



PhD Thesis

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Body Dust

Menstrual Waste among the Newar in Sankhu, Nepal

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Cover Picture: Sali Nadi river during waste clear-up after Svāsthānī melā in Sankhu, January 2023 (Photo taken by author).

With buckets of love,
Peter R. M. Humbert (27th February 1938-1st October 2023),
Professor Malcolm E. Yapp (29th May 1931-14th June 2025).

Abstract

Menstrual hygiene management is an underdeveloped field among scholars on religion despite its significance concerning the human body and ritual, environmental perceptions and practicalities of dealing with hygiene and sanitation. In Nepal, the rising menstrual activist scene prioritises discourses of anti-exclusion, hygiene and educational awareness but is disconnected from the diverse lived experiences of women. As a feminist ethnography, this thesis expresses understandings and experiences of menstrual waste focused on the Newar communities of Sankhu, an ancient Newar town with historical and religious significance in Nepal. Drawing on 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in Sankhu (May-June 2022; January 2023- 2024) it incorporates insights from participant observation in all aspects of daily life, especially menstruation, as well as 20 formal interviews with residents, audio recordings, workshops and informal discussions.

In Sankhu, menstrual waste coagulates, dissolves and lingers across layered, spatial containers. Menstrual waste, as dirty blood, carries moral impurities that must be expelled from the town. Separating menstrual blood from sanitary items with flowing water avoids unsolicited contact. Menstrual blood threatens female virtue as the enclosed body, monitored and maintained through habits. Avoiding the kitchen during menstruation and washing bedclothes reinforces the inner sanctity of the home. Enclosure marks the *bārāḥ* menarche ritual for Newar girls, as the town bears witness to its inhabitants participating in its rhythms. During menstruation, women avoid the temples surrounding the town that contain the domain of the goddess Vajrayoginī whose power is harnessed through a stable body. Against all this, the ever-expansive urban metropolis of Kathmandu extends into Sankhu through sanitary products and disposal infrastructure. This ethnography mirrors how women in Sankhu conceptualise and negotiate menstrual waste through its ambiguity, contradictions and control, refashioning themselves within the shifting Kathmandu Valley.

Through unique ethnographic insights on disposal practices, menstruation and daily life in Sankhu, this thesis contributes to understandings of contemporary Newar ritual practices and positions of Newar women in Sankhu. This thesis challenges a technical approach to women's health and sanitation by situating menstrual hygiene management within the lived experiences of Newar women.

Resumé

Håndteringen af menstruation som hygiejnepraksis er et understuderet område indenfor religionsforskningen. Dette på trods af, menstruationens centrale betydning for kroppen og de tilhørende ritualer, og for samfundets forståelse og praksisser indenfor hygiejne og renlighed. I Kathmandudalen prioriterer den aktivistiske scene diskurser om anti-eksklusion, hygiejne og bevidsthed vedrørende menstruation uden at inddrage kvinders mangfoldige og varierende oplevelser. Denne afhandling gør bod på dette og, som en feministisk etnografi, formidler flerfoldige forståelser for og oplevelser af menstruation og dens affald i Sankhu – en ældgammel Newar-by med stor historisk og religiøs betydning i Nepal. Afhandlingen tager udgangspunkt i fjorten måneders etnografisk feltarbejde i Sankhu (maj-juni 2022; januar 2023-januar 2024), der inkluderer deltagerobservation af alle aspekter ved hverdagslivet – også de der gælder menstruation – samt tyve lydoptagelser af interviews med indbyggere, workshops og uformelle diskussioner.

I Sankhu koagulerer, opløses og dvæler menstruationsaffald i flere lag og rum. Menstruationsaffald, forstået som beskidt blod, indeholder moralske urenheder, som skal uddrives fra Sankhu. Det sker blandt andet ved at, med rindende vand, skille menstruationsblod fra hygiejneprodukter for at undgå uønsket kontakt. Menstruationsblod anses for at være en trussel mod kvindelige dyder, hvor kroppen bør være en lukket enhed, der passes og plejes gennem vaner. Kvinder bør undgå køkkenet og vaske deres sengelinned ofte, når de har menstruation, for at opretholde en indre renlighed i hjemmet. Udgrænsning markerer *bārāḥ* menarche-ritualet for Newar-piger, hvormed byen bevidner indbyggernes deltagelse i byens cyklus. Under deres menstruation undgår kvinder byens templer, der huser gudinden *Vajrayoginī*, hvis kraft tøjles af den stabile kvindekrop. I kontrast til alt dette, står den stadigt ekspanderende storby, Kathmandu, der trænger sig ind i Sankhu og påvirker den lokale infrastruktur med fornyet viden om hygiejneprodukter og bortskaffelse. Denne etnografi skildrer hvordan kvinder i Sankhu begrebsliggør og forhandler menstruationsaffald gennem tvetydighed, modsætninger og kontrol, i den omskiftelige Kathmandudal.

Gennem en enestående etnografisk indsigt i menstruation, hverdagsliv og bortskaffelse i Sankhu, bidrager denne afhandling til forståelsen af Newar-kvinders rolle og praksisser vedrørende menstruation i Sankhu. Afhandling adskiller sig fra tidligere tekniske tilgange til kvinders sundhed og renlighed ved at tage udgangspunkt i deres personlige oplevelser af menstruationens hygiejnepraksisser i Sankhu.

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Contents

RESUMÉ.....	V
LIST OF FIGURES.....	XII
ACRONYMS.....	XIV
NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION.....	XV
CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: UNTOUCHABLE.....	1
MENSTRUATION IN NEPAL	4
SANITARY WASTE: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC OBJECT	8
SANKHU	12
NEWAR.....	14
ANTHROPOLOGY OF MENSTRUATION	17
CONTAINERS	20
METHODS AND ETHICS	21
CHAPTER OUTLINE	22
CHAPTER 2 METHODOLOGY: EMBODIED INVISIBILITY	25
FEMINIST SELF	26
NARRATIVES	32
EXPERIENCE	38
WASTE	42
DIALOGUE	47
“MAIN THING IS MENSTRUATION.”	51
CHAPTER 3 BLOOD: MENSTRUAL WASTE	53
DIRTY	55
DRIED.....	62
DANGEROUS	67
“I DON'T WANT TO GET STAIN.”	71

CHAPTER 4 BODY: MENSTRUAL EXPERIENCE	73
SACRED.....	74
PAIN	81
HABITS	87
“YOU HAVE THE PERFECT BODY.”	92
 CHAPTER 4 HOME: FLOWING	 94
KITCHEN.....	96
BEDROOM	103
BATHROOM	109
“OUR HOME IS LIKE A TEMPLE.”	113
 CHAPTER 6 TOWN: MENSTRUAL RHYTHMS.....	 115
KUMĀRĪ.....	117
BĀRĀḤ.....	124
URNS	131
“DON'T YOU RECOGNISE HER?”	135
 CHAPTER 7 TEMPLE: MENSTRUAL BOUNDARIES	 137
VAJRAYOGINĪ	139
MASKS	145
HEART	150
“THE NEGATIVE SIDE OF THE GODS.”	155
 CHAPTER 8 URBAN: MENSTRUAL HYGIENE.....	 157
PRODUCTS.....	158
KNOWLEDGE	165
DISPOSAL	170
“HAVE YOU BEEN TO THE PUBLIC TOILETS?”	177
 CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION: BODY DUST	 179
COAGULATION.....	180
DISSOLUTION	181
DILUTION	182
WASTE ETHNOGRAPHY	183

FUTURES	186
<u>BIBLIOGRAPHY.....</u>	<u>192</u>
<u>APPENDIX I: GLOSSARY</u>	<u>219</u>
<u>APPENDIX II: INTERVIEW GUIDE, PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET AND CONSENT FORMS.....</u>	<u>225</u>
INTERVIEW GUIDE	225
WALKING INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	227
CONSENT FORM	229
CONSENT FORM (DEVANAGARI)	231
CONSENT FORM FOR ORGANISATION	233
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET	235
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (DEVANAGARI).....	237

List of Figures

All photos in this thesis were taken by the author.

<i>Figure 1</i> HECAF 360 display of sanitary pads detailing their toxicity displayed at National Menstrual Hygiene Day, May 2022. Photo taken during MHMPA meeting, May 2023. _____	5
<i>Figure 2</i> Kathmandu Valley (marked in red) in Nepal. (Source: Open Street Map). _____	12
<i>Figure 3</i> Wards 6, 7, 8 and 9 (marked in red) within Shankharapur municipality. (Source: Open Street Map) _____	13
<i>Figure 4</i> The domain of Vajrayoginī bordered by Sali Nadi river, Vajrayoginī, Indrayanī, Sali Nadi and Salambutar temple. Mahadevstan on the outskirts of the Sankhu town. BlueWaste2Value in the Northeast next to the crematorium. (Source: Open Street Map). _____	14
<i>Figure 5</i> A woman walks next to Indrayani temple as Bratabandha procession approaches, March 2023. ____	29
<i>Figure 6</i> Steps leading up to Vajrayoginī temple, April 2023 _____	35
<i>Figure 7</i> Residents circumambulate Sankhu during Buddha Jayanti, May 2023. _____	36
<i>Figure 8</i> Rooftops of Sankhu with Changunarayan hill where a plot of land is cleared for property development, March 2023. _____	37
<i>Figure 9</i> Signpost declaring a fine of 5000npr if waste is dumped in this area outside Sankhu, February 2023. _____	44
<i>Figure 10</i> Plastic packages in a wheelbarrow in front of rice fields, May 2023. _____	46
<i>Figure 11:</i> Powder thrown over chariot as residents and visitors celebrate at Panauti jātrā, May 2023. ____	56
<i>Figure 12</i> Dumpsite on entrance to Sanagaun, January 2023. _____	60
<i>Figure 13</i> Sali Nadi by Svāsthānī temple after heavy monsoon rains, August 2023. _____	65
<i>Figure 14</i> Waste pickers in front of ridge by Sali Nadi beyond which boksi is described to reside, February 2023. _____	70
<i>Figure 15</i> Ritual apparatus of Mha Pūjā ceremony from left: Sukunda (Lord Ganesha lamp), karuwa (water jug made of brass, tānpa (clay pot), hasa (basket for farming). In front are five mandalas made of yellow and vermilion powder, rice and seeds, November 2023. _____	75
<i>Figure 16</i> Ritual apparatus of Mha Pūjā ceremony from left: Sukunda (Lord Ganesha lamp), karuwa (water jug made of brass, tānpa (clay pot), hasa (basket for farming). In front are five mandalas of yellow and vermilion powder, rice and seeds, November 2023. _____	76
<i>Figure 17</i> Mandala during mha pūjā, November 2023.. _____	79
<i>Figure 18</i> Sidhwakha in Mahadevstan where dead bodies from Sankhu must pass when departing from Sankhu, December 2023. _____	80
<i>Figure 19</i> Sukunda lamp and plates with food during birthday ceremony, November 2023. _____	99
<i>Figure 20</i> Pre-earthquake Newar house in Sankhu partially reconstructed since 2015 earthquake, December 2023. _____	107
<i>Figure 21</i> Residents pass by new properties built post-earthquake in Sankhu, May 2023. _____	108
<i>Figure 22</i> Newar girl undertaking Surya Dashain in Sankhu, March 2023. _____	116

Figure 23 Mandala of Kumārī in Illa tole, November 2023. _____	119
Figure 24 Kumārī pūjā in Sankhu, July 2023. _____	122
Figure 25 Khyā drawing during bārāḥ, March 2023. _____	125
Figure 26 Presentation at Lord Ganesha temple after Surya Dashein including “sathi” doll. March 2023. ____	129
Figure 27 Newar girl participates in Narsingha worship, September 2023. _____	134
Figure 28 Vajrayoginī devī is carried around Sankhu during Vajrayoginī jātrā, April 2023. _____	140
Figure 29 Iconography for Vajrayoginī devī in book displayed by vājracārya, July 2023. _____	142
Figure 30 Frontcover of Maṇiśailamahāvadāna presented by Vāracārya _____	142
Figure 31 Ritual diagram to meditate on Vajrayoginī presented by Vajrāchārya, July 2023. _____	143
Figure 32 Mural of Vajrayoginī in Chalakhu tole painted by local artists, December 2023. _____	144
Figure 33 Narsingha embodied through boar mask accompanied by Lakshmi and Saraswati goddess, September 2023. _____	147
Figure 34 Khyāḥ, Kavacha and Beta during Devī pyākhan, September 2023. _____	149
Figure 35 Newar women with hair braided and dressed in sari throw rice as offerings during Narsingha worship, September 2023. _____	155
Figure 36 Woman walks through Sangaldvāraka. On the right is a sign for Nepal electricity authority, December 2023. _____	164
Figure 38 BlueWaste2Value truck collects waste in Sanagaun, January 2023. _____	172
Figure 39 Bags of sorted plastic at BlueWaste2Value depot, June 2022. _____	176
Figure 40 Drowned figure from Guthamuga in Sali Nadi river, June 2023. _____	183
Figure 41 Diagram of methodological approach to an ethnography of menstrual waste. Waste , feminist and experiential ethnography provide a triangulated framework for engaging with menstrual waste. _____	185
Figure 42 View downstream of Sali Nadi river from Svāsthānī temple in Sankhu, Nepal. January 2023. ____	191

Acronyms

BW2V: BlueWaste2Value.

DIFD: UK (former) Department for International Development.

HECAF 360: Health, Environment and Climate Action Foundation

MHM: Menstrual Hygiene Management.

MHMPA: Menstrual Hygiene Management Partnership Alliance.

NGO: Non-governmental organisation.

UNICEF: United Nation's Children's Fund.

WHO: World Health Organisation.

Note on transliteration

This thesis engages with Nepali, Newar and English as spoken in Sankhu. The romanisation of Nepali and Newar words are marked by italics. As Emmrich (2014) writes, terms such as “Nepal bhāṣā”, “Newari” or distinctions between spoken and written language (Gutschow and Axelson, 2012) are disconnected from how Newar speakers refer to their language. For this thesis, I use the term “Newar” (New.) to signify the language spoken among the Newars in Sankhu. Nepali words are designated with (Nep.)

Nepali is a phonetic language written in Devanagari script. For the transliteration of Nepali terms in this text, I use the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) to romanise words with diacritics. Devanagari script is unrepresentative of Newar phonetics which is written in Ranjana Lipi, Nepal Lipi or adapted versions of Devanagari. For romanisation within my thesis, I modify IAST for accurate expression of pronunciation in Sankhu. For example, “mha” (body). To assist with this, I refer to *A Dictionary of Contemporary Newari* by Ulrike Kolver and Ishwarananda Shresthacharya (1994) as well as conversations with Newar speakers from Sankhu. In this thesis, I do not distinguish terms derived from Sanskrit such as “*pūjā*” (worship).

Within the thesis, I use the dialect and terms spoken by interlocutors in Sankhu. I transcribe interviews quoted in the thesis exactly as spoken, following their orthography as speakers switch between Newar, Nepali or English terms. Interview consent forms were provided in Devanagari and English and are included in the appendix. For place names, I use Nepali terms for consistency. For example, “Sakwo” (New.) is Sankhu (Nep.). To refer to deities within the thesis, I use *deva* (god) or *devī* (goddess). For the broader concept of “*dya*” I use the heuristic “god” within my discussions. For senior religious officials within Sankhu, I use the terms by interlocutors. For example, *vājrcārya* (Newar Buddhist tantric master) and *pūjāri* (Brahmin Hindu ordained to conduct *pūjā*). In the appendix, there is a glossary for Nepali and Newar terms referred to in this thesis.

Honorifics are used in communications in Nepal to denote respect and familiarity. When referring to interlocutors, I use the terms commonly used in speech in Sankhu, for instance “Aunty” or “*didī*” (big sister). All names are pseudonymised.

Chapter 1

Introduction: Untouchable

Deep cramps in my abdomen wake me to the regular morning soundscape in Sankhu - *Sakwo* (New.) – a town on the Northeast of the Kathmandu Valley.¹ Pigeons coo above the windows, *pūjā* (worship) bells ring intermittently, and a gas stove steams for morning tea. It is 4am and Lokisha Aunty sweeps the stairs ensuring dust is dispelled from the house into the street. Today, I am participating in a pilgrimage to a *melā*, Suryabinayak Ganesha temple, followed by a picnic in Bhaktapur with the Aunties from Happy Soul Dance Studio with whom I attend Zumba every morning.^{2 3} We planned this trip weeks in advance with consideration of everyone’s menstrual cycles. Glancing at my clothes laid out from the night before, I am fearful that the cramps mark menstruation. It is unacceptable to enter temple spaces or touch the gods when menstruating as it may contaminate worship with dangerous consequences. This relies on women, including myself, self-declaring their period. Upon checking, I am relieved to discover there is no menstrual blood, hoisting on a long skirt, Happy Soul Dance Studio T-shirt and slider sandals.

Stepping out into the heavy air of the dark, July morning I follow the uneven path towered over by tall-bricked buildings, surrounded by echoes of *pūjā* bells for morning worship. A half-moon hangs between the peaks of the valley, the lunar phases signifying the rhythm of the Nepal Samvat annual calendar in Sankhu, shared by Newar across the Kathmandu Valley. Passing the crossroads, women chatter as they lather and scrub clothes and linen at the waterspouts as others continue their blessings in their homes and Lord Ganesha temple located in each *tole*.⁴ The stone waterspouts distinctive to the Kathmandu Valley, recognisable by their resemblance to snake heads, pour continuous water. I follow the uneven ground behind the butcher shops, dogs gathering in apprehension for leftovers and ducks crossing the damp ground. It is monsoon season, and I hop between bricks raised above the stagnating water surface. Checking for motorbikes or trucks that

¹ Sankhu, pronounced “Sakhu” is referred to as “*Sakwo*” in Newar. However, I use Sankhu throughout the thesis because this is the standard way of referring to the town used in conversation.

² *Melā* is a sanskrit word meaning “to gather” or “to meet.” It is popularly used to refer to a festival where pilgrims will worship at a temple.

³ Lord Ganesha is the god of wisdom whose iconography is distinguished by an elephant-head. He is believed to remove obstacles.

⁴ *Tole* refers to the physical space (there are 8 *tole* each with a square, meeting space, god house and tea shop) as well as the community associated with this space.

speed down the bypass towards Mahadevstan temple devoted to Lord Shiva, I arrive at Sali Nadi bus stop where a minibus awaits surrounded by Zumba studio members from Sankhu.⁵ Radha Aunty, the senior of the group and Samira Aunty gather outside as the rest wait in the bus. The majority are Newar Shrestha caste but there are also Rai and Chhetri participants. Sankhu, situated on the edge of the Kathmandu Valley in Shankharapur municipality, historically inhabited by Newar, is home to a range of ethnicities and castes. Sabina *didī*, a dance teacher who grew up in Sankhu, ushers us into the bus. She started the dance studio to celebrate her passion for dance, contribute to her family income and give space for women and children to exercise and socialise every morning. We sit at the back, cramps in my abdomen confirming that my menstrual cycle will arrive at an indeterminate time in the coming days.

As the hour approaches 5am, the soft hues of dawn breaching the morning sky, three Aunties are absent. They message in our Facebook group chat that they started menstruating overnight and cannot attend the pilgrimage. Sabina expresses her disappointment, as we chose this date to accommodate our menstrual cycles. The women highlight pain and fatigue, especially cramps in their stomach and legs and are encouraged to “*ārām garcha*” (take rest) and refrain from physical activities. Deemed untouchable during menstruation, they might avoid the kitchen, *pūjā* rooms and men in their households until they can bathe on the fourth day and participate in worship again depending on their caste and family practices. Kafle (2023) suggests that untouchability derives from India through reclassified Hindu concepts of purity and pollution during the Malla period upon the Newar kingdoms. Through this lens, avoidance practices during menstruation mark women’s complicity in dehumanising and oppressive caste systems that conceal dominance over the means of production (Chakravati, 2018). Misra (2019) argues that early marriage, puberty rites and the internalisation of menstrual norms control women’s sexuality reinforcing the legitimacy of the caste system in Nepal. To homogenise untouchability ignores the diverse perspectives and engagements and how people negotiate the category (Chowdhry, 2007). By avoiding the pilgrimage, women negotiate a tension between feelings of obligations and responsibility, devotion towards the gods and family expectations.

This thesis is based on fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork investigating the significance of menstrual waste among the Newar in Sankhu through participant observation in daily life. As the first long-term study on menstruation among a Newar populace, this study contributes insights into the lives of Newar women and contemporary shifts such as urbanisation

⁵ Lord Shiva, also known as Mahadeva, is a supreme god in Hinduism associated with destruction and creation of the universe.

and migration within the Kathmandu Valley. Nevertheless, the lives of the Newar are embedded alongside a range of ethnicities, castes and practices. To engage with the diverse populace in Sankhu following a two month preliminary field visit to the Kathmandu Valley from May to June 2022, I undertook twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork in Sankhu and the surrounding villages from January 2023 to 2024, including 20 formal interviews with residents, audio recordings, photographs, workshops and informal discussions. The absences during the morning of the pilgrimage raise the following questions:

- How is menstrual waste understood and experienced in Sankhu?
- What does menstrual waste management reveal about women's understandings of themselves within caste, gender and religion?
- In what ways do women negotiate expectations, contradictions and interventions surrounding menstrual waste within their daily lives?

This thesis is a feminist ethnography expressing understandings and experiences of menstrual waste focused on the Newar communities of Sankhu, the ancient-urban nexus of Shankharapur municipality. To avoid homogenising or presenting women in a timeless vacuum, this thesis engages with the multiple fragments, layers and lived experiences surrounding menstruation. Abu-Lughod (1993) reflects on how the traditional anthropological thesis is insufficient for depicting the narratives, voices and experiences of her interlocutors. Sharing her discomfort, I draw on feminist (Lughod, 1993; Davis and Craven, 2016) and experiential ethnography (Desjarlais et al. 2011; Desjarlais 2016) to write on menstruation. I demonstrate how menstruation is an access point for connecting, empathising and understanding the pressures and commitments for women in Sankhu, underscored by devotion towards the gods and religious life within the Kathmandu Valley. Thereby, this ethnography mirrors how women conceptualise and negotiate menstruation in Sankhu.

