesa [ancestral occupation] is the foundation of our ethnic identity. If we are demanding with the government to be listed as Janajati then this very ancestral occupation is important; we should not give them up without viable alternatives (Interview, March 25, 2011).

Another Sonaha leader then remarked that, in addition to the harassments by the Park authorities, he was also motivated in their movement with a sense of urgency and a fear of losing their ancestral occupations and by concerns over, as he put it “how to secure this occupation seized by the state, how to make our jati known to others and how do we sensitise our fellow members in our society?” (Interview, March 25, 2011). Most of the Sonaha leaders whom I interviewed expressed strong attachment to their ancestral occupations and customary practices, their meanings and their close associations with the identity and culture of the Sonahas. The founding president of the NSS affirmed, “Fishing and gold panning are our ancestral occupations. These are what identify us as Sonahas and these are also our culture” (Interview, March 25, 2011). Hence, for many Sonahas, their customary occupations constitute part of their collective identity and history, and integral to Sonaha culture.

I also noticed during my fieldwork, that, while the Sonahas do not reject the alternative livelihood options rather they are sceptical of the value and utility of some of the options offered to them (as discussed in Chapter Eight). The Sonahas also contest the perceptions of those Park officials who consider the Sonaha occupation of fishing as being unsustainable and therefore favour alternative livelihood options pushing the Sonahas away from the rivers (and the Park). The assistant park warden who was critical of the NGOs that were advocating the Sonaha rights argued:

There is a common view that a Sonaha's son should be a fishing Sonaha. This is not healthy...rather it is meaningless... Few elders did not have other options.... but for the young ones we should think of other occupations. The moment we debate that even the youth should also get fishing licenses....it hints at an attitude that says - you remain in the same situation where you were, you do not progress, simply continue to fish....their culture [the Sonaha lifestyle] ... should also be diverted. There should be improvement in their food habits; they should be economically uplifted (Interview, April 24, 2012).

On numerous occasions, Sonahas indicated that, if the government made adequate arrangements for their livelihood with sufficient land or viable economic opportunities, they would relinquish fishing and gold panning. A Sonaha leader from Saijana, where all the Sonahas are landless, also claimed, "If we have adequate land [3380 square meters] we won't go to India or even fish in the river" (Interview, June 11, 2011). Another leader from the same village also indicated, in the face of ongoing uncertainties about the potential relocation of the village, that they would only agree to leave their current place if sufficient land was made over to them elsewhere, whether or not it was away from the river<sup>24</sup>, even though they acknowledged their relationship with the river and their customary occupations.

With the encounters and appropriation of the counter discourses of Janajati rights, ethnic and cultural identities, the Sonahas have been reconstructing and reclaiming these ancestral occupations and the meanings that are attached to these identities. In

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<sup>24</sup> There were ongoing discussions at Saijana about the local demands if the Park relocates their village along with two other flood prone villages nearby. There were suspicions and uncertainties whether the Park would expand a wildlife corridor created after their relocation.

part, their claims of distinct ethnic identity are implicitly based upon the meanings that they derive from their ancestral and customary occupations, which reproduce and reinforce the Sonahas' politics and counter discourse to the mainstream conservation discourse. However, while there is a common consciousness of their ethnic identity, there are differing perceptions of and affinities to the ancestral occupations among the Sonaha subgroups.

#### **9.4.5 Summary**

The Sonahas have increasingly appropriated and adopted discourses of cultural and ethnic identity coupled with that of Janajati rights as they encounter them in their everyday lives. These are being asserted in their socio-political movements. Several factors, actors and institutions have contributed to shape the Sonaha collective consciousness, the construction of their ethnic identities and their articulations. The Nepalese state's exclusion of the Sonahas in the government list of Janajati has surfaced as one of their twin agendas in their ongoing struggles for fishing and gold panning rights. The assertion and politics of their ethnic identity have thus become important in advancing their rights claims with the national park regime and their confrontation with the mainstream conservation discourse. Linkages to their ancestral occupations, ethnic identity and culture have been increasingly asserted to advance their claims for distinct occupational rights integral to their everyday livelihoods.

### **9.5 Summary and conclusion**

In this chapter, I demonstrated how the Sonahas are resisting the national park regime and the Nepalese state in several ways. First, despite the Park's restrictions and the physical risks involved, many of them continue to confront Park regime and rules in their everyday lives, albeit secretly, and in an evasive and generally non-confrontational manner. Their mobility on the rivers, although constrained at present, by the Park management vigilance and restrictions also marks their resistance as argued by Cresswell (1993). Second, with the backing of civil society organisations and activists under the new democratic political environment, and regardless of their

marginalised and minority society status, the Sonahas have been resisting the Park regime through various organised and non-violent collective actions.

The Sonahas resistance is directed at the national park management authorities (warden, army, game scouts, and rangers) and the associated restrictive regime that denies their fishing and gold panning access to the rivers. Hence, their pragmatic collective actions and rights assertion focuses primarily upon obtaining concessions or permits rather than on claims of regaining and reclaiming control over their ancestral riverine territory despite its deeper meanings, relationship and memory for the Sonahas. Rather than an outright rejection and challenge to the mainstream discourse of conservation, the Sonahas have partially appropriated this discourse (as depicted in Chapter Eight). However, the Sonahas have simultaneously appropriated both the mainstream conservation discourse and the counter discourse of Janajati rights in the national park.

As I showed in this chapter, their ancestral occupations, and their long standing history in the delta, are increasingly reconstructed as rights of Janajati and are associated with their claims of identity as an endangered ethnic group. The Sonaha politics of natural resource and livelihood rights thus merges with their ongoing claims and struggles for ethnic and cultural identity.

# **Chapter Ten: Conclusions and implications**

## **10.1 Introduction**

In this concluding chapter, I will summarise the answers to my research questions, highlight my key findings and analytical insights. I indicate the contribution that this thesis makes to the academic literature, to the broader field and area of research related to the topic under consideration and discusses the academic and policy implications of my work.

## **10.2 Summary of key findings**

### **10.2.1 The Sonaha ancestral territory, way of life and biocultural space**

The first research question, namely how are the Sonahas' experiences and lives related to and implicated in the river and riparian landscapes in the lower Karnali river delta was addressed in Chapter Six. The Sonahas recollections of their long standing presence and interactions with the lower Karnali River delta indicate a much longer history and occupancy therein than that of the majority Dangaura Tharu subgroup. The Karnali River and its major eastern channel, the Geruwa River and the riparian areas in and around the delta – which I have termed the riverscape, constitute the Sonaha ancestral territory. The Sonahas' history, their semi mobile and customary way of life involving the river based livelihoods of artisanal fishing and manual gold panning are practices which have forged deep connections, relationships and meanings with this territory and its natural environment.

This customary way of life of the Sonahas and their control over the lands and waters in their ancestral territory is increasingly mediated by the Nepalese state in the recent years. This has also long been shaped by the state induced feudal landlordism and in-migration since the 19th century. Equally pertinent have been the Sonahas' interactions with the Tharu indigenous peoples of the Tarai, and the hill migrants in the delta. Both in-migration and the loss of Sonaha lands to Tharu and immigrant landlords increased after 1950. However, over this recent period, the Sonahas' lives have also been significantly altered by state control of the forests and by the

management of their territory for conservation purposes. More recent significant impacts have included: the rise of local community managed forestry in the delta; declining fish stocks and changing river flows; conversion of some Sonahas to Christianity and an increasing trend of Sonaha outmigration.

Nevertheless, this thesis demonstrates that many Sonaha still complement their residence in predominantly agrarian hamlets in and around the delta with a semi mobile way of life encompassing the use of customary Dera (temporary shelters) on the riparian areas for extended periods of time (up to one month). Although this practice is less common than hitherto, close interaction with the riverine and forest ecosystem is still integral to the Sonaha way of life for a significant proportion of their population in the delta (see sections 6.4 and 6.5). These customary occupations contribute significantly to their livelihoods since the majority of them are landless or only possess minimal landholdings. This thesis provides new information about the Sonahas' unique system of governing and managing their gold panning areas which are considered to be both common property and sacred (see subsection 6.4.3).