There are three central strands that form the argument of this thesis. First, the materiality of menstrual waste. Menstrual waste is an amorphous form that moves through the spatial domains of Sankhu posing a perceived threat to bodily integrity. Second, the experience of menstrual waste. Menstrual waste evokes an awareness of impermanence through fear, responsibility and ambiguity. The third is the body, as self. Through habits, sanitary product choices and disposal methods, Newar women reconceptualise, negotiate and situate themselves within Sankhu. This ethnography of menstrual waste challenges technical interventions and approaches to menstrual hygiene management. Thus, the central thesis is that menstrual waste coagulates, dissolves and lingers generating affective qualities contained, expelled and negotiated by women in Sankhu.

For the remainder of this introduction, I will delineate the context of menstruation in Nepal. Next, I outline the project framework before introducing the field site for this study as Sankhu. Following this, I introduce the Newars as the historical and majority inhabitants of Sankhu. Through an outline of the Anthropology of Menstruation, I discuss how my theoretical approach within the thesis builds on Pollution theory. After discerning my spatial-analytical framework as containers of menstrual waste, I describe the methods and ethical guidelines for this project. Finally, I outline the chapter argument for this thesis.

Menstruation in Nepal

In May 2022, I received a text from Real Relief, a Danish company producing and distributing “Safepad,” a reusable sanitary pad, inviting me to the National Menstrual Hygiene Day. Within a large courtyard by Patan gate hundreds of attendees browse stalls, watch performances on menstrual discrimination and share innovations around menstrual hygiene. Menstrual pads exposed from their packets on boards with innovations include banana leaf designs for reusable pads, worm composting and training schemes to teach communities reusable pads designs. The National Menstrual Hygiene Day, hosted by the Menstrual Hygiene Management Partner Alliance (MHMPA), demonstrates an eagerness to promote interventions surrounding menstruation as a national concern, placing Nepal at the forefront of menstrual activism globally (Parker and Standing, 2024). The MHMPA is a convergence between the NGO sector, menstrual activism and researchers advocating on issues surrounding menstruation in Nepal. In this section, I will give an overview of menstruation in Nepal, highlighting anti-exclusion, hygiene and education as dominant discourses within the national activist scene.

Women’s perspectives on socio-cultural and religious practices and restrictions associated with menstruation remain an understudied field (Mukherjee et al. 2020) with a focus on access to sanitary products rather than sanitary waste disposal (Ellege et al., 2018). UNICEF (2019) use “Menstrual Hygiene Management” (MHM), to refer to access to materials for absorbing menstrual blood, safe facilities for cleaning and disposal and knowledge on the menstrual cycle within programs focused on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WaSH). Positioned as a public health topic, it places sanitary pad provision as the automatic solution towards menstrual needs (Sommer et al., 2015). MHM is central to framing menstruation in research and interventions by providing a uniform concept recognisable on an international level, yet it excludes other aspects of menstruation such as pain management and reproduction (Thomson et al., 2019). MHM reduces menstruation to technical questions of hygiene removed from the lived experiences of women.



Figure 1 HECAF 360 display of sanitary pads detailing their toxicity displayed at National Menstrual Hygiene Day, May 2022. Photo taken during MHMPA meeting, May 2023.

In Nepal, attitudes towards menstruation as polluting and dangerous derive from Sanskritisation, a process where lower castes emulate rituals and practices of the dominant or upper caste to obtain upward mobility (Wojczak, 2024). Positioned between the Himalayas and North India, Nepal emerged as a State in the late eighteenth century as the hill kingdom of Gorkha. In 1743, Prithvi Narayan Shah moved the Shah dynasty court to the Kathmandu Valley to form the Gorkha Empire (Whelpton, 2005). The king encouraged migration through land grants to absorb local ethnic groups into their political framework, collectively assimilating to high caste Hindus (Rosser, 1966). Brahmanical texts, such as the Mulukī Ain, a civic code instituted in 1854 under the Rana regime, institutionalised the Hindu caste structure in Nepal. Translations of myths in Vedic texts deemed menstruating women as equivalent to low castes or outcastes and their clothes and food as signifiers of menstrual pollution (Wojczak, 2024). The Mulakī Ain documented and reinforced attitudes towards the untouchability and regulation of menstruating bodies as preserving caste and household prestige. (Lotter and Khanal, 2024). These texts influence social norms across castes and social groups in Nepal perpetuating subordination within a caste hierarchy (Joshi, 2022). Sanskritisation is an ongoing process with ramifications towards menstruation as the Nepal State integrates across caste and ethnic distinctions.

Menstrual exclusion, where women cannot participate in daily life during their menstrual cycle dominates contemporary concerns on menstruation in Nepal. *Chhaupadi* is a Hindu practice where menstruating women must isolate in a separate place, named *chhau goth*

(menstruation cave). In 2005, international media attention criticised *chhaupadi* as an extreme form of menstrual exclusion (Thapa, 2021). Images of sheds with basic living conditions and associated risks of snakebites, smoke inhalation and exposure were condemned by international media for inhumane living conditions (Amatya et al., 2018). Interventions surrounding menstrual exclusion subsequently focused on *chhaupadi* prevalent in Western Nepal (Thakari, 2021). Thapa et al (2019) distinguishes *chhaupadi* into two categories: separation and exclusion. This allows for an engagement with a range of practices, rather than solely the “menstruation cave,” resulting in Thapa et al. (2019) calling for a range of legislative, educational and infrastructural interventions.

Despite the Nepal government banning and criminalising *chhaupadi* in 2005 and 2017 respectively, the practice continues, due to concepts of menstrual pollution and untouchability omnipresent in Nepal society (Thapa and Aro, 2021). For instance, Sharma et al. (2022) reports how nine out of ten women in Nepal undergo “restrictions” during menstruation. Amary et al. (2023) echo this sentiment stating how “*chhaupadi* represents the extreme end of menstrual restrictions in Nepal” (Amary et al, 2023: 3). The internalisation of impurity cultivates a fear of harming the community from a young age as menstruating women perceive themselves as untouchable (Joshi, 2022). Yet, as Parker et al. (2024) argue, *chhaupadi* is conflated with diverse practices and relationships towards menstruation across Nepal. When framed solely as exclusion, all practices around menstruation in Nepal are placed on a spectrum against *chhaupadi* without consideration of specific relationships to menstruation.

The 2015 earthquake of 7.8 magnitude transformed the physical and political landscape, including surrounding menstruation. With the subsequent Constitution of Nepal (2015) emerged the right to equality (Article 18) and the right to reproductive health (Article 38) (Thakari, 2021). Lack of access to hygiene facilities and sanitary pads among displaced populations following the earthquake rose to a national concern (Budhathoki, 2018). The 2015 earthquake therefore shifted attention to the urban regions of Nepal, specifically Kathmandu (Adyin et al. 2025). Delivering sanitary pads to displaced populations sparked broader attention towards the importance of menstrual hygiene provision across the Kathmandu Valley.

Evidence that menstruation results in reduced school attendance, and therefore gender gaps in education forefronted Menstrual hygiene management (MHM) as a public concern (Shrestha, 2022; Shrestha et al, 2024), despite menstruation remaining taboo in public discourse (Am, 2015). In response to the increasing focus on gender by the United Nations Development Programme, the Nepal government distributed free sanitary pads to 130,000 girls in schools across the country (WaterAid, 2020). The “pad” (disposable sanitary pad) became a tangible and visible

solution towards MHM, and therefore an extension of the Nepal State. With the disposable pad, menstruation is reduced to a technical question of hygiene and cleanliness.

With MHM a national concern, schools are a key access point for researching menstruation and disseminating knowledge. Educational initiatives focused on raising awareness around menstruation and obtaining insight into girl's experiences and understandings of menstruation (Shrestha et al. 2022). Yilmaz et al. (2021) discuss emotional stressors around menstruation highlighting the school as a space for disseminating knowledge and intervention. Menstrual pain (dysmenorrhea) and heavy bleeding (menorrhagia) affect daily life, especially school and higher education attendance (Upadhyaya and Adhikari, 2023; Adhikari and Adhikari, 2024). Girls in schools report their mothers as their knowledge basis for menstruation meaning they are targeted as a key means to change understandings (Maharaj and Winkler, 2020). Despite raising awareness, there is evidence of the prevalence of practices around menstruation (Parajuli, 2019). Access to social media simultaneously reinforces menstrual stigma creating opportunities for dialogue and change (Urban and Holtzman, 2023). Therefore, education is perceived as the primary means to change attitudes towards menstrual pollution and exclusionary practices.

Nevertheless, there remains limited research on menstruation in Nepal despite its recognition as an important health and social issue (Sharma, 2022). The limited research on how women make meaning of these practices leads to assumptions surrounding menstrual stigma (Crawford et al, 2014). Defining menstruation as “a technical, hygiene crisis” (Maharaj and Winkler, 2020: 267) ignores and stigmatises the meanings surrounding menstruation within women's lives. Subedi and Parker (2021) highlight the lack of clarity around the MHMPA central concept of “dignified menstruation” because of the MHMPA attempt to merge the Sustainable Development Goals (2020) with the Nepal context.⁶ National homogenous programs are inadequate for addressing the diversity of relationships towards menstruation across Nepal (Baumann et al. 2019). Subedi and Parker (2021) call for engagement with communities through interdisciplinary multisector approaches incorporating women's perspectives.

On attending the National Menstrual Hygiene day in 2024, the repeated phrase, “not all women menstruate and not all menstruators are women” (also quoted in Parker et al. 2024:1),

⁶ The sustainable development goals were adopted by the United Nation Member States in 2015 as action towards ending poverty and environmental sustainability.

highlights shifting discourses around gender and inclusive language.⁷ The recent volume titled *Menstruation in Nepal* (Parker et al, 2024) demonstrates how there “is no one single narrative of menstruation” (Parker et al. 2024: 2) calling for acknowledgement of “the agency of people who menstruate” (Parker et al. 2024: 259), collaborations with communities in Nepal and further longitudinal research on these policies especially outside of Kathmandu. This thesis answers their call by providing an ethnographic account of menstrual waste based on long-term participation demonstrating how women understand, experience and negotiate menstruation in Sankhu.

Sanitary waste: an ethnographic object

My introduction to sanitary waste in Sankhu began in 2019 participating in a three-month Disaster Risk Reduction project with Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) under the International Citizen Service run by UK Department of International Development.⁸ Staying in a Newar Brahmin host home, I shared a room with a Chhetri female volunteer from Biratnagar, Nepal. When her menstrual cycle arrived, I was unable to enter the kitchen, fill up a water bottle or wash the dishes at the exterior tap. Sharing a room with a menstruating woman meant I must follow norms as if I was menstruating. As our voluntary work turned to waste management, our host Aunty raised the problem of sanitary waste. Avoiding water sources during menstruation, she is unable to wash reusable cloths until the fourth day and felt embarrassed to display them on the rooftop to dry. Further, she expressed concern that disposable pads are non-recyclable and burning plastic damages the fields. In response to this instance, I returned to Sankhu in 2022 planning to investigate methods of sanitary waste disposal. In this section, I outline the project framework for engaging with menstrual waste as an ethnographic object in Sankhu.

My Ph.D. research focus began as part of the broader scope of an international research project named “WASTE: Consumption and Buddhism in the Age of Garbage” at the Centre of Contemporary Buddhist studies, University of Copenhagen, that explores waste within Buddhist communities. Waste management interventions produce unintended consequences because of the multiple and indeterminate understandings of waste (Alexander and Sanchez, 2018) revealing concerns with morality and social order (Liboiron and Lepawski, 2023). By reconnecting

⁷ These two themes are specific to the national activist scene and did not emerge within my fieldwork in Sankhu. Hence, I use the term “woman” rather than “people who menstruate” or similar representing the discourses within the field.

⁸ The UK Department for International Development merged with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to form the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in 2020.

with BlueWaste2Value, a social enterprise for waste management based in Kathmandu with a branch in Shankharapur that operates by collecting memberships and selling materials to recyclers, I gained an overview of waste management in Sankhu. Waste management endeavours in Sankhu include illicit collections of scraps on bikes, entrenched modes of disposal such as burning waste, and enterprises such as BlueWaste2Value.

Yet, sanitary waste evades disposal methods in Sankhu. Due to fears of touching or seeing the menstrual blood, women separate, conceal and dispose used sanitary items from other forms of waste in Sankhu. Menstrual blood, as untouchable, must be disposed. Steng (2014) characterises this phenomenon as “sacred waste,” as residue that cannot be disposed or left alone because of its ambiguity. Her examples include the dust from Ground Zero, flowers from funerals and material remains from ritual practices. As a framework for analysing waste in Buddhist communities, Brox (2020) delineates excess, discard and afterlife. Excess addresses “material abundance” (Brox, 2020: 8), discard focuses on what is “thrown away” (Brox, 2020: 12) and “afterlife” addresses what remains. Taken in conversation with “sacred waste,” this framework accesses how sanitary waste is formed from excess, as consumption of disposable products, discard, as disposal practices and afterlife, the remains of bodily matter. Beyond a technical issue, as Hawkins (2001) construes, to manage waste is to manage the self. Taking these threads, sanitary waste posits a challenge towards disposal because of its intimacy with the body and self in Sankhu.

Returning to Sankhu in 2023, I worked with a researcher, Asmita Khulal, an MSc graduate in Sociology from Tribhuvan University and longstanding friend from our first VSO placement in Sankhu. From January-April 2023, she assisted for a few days each week with translation, collaborations and providing insights from her experiences with menstruation in Nepal. Our preliminary conversations with women’s groups, documentation of waste and conversations on menstruation clarified that sanitary waste as a concept is too narrow when framed as “blood, bodily tissues and used menstrual absorbents” (Water Aid, 2019: 2).⁹ Departing from the UNICEF and NGO discourse of Menstrual Hygiene Management and Sanitary Waste, I engaged with menstrual waste by decentring it as an ethnographic object and documenting all aspects of everyday life in Sankhu. Through long-term participant observation across all aspects of social life in Sankhu, I obtained language competencies, embodied boundaries and an

⁹ Women’s groups form as cash collectives where women will contribute money so that they can access funds when needed for emergencies or enterprises. These initiatives are formed from neighbours, usually from the same caste and ethnicity and will meet regularly (at least once a month) to give and/or collect money. These groups often are invited to attend workshops or participate in events in Sankhu.

understanding of how absence, discomfort and the hidden reveal the significance of menstruation in Sankhu.

In English, menstruation holds conceptual ambiguity: it refers to the process of shedding the uterine lining and is used as a noun to refer to menstrual blood. Discourse surrounding menstruation depicts the process of a female dispelling an egg and shedding their reproductive lining as a form of waste, inherently linked to age (bodily decay), reproduction and sexuality (Martin, 1989). Menstruation becomes a marker for sexual difference, with men deemed to have endless reproductive potential while women are born with a set number of eggs that inevitably decline from menarche (Martin, 1989). Women's bodies are associated with infantile incontinence as a site of potential bodily flows, such as menstrual blood (Grosz, 1994). Within a Western context, Grosz argues that menstruation defines a woman's body through seepage, uncontrollability and leaks placing women in a morally inferior position to men. In English, there are many colloquial terms such as "Auntie Flo," "Time of the month" or "On the rag" as semantic domains for shame (Sveen, 2016) or strategic conceptual metaphors (Boughenout, 2023). The concept of menstruation becomes a site of moral, gendered hierarchies navigated through its shifting meanings.

In Nepal, menstruation is referred to through euphemisms. Euphemisms are a polite way to refer to taboo or problematic concepts within everyday discourses of menstruation (Newton, 2016). Nepali, as the national language in Nepal, has multiple concepts for menstruation such "*phohor*" (waste) (pronounced "*phor*"), "*mahināvārī*" (monthly turn), "*bagcha*" (flow) and "*nachune*" (untouchable). Different contexts, castes and social settings prioritise concepts. For instance, "*phohor*" emerges when referring to the disposal of menstrual blood, *chhui* (untouchable) is used by Chhetri communities and "*bagcha?*" (are you flowing?) will politely ask if one's menstrual bleed has started. Residents in Sanku move through languages, switching from Nepali to English or their mother tongue meaning the concept and expressions surrounding menstruation is co-constituted across castes, ethnicities and languages.¹⁰

Among Newar language speakers, there are three primary ways to ask about menstruation. In Newar language, "*cha majyu chau la?*" (Is your menstruation happening?). *Mayju*, meaning untouchable or prohibited, expresses that one must stay away from festivals, temples and family members during menstruation, so the verbatim translation is "you impermissible happening is?" This phrasing is primarily used among older generations if speaking solely in Newar language. Second, a senior woman in the home may ask "*nachune hunu?*" (are

¹⁰ Mother tongue is how residents will refer to their first language within Sankhu.

you untouchable?), to which one responds “*nachune bhayo.*” (untouchable happening). Across youth, senior generations and genders in Sankhu, the third primary way to refer to menstruation is “*yo mens bhayo?*” (Is menstruation happened?). This colloquialism of the English term menstruation pronounced “mins” is an explicit way to refer to menstruation. By using English, it sidesteps the expectations of euphemisms within Newar language. Among peers, youth will use English terminologies such as “my period” or “menstruation” to discuss their menstrual cycles.

Throughout the thesis, I explore the significance of these concepts within the contexts of ethnographic narratives and experiences. Menstrual waste, as an ethnographic object, refers to the qualities, practices and substance situated within broader understandings of the body, gender and the sacred. Within this brief introduction to the terminologies referring to menstruation in Sankhu, I highlighted how these concepts are shifting, contextual and indicative of generational differences. This is also reflective of how language is mobilised in Sankhu. Newar language is situated within its context, for example, descriptions of objects will rely on visual cues, distinguishing between animate and inanimate objects, quantity and physical appearance of length, flatness and roundness (Shakya, 1997). For example, deities and spirits are classified with the animate classifier (-mha), long thin, objects have the classifier “-pu.” Nevertheless, a full linguistic analysis of Newar language discourse is beyond the scope of this study. Instead of offering literal or verbatim translations, during the thesis I explore the embodied meaning and lived experience of concepts surrounding menstruation, and particularly *majyu*.

To this end, I draw on narrative, sensory and experiential ethnographic writing to present the embodied, partial and invisible presence of menstrual waste in Sankhu. I use a narrative style, echoing Abu-Lughod (1993) to forefront women and their daily negotiations with menstrual waste. The thesis mobilises the disposal narratives of a select number of women focusing on the interactions during our interviews and what is unsaid, drawn from the trusting relationships built with women across Sankhu. To conceptualise this in terms of absence engages with the withdrawal, removal and invisibility that imparts influence on social activity. Menstrual blood is absent in how it is concealed, managed and contained, whether through boundaries within the home, sanitary waste disposal or self-monitoring. Absence as a “corporeal, emotional and sensuous phenomenon” (Bille, M et al., 2010: 13) holds an ambiguous, irrevocable but non-binary relationship to its antonym, presence. To express this, I draw on the soundscapes, smells and dissonances that refract how menstrual waste pervades and dictates social encounters within a shifting landscape.

Sankhu

Sankhu is an ancient Newar town located in the northeast of the Kathmandu Valley. Carved out within the hills and overlooked by the Himalayas, the Kathmandu Valley is conceived of religiously and politically as a mandala and continues to constitute itself as a sacred centre (Gellner and Latizia, 2016) and political core where the government is situated (see Figure 2). Sankhu is proximate to Kathmandu meaning that it has longstanding trade and religious relationships to the sites in the Kathmandu Valley. Vajrayoginī, the local and founding goddess of Sankhu participates in the myth for the founding of the Kathmandu Valley by handing the sword to Mañjuśrī, a bodhisattva, that drain a lake to reveal the fertile lands of the Kathmandu Valley. Historically, agriculture is the primary mode of sustenance for the Newar. As the first stop on the trading route from Lhasa towards India, its markets traded in artistry and metals creating a wealthy populace (Rankin, 2004). Sankhu is famous for the Svāsthānī melā when tens of thousands of pilgrims visit Sali Nadī river (Birkenholtz, 2018) and Vajrayoginī temple. The landscape is marked by physical and climatic differences with cool forests in the hills, the urban nexus of Sankhu and the rice fields that sprawl towards Kathmandu.



Figure 2 Kathmandu Valley (marked in red) in Nepal.
(Source: Open Street Map).

Sankhu is situated within the local administration of Shankharapur municipality within the federal structure of governance in Nepal. In 2014, village committees merged to produce a new local administration under Shankharapur municipality with 9 wards (districts) and 7140 households (Nepal Census, 2021).¹¹ Nepal is a majority Hindu country with the Nepal census (2021) reporting 81.3% (Nepal 2021 census) self-declaring as Hindu.¹² The majority ethnicities consisting of 37%

¹¹ Wards are responsible for communicating between the people and the municipality, which in turn provides public services such as education, transportation, water supply.

¹² It should be noted that self-declaring as Hindu may have social benefits in Nepal. Shrestha (2012) for example found that his census data meant people were more likely to declare themselves as Hindu to access social benefits from the State.

Tamang, 22.6% Newar, 20.2% Chhetri (Nepal Census, 2021) live across the landscape of Shankharapur municipality. For instance, the Tamang populace primarily occupy the hills, majority Newar populace in Sankhu town and Chhetri communities in the surrounding villages. The disaster response following the 2015 Gorkha earthquake caused a disconnect between municipal interventions such as road infrastructure and its populace (Rana, 2021). Studies on intimate partner violence (Ghimire et al, 2023) and

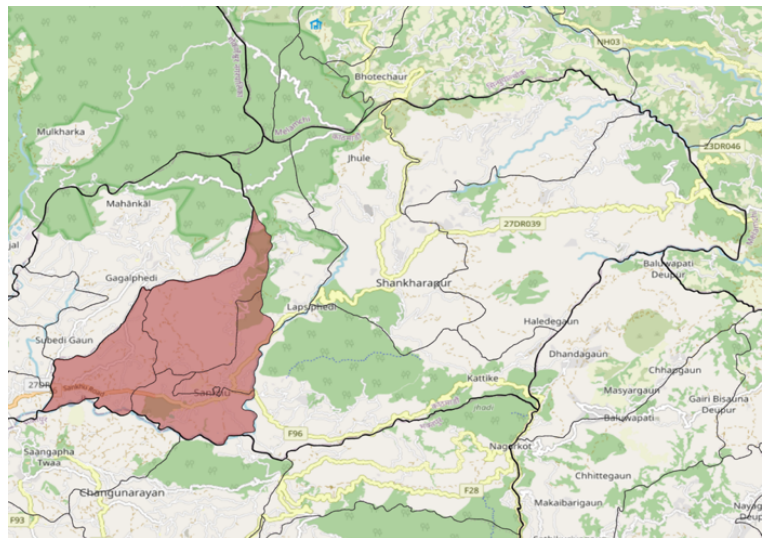


Figure 3 Wards 6, 7, 8 and 9 (marked in red) within Shankharapur municipality.