### ***The riverscape as the biocultural space of the Sonahas***

Based on the understanding, worldviews and experiences of the Sonahas, I argued that this riverscape cannot be reduced to or be simplified as a natural or a conservation landscape in the popular sense. Sonahas' intimate connections to and interactions with the riverscape cannot be limited to the issues of access and use of natural resources although they are vital to their livelihoods. "Lives in the river and riparian areas" and "sheltering on the river islands", as commonly expressed by the Sonahas, have different socio-cultural meanings, values and attributes, and are central to the lived and cultural experiences of the Sonahas.

I argued that the riverscape is understood by the Sonahas in a holistic sense as a perceived-conceived-lived space, with physical-mental-sociocultural and symbolic attributes and dynamisms. This is a nature-culture hybrid constitutive of the Sonahas' epistemology, ontology and cosmology. I therefore reconceptualised this as a biocultural space (see section 6.7), a concept and a reality which have been marginalised by the dominant conservation regime and its discourse. By unravelling

the Sonahas' unique connections and relationships to the natural environment of the riverscape this thesis complements the literatures on the multiple and complex relationships and cultural practices of indigenous peoples embedded in natural environments (e.g., Gow, 1995; F. Jana, 2009; Runk, 2009).

### **10.2.2 Conservation impacts and violence**

How have state interventions and mainstream conservation discourse impacted on the lives of the Sonahas in the context of the Bardia National Park and its buffer zone? This second research question relates to the material presented in Chapters Seven and Eight. The national park policies and actions of the conservationist state, especially the military deployments since the mid-1970s have alienated the Sonahas from their ancestral territories and dismantled their relationship with the riverscape.

These policies and actions have had direct material impacts on the lives of the Sonahas. The restrictions on fishing and gold panning, as well as on their mobility and access to sites of refuge in and around the rivers in the areas under the Park's jurisdiction and oversight have caused immense economic hardship for the Sonahas. They have faced serious ill treatment and harassment from the Park guards. Their possessions have been confiscated and they have incurred monetary fines and even been held in custody for fishing and gold panning in the Park and BZ rivers for contravening the Park rules. The economic impacts of the Park regime had pushed many Sonahas into oppressive bonded labour systems and has triggered out-migration, both seasonal and extended, particularly to India (see Chapter Seven).

However, tensions between the Park guards and the Sonahas have eased in the last few years in spite of occasional raids and interceptions of Sonahas by the Park patrols in the rivers. However, this is largely because of changes in the main river flow, and thus the Sonahas' fishing and gold panning activities, have been concentrated in the western part of the delta outside of the Park jurisdiction. Should the dominant river flow return to the River Geruwa at the edge of the Park, tensions are likely to increase once more.

Findings from this study support the evidence emerging globally on the negative consequences of the policies and actions with respect to protected area management on the livelihoods of poor, marginalised groups and indigenous peoples (see subsection 1.4.2 and 1.4.3). The thesis offers case specific evidence on the loss of the Sonahas' unique gold panning commons (Kafthans) and associated cultural practices, and their access to rivers as a tragedy of enclosures of commons by conservation regime argued by Bryant & Bailey (1997) and (Neumann, 2004b) elsewhere.

This thesis advances the work of Neumann (2001) and Peluso (1993) by producing empirical evidence on the negative impacts of the national park regime on the Sonahas that suggests an occurrence of conservation violence. The violence backed by the dominant discourse of conservation delegitimises the Sonaha way of life; marginalises the Sonahas and their meanings, values, constructs, representations and lived experiences of river and riparian space. This nexus between conservation violence and discourse is discussed in the next subsection below.

Likewise, uneasy relationships between the Sonahas and non-Sonaha local youth involved in conservation and anti-poaching campaigns supported by the Park administration and its conservation partners indicate that the effective community based anti-poaching strategy has aggravated local tensions (section 7.4). I argued that this initiative is a localisation of state coercive conservation in the Park Buffer Zone (BZ) since local actors are policing and enforcing the national park rules and policies in ways that are sometimes against the interests of the Sonahas. The fact that while some groups chose to extend the conservationist state others contest signals a deep division in the society itself. Violent conservation regime reinforces and is also entrenched by such societal divisions.

### **10.2.3 Conservation discourse and violence**

Furthermore, in relation to the second research question, I examined mainstream conservation discourse and its implications for the Sonahas in Chapter Eight. The conception and inception of a modern protected area in Bardia was inherent in the scientific discourse of conservation emanating from Western conservationists as well as their limited experience and impressions of the river, its riparian landscape and its conservation value in the 1960s (see section 8.3). Importantly, these views were informed and influenced by the dominant and exclusionary discourse of protected area and protection of endangered wildlife in the 1960s and 1970s. The dominant discourse was shaped by a narrow domain constituted by national and international conservation actors and power elites, including the ruling monarch and the royal family (see Chapter Four). I therefore argued that the discursive creation of the Park as well as the dominant conservationist representations and constructions of the riverscape, which only placed value on wildlife and biodiversity, have transformed the understanding and meanings of this place and obscured the Sonahas' presence and relationships therein. In fact, the Sonahas, notwithstanding their longstanding history and presence in the riverscape, have been largely invisible in the mainstream conservation discourse.

I demonstrated how the Sonahas encountered the mainstream conservation discourse mainly through the actions of the Park administration, its conservation partners, Integrated Conservation and Development Projects (ICDPs) and grassroots institutions in the BZ. I found that even participatory conservation reforms (see subsection 1.5.3) and interventions initiated by the state and its conservation partners in the BZ have also been problematic at times (see section 8.5). The current predicament of many Sonahas as documented in this thesis challenges the optimistic claims of projects such the WTCLP and their donors of transforming the situation of the Sonahas through their interventions. In fact I have argued that the conservation discourse surrounding participatory conservation and development interventions in the BZ and alternative livelihoods for the Sonahas reinforces and reproduces the dominant discourse of a national park and a riverscape devoid of Sonahas. Such projects therefore legitimise state enclosure of the Sonaha ancestral territory and marginalise the Sonahas' relationships and meanings that are embedded with the

riverscape and thus their counter-discourse and rights claims. Hence they also embody and reproduce hegemonic conservation discourse.

I also showed how mainstream discourse of conservation in the context of a national park; permeate the grassroots through networks of institutions and actors at multiple levels (see Figure 8.1). The Sonahas in the Park BZ have been governed by or subjected to the dominant conservation discourse and, in part, have also appropriated and adopted it through the community organisations that the Park administration and its partners have helped to set up, i.e., the SSBU.

### ***The nexus between conservation discourse and violence***

I agree with Peluso (1993) that state violence in the name of conservation or of the protection of endangered species, resources or ecosystems in national parks is legitimised by this dominant conservation discourse. I have built upon Peluso's argument by demonstrating that the mainstream conservation discourse of the national park, and the riverscape as well as that of participatory conservation and development in the Park BZ, have contributed to the normalisation and legitimisation of the state's conservation violence against the Sonahas.

It is interesting to note that the Sonahas in the Park BZ therefore grapple with the direct exercise of power and authority of the state through violent conservation measures and practices (see Chapter Seven) as well as with the subtle exercise of power through this hegemonic conservation discourse. Hence, my analysis also advances Colchester's (2003) critique that the authority of modern conservation to regulate indigenous peoples' interactions with nature emanates not only through state power but also through the hegemonic discourse and discursive practices. I argue, based on the empirical evidence from this study, that the participatory conservation discourse and practices (e.g., Budhathoki, 2012; Bajimaya, 2003) have not transformed the violent and the protectionist regime that the Sonahas are confronting but rather that they have re-entrenched them. The Sonahas' experiences suggest that state induced conservation violence and hegemonic conservation discourse operate hand in hand and reinforce each other.

#### **10.2.4 Unravelling Sonaha resistance and social movements**

The third major research question on how the Sonahas are responding to the conservation discourse and practices and how their responses and politics can be understood, was explored in Chapter Eight. Although the Sonahas have been subjected to violence and hegemonic conservation discourse, as discussed in the previous two subsections, they have been resisting the national park regime and state intervention since its creation, albeit unsuccessful to stop the conservation violence. The Sonahas resort to silent, secretive and indirect, as well as open, direct and confrontational, resistance. They exercise individual or collective agency depending upon the circumstances. In spite of the risks of punishment, many of them contravene the Park rules, fishing and gold panning in the river and they maintain a degree of mobility within the riverscape. These actions mark the Sonahas' more individualised resistance.

From the detailed trajectory of their organised struggles against the national park regime, it is clear that their resistance found expression in the form of collective actions and protests mainly after the formation of their national organisation, the NSS, in 2006 although they had begun to organise for rights since the late 1990s. These actions were supported by rights NGOs, activists and local leaders in the BZ during more politically favourable periods. Although these actions have drawn the attention of government authorities and media towards the plight of the Sonahas nationally and strengthened counter discourse of Janajati (indigenous peoples) rights in the national parks, they have largely failed to transform the everyday realities of the struggling Sonahas.

##### ***The movement withers***

The Sonaha andolan - social movement- (2006-2011) against the Park seems to have waned since 2012. There could be several explanations for this. First, project support from NGOs for their rights campaign and advocacy ended. Second, many Sonahas did not perceive the urgency of andolan when they could fish and pan gold in the currently free-flowing river channels outside the Park. The more disputed river channel next to the Park (the Geruwa) became a less preferred option as its water levels fell. Third, a crisis of leadership and internal tussles between the Sonaha activists and leaders destabilised the collective spirit and momentum of the NSS.

Implicitly or explicitly, three splits can be identified in Sonaha society, first between villages or between residents inside and outside the BZ; second, between Hindu and Christian Sonahas, and third between those seeking new occupations and those demanding a continued focus on ancestral occupation, and preservation of culture, identity, sometimes for political purposes. Fourth, many Sonahas were disenchanted when they failed to receive fishing and gold panning concessions after their fishing licenses were unilaterally revoked by the Park administration in 2008 despite continued efforts by the NSS. Fifth, an increasing number of Sonahas have been diversifying their livelihood options through labour migration beyond the delta.

Hence, the Sonaha andolan cannot be simply romanticised and valorised. It is challenging for poor, minority and marginalised ethnic groups, as noted elsewhere (Holmes, 2013), who are struggling for survival such as the Sonahas to persistently organise and wage mass actions of protest against the powerful state without exogenous support. Confronting and contesting the mainstream hegemonic discourse and forces of conservation or park management is difficult for the Sonahas despite resentments. Notwithstanding their persistent resistance, here, as elsewhere (Brockington, 2004; Holmes, 2013), the dominance of the conservationist state and its mainstream discourse prevails. However, a notable finding of this thesis is that Sonaha politics and their struggles for their livelihood against the national park regime have now been fused with their collective ethnic consciousness and their ongoing struggle for ethnic and cultural identity (see section 9.4).

***Resistance and social movements as sites and the articulation of counter-discourse***

Individually many Sonaha resist mainstream conservation discourse and the national park regime by continuing their customary way of life. Equally, the Sonaha andolan is also a site and an articulation of counter discourse insofar as it is a struggle for the survival of their way of life and ethnic identity. The Sonahas have been increasingly exposed to the counter discourse “Janajati adhikar” (rights of indigenous peoples) in the course of their struggles against the Park regime (see section 9.3). Their leaders and activists frame their plight and livelihoods crisis as a violation of Janajati rights over natural resources by the Park policy. The discourse of Janajati rights embodied in the Sonaha andolan and reproduced by it, constitutes a political economy of Sonaha resistance and thereby confronts the dominant conservation discourse.

The Sonaha resistance and andolan entail and enact cultural politics by contesting the dominant meanings and values of the riverscape; thereby asserting their relationship with their customary territory. The andolan is therefore an important site where counter discourse germinates and is sustained to challenge the exclusionary and scientific conservation discourse, and centralised conservation regime of the state. The counter discourse is reinforced to advance their claims over customary livelihoods, and to seek recognition of their ethnic and cultural identity as a minority Janajati. This suggests blending of economic and symbolic or cultural dimensions to their resistance. Hence, this thesis builds on the analysis of Holmes (2007) on various facets of local resistance to protected areas and provides a new additional dimension to such analysis.

***Appropriation of mainstream discourse and resistance to the park regime***

The Sonahas' everyday lives in the Park BZ have been mediated by competing discourses and practices, notably by, the hegemonic mainstream conservation and Janajati rights and identity. This is evident in their engagement in both the SSBU that leverages benefits of ICDPs and the NSS that advocates Sonaha rights (see Chapter Nine). Unlike the scenario of the hegemonic discourse of conservation versus counter hegemonic discourses as demonstrated elsewhere by Norgrove and Hulme (2006) the situation is much more complex than the simply binary. Those Sonahas who have appropriated the hegemonic conservation discourse do not necessarily challenge this dominant conservation ideology explicitly even though the Sonaha collective struggle embodies counter discourse to the mainstream conservation.

### 10.3 Politics of space

The experience of the Sonaha resistance to and contestations with the national park regime, and mainstream conservation discourse and practices can be also understood as an enactment and constitution of a politics of space (see section 2.6 on theory of space). I have considered the geography of the lower Karnali-Geruwa River and the riparian areas around the BNP, which I have termed the riverscape as a space, and I have used this as a reference point in my analysis (see Table 10.1). In the context of the Sonahas and the Park, this space becomes an important geographical site of resistance, and a location of conflicts and contestations among competing actors, discourses, world views, cultures and practices. It is thus much more than a mere setting where events unfold or actors inter-play. As a location, it can be considered as a contested space (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga, 2003).

**Table 10.1 Interpretation of Lefebvre's social theory of space in the context of the Sonahas and the national park.**

Space	Social Theory	Interpretation
Spatial practices	Real space (physical), practices resulting from perceived space and the activities of everyday life	Customary way of life and livelihoods of the Sonahas; the Karnali-Geruwa riverscape in and around the Park; state direct interventions.
Representation of space	Conceived or conceptualised space; tied to knowledge; discursively constructed. Space of scientists, planners and bureaucrats. A dominant mode of production of space.	Mental or discursive space; dominant or hegemonic mainstream conservation discourse; representations, maps, plans, literatures; discursive constructs of the riverscape by conservationists and the state.
Representational spaces	Lived space (both real and imagined), space directly lived through symbols, images, imaginations. Spaces of users and inhabitants, but also of philosophers, writers and artists. Dominated space, passively experienced.	Counter discourse of the Sonahas, Sonahas' symbolic and cultural meanings of the riverscape as lived, experienced, embodied (imagined), Sonahas' sense of place marginalised; memories, dreams, imaginations, emotions, symbolisms.

Note: See section 2.6, Chapter Two on Lefebvre's social theory of space

The Sonaha struggles and collective ethnic identities can be neither essentialised nor spatialised, bounded by the riverscape. But we cannot ignore their political claims; their assertions of collective identity and culture which are rooted in their ancestral riverine territory; their shared history, ancestral occupations and practices; and their implicit conceptions and meanings of and relationships to the riverscape of which they are a part (see Chapter Six). It is the political meanings and stakes of the Sonahas in this space that serve as the bases upon which they seek to negotiate claims of customary resource use rights with the state and struggle for the recognition of their ethnic identity. The Sonaha geography of resistance therefore involves an interweaving of struggles over meanings of place, territory, cultures, identities and livelihoods, as all of which contribute to a politics of space.

### **10.3.1 Engagement with Lefebvre**

Going beyond the physical notion of space, an appreciation of its multiplicity and its three dimensions (perceived-conceived-directly lived) and of the interrelated moments in the production of space is offered by Lefebvre (see Table 10.1). Such a conception is crucial in examining and understanding the (re)productions of this riverscape and contestations surrounding the same in the context of this thesis. Following Lefebvre's concept of space as an entity produced by ideas, actions and social relations (see section 2.6), in agreement with others such as West (2005) and Sletto (2002), I maintain that this riverscape (space) in relation to the Park and its BZ has been produced and reproduced by dominant conceptions, representations and the conservation discourse (as also noted in subsection 10.2.3) as well by as the actions and practices of powerful actors and institutions (as discussed in Chapter Seven and Eight).