(Source: Open Street Map)

cervical cancer prevention (Rijal et al. 2018) among married women in Shankharapur indicate the necessity of qualitative research to address problems pertaining to the female populace. These studies highlight the challenge of accessing women's perspectives because of distrust and reservations towards expressing critical opinions. Based on the families and organisations I had worked with in 2019, this study is located within Wards 6, 7, 8 and 9 as indicated in Figure 3. This thesis offers a unique contribution to understanding the lives of women in Sankhu, as the first study to explore menstruation in the region.

Historically, the town at the heart of Vajrayoginī's domain was named Shankharapur after King Shankhadev and its shape as a *śaṅkha* (conch), the domain of Vajrayoginī referred to as *Sakwo* (New.).¹³ The domain of Vajrayoginī extends from her temple above the town bordered, to Sali Nadi river, Salambutar temple, Indrayanī temple and at its heart, Sankhu town (see Figure 4). As a majority Newar town, Sankhu follows the Nepal Samvat calendar with innumerable festivals and rituals undertaken against the lunar patterns. Shrestha (2012) provides a comprehensive study of Sankhu informed by his positionality as a resident where he argues how Sankhu's boundaries are ritually defined through worship, dances and festivals. In particular, he delineates how the town is organised spatially around caste with the higher castes closer to the centre and lower castes in the periphery highlighting the role of *gūthi* (funeral associations) within the social organisation of the

¹³ Within the thesis, I use the term Sankhu to refer to the town and the surrounding region interchangeable as used by my interlocutors.

town. The 2015 earthquake caused extensive damage to Sankhu collapsing homes and numerous casualties.¹⁴ According to the earthquake assessment undertaken by Shrestha et al (2017), in 2015 there were 1000 households in Sankhu. Of the 631 traditional Newar houses made of brick and mortar, 70% were destroyed and 93% severely damaged. Non-traditional house constructions also suffered damages. With residents needing to sell their land to rebuild their homes, rampant property development desecrates the Kathmandu Valley. This thesis explores how menstruation contributes to the shifting boundaries of Sankhu as the domain of Vajrayoginī.

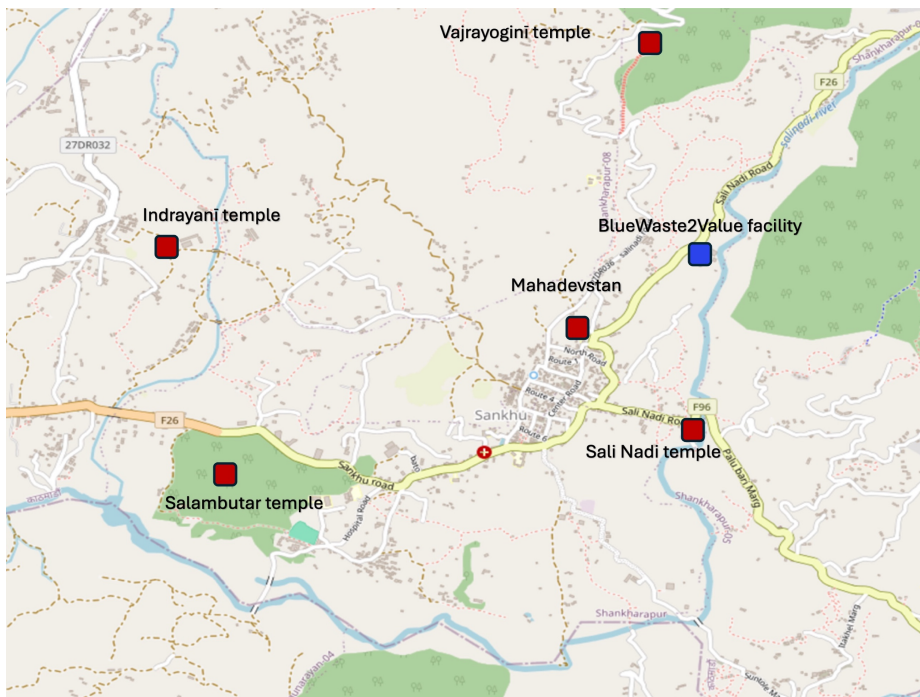


Figure 4 The domain of Vajrayoginī bordered by Sali Nadi river, Vajrayoginī, Indrayanī, Sali Nadi and Salambutar temple. Mahadevstan on the outskirts of the Sankhu town. BlueWaste2Value in the Northeast next to the crematorium. (Source: Open Street Map).

Newar

Cool air flows through the empty Jyāpu Museum as I tour the donated collections with the primary curator demonstrating the cultural and material heritage of the Jyāpu caste, the farming caste of the Newar. On its opening, a 1km queue stretched through its heavy, wooden doors as visitors fainted from the large crowds. Now empty, two mannequins in male and female

¹⁴ The 2015 earthquake is termed “bahaṭar sāṅko vukampa” meaning “Earthquake of 72” referring to the year the earthquake took place in the Bikram Samvat (Nepali calendar). Within the thesis, I refer to the earthquake as “the 2015 earthquake” to mirror this phrasing.

traditional dress (*tapālan* and *hāku patāsi* respectively) kneel at the front holding a sign “*Namaste*” (Greetings). Across the tables covered in a red fabric, the curator guides me through the clay objects, baskets and sewing utensils, to brass and copper pots and instruments. “There are 40,000 objects” the curator exclaims. On the right side is a model of the ceremony the annual Machhindranath ceremony where a 30ft chariot is pulled through the streets of Patan. Newar refer to themselves as “festival people” due to their heavy ritual calendar. In this section, I introduce caste, gender and religion among the Newar highlighting how this thesis contributes to understandings of Newar women.

Until the mid-eighteenth century, the Newar were the majority inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley rooted within the Ancient Kingdoms of Bhaktapur, Patan and Kathmandu (Gellner, 1997; Whelton, 2005). When the Shah Dynasty court formed the Gorkha Empire, they absorbed ethnic groups, including the Newar, into their political framework. Through the plight to generate a common identity and forge a nation-State, political elites created a binary opposition opposing the Hindu Southerners towards “tribes” with Northern Buddhist influence (Gellner, 1991). Under the Rana regime and the introduction of the Mulukī Ain (1958), a legal caste code, Newar castes were reorganised as subordinate to the Brahmin-Chhetri castes. The Mulukī Ain, a civil code instituted in 1854 under the Rana regime further institutionalised the Hindu caste structure, regulating divorce among Newar women through heavy payments (Gellner, 1991). Nostalgia resonates among the Newar in Sankhu for the Malla period under which the Newar expanded in trade, artistry and influence (Gellner, 1992). In Sankhu, the Newar remain the majority populace with longstanding generations of families.

According to Gellner, caste remains “the most important determinant of a person's attitudes” among the Newar (Gellner, 1992: 43). Gellner (1992) characterises Newar as a “double-headed caste system” whereby the highest caste consists of Brahmin *pūjarī* and non-monastic Buddhist *vajracārya* perform household rituals and rites among the Newar populace. The Newar caste system formed during the 8th or 9th Century (Licchavis period) and restructured during the Malla period (13th-18th Century) (Shrestha, 2012). The *vajracārya* and Śākya, high Buddhist castes, adapted ritual traditions to conform to State caste laws (Lewis, 2015) and adapt to North-Brahmanical systems (Van Rospatt, 2014). The caste system, maintained through ritual practice, creates a possibility for social mobility through the modification of behaviour assimilating to higher castes (Rosser, 1966). Quigley (1993) draws on his ethnographic work among the Newar to argue that caste is located around kingship, rather than eschatological notions of purity. This creates a conception of a centrifugal system whereby the closer the person is to the centre (the

palace), the closer to divinity (Gellner, 1992). Through the lens of menstruation, Newar uphold and challenge systems within Newar caste.

Among the Newar, daily activities are inseparable from religion (Toffins, 2015) consisting of rising Theravada movements (LeVine and Gellner, 2005), Newar (Vajrayana Buddhist), and North Indian Brahmanic systems (Gellner, 2001). Gellner (1991) criticises the dichotomy “Hindu” and “Tribal” models produced by political elites establishing a centralised government in Kathmandu. He suggests the trichotomous model of “Hindu,” “Tribal” and “Newar” influences to social organisation and ritual practices. Birkenholtz (2019) refers to the coy response when asking “are you Buddhist or Hindu?” When I asked the same question in my own fieldwork I am greeted with a smile and various responses, some saying clearly “both,” an acknowledgement that they are Hindu but worship Lord Buddha or a quizzical expression towards a perceived irrelevant question. Shrestha (2012) evades the distinction by focusing on how ritual practices, including festivals, sanctify the town. Although Shrestha expands the heuristic models of Gellner, his analysis is underpinned by a distancing from ambiguity which leaves a functionalist undertone to his analysis defining the sacred as collective awareness reified through ritual practice. By introducing tensions at the core of religious and daily life in Sankhu, I show how the “sacred” is embodied by amorphous substances such as menstrual blood.

In the Jyāpu museum, a female statue poses beating rice adjacent to large clay pots for making rice wine. The curator turns with a laugh to clarify that women make the wine and men taste it. He points to a flask shaped object covered in a woven basket with a hand explaining how it is delivered to the wife’s family, as dowry, during marriage. The curator points out the reddish-brown sārī used before a girl has her first period and distinguishes it from the dark green sārī worn for marriage, like his wife had worn. “Now they wear dresses from India,” the curator gestures to the picture pinned above the display. Newar are endogamous, meaning there is a custom of marrying within the limits of caste but to marry within a patrilineal group is incestuous (Gutshow, N et al. 2012). According to Gellner (2004), far from being excluded, women are fundamental to religious life among the Newar. He highlights how within the highest castes women and men perform certain practices as a couple and “preservers of tradition” (Gellner, 2004: 4). Yet, a tension presides in how due to these domestic duties, women are removed from public life (Rankin, 2004). Birkenholtz (2019) overcomes a dichotomy of empowerment against oppression by exploring how women relate to Svāthānī, a powerful goddess, negotiating the meanings of *shakti* (power) and *dharma* (religious duty). In the vein of Bennett’s (1983) ethnography on the status of Brahmin-Chhetri women, problematising the assumption that their sole position was inferiority of men and showing their

strategies and status within domestic space, this thesis contributes insights on the contemporary position and expressions of Newar women.

On the third floor of the Jyāpu museum, I see plastic covering the walls and floor. “Oh no, they have already been here” the curator exclaims. We step down onto a sunken floor surrounded by pillars. Mattresses line the room and the windows are covered shut in material, a pink fabric across the ceiling casting a hue across the room. The curator explains that before the menarche the girl is confined for seven days so no men can see them, after which they enter sunlight and marry a god. The practice of spending days shielded from the sun is *bārāḥ*, a ceremony undertaken before menarche (Emmrich, 2014).¹⁵ My eyes adjust as I tread around the wooden ceiling posts where fifty girls will follow a program to keep them entertained inside for one week. In the main corridor, the curator points out that the participating girls must use that restroom paved with paper so they will avoid contact with sunlight. Within this thesis, I explore how ceremonies unique to Newar girls, such as *bārāḥ* are practiced in Sankhu and their significance upon the gendered experiences of girls and women. Thus, thesis contribute insights on the contemporary position of Newar women by presenting presents the challenges, negotiations and endeavours through efforts to conceal and dispose of menstrual waste

Anthropology of menstruation

Menstruation remained peripheral in anthropological research despite its significance for understanding the female body. In tandem with developments in feminist theory and material studies in Anthropology, ethnographic work on menstruation has expanded and deepened, now a growing field of study. In this section, I give an overview of the Anthropology of menstruation before proposing how this thesis builds on pollution theory, as the dominant theoretical approach within the Anthropology of menstruation.

The groundbreaking anthology *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation* (Buckley et al. 1988) delineated the Anthropology of Menstruation as a field of study. Menstrual blood is a cross-culturally problematic substance, managed through customs and taboos (Buckley and Gottlieb, 1988). According to Buckley and Gottlieb (1988), 1950s concerns with toxins produced during menstruation and the focus on hormones in the 1980s distorted theoretical and

¹⁵ In Sankhu, interlocutors explain that *bara* means twelve, refers to the twelve days of ritual seclusion. Emmrich (2014) also notes how *bārāḥ* denotes “a fence, a barrier” (Emmrich, 2014: 89). For full discussion of *bārāḥ*, see chapter 6.

ethnographic engagements with menstruation (Buckley and Gottlieb, 1988). For instance, Costello's (1989) damning exposure of tampons demonstrated the toxicity of tampons, bleached with chemicals to achieve the whiteness associated with cleanliness. Conceptualised through the lens of "menstrual rituals" (Winslow, 1980), early ethnographic engagement primarily focused on perspectives of menarche. For example, Turner (1967) observed the significance of menstruation among the Ndembu in Zambia as a facet of fertility detailing its relationship to puberty rites and gendered positions. In Tanzania, menstruation raises young women to a higher status recognised socially through an initiation rite, where menstruating women are expected to keep the secrets of menstruation from young girls (Wemba-Rashid, 1986). Despite a recurring theme within ethnographic works, especially those focused on puberty rituals, menstruation remained peripheral in research.

Despite Buckley and Gottlieb's anthology, the Anthropology of Menstruation remained a quiet and discrete field. A special issue *Blood mystery: Beyond menstruation* considered whether menstruation is pollution (Hoskins et al. 2002). With a wide range of ethnographic examples from around the world, the contributors pushed back against the emphasis on menstruation as polluting, demonstrating examples in Papua New Guinea and Samoa where menstruation signifies collaboration between the sexes as well as the use of menstrual blood in occult practices (Hoskins, 2002). Within the Anthropology of Pregnancy loss (Cecil et al. 1986), menstruation is mentioned in relation to puberty. For instance, in Northern India puberty accumulates heat, associated with sexual heat, and is rapidly cleansed to prevent poison accumulating meaning menstrual blood is dirty (Jeffery and Jeffery, 1986). Underpinning these approaches is a symbolic analysis of menstrual pollution and how to control menstruation.

In the US, a collection of authors gathered to address the lack of focused studies on menstruation as an "exposure of the power of misogyny and stigma to suppress knowledge production" (Bobel et al. 2020: 1). Pushing the urgency as lying in health concerns surrounding reproductive diseases and toxic shock syndrome, the volume brought to light forms of menstrual stigma around the world. Bringing a critical lens, they highlight key themes of menstrual concealment, stigma and control, especially the medicalisation of women's bodies (Wood, 2020). The volume's damning critique highlighted how menstruation is framed as a "technical, hygienic crisis" (McCarthy and Lahiri-Dutt, 2020: 267) ignoring what makes menstruation meaningful in the lives of women and girls. The volume on *Menstruation in Nepal: Dignity without Danger* (Parker et al., 2024) provides an example of the diversity of understandings of menstruation within one country and points to the possibilities of cross-cultural analysis that Buckley and Gottlieb called for 40 years prior. The pivot to materialities in Anthropology (Miller, 2005) inspires early

career researchers to consider the significance and relationships to the substance of menstruation itself. For example, Banke (2025) uses a material approach towards menstrual products in Odense, Denmark by collecting photos of menstrual blood to show the relationship between bodies and products. With growing reflections on positionality, the understanding that the researcher is an active participant in social life rather than an observer has led to reflections on the impact of practices around menstruation on the researcher.

Pollution theory, as delineated by Douglas *Purity and Danger* is heralded as the most comprehensive framework for understanding the symbolic potency of menstrual blood (Buckley and Gottlieb, 1986). In her conception that the body is a reflection, and site, that sustains the boundaries of society, Douglas (1966; 1970) attempts to create a comparative form of reference for understanding transgressive substances. Anything that can pass the boundary of the body, such as spit, hair or menstrual blood is threatening. Customs or taboos as moral codes maintain these boundaries through rules of avoidance. Dirt as the byproduct of order is sacralised within religion as “an apt symbol of creative formlessness” (Douglas, 1966: 199) in its capacity to transcend boundaries. Through this concept, Douglas posits how substances that transgress margins with indefinable, placeness qualities – such as dirt – meeting vulnerable boundaries, represent the potential for new boundaries. Only through rejection, is order, and thus purity sustained. At the core of Douglas’s argument is a Durkheimian perspective that the purpose of society is to sustain itself, and each component, especially morality, works towards this function. Durkheim (1912) characterises morality as a mechanism underpinning social relations through the production of social solidarity. From Douglas’s symbolic perspective, menstruation represents broader anxieties and its rejection as a solution to reinstating society.

My theoretical contribution to the Anthropology of menstruation builds on Douglas’s symbolic interplay between “articulate and inarticulate” (Douglas, 1966: 118), to theorise menstrual waste as a relational, amorphous form. Through how menstrual waste is hidden, it is possible to understand form. To this end, I draw on phenomenology to explore how menstruation is experienced. Merleau-Ponty (1968) conceptualises “the flesh” as an interpolation between the invisible and the visible. The “flesh” is the surface of the body, the visible and the invisible intertwined in a chiasm. Merleau-Ponty therefore conceptualises the body as an embodied perceiver. Focusing on bodily matter through a new materialist approach engages with how the body perceives. Menstrual blood takes an agential quality as a material that exerts its capacity on people’s lives (Miller, 2007). Therefore, the “flesh” in the chiasm is grounded in human corporeality and its surroundings (Alaim and Helina, 2010), the “inter-agency” of objects (Barad, 2003; 2007) and the co-constitution of materialities (Alaim and Helina, 210). By putting material

feminist theory in conversation with phenomenology, grounded in my ethnographic data, I theorise how the qualities of menstrual waste influence life in Sankhu.

Containers

Menstruation is embedded within the landscape in Sankhu as an embodied and negotiated space (Low, 2009). Following a spatial framework within the thesis moves beyond a cosmological perspective (Sahlins, 1989) where each ethnicity exists as an isolated entity interacting with the other or mapping ethnicities onto place (Ferguson and Gupta, 1992). Space, when understood as fragments “hierarchically interconnected” (Ferguson and Gupta, 1992:8) centres on relations. Taking this lens, menstrual waste is a fragmented, hierarchically interconnected phenomenon that forms relations between hierarchically interconnected spaces in Sankhu. To understand the significance of frictions between these planes, I use a spatial analysis within this thesis.

To posit how menstrual blood is contained within each spatial layer, I use the concept of containers to conceptualise these spatial planes. The concept of “containers” features in Strathern’s (2018) theory of relations where she posits that to understand relations is, by definition, to engage with “nonrelational phenomena.” Objects emerge as categories for a relation to form, as opposed to categories pre-existing relations. Among the Hagen, Strathern (1988) offers a concrete example by arguing that the categories of male and female emerge through actions as expressions of relations suggesting that there is no pre-existing category of male and female. “The momentary realisation of opposed single sex identities appears as container distinguished from contained.” (Strathern, 1988: 175). These containers merge and reify distinct identities with creative potential. The two logics underpinning Strathern’s theorisation of relations is first, that formlessness underpins form and second, that actions exert influence within these spaces.

Within this thesis, each chapter analyses the contradictions, junctures and disruptions that emerge within each container - blood, body, home, town, temple and urban - showing how these enclose or leak. Female virtue is the enclosed body, monitored and maintained through habits. Avoiding the kitchen during menstruation and washing bedclothes reinforces the home. Enclosure marks the *bārāḥ* menarche ritual for Newar girls, as the town bears witness to its inhabitants participating in its rhythms. During menstruation, women avoid the temples surrounding the town that contain the domain of the Vajrayoginī *devī* whose power is harnessed through a stable body. Against all this, the ever-expansive urban metropolis of Kathmandu extends into Sankhu through sanitary products and disposal infrastructure. In Sankhu, menstrual waste coagulates, dissolves and lingers across layered, spatial containers.

By conceptualising the chapters in this thesis as containers, I mirror the containment of menstrual waste in Sankhu and reveal the frictions that form between these layers as menstrual waste threatens to disintegrate these hierarchical interconnections. Newar women negotiate these frictions through sanitary product choices and disposal methods that contain the substance and themselves within Sankhu across all aspects of daily life.

Methods and ethics

This thesis is based on ethnographic methods engaging with the understandings, experiences and practices surrounding menstrual waste. First, long-term participation observation is the primary and fundamental core of this research. This involved living in a host home, participating in the ritual calendar, household activities and daily life. For three months I lived in Ukhatar, a village 45 minutes from Sankhu, with a Chhetri host family. From March 2023-January 2024, I lived in a Newar household in Sankhu to fully participate in daily life, regularly visiting Ukhatar and families in surrounding villages. I joined the Zumba studio, which built relationships with women in the town and is a significant space within this thesis. I passed time in the public domains of life, such as the teashops, temples and festival celebrations as well as residents homes.

Concerning menstruation, I followed the customs as expected of a member of these households, declaring my menstrual cycle and avoiding spaces such as the kitchen and pūjā room. The ethical deliberations that arose over whether to attend events were part of the process in engaging with the lived experiences of women in Sankhu. An integral component of this documentation is fieldnotes. I maintained four primary journals documenting: (1) planned events, (2) events and primary observations (3) vocabulary (4) a personal journal. I wrote all journals by hand, later transcribing onto the computer as part of the analysis. Writing by hand meant I could make discrete notes at opportune events complemented by photos and audio recordings.

During this research, I collaborated with a researcher, Asmita Khulal who visited for two days each week providing translations, organising meetings and contributing her perspectives on the town from January-March 2023. Due to family responsibilities, Asmita stepped back from the project after three months but continued to offer ongoing support through translating consent forms (see Appendix II). Sonam Sherpa, a teacher with whom I also collaborated in 2019 conducted joint interviews with monastics, *vajrācārya* and *jogi* at the temples and monastery within Sankhu.

To complement participant observation, I undertook twenty recorded semi-structured interviews between July-December 2023 with residents from Sankhu. The demographic

of formal interviewees consists of four Newar Shrestha males within senior organisational roles in Sankhu, three Chhetri women based in villages outside of Sankhu, two Newar Manandhar women, one Newar Khadgi woman, eleven Newar Shrestha women and one Dalit woman. The age range of interlocutors for interviews ranged from 19-60+. In the latter phase of the fieldwork, I conducted three group interviews of two or three women (some overlapping). All formal interviews were transcribed manually and analysed with a thematic coding cross-referenced with NVivo.

Language has a significant role in this research. At the start of this fieldwork, I had some language competency in Nepali from my previous stay in Sankhu in 2019, preliminary field visit in 2022 and preparation. Living in Ukhatar, I used resources such as Matthews (1997) *A Course in Nepali*, Hutt's (2003) *Teach Yourself Nepal*, and learning vocabulary with residents. After moving to Sankhu, I spent time learning Newar language with residents. The majority formal interviews were undertaken in English and Nepali, switching between whatever the participant felt confident. In the group interviews, the most confident English speaker translated where necessary. On return from Sankhu and writing the thesis, I continued language learning to enhance the findings of this thesis.

To ensure the ethical integrity of this project, I follow the General Data Protection (GDPR) and Danish Data Protection Act (2018) guidelines for collecting and storing data (see Appendix II). All interviewees received consent forms in Nepali and English and gave permission for audio recordings. Two interlocutors requested not to be recorded and for these I took notes during the interviews. All interviewees had the option to withdraw from the study by December 2023. All photographs used in this thesis are from public events or have express permission. Only over 18s participated in formal interviews for this study.

Chapter Outline

Within this introduction, I have outlined menstruation in Nepal, Sankhu, the Newar, the Anthropology of Menstruation, theoretical and spatial-analytical framework and methods. In Chapter 2, I afford space to discuss the methodological reflections on this research. Moving through the landscape of Sankhu, I introduce key sites and reflections within the thesis while outlining the feminist, experiential and waste methods that inform the findings and implications of this ethnography.

Following the methodological framing I move through the containers of this thesis. Chapter 3 begins with a menstrual stain on a skirt worshipping with Newar women at temples in the Kathmandu Valley presents an unexpected mess. This breach of the body's boundary and its

traces threaten the integrity of worship due to prohibitions on worshipping or touching gods during menstruation. Visible blood in Sankhu at festivals and blood donations share the capacity of menstrual blood to dissolve bodily boundaries. Walking with women in Sankhu reveals the meanings of menstrual waste and how menstrual blood – dirty, dried and dangerous – embodies moral values leading to unique practices of containment and concealment.

Chapter 4 centres on the space of the Zumba dance studio where women's bodies reveal themselves through experiences of menstruation. Rituals, such as *mha pūjā*, cultivate an embodied awareness that sacralises the body. With an understanding of menstruation as a natural, exhausting process, women must take care of their bodies. Menstrual pain creates a heightened sense of this awareness affirming the boundaries of the body. Habits, such as bathing on the fourth day of the menstrual cycle, reveal expectations of feminine virtue with the female body maintained as a container.

Chapter 5 focuses on practices surrounding menstrual waste within the home. Beginning in the *dya chhen* (god house), women avoid worshipping the god or touching the kitchen hearth during menstruation. Moving into the bedroom, as an ambiguous space that shifts throughout the day, women clean their sheets and blankets on the fourth day of menstrual bleeding. With the majority of homes collapsed during the 2015 earthquake, practices around menstruation shifted within the rebuilt physical structures. The bathroom, as a temporary enclosed space facilitates expulsion of menstrual waste from the home.

Chapter 6 moves into the watchful gaze of the town. Focusing on the worshipping of pre-menarche girls, I argue that the town is established through its role as a witness. During *Bārāḥ*, girls retreat for twelve days at menarche, an enclosed space integral to gendered self-transformation. Menstruation structures patterns of work, festivals and calendrical rhythms drawing women into Sankhu. Through the celebration of menarche, expectations around female purity are formed, embodied by menstrual waste.

In Chapter 7, women avoid of deities as an active engagement with the gods. Vajrayoginī, the local and founding goddess, has iconography symbolising the consumption of blood. Meanwhile, across all castes and ethnicities in Sankhu, one must not touch the god or participate in worship during the first four days of menstrual bleeds. Rituals and tools, such as masks harness the power of the gods. However, the menstruating body is an unreliable container excluding women from roles such as priests. Women, instead, cultivate intimacy with the god through the negotiation of these boundaries to protect Sankhu from harm.

In Chapter 8, I argue how menstrual infrastructures – technologies for managing menstrual waste – participate in the expansion of the metropolis of Kathmandu into Sankhu.

Disposable pads reach into the lives of women in Sankhu, offering convenience and affordability. Women adapt formal pedagogical spaces and interventions on menstruation through their pre-existing socialities participating in social change. Women's bodies become infrastructure as they manage disposal of sanitary waste.

The final chapter, as the conclusion, draws together the containers of this thesis - blood, body, home, town, temple and urban - to argue how through menstruation, women negotiate their positions in Sankhu. The thesis concludes outlining future avenues for research on menstruation and reproductive health in Nepal and globally.

Chapter 2

Methodology: Embodied Invisibility

Turning up the steep hill towards Sanagaun, in Shankharapur municipality, the taxi driver comments on how before the road was pitched (concreted) these villages were unreachable. Approaching the gravel road, he announces that we have arrived at the Chhetri village of Ukhatar, named after the sugarcane growing in the surrounding fields that provides sweet relief in the monsoon heat. Prekshya and her mother, whom I knew from my stays in Sankhu in 2019 and 2022, stand outside to greet me. Their house, built after the 2015 earthquake, has an open design with seven family members and regular visits from extended family. After our initial reunion, I place my bags in my bedroom on the basement floor, and the family invites me into the kitchen to eat rotis. As her mother throws flour onto the counter and kneads the dough with precision, Prekshya leans across the table and asks me in her direct manner “when is your period?” After I inform her of my expected menstrual date, she follows with “you must tell us when your period comes, okay?”

A few weeks later, I wake up realising I am menstruating and I inform Prekshya and her mother. The family is Hindu and as a member of their household, I must take my lunch on the terrace and avoid the kitchen, washing my dishes under the exterior tap on the ground floor for the first four days of my menstrual bleed. After lunch, I sit at the bottom of the stairs tying my shoes. Prekshya appears on the balcony. “Where are you going?” she asks. I respond that I plan to walk to Sankhu to visit the BlueWaste2Value office. “But you are on your period; you should rest,” she replies. I say that I have taken paracetamol and cannot stop my work for my menstrual cycles. “Now you are in Nepal,” she responds. “Don’t go to Vajrayoginī or Sali Nadi, okay?” Menstruating women must never touch the gods which means I must avoid the temples within walking distance of her home.

From first impressions, these avoidance practices mean menstruation seems accessible as a research topic. With frequent NGO interventions on menstrual hygiene management, residents rarely asked additional questions once I explained that I was researching menstruation and sanitary waste. On a surface level the topic appears depoliticised compared to, for example, issues of land ownership. Yet, when asked about reasons for customs or practices, the answer defers towards generations, customs or *pūjāri*; “it is our forefathers.” Prekshya states. In Sankhu, menstrual waste is an obscured ethnographic object coagulating in leaks, avoidance, objects and intimate conversations with women about shared pain, timing, and inconveniences.

Bodily experiences of shame, taboo or concealment are “embodied invisibility” (Sadar, 2024). Within Indian English novels, Sadar (2024) mobilises the concept of “embodied invisibility” to articulate how the female body constitutes selfhood informing women’s experiences. Embodied invisibility emerges within how women with physical disabilities in Toronto reduce social stigmatisation through concealment and avoidance (Zitzelberger, 2010) and how racialised bodies become hypervisible through infantilisation and surveillance (Barthwal-Datta, 2023). In this thesis, embodied invisibility is a methodological concept encapsulating the feminist, experiential and waste approaches that attune to how women embody, conceal and experience menstrual waste in Sankhu.

In this chapter, I use the challenges of researching menstruation to explore the embodied and positional aspects of ethnographic fieldwork. By concentrating on walking as a method and literary technique, I explore how the field is an embodied space (Coffey, 1999) of which menstruation is fundamental. Second, aligning with Birkenholtz (2019) and Moore (2024), I show narratives preside in the material landscape, with ramifications on the affective qualities of menstrual blood. Third, experiential and phenomenological approaches (Desjarlais and Throop, 2011; Desjarlais, 2008), I consider how empathy refracts insights onto menstruation. Third, I highlight waste as a methodological framing for unveiling menstrual blood as an “invisible materiality” (Holmes, 2024), revealed through “periscoping” (Hiemstra, 2016), leakages, and breakdowns. Fifth, I discuss the concept of “dialogue” within the ethnographic research process and its ethical affordances, emphasising that the findings of this thesis are grounded in the process of forming and negotiating relations in Sankhu. Menstrual waste, as embodied invisibility, centres the lived, layered experiences of women in Sankhu.

Feminist Self

After spending a morning sitting in Prekshya’s room, the rain stops and we take a stroll. Prekshya and I walk to the edge of her village and she points to the fields where the old houses remain from before the earthquake, reminiscing on how everyone used to socialise together. Now, “they” are separate in their homes. We step into the shadows of each house in her village with small fire pits, empty noodle packets, flip flops or unidentifiable plastic. The BlueWaste2Value truck that collects waste does not visit this far, so families burn their non-degradable waste outside their land. We walk the long path past the tea shop, greeted with a wave from the tea shop owner, one of Prekshya’s relatives, who uses fresh milk from her farm and never dilutes the tea with water.

Nourishing her customers with undiluted cow's milk is a metaphor for her integrity, where substances are left untainted despite the appeal of profit.

In this thesis, every sentence, memory and vignette connect to a profound set of emotional resonances as the “embodied field” (Coffey, 1999). In this section, I use walking as “a way of knowing” (Ingold and Vergunst, 2008: 6) to express the embodied field within my research. Tracing a route I regularly followed from Sanagaun to Sankhu, I reflect on the practical ways walking initiated bodily transformations, gendered spaces and physical boundaries of the fieldsite.¹⁶ Walking affords insight into how the fieldsite is inseparable from the “ethnographic self” coagulated through the emotional and embodied aspects of fieldwork. An embodied field implicates how menstruation drew me into the field and marked its boundaries.

Walking formed a significant dimension of my experience and research efforts in the field as my primary mode of travel and through walking interviews. While walking, different imaginations and acts imprint on the body as “attunement” (Ernsten and Shepherd, 2025:67). For instance, Prekshya comments how fast I walk until I adopt a casual, slower movement. In this attunement, we pass under the gate to Sanagaun, the small Newar village with reconstructed blue houses since collapse in the 2015 earthquake. I am greeted by Kusal. Every day he wakes at 4 am to work on his fields and assist his mother with cooking. He gestures to my feet. “You Westerners always wear those shoes”, referring to my walking boots.

The strength of engaging in immersive, long-term ethnographic methods is that transformative, embodied data collection evades the hegemonism of positivist knowledge (Spencer, 2011). In Kusal's comment, he highlights my position as a foreigner in the town later physically replaced by my clothing, pace and demeanour. De Certeau's (1984) chapter on “walking the city” expresses a dialectic between the visions of the urban planner and walking the city. The motion of walking means that this dialectical relation becomes invisible so that one forgets the original components. In the same step, walking the field means that the dialectical relation between ethnographic self and fieldsite become indiscernible. By maintaining a thorough ethnographic journal documenting changes and reflections towards my physical comportment and stature allows for a later unpicking of these threads. From an ethnographic standpoint, focusing on this hidden process engages with embodied space, rhythms and landscape of Sankhu.

¹⁶ My gratitude towards the participants at the workshop “Marginal Subjects - Emotional Resonances: Navigating Research Collaborations and Audiences” (May 2025) for the space to reflect on the embodied field.

In the early days of fieldwork, I set the goal of leaving the house once a day and walking. For the first three months, I walked from Sanagaun to Sankhu, and sometimes beyond to Vajrayoginī, Jasenpowr or Sali Nadi. Seeing the route every day meant I noted different changes and practices, such as where people were at different times of day, river levels or an altercation in the town. Initially, I determined that the physical boundaries of Shankharapur marked the fieldsite, layered on physical obstructions (such as Sali Nadi river) and the domain of the Vajrayoginī. How could I delineate the field when I visited other parts of the Kathmandu Valley attending festivals and events, hikes with friends from Sankhu, and communicated on social media? Instead of a patchwork of physical sites as multi-sited fieldwork (Marcus, 1995), the fieldsite is a “space which cuts through meaning” (Candea, 2007:15) meaning it is formed through blocks that emerge through the research process. One such block is the boundaries of temple spaces during menstruation. By encountering these blocks, the boundaries of the fieldsite are embodied knowledge shared with residents in Sankhu.

On one morning, at Prekshya’s beckoning, I climb the steps to the balcony to take tea. Sitting with the extended family, I ask a cousin if it was safe for me to walk alone. They frown and recommend against it. This posed a significant challenge: how could I research if I could not leave the house alone? In the ideal figure of the “Dérive” (Debord, 1983), observing peripheral awareness through different terrains and the “Flâneur” (Benjamin, 1999) wandering through historical materialities of Parisian streets, the romantic image of a wanderer roaming through urban spaces is within a masculine, class-based body. The concept of the “Flâneur” and the “Dérive” ignores “embodied difference” (Sharanya, 2016:200). Sharanya’s (2016) application of the “Dérive” concept for walking through Delhi demonstrates how gendered positionality changes her ability to move through the streets. As a Dérive in Sankhu, it is unusual for anyone to walk around alone, especially a foreign woman. To mitigate risks, I set boundaries on when I could walk, such as past sunset. As I walk the routes to Sankhu and surrounding temples, residents accustomed to my routines expect me at certain times as I become a part of the landscape under their gaze.

Walking with interlocutors in Sankhu built trust, facilitating access to the town through embodied experience and meant interlocutors physically led the research. Kusal, Prekshya and I enter the forest area, passing to the left of the pipal tree as it is important to have the right arm towards the sacred object as we pass towards the wide-open space to Indrayani temple. The trees create reprise from the heat and a peaceful breeze passes from below. This is the main temple of Prekshya’s forefathers and is also a protector temple for the bodhisattva temple of Vajrayoginī revered by Newar like Kusal. The sounds of children echo in the background. “*Ke bhayo*” (what happened?) “...so many children!” Prekshya pauses affirming: “It is a peaceful place.”



Figure 5 A woman walks next to Indrayani temple as Bratabandha procession approaches, March 2023.

As an “exceptional space” (Pasquetti, 2019), the soundscape surrounding Indrayani temple evokes a dissonant reaction within Prekshya as she reacts to the immediate disturbance of noisy children before reaffirming the imagined ideal of tranquility. Within Pasquetti’s investigation into state significance within Lydda-Lod in Palestine, his research participant, Marwan, shows him the old Arab centre pointing to a Mosque disclosing a massacre that occurred there. In the context of a treacherous political milieu, walking and talking enabled access to the Palestinian historical narrative highlighting “exceptional space(s)” (Pasquetti, 2019: 861) for the residents. Although removed from the dangers pervading Pasquetti’s research, walking with interlocutors like Prekshya and Kusal accessed their narratives through the embodied, ambiguous sensations of significant landmarks such as Indrayani temple.

In Indrayani, Prekshya begins describing the other temples, highlighting Sali Nadi and the Svāsthānī *melā*, where 10000 pilgrims’ worship Svāsthānī *devī* as the most famous, her family might visit Vajrayoginī temple to sacrifice a goat during Dashain, an annual Hindu festival in *Ashwin* or *Kartik* (corresponding to September-October in the Gregorian calendar). Leaning over the bars, there are plans to build a new dump pit for Sanagaun, but what might this mean for the villages below? She comments on the problem. “Dumping, plastic, unhygienic, food all throwing outside.” She immediately follows up, mentioning the problem with alcoholism at night

among men, who might then return home to abuse their wives. This example corroborates Anderson's (2004) argument on how conversations while walking "harness place as an active trigger" (2004:254). The visible issues of waste disposal led to a reflection on hidden "disturbances" within the town, including domestic violence and alcohol consumption; a recurring theme within conversations with women in Sankhu.

Walking is an embodied method, a way to track the transformations taking place during fieldwork through the body's relation to place. At Indrayani temple, there is a water tap adjacent to steep steps covered in branches. Above looms a strangler fig suffocating its victim. Every day we pass this tree, I am reminded of its inevitable fate, marked by the remaining haunting structure. Watching snakes or bugs and avoiding the concrete gap in the ground, I glance at myself in the mirror of the small shrine underneath the temple. In time, I see my body adapting to the climate, the walking boots replaced by rubber sliders, the route ingrained in my muscle memory. Understanding that this is an "embodied field" (Coffey, 1999:75) engages with the destabilising and empathic correlates of fieldwork. To undertake ethnographic fieldwork is a research method connected to the researcher's sense of self (Coffey, 1999). Rather than a disclosure statement, the positionality of the ethnographer is a "resource" (Collins and Gallinat, 2010:14) creating the field by dissolving the boundary between research and lived self.

I am walking down the uneven path, which only the most skilled motorcyclists attempt, with the view stretching across Sankhu. I pass a *ghumba* (monastery) whose concrete skeleton in 2019 is gilded in gold, with three Buddhas inside. Holding 80 novices, this is a Buddhist monastery sponsored by a Taiwanese guru based in the US. Sulke Khola, a Chhetri village named after the river that runs past its homes moved from the hills down onto the flat area of the valley after the earthquake, the abandoned buildings visible from the roofs of the concrete houses. Over the months, I observe climatic shifts in the village. In dry season, waste gathers on the banks of the river whereas once monsoon arrived, it washes downstream. As the heat increased in the summer months, the sounds of cicadas echoed across Sankhu from the surrounding jungles. I become accustomed to the rhythms of the agricultural calendar, watching crops planted, grown, harvested and dried in the sun. Grosz (1995) uses loose language to demonstrate the fluidity and impermanence of architecture and economic processes as forming semi-permanent environments. The "city", or in this case the village, is part of the constitution of the body and factors in "the social production of (sexed) corporeality" (Grosz, 1995:381). Within the semi-permanent environment of Sankhu forms the gendered body.

Within my fieldwork, my status shifted depending on with whom I walked. Beyond the monastery, I am greeted by Danyata and Maya from Sulke Khola and we play Carrom, a

popular variation of snooker which involves flicking a circular plastic piece against another towards a goal on the table. Danyata studies journalism and has started a business running a shop, Maya, her sister in the village, completes her bachelor's in social work. I first met her after Maya's mother saw me walking alone from Sankhu and invited me for tea. After that day, I became close friends with the family frequenting their house for tea. As Abu-Lughod (1990) emphasises, being a woman does not necessarily remove power dynamics. For instance, walking side-by-side with Danyata created solidarity against the watchful, curious gaze of the town, while walking with the cultural president of Sankhu sometimes led to teasing call "*chwayegu desh yaye*" (She will take you to her country) subsiding to "*khana khayō*" (have you eaten?). Despite being a foreigner during her fieldwork in Turkey, Wolf (1997) highlights gender as the primary factor affecting fieldwork relations. She became incorporated into kinship idioms and a subordinated role vis-à-vis men, entering non-hierarchical relationships with women. Walking gives space for the negotiated positionalities of women within Sankhu.

Caste also arose within this frame of shifting perceptions. Walking with the Chhetri families in Sanagaun and Sulke Khola meant that I interacted with their families and taken to events, perceived as part of their households. After moving to Sankhu, I spent more time with the Newar communities in Shalkha *tole*, Chalakhu *tole* and Sali Nadi. The majority caste in Sankhu is Shrestha, as well as my host home in Sankhu, yet I also walked with Manandhar and Khadgi caste. Focusing on the spaces where caste emerged as a social stratum, such as during the *devī pyakhān*, (god dances, see Chapter 7), jewellery worn by women at Happy Soul Dance Studio or discussions of marriage, compared to where it disappeared, such as during trips to Kathmandu or the resorts in Sankhu indicated embodied boundaries in Sankhu. My positionality is neither reducible to a foreigner nor outside caste expectations but shifted depending on with whom I walked.

Beyond their home, the pitched sections of the road mean I jumped between different sections, the road builders patiently pausing their drills so I could pass. Walking alone, I record notes on my dictaphone, process the emotional strains of the field and benefit from natural exercise. Boundary-making, or a delineation of the researcher against the "real self" is a feminist methodological practice to navigate emotional labour with the field (Cuomo and Massan, 2014). Briggs (1996) reflects on how staying in an Innuttiaq household meant she carved out space for "privacy without the chill of isolation" (Briggs, 1996:23), fearful of losing solitary hours as a time to recharge and catch up on notes. Living in multi-generational households, where women undertake a significant portion of domestic responsibilities (see Chapter 6), walking with interlocutors created an opportunity for private conversations and eventually walking interviews.

Walking formed boundaries of privacy that allowed for intimate conversations, trust and emotional processing.

On a fresh morning, I linked arms with three other women as we followed the procession chanting “*Nhu Day Bhintuna*,” celebrating Newar new year. The women, including myself, are draped in the Newar *hāku patāsi* sārī, gold ornaments in the hair completed with a Bindi. I looked down at my feet treading carefully up the uneven paths and observed the carefully wrapped sārī, my blonde hair braided over my shoulder. My appearance changed from the boots and walking trousers to a Newar *hāku patāsi*, an active participant in Sankhu life. Yet, I remain marked as a *videshi* ‘foreigner’. Beyond props constructing and exterior identity, wearing *hāku patāsi* and jewellery are an expression of the embodied practice of fieldwork. Learning to present the self within the field is part of the research strategy (Watts, 2006). As I took slow steps, linking arms, the pace mirroring my companions surrounding me, I “legitimise(d) the fieldworker body” (Coffey, 1999: 57). The field is embodied by the fieldworker physically negotiating the boundaries of the body.