These powerful constructs and the mainstream discourse, and hence, their dominant representations of this space (the riverscape), frame, influence and problematise the Sonahas' spatial practices (their everyday lives, fishing and gold panning, mobility in the delta) with respect to nature conservation. They marginalise the Sonaha counter discourse and conceptualisations of the riverscape. Thus, they also disregard and devalue the Sonahas' representational spaces as articulated in their imaginations, emotions, memories and lived experiences and their embodied symbolic and cultural meanings of the riverscape.

However, the Sonaha resistance also articulates and signifies the Sonahas' dominated and excluded representational spaces, in a counter discourse of their meanings and lived experiences within the riverscape, both real and imagined, which are tied up with their spatial practices and actions. The dominant conservation discourse and related practices that construct and treat the Sonahas as resource users or extractors (fishers and gold panners); as residents of the Park BZ and as participants or beneficiaries in participatory conservation and development efforts, or even criminalises their customary occupations (for violating national park rules) ignores and silences the reality of the Sonahas as producers and custodians of this space. The Sonahas' actions and agency can also be understood as an empowering process of reclaiming and negotiating themselves as rightful and active producers of this space.

Lefebvre's work on the production of space has been critiqued for dehumanising space, for failing to consider empowerment, inequalities, human misery, and deprivation and for its silence about lived experience and the human dimension of nature (Unwin, 2000). My use of Lefebvre's understandings of space as a basis for this ethnographic engagement with the poor and indigenous minority group such as the Sonahas and the national park regime, thereby, my consideration of the politics of space with reference to the contested riverscape in this thesis provide a counter to such criticisms. Lefebvre's radical conception of space is also germane to the knowledge contributed by this thesis in the reframing of park-people contestations and fostering democratic and inclusive conservation as indicated in the subsequent section.

### **10.3.2 Power-space-discourse**

The foregoing sections have demonstrated the strong linkages between conservation violence, hegemonic conservation discourse and the inherent politics of space as it is produced, controlled, and contested by the Sonaha resistance. It is evident that conservation violence against the Sonaha has been predicated upon the state's conservation enclosure of the riverscape, and thereby the Sonahas' separation from their ancestral territory, and their direct exercise of power over this space. This has been achieved through an evident spatial strategy of control and surveillance over the Sonahas and their spatial practices as well as discursive control over the riverscape (see subsection 10.1.3), hence aided by powerful and hegemonic mainstream

conservation discourse. As demonstrated earlier, counter discourse embedded in the Sonahas resistance also articulate their claims over the riverspace and sense of place. The empirical findings and analysis from this study of the Sonahas, the Park and the contested riverscape inform and support the interplay of power and space (e.g., Lefebvre, 1976, 1991; Massey, 2005). The linkages and interconnections between space, discourse and power that have been demonstrated in my analysis make both a theoretical and an empirical contribution to geography and political ecology of conservation.

## **10.4 Reframing Protected Area-People contestations**

### **10.4.1 A crisis of participatory conservation?**

The Sonahas' contemporary struggles raise questions about the appropriateness, efficacy and adequacy of the current participatory co-management approaches in the BZs to address park-people conflicts in Nepal, and more widely. In addition to criticisms of the current paradigm and practices of participatory conservation and development noted earlier (see subsection 10.1.3), this thesis contributes to existing critical scholarship in this area (e.g., Campbell, 2005a; Dressler, 2009; Tsing et al., 2005). The current conception and model of BZ management do not appear to address the differential relationships between and the dependence of socio-cultural groups on the natural environment. They fail to appreciate the unique socio-cultural and spatial realities and worldviews of indigenous groups such as the Sonahas and uphold the separation of nature and culture or society.

The insights presented in this thesis support a similar critique of community based conservation with respect to the indigenous population of Palawan (Dressler, 2009) and that of a forest focused conservation regime in Panama which ignores the social and river networked cosmos of the Wounaan people (Runk, 2009). My critique of the national park BZ as a fragmented space that disregards the Sonahas' holistic view of the riverscape therefore supports Ingold's (2005) contention of the inadequacy of a view of the protection of nature which fails to acknowledge the protection of place. The artificiality of the national park boundaries and the lack of distinction between

the Park and the BZ were evident to me during my close encounters and observations of Sonaha mobility, presence and practices in the Karnali-Geruwa river stretch bordering the Park.

#### **10.4.2 State-community contestations**

The Sonahas' struggles also reveal that general inquiries into state-community or state-ethnic group relations and contestations are crucial but are inadequate in the context of conservation regime and a protected area or BZ management. The Sonahas' occasional conflicts with local community forest user groups both inside and outside the BZ, as well as the tensions between fishing and gold panning Sonahas and local youth cadres engaged in anti-poaching operations are arenas of social conflict among the heterogeneous local populations. Issues of this type have not been debated or explored adequately. At least in the context of Nepal, this thesis provides new information in this regard. Specifically, the hitherto undocumented struggles of the minority Sonahas, who are currently unrecognised as Janajati by the Nepalese state, are depicted as they inhabit and interact with the same natural environment as the Tharu, the recognised Janajati. This thesis therefore cautions against an uncritical focus on the category of indigenous peoples without contextualising or appreciating the often unequal power relations between dominant and minority indigenous groups.

#### **10.4.3 Reconceptualising contestations as a multidimensional politics of space**

This thesis demonstrates that a politics of contested space is central to the complexities of Sonaha-Park contestations. Three aspects or dimensions of Sonaha resistance and struggle in relation to the state's protected area policy and interventions, overlap, interweave and interconnect in this study of the politics of (riverscape) conservation and the contestations around this. These are:

- The material-structural (e.g., conflicts over resource use, access, rights and livelihood practices, conservation interventions and policies).

- The discursive (e.g., dominant and powerful representations, knowledge, meanings and constructs of the riverscape; the hegemonic mainstream discourse of conservation).
- The symbolic (e.g., counter-discourse, embodied collective identity, culture hence the representational spaces of the Sonahas, their dominated emotions and meanings of the riverscape, sense of place).

These three interconnected dimensions replicate the three conceptual categories offered by Lefebvre (see Table 10.1). They provide a useful and a new perspective by which to understand the problematic and dynamisms of contested and produced spaces such as the Karnali-Geruwa riverscape in the context of state-local indigenous population conflicts around nature conservation. It also aids an understanding of Sonahas' claims of place and practices. The three inter-related dimensions outlined above serve to articulate and constitute a political ecology of conservation and a political economy and a cultural politics of space. This perspective contributes to the existing body of literature on the political ecology of conservation and more specifically, on local resistance and contestations related to protected areas and nature conservation as discussed in the beginning of this thesis (see subsection 2.2.3 and 2.3.2).

The current park-people conflict literature on Nepal (e.g., S. Jana, 2007a; Kollmair et al., 2003; Wells & Sharma, 1998), also see subsection 1.5.1, which encompasses conflicts over natural resources, human-wildlife interactions, local population and protected area authority tensions, and even criticisms of a rights based framework provides an important but not a sufficient frame of analysis. The protected area and local people contestations have to be deciphered and reframed in a much wider sense considering the three interconnected spatial aspects outlined above and the politics of this multi faceted space.

#### **10.4.4 The perspective of “biocultural social space”**

Based on the findings and analyses presented and discussed thus far, this thesis offers a critical new perspective that I refer to as “biocultural social space”. This is offered as a contribution to the political ecology of conservation in response to my critique of conservation regime, policy and discourse. This perspective has implications for theory, practice and praxis, and provides a broader inclusive framework through which to address the complexities of contestations between protected area and indigenous peoples. It is informed by and sensitive to the three dimensions of contestation over or embedded in space, as articulated in the Sonaha struggle over state conservation and intervention: material-structural, discursive and symbolic; and to their location in time and space.

This perspective challenges reductionist view of space and embraces reconceptualisation of space, for instance, in a Lefebvreian sense and integrates this with a politics of space. Thus it gives attention to those lived, embodied, emotional, symbolic-sociocultural dimensions and attributes of space that are frequently overlooked by the dominant discourse, conceptions and representations of space. It acknowledges the existence and experiences of local inhabitants, particularly those with longstanding histories, interactions and relationships with the space, the natural environment.