Within the context of menstruation, this is exemplified through participation in managing bodily fluids according to the field. Throughout the thesis, I demonstrate how I participated in disposal practices, avoided temples and disclosed my menstrual cycle. Avoiding the temples during menstruation exemplifies how I coagulated and dissolved embodied boundaries within Sankhu. The “end” of fieldwork marked by bodily adjustment adapting to rhythms of meals, waking and menstruation. As my fieldnotes continued another six months documenting the transition to Denmark, I negotiated the challenges of managing menstruation within Danish society. Instead of taking days off to rest each month as I had done in Nepal, I felt compelled to hide my menstrual cycle that became increasingly painful due to nutritional deficiencies. Only when my body had adapted to the rhythms of Denmark did I consider my fieldwork complete; the embodied field no longer walked by my body. Thus, the embodied invisibility of the field contained by the body.

Narratives

Fragments of narratives, memories and soundscapes merge to produce the specificity of experience in Sankhu. Birkenholtz (2018) wrote a comprehensive analysis of the Svāsthānīvrata kathā - a Hindu ritual text recounted during the Svāsthānī *melā* across Nepal - and Svāsthānī *devī* in Sankhu. For Birkenholtz, the transformation of Svāsthānī *devī* from a fluid, invisible goddess to local protector of place mirrors the narrative tradition during Svāsthānī *mēla*,

where women will read a chapter from the text on each day. Crucially, Birkenholtz observes the gradual emergence of Svāsthānī in the physical, materiality of Sankhu. In this section, I recount the space of Sankhu through the narratives that pervaded my stay embedded within the material remnants of the town and its temples. Through this lens, I introduce the sensations of Sankhu and how its gaze impresses upon its inhabitants as well as highlighting the significance of emplaced narratives for understanding menstruation.

From the second floor of the upper temple of Vajrayoginī, framed by the latticed window, is Sankhu town in the outline of a conch. Named Shankharapur after its founder, King Shankhadev, it sits within the domain of Vajrayoginī *devī* marked by protector temples at Sali Nadi river, Salambutar and Indrayani. Enclaved within the Kathmandu Valley, her temple sits halfway up the Manichanda hill on the site of a self-arising volcanic rock. Mañjuśrī, a bodhisattva, took the sword from Vajrayoginī, carving into Chobhar hill, south of the Kathmandu valley, before returning the sword to Vajrayoginī where it remains tied to the back of her hand, symbolising non-violence and potential power. The receding forest that once concealed the temple from human society (Zanen, 1986), now with gaping wounds preparing for property development, encroached upon by resorts, meditation retreats and vendors.

Within the upper temple is the yellow goddess of Vajrayoginī named Mhasukhwa Maju. Worshipped by Buddhist and Hindus, Vajrayoginī *devī* proliferates across India and Europe as a symbol of tantric practice, transforming from a fierce god into a mother-like figure (Moore, 2020) with numerous pilgrims increasingly from outside Nepal. Some leave gifts, worship by touching her feet beneath the gown, meditate or complete prostrations. She also embodies Ugra Tārā, the wisdom goddess, Hindus consider her the incarnation of Parvati, wife of Lord Siva. Moore (2012) characterises Vajrayoginī as “discontinuous” through her presentation in the Mañisailamahāvadānā, yet Vajrayoginī is omnipresent within Sankhu. In Sankhu, she is a mother goddess, a benevolent protector god, expressed in the Sankhu greeting “Tare Mam” (Mother Tara) acknowledging how all residents carry her in their heart. Her image dominates Sankhu on posters, murals and phones, her eyes the transmission of power and blessings. Moore (2024) provides an in-depth translation and analysis of how the affective, emotive and literary aspects of the Mañisailamahāvadānā spread dharma. On an annual basis, Vajrayoginī visits Sankhu as the yellow goddess celebrated in a *jatra* (chariot procession), as part of the annual ritual calendar. Vajrayoginī is indiscernible from her domain of Sankhu.

The red goddess residing in the lower temple, named Hyau Khwā Māju, may only be touched by a designated Vajrācārya exchanging offerings through a golden embellished window. Next to the lower temple sits a stupa (dome shaped Buddhist shrine), older than

Swayambhu, under a pagoda temple design from the Malla period (13th-18th Century) (Shrestha, 2012). The sounds of construction echo with the bells rang in worship. Beneath the steep walls, an upside-down stupa cast over the wall during a temple invasion, the smashed Buddha faces an echo of a violent past. Hostile monkeys roam this path, feasting on offerings and waste dumped to the side. Dogs participate in this scene, occasionally falling into a fight. 108 steps form the pathway to the temple, guarded by carved rocks of two fierce lions. The uneven steps untroublesome to the seasoned pilgrim. 108 caves line the landscape that will open when inhabiting gurus complete their meditation: nine vacant, each with a distinct acoustic and atmosphere.¹⁷ On a festival day, under the crisp morning light, residents of Sankhu greet one another warmly. As the day progresses and the air becomes hotter, only an occasional greeting exchanges between a lone guard, tourists or visitors from Kathmandu.

Vajrayoginī approached King Shankhadev as an old woman and instructed him to build the town of Shankharapur. Shaped like a conch, the town follows measurements with the spatial layout like a mandala (Zanen, 1986), echoing the royal centres of Newar kingdoms with four gates, the palace in the south and a cremation ground outside of the town. Four sacred gates mark the boundaries of Shankharapur, as Sankhu town. In the Southwest, Bhaudvāraka for the bride to enter. All Newar women married to men in Sankhu pass through this gate. From the Southeast Sangaldvāraka, daughters of Sankhu depart to wed in other towns. During the annual *jatra* the yellow goddess of Vajrayoginī enters the northeast Dhulladvāraka. Newar bring their dead through Sidhwakha (“*si*” New. death) by Mahadevstan. A humbling reminder for any Newar resident in Sankhu, one inevitably leaves through that gate. A fifth gate presides in the East used during the Svāsthānī melā, where thousands of Hindu pilgrims across Nepal flood through this gate towards Sali Nadi river worshipping *Svāsthānī*. This final gate named Dhalankwodvāraka

¹⁷ 108 is an auspicious and common number in Buddhism often determining the number of prostrations, beads in a garland or in this case the number of steps the Bodhisatta temple (Buswell and Lopez, 214).

meaning “waterflow gate” express its downstream position. Circumambulation of the town during festivals or worship must remain inside the gates, lower castes live outside these gates.



Figure 6 Steps leading up to Vajrayoginī temple, April 2023

Strategically located on the ancient trade route to Lhasa, for a weary pilgrim or trader, Sankhu town was the first stop on entry to the Kathmandu Valley where night markets bustled trading metal artistry, agricultural produce and exquisite carpentry creating a wealthy populace. The motorways constructed across the Valley since 1958 mean Sankhu is no longer a trade centre (Shrestha, 2012). The night markets no longer exist, but traders sell crafts and items for festivals alongside imported items and plastic bags hanging outside stores, with economic activity reinforced through the built environment (Rankin, 2004). The buildings participate in shared spatial expressions for those who live in Sankhu. Bikes and cars circle the larger roads of the town. Old junctions where men meet to play chess, smoke and discuss the town’s happenings, backstreet alleys with ancient taps and large pools, carefully cleaned before monsoon during Siti Nakha. Steps where Aunties gather to knit colourful sweaters and greet passer-bys. Life meticulously designed around community squares. Sankhu is a “ritually defined universe” (Shrestha, 2012:10) steeped in ritual activity sanctifying and defining the boundaries of Sankhu.



Figure 7 Residents circumabulate Sankhu during Buddha Jayanti, May 2023.

The 2015 earthquake haunts Sankhu. Residents recall their movements at 11:56am: at Vajrayoginī temple where a candle blows before collapse, setting off on a journey with friends in the car sheltered from the collapsing houses, a mother and daughter jumping out the second-floor window before the water holder crashes down, in the local restaurant DeHakuz or crawling from their shop desk. Tales of pulling victims from the mud. Months sat outside the town in makeshift camps, chasing chickens for dinner, starting romances and rebuilding lives. Through sensitivity towards the dispositions of his interlocutors, the Yolmo in Nepal, Desjarlais (2003) shows how perceptions through storytelling and sensory engagements influence how people perceive and experience their lives. The 2015 earthquake is still visible in Sankhu town as land disputes delay reconstruction, leaving empty spaces or the remnants of the old homes. Memories of running through the maze-like streets. With tall, multi-storey concrete buildings, how will residents escape when the next major earthquake hits the Valley? That thought is always there, no one wants to relive that day.

Grounded in the watchful, panoptic gaze of Sankhu. “*kaagko hulma bakulla*” (A crane among crows) a Nepali proverb encapsulates the feeling of being watched. Repeatedly tracing the same routes, residents anticipate my appearance. An awareness of rhythmic movements around the town embodied in the slow pace of walking and joy at a spontaneous meeting, with

temporary accompaniment from a child, dog, or friend. Observing myself from Vajrayoginī temple, the homes and these daily interactions, come the alterations of Sankhu. To be in Sankhu is to be observed. The gaze a spatial practice until memory, narrative and myth is carried within the body. What does it mean to bleed in Sankhu? Throughout my fieldwork, I noted the sensory experiences of Sankhu creating a sensitivity to seasonal and bodily changes. For instance, the cool wind that moves from Sali Nadi river, the feeling of the dusty road beneath the sandals, gasping for breath on the climb to Vajrayoginī temple, exhaustion during ceremonies, the weight of the monsoon clouds, the smell of the butchers or the sound of evening *bhajan* hymns creates a sense of the lived experience. Attention to sensory perception creates an embodied knowing implicating how the everyday is experienced, its spatial and power relations (Pink, 2008). By engaging with embodied knowing in Sankhu through the senses, I recognise how the body dissolves in Sankhu through death, miscarriage or menstruation.



Figure 8 Rooftops of Sankhu with Changunarayan hill where a plot of land is cleared for property development, March 2023.

Experience

The rain pours off the patio roof overflowing the guttering as Prekshya, her sister-in-law, sister and I sit outside on the upper floor terrace. Usually, Prekshya's sister-in-law woke at 5am to attend to farmwork. During menstruation she no longer undertakes this intense labour as she must rest. Her husband and children, in her absence, must now share this labour to ensure the household is fed and running. The senior Auntie in the household, who prefers to be called "Ama" (*mother*) brings out the kettle and pours boiling water into bottles, ensuring the water avoids our bottles. The two younger brothers bring out platters of *dal bhat* positioning them on the floor next to us. Today, Prekshya's older brother helped cook the vegetables since all the women in the household, aside from Ama, are unable to enter the kitchen during menstruation. We shelter from the rain under the terrace awning, the shared visibility of our menstruation marked by our inability to enter the kitchen. It is jarring to inform the family of my menstrual cycle instilling feelings of fear (have I trespassed a boundary?), relief (I can relax) frustration (why must I sit outside?) and shame (everyone knows I am menstruating). How might these experiences share or contrast with those of Prekshya, her sisters or women in Sankhu? By taking an experiential approach to menstruation and daily life in Sankhu, I obtain an understanding of menstrual waste beyond disposal, its meanings and how it is managed in Sankhu.

To access menstrual waste within the embodied field necessitates an engagement with immersive, ethnographic methods characteristic of phenomenological anthropology (Desjarlais and Throop, 2011). In this section, I outline how a phenomenological approach to menstruation is necessary to investigate menstrual waste in Sankhu. First, I focus on my participation in household practices and customs surrounding menstruation. By reflecting and documenting how menstruating in Sankhu feels, my positionality in the field emerges through the disconnect between my experiences, my interlocutors and shifts over time. Second, taking a phenomenological approach to interviews, focusing on narratives and emotions around menarche rituals brings insight into how women relate to their bodies, selves and the Sankhu Valley. Focusing on experience across these domains creates an empathic artery that runs throughout this thesis.

Menstruation, as a bodily experience, is accessible through phenomenology because of how it prioritises the body (Kellend et al, 2017). In this research, I ground my experiential and phenomenological approaches within Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body as an "embodied subject" in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). He theorises how being in the world necessitates the presence of the body, as a sensory and perceiving unity which creates a sense of its

permanence. To be in the world means to be in a body and in my research, a menstruating body. In terms of ethnographic fieldwork, Merleau-Ponty's theorisation offers a framework on how documenting the senses informs the ethnographer of bodily understandings avoiding a relativism through acknowledgement of shared experiences. Further, the strength of this approach is that it acknowledges the limitation of empathic experience as what cannot be experienced by one's body (Throop, 2010). At this limitation, or boundary, are the insights towards the embodied invisibility of menstrual waste.

The choice to document long-term participant observation of menstrual waste in Sankhu centres a marginalised experience of female fieldworkers. Gurung and Lotter (2025) highlight how menstruation affects female researchers in Nepal who must negotiate self-disclosure, exclusion and respect for customs surrounding menstruation central to their positionality. Their study, based on questionnaires with female Nepali and international researchers indicates that menstruation is a defining but hidden aspect for their research often instilling negative feelings. On my first visit to Sankhu in 2019 I had no menstrual cycle and suspicions were verbalised on whether I was concealing it. Before embarking on fieldwork in 2023, I discerned that to comprehend menstrual waste in Sankhu, I must fully participate in the lived experiences of menstruation. Attending to this decision, I stopped taking the combined oral contraceptive pill (COCP) to align my bodily rhythms, hormonal fluctuations and menstrual bleeds without interference from medication. However, this came at a physical cost with heavy bleeds and pre-menstrual symptoms of cramps, anxiety and acne. By tracking the fluctuations of my menstrual cycle in my personal fieldnotes journal, such as delays, emotions and pain, I documented my changing perspective of my menstrual cycle.

My menstrual cycle became a modus for forming relationships in Sankhu. In Wacquant's (2003) embodied research on a Chicago boxing gym where he participates in boxing classes to understand how his interlocutors relate to the sport. By following their discipline, routine and habits, Wacquant obtains unique access to class and achievement within this space, but more importantly, shifts his relations with his interlocutors through the mechanisms within the sport such as the experience of sweating in the gym. As my fieldwork progressed, I felt an obligation towards my interlocutors meaning visiting a temple or participating in a pūjā during menstruation felt unthinkable. For example, sat on the floor of the Zumba dance studio, Sabina exclaimed that she wanted to travel between Dashain and Tihar (festival of lights) to Ama Yangri, a pilgrimage site two days north of Sankhu. Sabina asks when I expect my menstrual bleed as Ama Yangri is a holy site and it will be exhausting to travel during menstruation. I refer to my fieldnotes journal where I track symptoms and predicted dates. After discerning my next bleed, we push back the

plans a couple of days to ensure no one would be menstruating. This process elicited how menstruation defined my temporal, rhythmic relations to women in Sankhu. The mechanisms of managing menstruation in Sankhu relies on trust and disclosure.

As a foreign woman living in Sankhu, there are disconnects between my experiences and interlocutors. In his ethnography of the Yolmo in Nepal, Desjarlais (1992) focuses on the gap between his experience and his interlocutors in a possession ritual, informing him of expectations for bodily realities. Noting how he does not feel the urge to shake during a possession ritual mimicking the movements, Desjarlais (1992) he observes how the sensation and subsequent mimicry is a dissonance from his interlocutors. For instance, in the example of sitting on the balcony with Prekshya, her sister and sister-in-law, though we shared the experience of avoiding the kitchen and cooking utensils during menstruation, there are differences between our experiences. Prekshya's sister-in-law expressed that she appreciated the rest. Meanwhile, I found it confronting having the entire household know I was menstruating. Yet, these experiences are also irreducible to singular perspectives and what is expressed, as demonstrated throughout this thesis, is not always what is believed. By acknowledging these dissonances, I obtain insights into how menstruation is fundamental to daily life in Sankhu.

Taking this approach reveals how conceptions of menstrual waste are co-constituted between the range of individuals, households and approaches in Sankhu. It acknowledges how my research participates in these meanings expanding Shrestha's (2012) extensive ethnographic work on the Newar communities. In this chapter, I have focused on my interactions with Prekshya, who I continue to walk with to understand the meaning of menstrual waste in her village in Chapter 3. Participating in a Chhetri household inseparable from Newar communities. This Chhetri community, Hindu and with longstanding ancestry in the area hold a close relationship to the local goddesses such as Vajrayoginī, Salambutar *devī* and Svāsthānī. To participate in daily life in the festivals, rituals and social life in Sankhu especially in the evenings, I moved to a host home in Sankhu but continued to visit Prekshya, her family and surrounding villages. As Sankhu becomes a convenient connection to Kathmandu, many migrant workers lodge in the town. Within the hills at Vajayoginī, Tamang communities dominate with a range of festivals distinct but connected to the religious life of Sankhu. In Chapter 8, I introduce Arya, a Christian participant moved to Sankhu to earn money to build her home. By avoiding festivals, *tīkā* (blessings) and practices surrounding menstruation, she separates herself from Hinduism and from the caste system. Taking a phenomenological approach, focused on meanings surrounding menstrual waste, contributes to an understanding on how Newar communities in Sankhu are situated within broader milieu where ethnicities, castes and religions co-constitute understandings of menstruation.

A phenomenological approach to menstruation avoids homogenising ethnicities, castes and households in Sankhu. During interviews, I paid attention to the spaces, sensations and bodily reactions during interviews. As semi-structured interviews, I often began with a question such as “what practices do you follow during menstruation?” following with questions pertaining towards the feelings and sensations around the topic. Throughout the thesis, I note these reactions as an insight into how women distance and negotiate their relationships to menstruation with exclamations and caveats beyond their initial answers. Kelland et al. (2017) posit a phenomenological account of menstruation as engaging with “menstruation as situation” (Kelland, et al. 2017: 34). Comprehending how negative associations with menstruation combined with material conditions (such as availability of menstrual products) diminishes women’s freedoms. Their approach highlights how stigmatisation towards menstruation creates an abjection towards the self through which women form their identities. By focusing on feelings, sensations and experiences of menstrual waste, such as perceptions of it as “nasty” or “dirty” (see chapter 3), I access multiple subjectivities of women in Sankhu. Rather than reducing menstruation as negative stigma, I indicate through layers and contradictions how women form their relationships to menstrual waste, their bodies in Sankhu.

Experiences of menstruation access feminine subjectivities in Sankhu. For instance, in Chapter 3, I juxtapose the stress of a menstrual stain on my skirt with broader concerns of managing menstruation in Sankhu. In their investigation into narratives around Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS) and Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD), Cosgrove and Riddle (2003) highlight how narratives around menstrual distress in America are connected to constructions of femininity. As their interlocutors express an alienation from “the PMS self” which they control through bodily surveillance, they indicate how PMS symptoms are experienced as failures of womanhood. Although this study would have benefitted from more questions and insights into the broader experiences of PMS, by taking a phenomenological stance during interviews and conversations, focused on distress around spilling menstrual waste, I demonstrate that narratives of fear, solidarity and transformation express an embodied subjectivity of feminine ideals.

By focusing on sensory experiences pertaining to menstruation and daily life in Sankhu throughout this thesis, I embark upon what Throop (2010) terms an empathic ethnography which draws on experiential methods. By exploring my feelings, sensations and reactions to menstruation within Sankhu and following narratives of menarche rituals and disposal practices, I engage with how menstruation is felt, and the lived realities of the body. More significantly, as Throop (2010) argues, “empathy is an experience of the limits of accessing another’s first person experience directly” (Throop, 2010: 14) meaning it necessitates an awareness of the limitation and

therefore insights into what, if anything, is specific about menstruation in Sankhu. This limit is part of what I argue is the “embodied invisibility” that induces reflexivity towards how the researcher is indiscernible from the research setting (Hockney and Collinson, 2023). Instead of bracketing my experiences as irrelevant, I invoke them as a key access point leading to a sensory, experiential, empathic ethnography of menstrual waste in Sankhu.

Waste

As I enter the bathrooms of households in Sankhu, I occasionally see a blue plastic bag tied tightly and propped on a windowsill. The bags are distributed by shops in Sankhu when purchasing goods including sanitary pad items. The bag, concealing the menstrual blood becomes part of the waste disposal systems in Sankhu. Having established that experiential and phenomenological approaches as necessary to comprehend the embodied invisibility of menstruation within the field, I now move to two challenges within this research. First, menstrual waste detaches from the body. To solely focus on experience ignores the material realities of menstrual waste. Second, the absence of visible menstrual blood. During 14 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Sankhu, the only menstrual blood I encountered was my own or concealed in these plastic bags. How does one research an imperceptible substance and phenomenon?

To answer this, I draw on approaches from the Anthropology of Wastes (Alexander and O’Hare, 2023) to locate menstrual waste as an ethnographic object. First, I explore the (perceived) absence of menstrual waste in the field and how recording absence becomes an access point towards menstruation. Second, I discuss how waste can be mobilised as a method. Third, I argue that documenting qualities of waste described from interviews such as leakage, contamination and expulsion creates an alternative lens through which to engage with the field. These themes thread through this thesis as an axis for how menstruation is managed.

Menstrual blood is an “invisible materiality” (Holmes, 2024) that materialises through mistakes, absence and ambiguities. Theories of absence and invisible materialities offer a methodological lens to engage with menstrual waste. Holmes (2024) proposes through the concept of the “materiality of nothing” that we explore “materials which hide in plain sight, and objects and materials which change material form and which we cannot tangibly place.” (Holmes, 2024:4). Menstrual waste fits these criteria as a physical substance that changes status as it passes the boundary of the body, into a menstrual product and then enters the world, as well as a substance that is hidden throughout this process causing ethical distress or ambiguous relations to objects should its physical form be revealed. Through this lens, menstrual blood is an object whose

presence is defined by absence, such as the absence of women from events or sanitary waste from piles of waste. Focusing on visible research topics refracts insights on absent or invisible objects. According to Himestra (2016), “periscoping,” as researching a topic indirectly, engages with how nothing can be fully obscured. Within my fieldwork, periscoping techniques included questions during interviews about disposal methods, hygiene facilities and daily routines as well as documenting visible blood, such as sacrificial blood, donations and substitutes like vermilion powder (see Chapter 3). “Periscoping” enunciates menstrual blood as an invisible materiality.