This perspective adopts a paradigm of biocultural diversity conservation (e.g., Davidson-Hunt et al., 2012; Maffi & Woodley, 2010; Pilgrim & Pretty, 2010 ), and is sensitive to local cultures, identities and cultural practices being dynamic as opposed to static. It acknowledges the diversity of cultures and their intricate links with and contributions to the conservation of biocultural diversity and the natural environment. Particular attention is also given to cultural politics. First, it attends to the cultural contestations over the meanings and constructions of river/landscape by the competing actors. Second, it appreciates the alternative and marginalised discourses and dominated world views of those local inhabitants and indigenous groups embedded in the river/landscape who are often beyond the purview of the mainstream techno-scientific discourse and practice of conservation.

Likewise, it is evident that such a perspective has a relevance to address a political economy of space and of nature conservation with an emphasis on conflicts over resource use and over the local livelihoods of poor and natural resource dependent communities in particular. It seeks to harmonise customary livelihoods and sustainable practices in a just manner in order to promote equity and a just sharing of benefits of the conservation of landscapes and natural resources.

While such a perspective is not a panacea that can be applied as standard, it can possibly contribute towards a robust framework and epistemology that is respectful of local cultures, history, conservation stewardship, knowledge and practices but that does not descend into essentialism and romanticism. This perspective can potentially contribute to the existing body of knowledge not only as a critique of exclusionary and unjust conservation interventions but also to embrace praxis, and thus address at least some of the complexities inherent in the democratising governance and the management of protected areas and conservation of landscapes. The Sonaha indigenous minorities groups and the BNP is a case in point. Given the absence of any effective and democratic governance and management of the rivers in the context of national park, buffer zone or wildlife corridors in and around the delta, this perspective can add value to envisage and realise an innovative model of community based riverscape management and governance involving collaboration between a multiplicity of actors and groups (see Appendix J) and integrate interests and aspirations of the Sonahas.

The perspective seeks to promote social and environmental justice; as well as spatial justice (Soja, 2010) in the context of nature conservation. I therefore, see the value of this perspective as offering a transformative potential and prospects for a positive change. This perspective can meaningfully contribute to explore socially just and culturally appropriate practical solutions to the current Sonaha and national park contestations and similar situations elsewhere, thereby attempts towards balancing Sonaha rights and environment conservation measures.

## **10.5 Concluding words**

As has been demonstrated in this thesis, the lives of the Sonahas, their relationships to their ancestral territory and their cultural meanings and practices have been increasingly mediated by state policies and are undergoing rapid change. Although the Sonaha have sought to reconstruct and reclaim their lives, livelihood and heritage through their resistance to the nature conservation regime, they and their world views continue to be marginalised. Though the social movement of the Sonahas has withered in recent times, the Sonahas nevertheless consider their lives and cultures to be in crisis under the continued pressure of the conservation regime. Disturbed and discontented, they view the national park regime with despair and lives threatened by the Karnali River under stress. The Sonahas are increasingly at risk of cultural erosion stemming from alienation from their history, ancestral territory and customary practices.

The dominant perspective of the national park management, despite their recent participatory shifts, continues to be intolerant of Sonaha worldviews, and devoid of any appreciation and respect for the indigenous Sonahas who have a much longer history in the riverscape than does the national park. Mainstream conservation discourse and practices accord little space for the counter discourse and world views of the resisting Sonahas. The protected area management system in general and participatory conservation policy and practice in particular, could be made more genuinely inclusive of the values, expectations and interests of ethnic groups interacting with the natural environment such as the Sonahas. Conservation actors and partners can be respectful and appreciative of the Sonahas and their co-existence with the riverspace, and be sensitive to the negative consequences and injustices borne by the Sonahas, while still realising innovative, socially just and ethical options in conservation. It is the author's hope that the understanding of the plight of the Sonahas will help to increase the level of their public profile in Nepal and among international conservation organisations in positive and meaningful ways, thus facilitating the ameliorisation of the Sonahas' current state and status in relation to the Bardia National Park Authority.

In addition to their academic contribution, both the findings and the subsequent analytical and theoretical insights emanating from this thesis, advance the thinking and provide a more nuanced understanding of people and protected areas relationships or contestations. This thesis presented an ethnographic critique of nature or biodiversity conservation policies, and of how its interventions and discourse impact on minority indigenous groups such as the Sonahas. The insights included here reframe and reconceptualise contestations between people and protected areas, by engaging with and attending to a multidimensional understanding of space and politics. The perspective of biocultural social space has immense potential to address such complexities in similar situations elsewhere and thereby to democratise conservation practices. This thesis contributes to the debates within and, ideally, to meaningful collaboration between natural science, critical social science and indigenous rights activism; and towards a more critical engagement with the complexities associated with the interactions of conservational and social-space.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Terminology

#### **The lexicon and nomenclature of national park (*rastriya nikunja*)**

Gee (1959) stated that “The Nepal Government has wisely constituted *a national park* and has plans for a wild life sanctuary” when referring to Mahendra Deer Park (*Mahendra Mriga Kunja*) in Chitwan (p. 60, emphasis in original). This is the first instance of the term “national park” being first used in the published literature in a Nepalese context. It was used to describe enclosed forest and grasslands which was declared as a preserve of the King. During the late 1950s, Gee (1959) also recommended areas to be designated as “National Park Extension Areas or Protected Areas” (p. 84). This was the first instance of the use of the term “Protected Area” in the context of Nepal.

The translation of the term national park as *rastriya nikunja* in the national legislation is believed to have been coined by the conservationist B. N. Upreti. B. N. Upreti (Interview, February 15, 2011) recalled, amidst the confusion while drafting the NPWC Act (in the early 1970s) the term *kunja* or *nikunja* suggested a garden, “...therefore I coined a term *rastriya nikunja*, translated from an English version of national park”. Henceforth, the term has had a wider meaning and it now resonate a category of a protected area.

The NPWC Act, 1973 defines a “National Park” as an area set aside for the conservation, management and utilization of flora, fauna and scenery along with the natural environment. The term “national park” in a generic sense, is also found in the Wildlife Protection Act, 1957 that was translated by Shaha (1970) which refers to the authority of government (Article 16.2.c) to create rules in declaring areas as forest reserve, hunting preserve, national park and others.

## **Buffer Zone**

Although discussions about the creation of buffer zones around some protected areas in Nepal began in the mid-1980s, none were designated until 1990. U.R. Sharma (Interview, February 15, 2012), who pioneered the concepts of ‘impact zone’ and later Buffer Zone Management with Willam Shah, envisaged an impact zone as being an active and sustainably managed area which differed from than the traditional notion of a BZ that meant setting aside an area with provision of local access. The twin idea of impact zone –wildlife impacting the locals and locals interacting with the park resources was later translated into the idea of buffer zone. It was then institutionalized through regulatory provisions since mid-1990s.

The NPWC Act, fourth amendment in 1993, included the notion of BZ and yielded a specific legislation for its management in 1996 (see Appendix B) through provisions of three tier community based people’s institutions (see Figure 1.1). The Act defines buffer zone as a peripheral area of a national park or reserve declared by the government in order to provide facilities to use forest resources on a regular and beneficial basis for the local people. National biodiversity strategy document of Nepal defines it as “a designated area surrounding a national park or a reserve within which the use of forest products by local people is regulated to ensure sustainability” (MoFSC/GoN, 2002, p. 39).

## Appendix B: Key legal provisions related to Protected Areas in Nepal

<b>1970s: Era of modern conservation under strict and protectionist paradigms, the designation and management of Protected Areas (PAs)</b>	
1973: National Park & Wildlife Conservation (NPWC) Act	Supreme PA legislation, allowed for the establishment of PAs in Nepal
1974: First amendment to the NPWC Act	Opened PAs for tourism, allowed self-defence in case of emergency
1976: Himalayan National Park Regulation	Local concessions for resource access and recognition of enclave settlements
<b>1980s: Inception of community based conservation &amp; participatory approach, creation of new protected areas.</b>	
1982: Second amendment to the NPWC Act	Allowed increased access to park resources for subsistence use
1989: Third amendment to the NPWC Act	Legal recognition of co-managed conservation areas with human habitation
<b>1990s: Intensification and consolidation of participatory conservation, new protected areas.</b>	
1993: Fourth amendment to the NPWC Act	Local participation and benefit sharing in buffer zones
1996: Buffer Zone Management Regulation	Legal provision for buffer zone management and people's institutions.
1996: Conservation Area Management Regulation	Management and governance of Conservation Areas.
Kanchenjunga Conservation Area (KCA) Management Regulation, 2005	Community management of PA
<b>2000 onwards: Protected area connectivity and trans-boundary conservation, new protected areas.</b>	

Note: Adapted and modified from Paudel, Jana, and Rai (2011).

### **Appendix C: Chronology of events in the BNP and its BZ.**

<b>Time</b>	<b>Events</b>
1816 CE	British India annexed Bardia and presented it to the Nawab of Oudh (Awadh); under British India control. The Bardia district was used as a game and grazing site during the dry season.
1860	Land, including Bardia and other parts of the far western lowlands, that had been ceded earlier were restored to Nepal by British India. The first Rana Prime Minister, Jung Bahadur attempted to develop this restored territory (far western Tarai) as Rana family property
1876	Prince of Wales, Albert Edward and his hunting team, on a hunting trip organized by the Rana rulers, killed at least 17 tigers in about a month in the jungles of western Tarai.
1923	Under Prime Minister Chandra Shamsher, clearing of Bardia forests for timber extraction and export to British India as railway sleepers.
Pre 1956	Bardia as a Birta of Jung Bahadur Rana and a prime site for big game hunting. Feudal land tenure arrangements.
1954	Malaria eradication in the Tarai including Bardia and an influx of settlers from the hills.
1956	Forest under state control after their nationalisation.
1959	Birta Abolition Act.
1963	E.P. Gee (naturalist) marked the area in and around the Chisapani Gorge as a proposed sanctuary or national park; R.G. Willan, Chief Conservator of Forest, also reported its suitability as a sanctuary for wildlife.
1964	Resettlement under Nepal Resettlement Company and increased migration into Bardia.
1964/65	King Mahendra's royal hunt
1968	FAO/UNDP aided Forest Development Project launched (the area between Babai valley and Thakurdwara set aside under the wildlife management wing of the forest bureaucracy).
1969	Part of the area was designated as Royal Hunting Reserve and deployment of armed guards occurred; two villages were relocated before the establishment of the reserve.

1970	Nepal Settlement Company commenced their settlement project in Bardia and Kanchanpur.
1971	A core group was deputed to initiate the establishment of a wildlife reserve in Bardia.
1972	Work started with the establishment of the wildlife reserve office at Thakurdwara.
1973	Proposed status of wildlife reserve was noted by Blower (FAO advisor).
1974	Warden appointed for the wildlife reserve.
1975	Dinerstein's ecological survey. Free grazing and gathering of forest products inside the reserve were controlled.
1976	Bolton's preliminary wildlife surveys in the area recognized the importance of the reserve; Royal Karnali Wildlife Reserve gazetted over 386 km <sup>2</sup> after relocation of the village of Chisapani (east). Military replaced the forest guards; royal hunt of late King Birendra.
1980	Eight Blackbucks released at Bagaura Phanta inside the reserve.
1982	Reserve renamed as Royal Bardia Wildlife Reserve.
1983	Authorized annual grass cutting permits for the locals began. Study on the status and ecology of Gangetic Dolphin in the Karnali River systems by T. K. Shrestha.
1984	Reserve area extended to the east (including the Babai valley) taking in a total area of 968 km <sup>2</sup> . Local inhabitants (9500 people) were resettled in the Taratal area.
1986	13 rhinoceros were translocated to the western side of the park, in the Karnali flood plains. NTNC established rhino monitoring station at <i>Chepang</i> (Babai valley).
1988	The wildlife reserve was upgraded to status of a National Park.
1989	Field office of NTNC (Bardia Conservation Program) established. The Park – Extension Area was proposed in order to expand natural habitats for the Royal Bengal tiger and the four-horned Antelope.
1989	Two game scouts were killed following an encounter with local people who had illegally entered the park (IUCN, 1993).
1990	Construction of a highway through the national park.
1991	25 Rhinos translocated from the CNP.

1992	20 Gharial released in the Karnali River and 26 Black Buck released in Bagaura Phanta
1995	Bardia Integrated Conservation Project (WWF Nepal) initiated. UNDP Park and People Project launched.
1996	The BNP Regulation and BZ Management Regulation enacted; declaration of a buffer zone area around the Park.
2000	The national park was declared a “Gift to the Earth” by the government in the support of the ‘WWF 2000 – The Living Planet Campaign’; extension of 550 km <sup>2</sup> of BNP as ‘Gift to the Earth’ was announced by then Prime Minister during the WWF 39 <sup>th</sup> annual conference in Kathmandu.
2001	Park and People Project ended. Beginning of TAL Project.
2002	Participatory Conservation Program/UNDP (2002-2004)
2005	Western Tarai Arc Landscape Complex Project (WTLC) launched.
2007	31 rhinos counted in the Karnali Flood Plain. Mass rally and demonstration of the local population at the Park headquarters.
2008	February, Fishing licenses granted to the Sonahas. Sonahas from Manau were held on a charge of poaching rhino horn. In May, fishing licenses scrapped by the Park administration.
2010	180 km <sup>2</sup> extension of the Buffer Zone to the north of the Park. March 10, two local Dalit women and a girl child collecting forest products in the Park at Banspani shot dead by the Park army patrol.
2011	Zero (rhino) Poaching Year celebrated. February, one individual suspected of poaching shot dead by army patrol at Bagaura Phanta, and another held by soldiers in plain clothes during the raid; Sonaha demonstration at the Park headquarters.
2012	March, Community Based Anti-Poaching Day marked in Bardia; October, tiger population in the Park doubles, i.e., 37 from 18 in 2008. Frequent sighting in the Karnali flood plain area including grasslands in the western section of the Park near the River Geruwa.
2013	June, early monsoon floods in Karnali, River several riverside villages in the delta affected, and their populations temporarily displaced.

## Appendix D: The Sonaha population and settlements in Nepal as of 2012

Settlement/Village	HH	VDC/Municipality
<b>Bardia District</b>		
Rajipur-4, North Sonaha hamlet	14	Patabhar
Rajipur-4 , South Sonaha hamlet	24	"
Sarkhol – 7, Sonaha hamlet	15	"
Khutiyana -9, Sonaha hamlets	11	"
Kholti Bazar	3	Gola
Gola	1	"
Saijana, Parseni Bazar - 9	41	Manau
<b>Total in buffer zone (Bardia)</b>	<b>109</b>	<b>559.17 (44.76%)</b>
Khairi Chandanpur (Kothiya Ghat)	3	Khairi Chandanpur
Tin Gharwa, Murghawa -2	7	Daulatpur (outside BZ)
Milpur, Murghauwa -2	24	"
Chanaura	8	"
Khairanipur	7	"
<i>Total outside the buffer zone in Bardia</i>	<i>49</i>	<i>251.37 (20.12 %)</i>
<b>Total in the Karnali river delta, Bardia</b>	<b>158</b>	<b>810.54 (64.89%)</b>
<b>Kailali District</b>		
Gorangey	6	Baliya
Chisapani	1	Baliya
Bijay Nagar (Freed bonded labour camp)	4	Tikapur
Flood victim settlement	1	Tikapur
Sukhhad	1	Sukhhad
<b>Total in Kailali</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>70.72 (5.66%)</b>
<b>Kanchanpur District</b>		
Airi (Mahakali)	29	Mahendra Nagar
Odali (Mahakali)	21	"
Pipraiya (Mahakali)	17	"
<b>Total in Kanchanpur</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>367.83 (29.44%)</b>
Total HHs in the country	<b>238</b>	
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>1249.09</b>	

Note: Average household (HH) sizes for Bardia, Kailai and Kanchanpur are 5.13, 5.44 and 5.59 as per the National Population and Housing Census, 2011.