However, to research an invisible materiality, one must conceptualise beyond dichotomies of absence vs presence, invisibility vs visibility, material vs immaterial, focusing on how “missing, loss or immaterial phenomenon are emotionally and experientially significant” (Bille, M. et al., 2010). Miller (2005) refutes the concept of immateriality arguing that if an object enacts on the world, it is never absent. This raises the question, what does immateriality mean in Sankhu? How does it appear through daily life? Immateriality emerges through affective, emotive and sensorial processes (Pink, 2015) such as traces, decay and displacement. In her ethnography on domestic energy in consumption in homes, Pink (2011) faced similar methodological challenges that resonate with the difficulty of accessing menstrual blood as an (in)tangible object in the field. Characterising energy as invisible for consumer and anthropologist, she advocates multi-modal sensorial ethnography to research intangible and invisible research subjects. Specifically, autoethnographic diaries, following the objects, asking interlocutors to talk about broader spaces (such as the home) reveal memories, experiences and practices allowing her to access an intangible object such as energy. Situating menstrual blood within the broader category of waste allowed me to access menstrual blood as an intangible object through documenting the sensorial waste, photography and practices of concealment, thus periscoping onto menstrual waste.

Waste as a method means systematically engaging with the conceptual, material and intangible qualities of waste through a range of fieldwork techniques. Methods are generative of what one studies meaning that the focusing on waste creates a particular lens (Lepawski, 2018). Walking around Sankhu or visiting Bluewaste2Value depot, I searched for evidence of used sanitary items. Despite encountering faeces, nappies and bandages entrenched in piles of objects on the side of the road, I never encountered menstrual waste. Patterns where waste is dumped revealed tensions within Sankhu. For instance, descending the road on the East side of Sankhu towards Sulke Khola, there is a huge pile of dumped items including plastic, wrappers and amorphous objects pressed into the earth. At the centre is a rusted sign declaring a five thousand Nepalese rupee fine if anyone dumps waste (see Figure 9). The sign is another abandoned object, a municipal intervention reconfiguring Sankhu.



Figure 9 Signpost declaring a fine of 5000npr if waste is dumped in this area outside Sankhu, February 2023.

Waste also became a way to access events. For example, when I was unable to attend the Sithi Nakhi worship which is exclusively for *gūthi* members (families for whom that is their god), I visited the shrines in the jungle, documenting the offerings consumed by monkeys. Considering worship from this perspective broadened what it means to participate in ritual. Even though I did not participate in the worship, engaging with the material remains presented a perspective on Sithi Nakh worship and the decay and removal of offerings. Waste also became a means to build relationships. For example, on a Saturday morning within my first month of fieldwork, I turn up at Sali Nadi temple on the North side of Sankhu to participate in a waste clear-up following the *Svāsthānī melā*. Each

team collected a basket and took on a section, sweeping the steps and picking up the shampoo sachets, packets and debris strewn across the well-trodden banks. Under the rising sun, we stooped over with the youth groups, BlueWaste2Value and community members actively participating in this tiring work. Participating in a waste clear-up builds relations through “dirty work” (Fredericks 2015), building trust through the precarious, physical and shared labour. For instance, I participated in waste sorting activities at BlueWaste2Value such as creating a garden with reusable items and recycling. Joining in this dirty work created space for conversations about the broader social challenges in Sankhu. Additionally, the location of the facility also created a perspective on the crematorium next door that is otherwise inaccessible to women. Waste created access points to Sankhu.

Focusing on waste created a perspective on the relationship between different economic stratas.. For instance, BlueWaste2Value is a well-established social enterprise, illegal wastepickers continue to gather metal and tyres to resell. On one such morning, it is 7am and I am sitting in a tea shop with the BlueWaste2Value manager and Asmita as we waited for the BlueWaste2Value truck. We hear sounds of the truck arriving and follow as it picks up the waste. The van is already nearly full and pauses outside each home as a female employee collects subscriptions. Usually, a woman answers the door and often is unable to pay, since their husband might manage the finances. As we follow the steep path up to Sanagaun, we encounter bright plastic bins that residents tied to trees to collect waste. A resident passing on his bike starts demanding that the van picks up the waste in the bins. Residents had put them up but no one collects them and BlueWaste cannot collect them without the membership. Following the waste truck gave insights into hidden tensions, caste and economic dynamics, such as the distribution of finances in the household and the reliance on infrastructures. Mid-December, Danyata asks if I had noticed how clean her village is now, no more waste in the river. She explained that since hearing of my work on waste management, they had prioritised their concerns about waste in the committee and now the municipality provides a truck. The new road meant it could pass through the village collecting dry waste so they no longer have to burn it. The conversation demonstrates how my presence focusing on researching waste management catalysed the prioritisation of presenting a cleaner village.

Photographing waste became a significant method within this study as it created an intimate engagement with the landscape and interlocutors. Desjarlais and Jackson (2015) how they use the camera to interact with interlocutors. Giving their camera to interlocutors engaged with their perspectives. In the early days of fieldwork, I walked around Sankhu photographing piles of dumped objects on the side of the road, burnt patches, collapsed ruins from the earthquakes and food consumed by monkeys. On one occasion, walking back from Narayan temple, Prekshya and I follow the riverbank of Sali Nadi back to Sankhu. Perched on the side of the road is a rusty

wheelbarrow accumulating rappers, plastic bags and an old rubber slipper. Charcoaled remains of burnt objects lined the wheelbarrow. “You should photograph that for your project,t” Prekshya suggests. Reaching for my camera, I captured the photo, taking additional pictures of waste piled by the roadside as we wandered back to Sankhu (see Figure 10). As demonstrated by my walk with Prekshya, interlocutors began to photograph what they considered useful for my research project. At times, handing over my camera and allowing interlocutors to photograph an event created a unique perspective on what they deemed important or useful for my work, such as the wheelbarrow. Taking regular photographs created the unintended consequence of documenting changes within the landscape, such as how monsoon season raised the level of the river washing accumulated objects downstream.



Figure 10 Plastic packages in a wheelbarrow in front of rice fields, May 2023.

Focusing questions on practices of concealment and disposal created a concrete means for interlocutors to reveal their relationship to menstruation. Navaro-Yashin (2012) in her study on abandoned objects and houses in the Turkish-occupied part of Cyprus demonstrated that when dealing with politically contested places it can be useful to focus on objects and people’s relations to them. She argues that the objects abandoned within the houses by Greek-Cypriots, untouched by the Turkish-Cypriots, contain affective properties that shape the subjectivities of the communities engaging with them. This method of focusing on the significance of abandonment, of what is not visible and the emotive and affective properties of objects inspired my approach in

focusing on the materialities of menstrual waste. For instance, asking directly about why women must not embody the gods such as during the *devī pyakhān* would be met with a circular answer “because of menstruation” and any further questions deferred to the “forefathers” or “it is our custom.” However, asking about disposal methods reveals an embodied relationship to menstruation. By focusing on concrete questions and practices of sanitary waste disposal, I generated insights into why menstrual blood must be kept hidden.

Dialogue

The sun has reached its peak as Asmita and I clamber the stairs into the upper room of Chalakhu *tole* resting house. BlueWaste2Value had invited us to sit in on a workshop spreading awareness about waste management in Sankhu. Fifteen women from the Chalakhu *tole* women’s group cross-legged on the floor, their backs straight and attuned to the images projected onto the screen. The presenters discuss the problems of air pollution. Ratna Aunt, positioned at the front speaks up: why should they worry about these things when this is an issue from Kathmandu? They are not creating the pollution. They have important things to worry about like running their lives. Asmita scribbles down notes as she speaks. We had agreed to absorb as much as we can from the workshop to help with our ideas and share our perspectives. Asmita turns to me: “we should ask her to help.” When the workshop had finished, we moved over to Ratna Aunt and Asmita explained the project on sanitary waste. Ratna Aunt suggests we speak to the head of the women’s group, to whom we wrote a letter proposing a workshop on menstruation. There was no response. However, six months later I am sat in the Zumba studio embarking on group conversations on the topic. Building long-term relationships opened up dialogue on menstruation in Sankhu.

Dialogue features throughout this thesis: the conversations with interlocutors, the reflections within this writing and the forming of relationships within Sankhu. At its centre, dialogue is concerned with the question of how to produce knowledge? How do we do so ethically and with awareness of the dynamics with all those who participate in the research process? In this section, I explore how dialogue, when mobilised as a methodological concept, can be used to consider the ethical and political underpinnings of engaging in ethnographic fieldwork. First, I mobilise anthropological critiques towards the imaginary of dialogue within intervention around menstruation in Nepal. Second, I demonstrate the significance of unintended dialogue with collaborators and participants, characterising the dialogical relations underpinning this research. Third, I briefly reflect on how writing, as a form of dialogue contributes to this process. Focusing

on menstrual waste, as a stigmatised topic, reveals insights into closeted topics in Sankhu including alcohol consumption, sexuality and women's experiences.

Dialogue is highlighted as integral to addressing menstrual exclusion in Nepal with researchers calling for multi-sectoral interventions (Thapo and Aro, 2021) and the MHMPA advocating for youth "normalizing menstruation discussions through open dialogue" (MHMPA Policy dialogue, 2025: 22). The MHMPA network supports the Nepal government in initiatives surrounding menstruation disseminating knowledge in Kathmandu. As evidenced by the National Menstrual Hygiene Day in the introduction of the thesis, this provided a significant resource in undertaking my work in conversation with broader dynamics in Kathmandu. To tackle menstrual exclusion, dialogue is understood as facilitating inclusivity and the multiple voices contributing to ideas and stigmas around menstruation. For instance, Subedi and Parker (2021) argue how males are "neglected and marginalised within the discourse on dignified menstruation" (Subedi and Parker, 2021: 4). Through the concepts of "frontstage" and "backstage," they articulate how municipal or ward representatives will deliver a narrative or image disconnected (frontstage) from the lived experiences of residents (backstage). To this end, they highlight the importance of building long-term trusting relations and to explore broader concepts such as the meaning of dignity. Dialogue is imagined promoting inclusivity in understanding and practises related to menstruation in Nepal.

Yet, the conflation of dialogue with inclusivity blurs the concept, especially when applied in methodological approaches. As Crapanzano (1990) argues, the sentimental, rhetoric embedded within the concept suggests an equal relationship between participants. The core of Crapanzano's critique is that the concept of dialogue suggests a separation (the researcher forms a bridge to the participant's world) when the anthropological researchers are "inextricably involved in our research encounters" (Crapanzano, 1990: 280). He argues that a dialogic method can overcome the singularity of a monograph format. Acknowledging "partial – committed and incomplete [truths]" (Clifford, 1986: 7) accesses the ethnographic insights towards people's lives. Taking Crapanzano and Clifford in conversation offers three practical approaches: first, to focus on unplanned conversations and moments. Second, to reflect on the limits on the extent one can experience the perspective imaginations and hierarchies that ensue. Third, to recognise that writing is as much a form of dialogue as conversation. Through this stance, the thesis remains a continuation of the conversations that took place in the field. Taking these three practical points, I will now demonstrate how these are mobilised within this study and why they are particularly useful for understanding menstrual waste.

Unplanned conversations became the primary mode for understanding discourses surrounding menstruation. The dialogue between my experience and Asmita became a key point of departure for exploring experiences and understandings of menstrual waste. For example, sat on the balcony of our host home, I expressed to Asmita that I felt lost in how to structure the research. She responded with a series of ideas including running events in collaboration with BlueWaste2Value and expressed her curiosity, as a Chhetri woman from Kathmandu, on Newar culture and practices. Her hesitancy to attend certain events, the way residents addressed her instead of me (with assumptions that she was my guide) and our lived experiences of menstruating in the home became conversation points on the long walks between Sanagaun and Sankhu. After three months, when Asmita saw I was settled, she returned to her family home offering support, guidance and translation of documents such as consent forms. Asmita's support in these avenues was invaluable, but beyond structured, task-based expectations, our dialogue created the foundation for understanding menstruation and gender in Sankhu.

Working with organisations in Sankhu provided spaces for dialogue and an understanding of the public discourses compared to those within Sankhu. For instance, BlueWaste2Value, the social enterprise for waste management in Sankhu became crucial for understanding the perspective of waste management in Shankharapur municipality. Working within the BlueWaste2Value office, participating in workshops and speaking on the challenges around waste and environment created space between the municipal directives and the lived experiences of residents in Sankhu. In their work on collaborative film making, Ghimire et al. (2024) argue the importance of engaging fathers, men and community healers to address *chhaupadi*. Their approach facilitated skills such as communication and public speaking. Similarly, by providing a resource kit including books surrounding menstruation, Parker et al. (2024) participate in the discourses on menstruation. Instead of the provision of book and resources as the primary outcome, they highlight the importance of providing knowledge, including male voices and to create educational approaches that encourage critical perspectives of menstruation. Within this vein, by encouraging dialogue with BlueWaste2Value, Sankhu Jaycees and organisations in Sankhu, as well as interviews with men informing perspectives within this thesis.

Various concepts of 'applied anthropology', engaged anthropology (Low and Merry, 2010) and Participatory Action Research speak to redefining relations to interlocutors beyond an authorial objective voice (Bernard and Gravlee, 2015). This pertains to is a "grass roots" imaginary that transcend power dynamics within postcolonial narratives (Marcus, 2020). In Castro and Mang's (2024) investigation into women's use of menstrual products with 476 women in a garment factory in Tongi, Bangladesh, they elevate dialogue as a primary method to engage in

“open discussions about menstruation, a stigmatized topic” (Castro and Mang, 2024: 476). Their primary findings were that women were eager to participate in conversations and second, by participation in conversations, women’s expected utility of menstrual products increased. In short, creating the space for dialogue on menstruation promoted menstrual products. This speaks to Stacey’s (1988) critique of ethnographic research as placing interlocutors at “grave risk of manipulation and betrayal by the ethnographer” (Stacey, 1988: 23). Working collaboratively with interlocutors in Sankhu means that one must face up to how every piece of knowledge shared, secrets, hopes, dreams, desires, regrets are all part of the “the ethnographic mill” (Stacey, 1988:23) and contend with the complicity in producing data. For instance, Sonam assisted with informal interviews with a llama (monastic) at the *gumba* in Sulke Khola, a jogī at Salambutar temple and vajraycarya at Vajrayoginī temple.¹⁸ He highlighted that when speaking the *pūjāri* at Salambutar, the conversation turned into a dharma lesson on morality and religious duty. Following Monk et al. (2003) who characterise the male tradition as research questions defined and published in an authorial voice, I attempt to alert myself to the power using this as a point of departure for exploring authorial voices in the field.

As the fieldwork progressed, I built increasing relationships in Sankhu. Members of Sankhu community with whom I spent time with every day had a strong understanding of my project aims and would actively seek information that might help me. For instance, I was given a copy of books on Newar architecture, Shrestha’s (2012) ethnography on Sankhu and publications on news by Lion’s Club and Sankhu Jaycees. I was invited to events and discussions focused on the environment as this was understood to be within my interests. My relationships and dialogues became an ethnographic mode of knowing in Sankhu. Close connections familiar with my goals and by extension, myself. However, reflecting on Stacey’s (1988) this comes with the ethical conundrum of how all conversations, moments and connections become part of the “mill” of data. Her caution is valid but the mill is a negative connotation suggesting that these relationships are crushed within the broader question of data. To the contrary, coming to awareness of these relationships, as Stacey recommends, forefronts the lived realities of how menstruation is managed within daily lives. Instead of a backdrop and foreground, as Subedi and Parker (2024) warn against, the navigation of these relations becomes the very ground on which menstruation is negotiated.

This brings me onto the final reflection on dialogue; where to situate this thesis. Although in the field it was possible to actively negotiate these relations and reflexively act on my

¹⁸ A jogī are practitioners devoted to Lord Shiva following ascetic lifestyles and undertaking duties such as caring for temple spaces.

shifting positionality, this becomes far more challenging in the writing process. Solitary months sat at a computer heeds Stacey's (1988) final critique: an ethnography is an intervention. Taking this line, I have continued to speak to residents from Sankhu, including sharing ideas and passages from the thesis to produce a hermeneutic framework for which to understand menstrual waste. Building on this, I conceptualise the WASTE project at the University of Copenhagen, conferences and workshops throughout this writing process as part of the dialogue informing this work.

The ongoing dialogue with residents from Sankhu has been crucial to understanding menstrual waste within the broader context of Nepal. Aligning with Asad's (1973) argument, within the mechanism of anthropological endeavour is a sensitivity towards contradictions, ambiguities and potentialities that challenge authorial narratives and expectations that create imbalanced "human intimacy" (Asad, 1973: 17). Within this thesis, I refer to participants as "interlocutors" to highlight this dialogical relationship. Further, I include the space, context on how relationships formed and the moments of disconnect to acknowledge the limits and imbalances that pervade ethnographic research, demonstrating how with awareness these same facets can be mobilised for insights on how menstrual waste is situated within gendered, political and national influences.

"Main thing is menstruation."

Prekshya and I walk the road from her house to Sanagaun, the oppressive July heat dampened by a monsoon shower. We decided to move the interview outside both for privacy and to stretch our legs. Now we had left her home she spoke about her first menstrual cycle when she was in Class 8. Her mother had told her it was because she played on bicycles too much and lost her virginity. She went to her Sister-in-law's home and stayed there for a week as she could not see her brother or father but her next period did not arrive until she was in Class 10. I asked about the challenges growing up: "many challenges here. I think you know slowly or you know all the things more than half, yeah. And main thing is menstruation." Prekshya highlights the pressures of meeting her family expectations as a woman where studies are acceptable but at a certain age, one should prioritise marriage. "And another thing is if I have read bachelors level after that they think that they are being older and they have to get married. If you are younger or starting menstruation cycles then all... all say that." In reaching this goal of education, further difficulties are produced through menstruation, which then changes the relationship with boys who are "thinking negative" about anyone younger who starts their menstrual cycle. Prekshya's reflections highlight the

struggle between education and personal goals, compared to familial expectations. Menstruation marks the point where dissonance emerges between these values.

The overarching methodological decision was to undertake long-term fieldwork in Sankhu. With fourteen months living in Sankhu, combined with my previous stay in 2019, was invaluable to develop the “embodied invisibility” of knowledge to understand the complexity and depth surrounding menstruation. Sat within my office at the University of Copenhagen, I watched on Instagram as the *Svāsthānī melā* took place outside my old host home. For months, focusing on menstruation allowed me to reflect on the formal part of the research: the interviews, National Menstrual Hygiene Day and collaborations and temporarily sidestep the intimacies of fieldwork and deflect from its emotional resonances. As the analytical and writing process progressed, it became clear that menstruation is deeply embedded, embodied and formative of all aspect of daily life, especially for women in Sankhu. As I centred what had seemed peripheral in my research, I accessed the intricacies, hierarchies and experiences of women in Sankhu. Through our conversations on menstruation, like Prekshya, women expressed frustrations confusion, ambiguity and tensions towards a nostalgia and love of their home and the expectations and watchful gaze of a “conservative” society.

Researching and writing about menstruation is a challenging topic as an ambiguous substance with multiple meanings. Embodied invisibility as a methodological approach aligns with feminist ethnography using self-reflexive, dialogical and embodied methods to determine the fieldsite, methods and findings (Davis and Cravin, 2016). Walking afforded me an access point to the field, building relations and awareness of changes in the ethnographic self. By walking with interlocutors, I generated an understanding of the “embodied field” (Coffey, 1999) where boundaries are drawn through emotional labour and self-reflections. Menstruation, as an “invisible materiality” (Holmes, 2024), absent from the field, meant that focusing on visible forms of waste, definitions of waste through photography and practices of concealment, “periscope” (Hiemstra, 2016) the menstrual waste in women’s lives in Sankhu. The methodological framing within this chapter speaks to the three strands within this thesis on menstrual waste as materiality, experience and negotiation.

Throughout the thesis, the ethnographic writing materialises menstrual waste through mistakes, absence and ambiguities. In the next chapter, I begin with the moment when a menstrual stain appeared on my skirt to consider the significance of perceived qualities of menstrual blood as dirty, dried and dangerous.

Chapter 3

Blood: Menstrual Waste

Rain patters rhythmically against the dark wooden pavilion rooftop, above the raised, tiled platform facing towards a small shrine devoted to Lord Ganesha, the Hindu god of wisdom. Radha Aunty, the most senior in the group and Samira Aunty stoop over as they line up two rows of foil plates. The twenty dancers from Happy Soul Dance Studio, ranging from early teenagers to sixties, predominantly Newar as well as Rai and Chhetri castes, sit behind each plate. Radha Aunty serves the feast prepared that morning from red containers with white lids: beaten rice, spicy pickles and seasoned potatoes. Meanwhile, Samira Aunty distributes a large bottle of coke pouring with precision to ensure the bottle avoids touching the recipient thin, transparent cups. We are famished; the morning spent fasting worshipping at Suryabinayak temple, now paused for a picnic lunch on the outskirts of Bhaktapur in the East of the Kathmandu Valley. Radha Aunty circles the group distributing beaten rice, stopped only by an insistent shielding with both hands over the plate. It is courteous to finish all food on the plate to indicating repleteness but an unexpected portion of beaten rice prevents me from doing so. Sabina, the dance teacher, nods at my plate instructing I leave it behind the pavilion where dogs wait to feast on leftovers.

On my return, Samira Aunty comments that there is a stain on my sky-blue floral skirt, rushing over to inspect it. Holding my skirt in her hands, she gestures towards the bags of *chaku* in the corner, a red, chilli sweet available in Sankhu, asking if I sat on them. Manisha Aunty calls out “*period bhayo?*” (did your period arrive?) I pull the skirt around to inspect it. She walks over and holds the top layer of my skirt, commenting on how it is not oily, so it cannot be the sweets. Using a doused sponge to wipe the stain, she declares it must be menstrual blood to wash off easily and asks if I menstruated at the temples. Sabina *didi* interjects that my period must have just arrived as my menstrual cycle usually follows hers. I would check in the bathroom.

Anuksha *bahinī* and Minu *bahinī* accompany me to a small confectionary store and ask if I can use the bathroom. They wait in the store. Within the dimly lit toilet behind the shop, I use a hose to wash my skirt down, though all seems clear. Just in case, I buy some sanitary pads from the shop next door wrapped in an old sheet of newspaper and placed on the counter. Walking back, I feel embarrassed at the leak. Had I unexpectedly started my menstrual bleed a week early, unknowingly visiting the temples with menstrual blood on my skirt? I feel guilty, knowing three Aunties missed the pilgrimage that morning because of the risk of contaminating worship. Walking across the concrete road to the pavilion, Anushka *bahinī* and Minu *bahinī* whisper there is no need

to be embarrassed, they do not mind. The group look up at our return and Anushka *bahinī* explains that nothing was there. Samira Aunty and Sabina *didi* relax, concluding it must have been the sweets. The rain lightens as the picnic is cleared away and we practice our sequences to music blasting on the stereo, though I am conscious of the stain upon my skirt, faded but a distinguishable hue.