### **Appendix E: Gods revered by various Sonaha lineages.**

<b>Lineage</b>	<b>Gods and goddesses revered</b>	<b>Former villages</b>
Golaha	Mahisasur; Jagani Baba; Bhawani Durga; Dudadhari; Sattadhari; Dwarika. House priest/shaman (Ghar Guru): Makunnaha.	Gola village
Makunnaha	Jaganna Bhawani, Jamuna Bhuiyar; Parsu Bhuiyar; Lallu Bhuiyar; Rautiniya Mai; Murrha Mahato; Balkunwar; Ban Sakti Mai; Bisahari Baba (Ghar Guru: Banchauriya)	
Banchauriya	Durga Bhawani; Duriya Baba; Satyahan; Chudil; Bisahari; Duwadihari. Ghar guru: Khutaniya	
Dalaiya	Durga Bhawani; Bram Dev; Bisahari; Kar Dev (Ghar Guru: Makunnaha)	Formerly Dalai village
Dahitwa	Dhanchor, Danuwa; Bhawani; Mari; Angwar	
Latbhariya	Garo Bhawani; Deuriya Baba; Tatsalwar Baba; Angan Baba	
Pathbhariya	Jagannathi, Maisasur	Patabhar village
Jhabhariya	Saiwakarth Ganesh	Formerly Jhabaha village
Khutaniya	Nagrahi Baba; Satyahan; Jaganathi Baba; Patal Bhawani; Dhuriya Baba	Khutiyana village
Berauwa	Ban satti	
Ahira	Maisasur	
Barghadiya	Barghar	

#### **Appendix F: Location of Kafthans governed by respective Sonaha lineages.**

<b>Lineage</b>	<b>Location or area in the Karnali-Geruwa River stretch</b>
Dahitwa	Mangauda- that lies next to the Baghaura Phanta -grassland on Geruwa River (see Map 5.2) ; the area between Ghosnikunda and Munuwa-thanda and between Samiti Ghat Fachakpur on the Karnali River
Golaha	Area along the Karnali river north of Banghushra Ghat; to the west of south Sonaha hamlet, Rajipur; near Daulatpur across the Karnali River
Dalaiya	Area further south of Rajapur (Karnali River stretch)
Makunnaha	Near Gola Ghat (Geruwa River) to Manau; near Satti south of Rajapur in the Karnali River
Banchauriya	A few areas at Balchaur (western branch of Karnali River); also an area south of Lalmati (across Geruwa River) further south, near the Game scout Ghat in the Park.
Latbhariya	Areas between Rajipur Ghat and Samiti Ghat, acrossfrom Patabhar village
Jhabhariya	Area between Kothiyaghat and Saijana Ghat (Manau) on the Geruwa River.
Khutaniya	Near Sankatti Ghat
Sarkhoriya	Near Sarkhol

Note: Also see Figures 6.3 and 6.4; Map 5.8

#### **Appendix G: Older settlements of Sonahas in and around the delta.**

<b>Name</b>	<b>Location</b>
Betahani	Thakurdwara VDC, near the current Park headquarter
Sonaha Gaun (Ward number 9.a)	Suryapatuwa VDC (a buffer zone south of the Park) across from Kothiya Ghat.
Bagaura Phanta	In grassland in the south western section of the park across the Geruwa River
Sonaha Phanta	On the banks of the Geruwa River at Manau VDC, north of Saijana Sonaha village.
Gola	Gola VDC on the Geruwa River
Okhadiya and Amuliya	Across from Janaknagar/ Intake Ghat
Dalai	Rajapur VDC
Banchaur	Baliya VDC, near Katasey Bazar in Kailai district on the River Karnali.

Note: See Maps 5.3 and 5.8; Figure 6.3 and 6.4.

## **Appendix H: Sonaha woman's songs**

### **Song One**

*...laddi ma jaina hamar pesa! Macchi margna, swan kamaina!  
Hamrey Sonaha jati, sikchya nai de sakti!  
Laundi manin aur launda manin! Laikey hamre swan kamaiti!  
Swan kamaina, hamar baubajey manin ho pesa!  
Sonaha jaat dokhri-bokri (dyara) kutti laikey! Choish aur chawash manin! bwaka  
charaikey! Jaitey laddima  
Sonaha jati, swan macchi kheti...*

Going to the river is our occupation! Fishing and gold panning! We Sonaha ethnic group, can't afford formal education [for children]. We take all our girls and boys to wash gold. Gold washing is our ancestral occupation. By carrying our belongings, carrying our sons and daughters, we go to the river...Sonaha ethnic group, gold and fish are our cultivation [English translation].

### **Song Two**

*Sonaha jati swan- machhi kheti, din rat kama karti!  
Kahi lagai nai pugkey, likhey padhey nai jankey, boley fey nai janti  
Nikunja ma macchi mara jaiti  
Sonahan naramainama! YCL ramaik paitha  
Nikunja ma swana kamai jaiti  
Warden se ladkey! Army se dhamkai ke! license fi nai paiti.*

Sonahas' farming is gold and fish! Earn our labour, day and night! We do have enough food and clothes! We can't even read and write, and speak [with illiterate non Sonaha and higher class groups]. We go to the national park to fish. When Sonahas are distressed! YCL [anti-poaching youth cadres] are cheerful! We go to the national park to wash gold! Amidst fights against the national park warden and threats of army! Still deprived of licenses [English translation].

## **Appendix I: Institutions and actors in the struggles between the Sonaha and the BNP**

<b>Institution</b>	<b>Descriptions</b>
Nepal Sonaha Sangh (NSS)	National organization of Sonahas formed to mobilize Sonahas and advocate for their rights and welfare. It led the social movement of the Sonahas.
Sonaha Samrakchyan tatha Bikas Upasamiti (SSBU)	A community organization of the Sonahas formed with the help of the WTCLP and the BNP administration. It is registered with the Park administration as a subcommittee within a BZ Users' Committee. It is involved in managing funds, projects and income generation and community development activities for the Sonahas in the BZ.
Nikunja Pidith Sangarsa Samiti (NPSS)- Bardia	An ad hoc people's organization of local people considered as national park and wildlife victims from the buffer zone villages in Bardia who are struggling for their rights against the BNP administration. Its leaders and activists supported the social movements of the Sonahas.
Samrachhit Chetra Jana-adhikar Mahasangh (SCAM)	A national ad hoc organization and collective forum of local inhabitants, activists and local leaders struggling against the government for the rights and social justice of local population in the BZ.
SCAM- Bardia	Constituency of SCAM in the buffer zone of BNP in Bardia, which was earlier known as NPSS.
ECOS	NGO formerly working with the Sonahas to organize them and advocate for their rights.
PCDF	As above
HURECOC	As above
CDO	A national NGO that supports the SCAM and the NSS and has been advocating for the human rights of local populations in the BZ and for democratic policies and practices in PAs in Nepal.
BZ Council, BNP	A peak body of local people for the management of BZ recognized by the BZ legislation. SCAM, Bardia and NSS pressurized it and sought its cooperation during their campaign.
BZ Users' Committee, BNP	A second tier body of BZ residents at the level of VDC in the BZ. The Sonahas maintain close contacts with the leaders of two such committees in Patabhar and Manau VDCs.
BZ Community Forests, BNP	Community forests in the BZ, recognized as a subcommittee of the BZ Users' Committee by the BNP. They have had conflicting relationships with the Sonahas in the delta.
WTCLP	ICDP implemented in the Western Tarai Arc Landscape including the BZ of the BNP; supported the SSBU.

## Appendix J: Relevant local actors/stakeholders in riverscape governance and management

<b>Actors and stakeholders</b>	<b>Current stake in the river</b>
The Sonahas	Fishing and gold panning, identity, culture
The Tharu	Fishing
Local population (including Sonahas, Tharu and hill migrants)	Accessing boulders from the river banks, irrigating agricultural lands, vulnerability to floods.
Water user groups and associations, Central Farmers Committee; Water Users Association (Canal)	Management of irrigation canals and water distribution for farming.
Buffer Zone User Committee	Drift wood collection, conservation, revenue from the boulders
Anti-poaching youth cadres	Curbing illegal and destructive fishing practices,
Buffer Zone Community Forests	Forest conservation, private ferrying contracts
Community forests	Forest conservation in the riparian areas, private ferrying contracts,
Community forests in the wildlife corridor	Conservation in the riparian areas, conservation education and awareness.
BNP Authorities and Administration	Conservation, curbing illegal activities, sustainable use of natural resources
Tarai Arc Landscape Project (Government and WWF Nepal), <i>Hariyo Ban</i> Program	Conservation and sustainable development at the landscape level
National Trust for Nature Conservation NTNC	Conservation and sustainable development
Village Development Committee (VDC)	No direct stake so far (potential source of revenue for local government)
District Development Committee (DDC)	Issuing private ferrying contracts and revenue generation
Private ferrying contracts	Generating profit from the ferry service
Tourist entrepreneur	Rafting, Sport fishing
Hotels and restaurants on the highway, at Chisapani (west)	Sale of fish from the Karnali
Local fish buyers	Earning from the fish
Department of Irrigation	Flood control, irrigation canals, embankments

## **Appendix K: Checklist for fieldwork and interviews**

### **The Sonaha way of life**

- How are Sonahas related to the natural environment in the lower Karnali river delta, land, rivers and forests therein?
- What are the Sonahas' claims about their history and occupancy in the delta? What do they consider and perceive as their ancestral territory? What are the associated meanings?
- The Sonahas' historical interactions with other indigenous groups, hill migrants, landlords in the delta
- How do the Sonahas perceive the Tharu people and their relationships with the Tharu in the delta?
- What is the significance of customary livelihoods and riparian environment in the lives of the Sonahas? What are the customary practices associated them?
- How do Sonaha men and women interact with the resources of the natural environment?
- The Sonahas' perception and meanings about their ways of live in the river and riparian areas; their interactions with the natural environment.
- Oral accounts, narratives and stories of the Sonahas and their elders.
- Observation of the Sonaha way of life at the temporary shelters on the riparian areas, their practices of fishing and gold panning, harvesting of forest products.
- Current mobility of the Sonahas in the rivers in the delta.
- Distribution of the Sonaha population and settlements in and around the delta.
- Participatory map of gold panning sites and customary allocation of plots; locations of customary shelters and fishing grounds; mobility in the rivers; ancestral territory as reconstructed by the Sonahas.
- Status of land holdings of the Sonahas (in the delta); factors leading to the loss of lands they had occupied; history of land clearance by the Sonaha ancestors in and around the delta.
- Earnings from fishing and gold panning occupations
- Observation of Sonahas festivities, ritual, communal cultural events, village gatherings, formal meetings
- Articulation of Sonahas ways of lives in their songs
- How are their customary livelihoods, practices and way of life undergoing changes in the recent times (especially in the post 1950 Nepal)? How are they diversifying their livelihood options (trends and practices of out migration)?
- Institutions and tenure regimes of natural resource management/governance in the delta (forests, rivers, national park, irrigation canals etc).
- Threats and challenges to their livelihoods and cultures as perceived by the Sonahas.

### **National park, discourse and practices in Sonaha villages and the buffer zone**

- The Sonaha elders' memory of encounters with the national park authorities, rules and discourse since the creation of the Bardia National Park.
- How did they come to know about the creation of wildlife reserve or the national park and its policies?
- The Sonahas' perception about the national park policies, actions of the Park authorities and guards.
- Impacts and consequences of the national park creation, its management, its policies and regulations; actions of the Park management authorities upon the Sonahas in the delta?
- How are their lives affected, influenced and shaped by associated mainstream conservation discourse?
- Observations of Geruwa River, bordering the Park and its Buffer Zone; fishing and gold panning locations of the Sonahas; the Karnali River Flood Plain area.
- Discussions about the national park, buffer zone, its benefits and challenges in the Sonaha villages.
- What and how do the Sonahas talk and converse about the wildlife, conservation of aquatic and terrestrial wildlife, forest.
- Stories of their encounters with the Park officials, park patrol and guards.
- What and how are various forms of power exercised upon the Sonahas in the context of nature conservation in general and the park management in particular?
- How does the dominant discourse of conservation in the context of the national park percolate to the grassroots in the buffer zone? Who are the key actors, institutions, and their roles? What are the associated paracities?
- How are the Sonahas encountering, interacting and appropriating the mainstream conservation discourse? How are Sonahas implicated in the conservation discourse?
- The Sonahas' perceptions about the benefits of national park, buffer zone, and conservation and development projects in general and for the Sonahas in particular.
- The Sonahas' relationship with the members of buffer zone community forests; buffer zone user committees and groups.
- Various activities of ICDP projects in the Sonaha villages so far.
- Why and how was the SSBU formed? What are the activities and actions the SSBU has been engaged with for the cause of Sonahas?
- How is the Sonahas' relationship with the anti-poaching local youth in the buffer zone? What are the activities of community based anti-poaching campaign? How are the Sonahas implicated?

### **Resistance and responses to the national park regime, contestations**

- How do the Sonahas feel about the Park authorities? Are they happy or unhappy with the Park authorities and rules? Why are they unhappy with the Park regime and the state? What are their grievances and dissent?
- What are their tensions with the Park management authorities and policies?
- How have they been responding to the policies and practices of the Park management? How are they confronting or opposing the Park regime and rules?
- Various organized collective actions of the Sonahas in their struggle against the Park regime and policies?
- Who are the allies and groups supporting the Sonaha rights movement and campaigns? What are their roles and activities in the struggles and movement of the Sonahas?
- What has been their agenda during the collective struggle? How has the agenda of the Sonahas changed over the years?
- How do they feel about these actions in relation to the Park (both Sonaha leaders, activists, the Sonahas not engaged in activism and the NGOs)? What are the meanings they construct out of these actions?
- The history of the NSS, its roles and activities.
- What are the Sonahas resisting about? Who are they resisting against?
- How do we understand the resistance of the Sonahas? How do we understand the counter discourse embodied or articulated in their resistance?
- What are the material as well as symbolic aspect of their resistance? (e.g., culture, meanings, identities in addition to livelihoods).
- How has the Janajati discourse in the country influenced the Sonahas?
- How have the ethnic and human rights discourses influenced their resistance against the national park regime?
- Important narratives and stories of the Sonahas, their activists and leaders.
- Observation of their encounters and interactions with the Park officials, forest bureaucracy, government officials, buffer zone management leaders, NGOs

### **Politics of space**

- How does the Sonaha-the BNP contestation inform the problematic of space and its politics?
- What is the relevance and significance of a social theory of space; a perspective of space and its reconceptualisation into the case study and related analysis?
- How do the Sonahas understand river, river banks, and forests and construct their lives in the rivers? Is there a difference in their perceptions and meanings than non-Sonahas? Are there variations even among and within Sonahas?

- How do we understand the Sonahas' representational spaces (lived and symbolic aspect of their place/territory)? Can we reconceptualise the riverscape where their spatial practices are embedded as their lived space?
- How are these implicated or threatened or transformed by representation of space (the riverscape) by powerful actors (conservation science and knowledge)?
- How is the river/landscape (river, Karnali flood plains and islands) represented in the mainstream discourse? How is the riverscape viewed or conceptualised by conservation actors and authorities?
- How are the Sonahas, their practices and their natural environment represented and constructed?
- How does the conservationist representation of the riverscape impacts and concerns the Sonahas and their spatial practices?
- How do the dominant discourse and practices create, (re)produce, construct the riverscape with respect to the national park?
- What are the linkages between power, discourse and space in the complexities of Sonaha-Park contestations

### **Key informants**

- Historical perspective to the creation of protected areas in the country, the BNP in particular (e.g., the rationale, key actors, national context, drivers).
- The dominant discourse, rationale, thinking that gave birth to an idea of protected areas and its institutionalisation in Nepal; creation of a protected area in Bardia.
- Historical perspective to the emergence of buffer zone management in Nepal and the BNP in particular; the current discourse.
- Contemporary discourse of protected areas management, park and people conflicts debates in Nepal; global protected area paradigm and discourse; its implications in Nepal's policies and practices.
- How do various discourses of the national park, wildlife or biodiversity conservation percolate to and operate at the grassroots (study area)?
- Functioning and activities of the past and present ICDPs (and actors) in the country, in the BNP buffer zone in particular, e.g., WTLCP; discussion on benefits to the Sonahas; buffer zone management, ICDP activities and its implications for the Sonahas.
- Conception and perceptions towards the Karnali Flood Plains, the Karnali-River delta in relation to the BNP, its conservation.
- Perception about the Sonahas and their practices in the riverscape; tensions with the BNP authorities and ongoing struggles of the Sonahas.
- Activities and support of the rights based NGOs, the SCAM in relation to the Sonahas.
- Democratic governance and management of the riverscape, the Karnali-Geruwa river stretch.