At the picnic, Samira Aunty and Manisha Aunty determined whether the stain was menstrual blood through its physical qualities: colour, water-solubility and position. As a young woman, there is an expectation of a healthy and regular menstrual cycle. Yet, the visible presence of menstrual blood on my skirt, with the possibility that I might have unknowingly bled at the temples marks the breach of bodily boundaries. The liminal status of substances breaching bodily boundaries mirrors anxieties about the bodily integrity of society (Douglas, 1966; 1970). The leaking menstrual blood, beyond a symbolic concern, exemplifies Grosz's (1994) concept of "leaky bodies," where bodily fluids are a metonym for the body's porosity. Grosz centres the body as a mode of analysis, arguing how in the West, the corporeality of the female body is "inscribed as a mode of seepage" (Grosz, 1994: 203). Menstrual blood is characterised as "formless flow" (Grosz, 1994: 203), meaning it threatens boundaries because it lacks its own. The association of menstrual blood with the "uncontrollable" (Grosz, 1994: 205) positions women's bodies as potential sites of danger. Grosz theorises with broad stroke observations of a Western context. Nevertheless, the concept of leaky bodies is useful for asking: What qualities characterise menstrual blood in Sankhu? Why did menstrual blood pose a threat to the worship of the group that morning? In what ways does sanitary product choice and disposal contain menstrual blood?

In this chapter, I begin by exploring the concept of *phohor* as menstrual waste. Drawing on Strathern (1990), I illustrate that visible blood such as vermilion powder (symbolising blood) and blood donations shares the capacity of menstrual blood to dissolve bodily boundaries. *Phohor*, connoting impurity, expresses how menstrual blood forms unwanted relations. I engage with the anthropology of disgust (Durham, 2011) and feminist materialities (Barad, 2003; Bennett, 2010) to consider how dried menstrual blood sustains this capacity outside of the body. Last, I consider how the mismanagement of menstrual blood risks attracting malevolent forces, disintegrating bodily integrity. The capacity of menstrual blood to dissolve bodily boundaries means any threat to an individual body extends to Sankhu. Thus, I demonstrate how menstrual waste is an amorphous substance that arbitrates the body within Sankhu.

Dirty

Choking on the vermillion powder in the air, I look up at the crimson cloud dissipating down onto the crowds filling the streets of Panauti, a small town on the southeast of the Kathmandu Valley. The deafening sound of drums and cymbals surrounds our group as we dance to its rhythms. That morning, I accompanied a small group from Sankhu to attend the annual *jatra*, where its residents drag large chariots containing gods through the town.¹⁹ The chariots crash and chase one another back and forth in a sensuous dance. Vendors line the narrow streets so that it is only possible to shuffle in one direction. The pungent scent of rice beer fermented in reused soda bottles joins the sea of scents among the bodies that sweat, dance and yell. Our faces are smeared with the powder, our skin concealed by encasing plumes. I cough in my hands. When I glance up, I have lost my companions in the crowd, indistinguishable under this rouge blanket. As I step up on to a platform, the chariot lurches forward for another approach. A voice calls out my name and I am pulled into a house. Reunited with the group, we catch our breath from the dancing, taking relief in the cool home as the drums and cymbals echo from the street. Stains from the powder covering our hands and faces remain on the wooden ladders as we climb to attend a feast. The vermillion powder, symbolising blood, dissolves bodily boundaries.

To comprehend the material meanings of menstrual blood, I begin with the Panauti *jatra* (chariot procession), showing how blood is a metonymic substance that dissolves boundaries between bodies. Attending a blood donation event in Sankhu reveals how donating blood removes moral impurities from the body. Walking with Prekshya, a Chhetri woman from a village on the outskirts of Sankhu, she defines menstrual blood as dirty instructing on how to keep menstrual waste hidden to remove it from her village. Daya, a Newar woman based in Sankhu, highlights preventing waste workers from touching her menstrual blood. Through these disposal narratives, I argue that menstrual waste management centres on preventing unwanted relations.

¹⁹ The Panauti *jātrā* enacts the relationship between Bhadakali and Bhairava, incarnations of Parvati and Lord Shiva. At the *jātrā* they were described as having a sexual relationship represented by the chariots moving alongside and touching each other.



Figure 11: Powder thrown over chariot as residents and visitors celebrate at Panauti jātrā, May 2023.

Inhaling the powder during the *jātrā*, it coats our bodies during the celebrations. At the feast that follows, food and drink are served on separate plates, *aylā* (alcohol) poured from a metre high so the vessel avoids the cup and spoiled plates washed outside. The efforts to contain food and drink contrasts to how vermilion powder moves between our bodies. Among the Newar, *hī* (New. blood) is a metonymic substance visible and prevalent across Sankhu. At *ja-trā*, festivals venerating the gods, or whenever a blessing is needed, sacrificial blood will pour from the heads of buffalos, goats or chickens, oxidising and staining the ground. Bodily fluids are social fluids transforming social relationships, with the colour and liquidity of blood linking it to health and life (Carsten, 2013). Relatedness, for Carsten, extends beyond kinship (Sahlins, 2010) formed through substances and practices, such as consuming food in the same home. As powder touches the body during the *jātrā*, representing blood, its vibrancy embodies intimacy between bodies.

As the vermilion powder coats our bodies, it exposes the interdependence of our bodies. Blood, semen and hair are socially distributed materials that extend the body and implicate others (Strathern, 1988). Strathern argues that substances and persons embody the relations that participated in their creation. For instance, she demonstrates how a pig exchanged among the Hagen are constituted by the labour and food that raised it. Actions thus express relations constituting entities. On interrogating the concept of relations, Strathern (2018) highlights the importance of nonrelational phenomena as a conceptual field. That is, for relations to form between

entities, there must be an acknowledgement of interdependence. In her analysis of menstrual blood among the Gimi, she suggests that menstrual blood is a “visible sign [of]...their ability to separate themselves from or contain the other” (Strathern, 1990: 107). Among the Gimi, substances such as menstrual blood, milk and semen flow between the sexes forming a distinction between male and female forms. Similarly, the containment of food and drink at the Panauti jātrā separated our bodies. Blood, as a relational substance, dissolves bodily boundaries in Sankhu.

Blood’s capacity to dissolve bodily boundaries is exemplified at a Sankhu Jaycees donation program.²⁰ Here, blood is collected in plastic bags on blue trays, no longer symbolised by powder but congealing in plain sight. Residents lie back in deckchairs under an awning, with a clear pipe protruding from their arms. One organiser approaches and asks if I will be donating. He explains that donating blood removes impure blood from the body. “So, the blood receivers get impure blood?” I ask the volunteer. A pause. The volunteer gives a hesitant “*chaina*” (no) before asking again whether I would donate. The volunteer clarifies that the blood collected in the blue trays for local hospitals is clean and the donor’s body is purified.

Within the volunteer’s hesitant answer to my question lies how within Sankhu community, donating blood is a meritorious act that removes impurities from the body. The donated blood, like the pigs among the Hagen, is constituted by its relations expressed as actions, in this case, the generosity of giving blood to a recipient.

To give blood voluntarily and willingly generates “*punya*” (merit, blessing) the volunteer clarifies. Blood donations are significant as an anonymous gift (Titmus, 1970). In his comparison of two gift-giving ceremonies among the Newar, Toffin (2018) highlights how generosity as a mode of behaviour. He distinguishes between *dāna* as gifts that reinforce the identities of laity and priests, compared to *punya* where there is an expectation of karmic return but with no repayment guarantee and uncertain timing. The difference between an unreciprocated gift and reciprocated gifts derives from Parry’s (1986) analysis of *dāna* in India. Parry argues that unreciprocated gifts prevent attachments to the world, reciprocated gifts embed givers and recipients.²¹ The limitation of Parry’s analysis is that it ignores how gifts such as blood donation are ambiguous in their degrees of reciprocity.

²⁰ Sankhu jaycees is a youth group in Sankhu that serves society through trainings and activities.

²¹ This contention underpins anthropological analysis of monastic-laity relations, as monastic communities focus on their spiritual attainments through *dāna* offered by the laity in Myanmar (Spiro, 1970) and in Thailand, create a ‘field of merit’ for the laity (Cook, 2010).

The blue, plastic containers with transparent packages of donated blood express the impersonal, alienated blood, that cannot be reciprocated. Among the Jain renouncers in India, where Laidlaw (2000) characterises “impersonability” (Laidlaw, 2000: 632) as fundamental to *dāna*, the donations facilitating Jain renouncers practice. He documents how as each renouncer enters a home with an alms bowl, no words or gratitude exchanged, as the renouncers collect food and depart. Removing the possibility for reciprocity and obligation qualifies the donations for the Jains. Carsten (2019) pays attention towards ambivalence intrinsic to the bureaucratic processes for blood donation in Penang, Malaysia. The forms that donors complete, characterising them on age and blood types transforms the moral qualities of blood (as expressive of kinship) to medical criteria. Noting the predominance of male donors, she considers how donating blood becomes a form of “virtuous labour”, where anonymity and generosity conceal a gendered economy. In Sankhu, as the blood congeals in its new containers, it is removed anonymously from the donor. Yet, the donors remain visible on the deck chairs, bleeding in view of Sankhu.

At the donation programme residents commented on the vibrancy and cleanliness of the blood. Blood, as a life force expresses moral commitment among the Newar. For instance, Parish (1991) observes how drinking alcohol is equated with drinking mother’s blood, heightening stigma and fear towards the consequences, morally and physically, towards alcohol overconsumption, reversely a metaphor for blood as a life-force. It is a violation to desecrate the life-force of one’s mother, so the expression to consume her blood insinuates dissolving her body. By contrast, giving blood is a moral act that dissolves bodily boundaries. These comments concerned express how blood participates in moral registers through their physical qualities as “moral materialities” (High, 2013). Through her ethnographic work in Mongolia, High (2013) observes how money earned from working in gold mines is treated as “dirty”. The crumpled notes of cash associated with illicit working are evidence of spiritual pollution, therefore handled and circulated in contrast to money from other sources. The money embodies a tension: a feasible form of income in an unstable economy that participates in the degradation of the Mongolian landscape. The physical properties become an identifier of relations constituting the substance. The cash is contained and managed through fast spending to prevent keeping dirty money in the home. The blood at the donation event has the moral materiality of cleanliness, visible in the blue boxes and plastic bags. Menstrual blood, however, carries an alternative moral materiality and must be hidden.

Walking with Prekshya clarified what distinguishes menstrual blood from the blood symbolised by the vermillion powder at the *jātrā* or the donated blood in the blue trays. Kicking up dust on the road with her sliders, Prekshya stares ahead as we amble along the trail towards the

Newar village of Sanagaun, 30 minutes' walk West of Sankhu. She treads the familiar trails, having grown up here into her mid-20s. Waving to Loshita Aunty at the teashop, who greets us with a bright smile, we encounter a large pit where the ground is barely visible beneath layers of plastic waste, a dumpsite for the surrounding villages. Dogs feed on scraps at the dumpsite adjacent to empty plastic netted bins tied to the trees, a feature of the landscape. Alongside the gate it marks the boundary between Sanagaun and the neighbouring village of Ukhatar. However, the pit is becoming increasingly full, overflowing its seams alongside the large gate. Only the monsoon rains might wash away discarded items, with hints of a new dumpsite emerging behind Indrayani temple. As we approach, children tease us, asking for chocolates, and Prekshya calls out to them to leave us alone. Prekshya and I peer inside the temple, where splatters of chicken blood stain the grey walls from years of sacrifices. She turns back to me, extending her arm to explain how, if she had a cut, the blood would be red, bright and clear as “saphā ragat” (clean blood). I ask about menstrual blood. She lowers her arm and between paces utters that menstrual blood “is unhygienic blood...we say this is phohor. Waste. They say that.”

Phohor conveys an ambiguous sentiment. Waste. The same word referring to the piles of wrappers, rubber sliders and plastic bags occupying the junction. Prekshya clarifies how in Nepali *phohor* connotes dirty, unhygienic or impure. “Impure is *na ramro* (not good), *na saphā* (unclean),” she explains. In Nepali, a negation prefix conveys the opposite meaning of the adjective. The meanings of *phohor*, as waste, shift as it mediates the space of forests and fields surrounding Sanagaun. Situated within landscapes, waste is a spatial concept (Gille and Lepawski, 2021). Waste gathering in a pit on the side of the road as *phohor* encroaches on the landscape, impeding on the village. *Phohor* in the Sanagaun pit next to empty plastic bins makes tangible how waste, even when spatially placed, signals impurity leaking into the landscape. Brox (2022) proposes that the perspective of discard typifies things that are thrown away because they are “unwanted, worthless, useless or dangerous.” (Brox, 2022: 12). Menstrual waste must be disposed because of its status as *phohor*.



Figure 12 Dumpsite on entrance to Sanagaun, January 2023.

Prekshya simultaneously relays and distances herself from the characterisation of menstrual blood as dirty. In Prekshya's statement on menstrual blood as *phohor* she mentions how "they say that." As she speaks, she distinguishes how members of her village define menstrual blood compared to her understanding. When I dig deeper on the expressions of menstrual blood as dirty blood, she defers to her "forefathers" referring to her village and ancestors. Switching between "we" and "they", she distances herself from these ideas and instead emphasises that menstruation is a "natural process". With this phrase, she diverts attention to how menstruation is integral and inevitable. The gaze of her village regulates how menstrual blood, for Prekshya, instils feelings of shame if seen by her neighbours. In her example of cash earnt from mining, High (2013) observations how shame embeds within the moral materiality of dirty money. It is the tension between Prekshya's position of menstruation as a natural process and the shame from displaying menstrual blood creates the moral materiality of dirty menstrual blood.

Menstrual waste, as *phohor*, must be kept hidden. Prekshya instructs that I wrap each menstrual pad carefully after use in its wrapper, storing it discreetly in the bathroom in one of the blue plastic bags the shops offer for purchased products. The brightly coloured plastic conceals and protects her village from seeing its contents. When I visited the homes of other women in Sankhu, I saw these bags propped up on the window shelf in the bathroom. The moment menstrual blood leaves the body, it must be caught, concealed and disposed. Without any waste collection facility, her household manages domestic waste by feeding "wet waste" (organic material such as

leftover foods) to the cow and burning “dry waste” such as packets and plastic. Menstrual waste, as *phohor*, evades the categories of “dry waste” and “wet waste” and must be disposed of separately. At the end of one’s menstrual cycle, Prekshya states that I must dispose of my menstrual waste away from their village in a “safe place”, preventing anyone from seeing the blood. In the case of blood donation, the act of giving coagulated the “clean blood”. According to Prekshya’s instruction, the act of rejection and removal forms the dirty blood as *phohor*.

Prekshya’s disposal narratives referred to the fear of her menstrual blood being seen, Newar women, such as Daya emphasised the tactile aspects of menstrual blood. Daya greets me outside her home before inviting me into the living room and hustling into the kitchen to prepare tea and snacks. “You want some buffalo?” she calls out. I respond that I am vegetarian. “Ehhh” resonates from the kitchen. She sits down and serves the plates, explaining she is tired. That morning, she had visited Kathmandu for her birthday. We met a month earlier when she was participating in a worship during Buddha-month where her Khadgi (butcher) caste plays music around the town activating stupas to assuage the act of killing animals.²² Daya giggled and lifted her hands to her face as she describes how a few years prior, she accidentally blocked the toilet pipes with her sanitary pads. Within the language of the Newar, a resonant concept for *phohor*, is *dhū* (New. *dust, filth*) to which I return in Chapter 4 as a distinct concept. Here, I focus on the Nepali concept of *phohor* residing within everyday speech, its meaning constituted across ethnicities and castes in Sankhu. Daya shares the conceptualisation of menstrual blood as dirty blood. Nevertheless, contrasting to Prekshya’s emphasis on how her forefathers and village are the reason for concealing sanitary waste, Daya states her disposal methods are “only for hygiene” to prevent others from touching something “nasty”. Rather than visibility, Daya’s concern is tactile contact with menstrual blood.

The introduction of BlueWaste2Value transformed Daya’s menstrual waste disposal. BlueWaste2Value is a social enterprise located on the outskirts of Sankhu which collects “dry waste” (including plastic, packages and objects) through a subscription service. Once a week the truck will visit a ward, and subscribed residents bring out their bags of “dry waste”. There is also the option to handover “wet waste” which will be composted but most households feed this to animals or for farming. To avoid the recyclers handling the menstrual waste, Daya collects her used sanitary pads in a bag, like Prekshya, over the first four days of her menstrual cycle. At the end of the four days, she runs the pad through water, to ensure the blood washes down the drain.

²² In the Newar Samvat calendar, *gunlā* known as Buddha month involves processions, music and alms and roughly corresponds to August in the Gregorian calendar.

Demonstrating with her hands, she breaks the inner cotton and disposes it in the washroom, so the “plastics” remain. After washing the used pads together “like the washing of clothes,” Daya disposes of the “plastics” with the collected “Dry waste” for BlueWaste2Value.

Daya’s dismantling of the sanitary pad and rigorous washing process means no one else will touch the blood with their hands. The “imagined intimacy” (Durham, 2011: 144) of someone touching her “nasty” blood reifies a boundary between self and other. Durham (2011) theorises how disgust is a moment of transgression, in the imagination of breaching a perceived boundary, and a moment of transcendence, through how it involves one in the experience of another. The “nasty” menstrual blood that the waste workers might touch creates a possibility of proximity, a breach of the body. Adjusting Bennet’s (2010) notion of how each object exudes a presence in the world as “vibrant matter” to “disgusting matter” frames how a substance independently exerts damage. Menstrual blood risks becoming “disgusting matter” and forming intimacies with people. For Daya, managing this breach involves separating the blood from the sanitary pad now classified as “dry waste” to waste handlers. She washes the menstrual blood down the toilet and ensuring that no one touches the menstrual blood, dissolving the disgusting matter.

Beginning with the vermilion powder at Panauti *jatra*, I demonstrated how blood dissolves boundaries between bodies. During blood donations, blood is clean reflected in its vibrance because of its donor’s generosity. Menstrual blood, by contrast, is expelled from the body meaning it is considered dirty. Among the Chhetri village, disposable methods emphasise keeping menstrual blood hidden, for Newar women such as Daya, menstrual blood must not be touched. Without the correct disposal methods, menstrual blood remains as *phohor*; dirty blood.

Dried

The scent of lemongrass candles fills the air as Sabina and I share a meal in Samara resort, a plate of kathi rolls between us. Adele’s harmonies echo from the speakers shielding our conversation from being overheard. Usually, Sabina must care for her nephew or prepare dance classes. We had a few hours before her evening classes teaching dance to children at her studio. Before her decision six months prior to switch to the menstrual cup, catalysed by dance, she used sanitary pads following a meticulous disposal process. Without a prompt, Sabina to clarifies how menstrual blood outside the body can cause illness “maybe because my mother and sister, they taught me to wash it before because when the blood becomes dry – I don’t know if it’s from conservative thoughts – but they say when the blood gets dry, stomach starts to hurt.” Echoing Prekshya and

Daya, Sabina emphasises that this belief has come from her family, distancing herself. Yet, she makes a crucial instruction: “You can’t dry the blood that comes from your body.”

From the foregoing discussion, I have established that in Sankhu menstrual blood is deemed dirty, reifying the boundary between bodies. In this section, I demonstrate why a menstrual stain, as dried blood, is especially problematic. Deepening the understanding of Daya’s practice of washing sanitary pads “like the washing of clothes,” I show how water dissolves menstrual blood. When menstrual blood coagulates, congeals and dries it is problematic because of its capacity to exert itself outside the body as disgusting matter. Conversely, when menstrual blood flows it shares the transformative potential of water. Therefore, the choice of sanitary item to contain menstrual blood must keep blood flowing. The menstrual cup is deemed effective for this purpose.

If menstrual blood dries, it is referred to as *kwā mawo* (New.). Dried blood, described as the brown stain that appears before the menstrual bleed or if there is a problem with a woman’s health is only spoken about between women. Although any bleed counts as the first day of menstrual bleeding when a woman must remove herself from daily activities. During the Svāsthānī melā, where women must fast for a month, their first menstrual bleed will be a normal flow the second bleed will be described as *kwā mawo*, referring to the physical effects of fasting and the process of purification taking place during the fast (Birkenholtz, 2018). Kwā mawo, as a menstrual stain, is problematic because of how it stagnates.

As Sabina explains, menstrual blood must be kept fresh when it leaves the body. I clarified, “you will feel bad in your stomach if it is outside of you?” Sabina confirms: “yeah, there is lots of them saying that.” Once again, her emphasis on “them” distances herself. “I don’t know how it connects but that is their belief, something like that.” When she used sanitary pads, Sabina found it challenging because of the dried blood on the sanitary pads. Although she witnessed others wrapping and placing used sanitary pads in the dustbin, she prefers to place the sanitary pad under the downstairs tap and use her feet to wash away all the menstrual blood. “Wash it and squeeze it and wash everything like how it [menstrual blood] is outside...only the plastic remains.” She pauses as the waiter collects our empty plates. As the light fades and sound of mosquitoes intensifies, the resort is now busy with a few uncles gathering and a small crowd of teenage boys. We order tea before continuing our conversation.

Menstrual blood, independent of the body, risks forming unwanted relations in Sankhu as disgusting matter. In Sabina and Daya’s washing process for used menstrual pads, the menstrual blood, as matter, enacts itself upon the pad. If someone touched the used menstrual pad, this matter reconfigures relations with another body. To further understand how menstrual blood

to exerts itself outside the body, Barad's (2007; 2010) theorisation of "intra-agency" decentres the human to engage with the destabilising, iterative capacity of phenomenon, in this case, menstrual blood, as disgusting matter. Barad conceptualises how matter is not made up of "things" but a dynamic configuration of units she terms "relational atoms". These constantly interacting relational atoms repeatedly enact themselves upon the world, to reconfigure boundaries. In the case of Sabina, the shift in these boundaries is felt as stomach pain caused by someone touching the dried blood and dissolving the boundary between their bodies. The limitation of Barad's approach is that it flattens relations, ignoring hierarchies and imbalances. Nevertheless, Barad's understanding of intra-agency reveals how menstrual blood exerts itself as a relational substance. Outside of the body, menstrual blood has the capacity to reconfigure boundaries, in this case bodily integrity. To follow Sabina's disposal method ensures that menstrual blood cannot exert "inter-agency" or form unexpected relations, preventing bodily illness.

Menstrual blood, when separate from the body, can enact itself upon a place creating traces. Enactment refers to how bodily activities take place outside of the skin, creating a sense of place (Mol, 2003). A concrete example of the enacting quality of blood features in Cifor's (2017) consideration of exhibitions of LGBTQ+ activists. He argues that stained undergarments with traces of blood mean viewers create an intimate relation to the exhibited icons. Traces of menstrual blood, like the stained undergarments, enacts on bodies and places. It should be noted that Daya did not mind collecting her sanitary pads for four days whereas Sabina emphasised the importance of avoiding allowing the blood to dry. When Sabina washes and squeezes the pad, she ensures that the menstrual blood is removed via the sewers away from Sankhu meaning there are no unwanted enactments with bodies or place. For Daya and Sabina, *lhā* (New. water) is a necessary component of the disposal process.²³ Using water distinguishes their disposal methods from Prekshya who contained and removed menstrual waste from her village. Among the Newar in Sankhu, water prevents dried menstrual blood from solidifying and enacting upon the town.

Water is connected to the rivers, taps and sewers in Sankhu. After an unsuccessful endeavour searching for Rhododendrons in the jungle with Suntol *dai* and Lakshmi *didi*, two Newar residents from Sankhu, we stepped out of the jungle and encounters a small shrine next to Sali Nadi river. Suntol pointed out that this was one of the clan gods which is visited during Sithi

²³ Newar language has different dialects and vocabulary across the Kathmandu Valley. For instance, in Sankhu, *lhā* means water, in Bhakatapur, the term is *wa*. This distinction was frequently brought up during my stay in Sankhu by residents to highlight the linguistic and regional distinctions between the ancient cities of the Kathmandu Valley.

Rathi.²⁴ During this annual festival that takes place at the beginning of monsoon, families will clean ponds, streams and water sources as worship towards their clan god at idols surrounding Sankhu. This highlights the importance of clearing blockages from water sources. In her analysis of the Ganga in India, Alley (2002) describes how flow sacralises the river despite visible pollution. Observing that the companies dispose wastewater into the river making it toxic, her interlocutors describe how the water on the top moves faster and is where the goddess resides. This means that if the river is moving, it retains its sacred quality even if there is waste in the water. This resonates with Sali Nadi river, where *phohor*, or waste on the surface of the river combines with offerings to become part of the river, flowing down the valley. Only if it becomes blocked or stagnant does it pose a threat to the sacred river, the monsoon seasons generating higher quantities of water and washing any residue waste downstream. Flow signals purification, vitality and continuity.



Figure 13 Sali Nadi by Svāsthānī temple after heavy monsoon rains, August 2023.

Raising his voice above the roar of the river flowing stealthily past the potato fields below the forest, Suntol *dai* notes that river is occasionally called “*bagcha*”, (Nep. Flow), the same word used for menstruation. Menstrual blood and water share the quality to flow through different spheres of Sankhu. Carsten (2019) highlights blood’s physical capacity to flow and move through

²⁴ Sithi Nakha is an annual Newar festival that takes place at the beginning of monsoon (during Jeth, Nepal calendar) where families will clean ponds, streams and water sources as worship towards their clan god at idols surrounding Sankhu.

different spheres of life. In her ethnographic work in Penang, she follows how blood moves between bodies of donors, patients, blood bags and labs, with layered meetings occurring at each interception. This ability to move through physical and social domains means blood is a metonymic substance that participates and expresses relationships formed through blood donations. *Bagcha* captures the shared quality of the river and menstrual blood as flowing through Sankhu.

The closer the physical qualities of menstrual blood to the flowing properties of water, the easier it is to dissolve and manage through sanitary products. Sabina meticulously cleans the sanitary pad, washing and squeezing the circular object in the pad ensuring no blood remains. Water dissolves menstrual blood and therefore purifies. Douglas (1966) argues that water has a reifying role because it dissolves and breaks up, meaning for a moment it ceases to exist. Douglas (1966) articulates how tears, which are fluid and clear, have purifying properties because they are like water. Meanwhile, mucus, bile or menstrual blood, as clumpy, dirty substances tend to express an intimate, unpleasant aspect of the body, and therefore society, that must remain hidden. In Sankhu, after the fourth day of a menstrual cycle, regardless of whether the woman is still menstruating, women will bathe themselves and wash their clothes and bedding. When menstrual blood encounters water there is a regenerative effect. Washing with water dissolves and separate an otherwise ambiguous substance.

To prevent coagulating menstrual blood outside of the body, one must keep it “*taja*” (fresh). In this case, *taja* is another term for the fluid quality of menstrual blood. Sabina’s eyes glaze as she recalls memories, laughing at her embarrassment. As a young woman she used a pad over the “cloth” (a piece of material for catching menstrual blood) to prevent leaking due to a heavy flow. She recalls how she used to wear a “frock” to school and the bulkiness from the pad and cloth together meant “I’d have to sit like this” and she leans to the side. “I feel hilarious thinking about that.” Six months prior, her friend introduced her to the menstrual cup because she thought it might help with sports. “I thought it would be hard to put inside but I don’t know how I just did it.” She lists the procedure “pull it out, pull it down, wash it and then put it in.” Sabina prefers the menstrual cup because it facilitates keeping the blood fresh. The menstrual cup catches the blood inside the body and keeps it fresh and flowing, before emptied down the toilet and reinserted. Through the menstrual cup she manages her bodily boundaries.

The choice of menstrual products and management of menstruation mediate bodily boundaries. The menstrual cup placed inside the canal catches the blood directly, then it is removed by a small tab at its base. The border zone, or “material boundary” (Ackley, 2019: 52) is moved inside the body. Ackley (2019) argues that in the case of female genital cutting in Somaliland the

labia creates a “material boundary” (Ackley, 2019: 52). In Somaliland, the women die three times: when their labia are cut, marriage and childbirth. By being cut, women enter a new status as (religiously) pure. Yet, one of the consequences is that large clots, unable to pass during menstruation, cause infections. Ackley argues that the labium is intimately tied up to bodily boundaries maintained through Female Genital Mutilation. By choosing the menstrual cup, Sabina ensures the menstrual blood remains hidden and maintains intimacy inside the body as long as possible, sustaining a flowing quality which can be disposed with water. The menstrual product conceals and controls menstrual blood forming a material boundary as it transforms into menstrual waste. The menstrual cup managing menstrual waste maintains the flowing quality of menstrual blood, compared to the dried stains on a sanitary pad.

Menstrual waste, as *phohor*, evades spatial containment meaning it carries the moral materiality of impurity. Even when outside the body, menstrual waste, especially if dried, enacts upon bodies and places. Managing menstrual waste involves dissolving menstrual blood with water. The more similar quality menstrual blood has to water, encapsulated by flow, the easier it is to dispose. Sanitary products, such as the menstrual cup, contain menstrual blood within the body in a fresh, flowing form. Sanitary pads must be washed before disposal to ensure the separation of *phohor* from sanitary waste, as the former dissolves.

Dangerous

As the light fades and the fairy lights decorating the patio cast colours over the evening, the music has shifted from English top hits to Nepali. Sabina explains her process for using the menstrual cup; first, she must sanitise it with hot water. One time, she informed her mother and sister that she had started her period and needed to boil the water. She asked them to put the boiling water down on the kitchen table. “No, no, no – I don't want to be near” she mimics her mother. “What will happen?” Sabina herself wondered but moves her narrative back to the point that her mother wanted to use a different pot that must be left outside. “They were feeling so disgusting about that thing.” As disgusting matter, even the water used to sterilise the cup was contaminated by menstrual blood. “*jhuto*” Sabina utters first to herself. She looks up and repeats louder this time: “*jhuto*.”

In this section, I explore the consequences associated with touching menstrual blood. Sabina’s justification of the menstrual cup for managing her menstrual blood reveals existential threats towards herself and her family in Sankhu. Through her narratives, containing menstrual blood is imperative for preventing malevolent forces from causing harm through sickness towards

bodies in Sankhu. Women negotiate these risks through their choice of sanitary products and disposal methods.

Jhuto is a Nepali term, loosely translated to polluted and insinuates impurity. In Newar language, the translation is *chipā* but *jhuto* dominates everyday speech. “If we put something in our mouth without washing inside in the kitchen that is not a good thing.” Sabina recounts again how her mother and sister informed her that to do so means her ancestors might haunt her. “Is it because if you touch it?” I ask. “–*jhuto*” Sabina interjects. Struggling to translate, she pulls out her phone to check google translate, exclaiming at the lack of wi-fi and throws it back onto the table. “Like if you eat and do not wash your hands? Dirty hands.” I ask again, “spiritually polluted?”. Exasperated, she cries out “no! not spiritually polluted...yeah like aaah let me see.” She takes a breath. “Suppose you are kissing and you go 100% mouth to mouth and then they touch each other what do you say?”

When Sabina talks about “kissing” she means the form of the body has collapsed. Sabina’s definition encapsulates the relational quality of *jhuto*. *Phohor* encapsulates the ambiguous quality of a substance, *jhuto* refers to the dissolving of boundaries between two people. To eat off another’s plate, to kiss, or touch the sterilising water for the menstrual cup, dissolves bodily boundaries. According to Douglas (1966), “pollution dangers strike when form has been attacked” (Douglas, 1966: 130). Transgressing a boundary threatens the individual and “the structure of ideas” (Douglas, 1966: 140). Douglas’s pollution theory acknowledges how someone can be polluting, or harmful, through displacement rather than intention. Yet, her emphasis on symbolic reflection of ideas deflects from the material qualities. An object referred to as *jhuto*, expresses its capacity for “intra-agency” (Barad, 2010), or unwanted contact, with potential to harm bodies. For instance, a soiled plate will be “*jhuto*” because it has already been used meaning it contains bodily traces until it is washed. If someone eats from the soiled plate, they may become ill. Menstrual blood, characterised as *jhuto*, contains bodily traces collapsing the form between bodies.

Sabina combs her hand through her hair bringing her right hand to her lip. “Have you seen?” she asks. “Yes!” I respond. Sitting at the tea shop, I had observed people running their hand through their hair or touching the back of their neck and blowing. “Not blowing,” Sabina corrected, “spitting!” She clarifies that it is just a belief and laughs at herself, the same expression as when she recounted wearing the bulky pad to school. When she gets her hair cut the hair falls to the ground and when no one is watching – here, she demonstrates by leaning forward on her chair as if glancing around – “to toof”. She spits on the hair. “When they find your hair, something from your body, they can just do this magical thing, unnatural thing.” Hair, like menstrual blood,

is a problematic substance because of how it is initially attached to the human form and then departs from it, holding a relation to the original person (Tarlo, 2016). Tarlo (2016) traces how wig making transforms hair into a new object devoid of its source. For Sabina, spitting becomes transformative. Holding the fluid, qualities of water, spit detaches hair from its source, meaning that it no longer holds a relation to the body from where it came. “When you throw you have to spit on that pad.” Spitting on the sanitary pad dissolves its connection to the original body.

The fear is that if one does not follow this process, the hair might attract *sarāp* (curse) from a *boksi*. A *boksi* is “the one who is not happy with you or the one who destroys you and they will do these unnatural things with that stuff [menstrual blood],” Sabina explains. Standing at Sali Nadi temple in Sankhu, I am accompanied by Sabal *dai* who points towards the ridge behind the straw house. He says that beyond lives a *boksi* and recounted a story from his uncle that a feminine being with dangerous powers would turn men into goats (and potentially eat them) if you cross them. The *boksi* as a female (although one can have male *boksa*) leads to suspicions of women living alone (Gellner, 1991). Exploring a case of witchcraft in Kathmandu, Gellner (2019) encounters a medium treating a women suspected of possession by a witch who during the exorcism died from her injuries. He contends that “the paradoxical result of [witchcraft] bringing about the very thing it fears” (Gellner, 2019: 134) with new conceptualises of evil expressed through witchcraft. *Boksi*, as an amorphous form of evil perpetuates in Sankhu.

Sabina clarifies how she has seen sisters and friends cursed by their neighbours and becoming ill. When she started her dance studio, she sensed that some people did not want her to grow and have success. One knows if they have been cursed if they feel tired. I joke “but I am always tired, you see me every morning, have I been cursed?” Sabina laughs, “not like that.” She clarifies that another sign of a *boksi* is if you have a blue mark, like someone has sucked on your skin. The threat towards the body through consumption or a curse of illness demonstrates fears of the dissolution of the body. Munn (1992) notices a similar dynamic concerning witchcraft in Gawa. The more ambiguous the witch figure, the more danger and fear ensue. The qualities of a witch as cannibalistic, ambiguous and indeterminate indicate a reversal to the dominant social values within Gawa, which prioritises generosity. Munn focuses on social values revealed through witches. Yet, in the case of the *boksi* there is a material threat to bodily integrity that must be managed. Substances such as hair attracting the threat of *serup* from *boksi* indicate the importance of maintaining bodily boundaries, achieved through bodily habits.

Boksi became a repeated theme throughout my stay in Sankhu. For instance, Samira Aunty, Manisha Aunty, Sabina *didi* and I sit on the floor of the studio. To manage menstruation, they use a piece of cloth. As soon as it is removed, they must wash it immediately. A series of

giggles erupted. “*Boksi*,” I hear. “Do you remember that?” Sabina asks, referring to our conversation. If they leave the cloth for just a few hours, there is a risk that a *boksi* might attack them. “That black magic occurs in our blood.” The black magic signifies the malevolent force of *boksi* meaning menstrual blood risks contaminating the vibrant blood fundamental to Sankhu. To understand this paradigm, I turn again to Douglas who situates witchcraft within broader concerns with fragile societal domains. In *Risk and Blame* (2003) she specifies how lepers and witches hold similar qualities because they are invisible threats to a society. The accusations and exclusions of these social groups allow for reaffirmation of the broader whole. Witchcraft, located at interstices and ambiguities, mirrors the fears and contradictions embedded in menstrual blood. Taking this line, the risk posed from *boksi* threatens social integrity. Once again, however, I deepen this by locating it in the moral materiality of menstrual blood as a threat to bodily integrity.



Figure 14 Waste pickers in front of ridge by Sali Nadi beyond which *boksi* is described to reside, February 2023.

When recounting the threat of *boksi*, residents like Sabina expressed how the responsibility is towards their health, but more importantly, their families. I have established that touching menstrual blood dissolves the form between two bodies, threatening bodily integrity which becomes visible through illness or bruises. Menstrual blood also has the capacity to dissolve the boundaries between multiple bodies. Although among Newar communities in Sankhu habits such as spitting on hair prevent unwanted contact, within families there is physical proximity. If one body is cursed by a *boksi* or ill through *jhuto*, another body may also be contaminated. This threat could extend to multiple families in Sankhu. Although there is ambiguity around beliefs in

these threats - Sabina, for instance, frequently distances herself from her beliefs by saying it is her mother or sister who think menstrual blood is “disgusting” – there is a sense of responsibility towards others. Therefore, alike the donated blood earlier in this chapter, there is a moral dimension encapsulated in the conceptualisation of an amorphous threat to bodily integrity. Managing menstrual blood concerns the bodily and moral integrity of Sankhu.

With this lens, menstrual products become important tools in the arbitration of bodies and morality in Sankhu. To mitigate these risks of bodily disintegration, Sabina, Rushka, and the Aunties separate menstrual blood from the sanitary product using water. For Sabina, the menstrual cup is more convenient than the sanitary pad or cloth because she can spit on the fresh blood in the cup and pour it down the toilet. For Samira and Manisha Aunty washing the cloths reassures them that they have removed the risks. To prevent the risk of “black magic” or *boksi*, one must clean the cloth and place it in the sun to dry. Separating menstrual blood from the disposable pad or cloth is necessary to prevent the “afterlife” (Brox, 2022) of menstrual waste from extending indefinitely. Brox (2022) argues that the concept of afterlife “show us that the endpoint of consumption is not inevitably death and discard” (Brox, 2022: 19). What if, however, the goal is “death”, or in this case dissolution, towards what has been discarded? The prevention of an afterlife of menstrual waste ensures that it breaks down. Plastic can contain menstrual blood, but unlike water, it cannot dissolve the matter, risking unwanted contact. Through containing and preventing the afterlife of menstrual blood, Sabina remove the dangers of menstrual blood. Menstrual blood arbitrates the moral materiality of Sankhu.

“I don't want to get stain.”

Sabina and I had been speaking for over an hour, the previously empty resort now occupied with residents enjoying a beer, snack or meeting. She asserts how when if she goes “outside” – referring to outside her home - she uses the menstrual cup as well as a pad. “I don't want to get stain” she clarifies. Beyond embarrassment or inconvenience, my conversation with Sabina had revealed that a menstrual stain is a problem because it risks bodily disintegration, posing a risk to herself, her family and Sankhu.

In Sankhu, menstrual blood is characterised as dirty, its impurity derived first from how it is expelled from the body. The physical qualities of menstrual blood – dirty, dried and dangerous – as emphasised by women in Sankhu embody moral values. Menstrual blood embodies a tension between a necessary and fundamental aspect of social life among the Newars and a substance that dissolves bodily boundaries. Daya and Sabina’s fear is if someone touches menstrual blood the boundary between the blood and the body dissolves merging the two forms.

This results in physical symptoms such as stomach pains. Yet, the conception of menstrual blood as dirty reifies the boundary between the bodies. By determining menstrual blood as “nasty”, “*na ramro*” (bad) or undesirable (“I don’t want to get stain.”), distances menstrual blood from the body, and therefore the self, marking it as something else through the imagination of merging forms.

Menstrual blood’s capacity to dissolve bodily boundaries even when separate from the body threatens the bodily integrity of Sankhu. Menstrual blood, as *jhuto* contains traces of the body contaminating others, dissolving form “like kissing.” Sabina expressed fears of *boksi*, an amorphous threat that may obtain bodily waste such as menstrual blood and curse the person from whom the substance originates. The danger, hence, the responsibility, extends beyond the singular body to the broader protection of Sankhu. The choice of sanitary products and disposal methods are critical for preventing unsolicited contact. Among Chhetri residents of Ukhatar, such as Prekshya, menstrual blood is discreetly packaged and disposed. Newar women like Daya and Sabina, conceal, contain and prevent physical contact with menstrual blood. Using water to wash sanitary pads, or menstrual cups to keep menstrual blood fresh, they wash menstrual blood down the sewers removing the dirty fluids and impurities from Sankhu. Sabina’s avoidance of a menstrual stain conversely expresses how menstrual blood, in its ambiguity, contradictions and control, facilitates negotiation of the female body in Sankhu. Beyond a practical choice, the menstrual cup arbitrates the body.

Following the picnic in Bhaktapur where menstrual blood stained my skirt, the bus dropped us off outside the dance studio, and the pilgrimage attendees walked back into the studio and sat on the floor to sort out finances and finish leftovers. As I entered the studio, the faded stain on my skirt reflected in the mirror and I was anxious to return home and change clothes. When deliberations commenced over whether it was oil from *chaku* (sweets) or menstrual blood, this stain represented a deeper concern of contamination. Impurity embodied by menstrual blood temporarily contaminates the body, dissolving menstrual waste with water restores the self within Sankhu.

The Zumba studio and its mirror become the point of departure for the next chapter, where in its reflection I explore how this awareness of the body is cultivated and experienced through menstrual ritual, pain and habits, negotiated through surveillance and care of women’s bodies.

Chapter 4

Body: Menstrual Experience

Moisture hangs in the air of the dance studio. A fan in the corner in a futile struggle against the thick humidity marking the impending rainy season. A hollowness within the abdomen as a scraping sensation carves out the insides relieved only by curling up in a foetal position. Nausea accompanies the relentless pain that washes over the body in waves. A heat in the abdomen spreads out into a cold sweat, a flushed face and exhaustion from waking in the night. Slipping off my sliders, I peer around the doorframe to find Sabina *didi*, the dance teacher, selecting music on her phone. Radha Aunty, the senior in the studio, stretches as Samira Aunty marks a dance sequence to record for Tiktok.²⁵ The majority of regular members are absent as they are helping their families prepare for rice planting imminent with the first rain. Relieved to be indoors and out of sight of Sankhu's scrutinising gaze, I remove my sweatshirt and join the stretching. Looking up into the mirror covering the wall, Radha Aunty declares to me through the reflection: "*tapailko mutu rato cha*" (your face is red). Feeling the tug of cramps in my abdomen, I explain I am menstruating and my face flushes from hormones. "You should take rest," Sabina advises, sharing that she is at the end of her menstrual bleed and that she looks forward to bathing and feeling "*taja*" (fresh) again. After class, she will wash, marking the end of her cycle allowing her to resume worship and enter the kitchen. Glancing at her phone, Sabina shifts her weight backwards on her heels and in one fluid movement, stands and announces that we start the class.

With calm, instrumental music echoing through the studio, Sabina announces that since I am menstruating, we will practice gentle exercises today. During menstruation, women avoid heavy exercise and watch from the singular cushion by the speakers, a scarf wrapped around the abdomen to relieve back pain. Kneeling on the floor facing the mirror, we stretch our bodies relieving pressure from our shoulders and necks and I feel the morning cramps dissipating. It is unclear whether the sheen on our faces is from the humid air outside or physical exertion. Radha Aunty turns sideways to the mirror, pulling up her Happy Soul Dance Studio T-shirt and clasping her stomach. Samira Aunty, wearing a simple *kurtā* (tunic garment), emulates her movements, offering reassuring encouragement that they had lost weight. Both completed their morning *pūjā* (worship) before class, arriving at Zumba with make-up, hair pulled back in a tidy bun. In the initial months in the studio, I arrive straight from bed, my face without make-up. As the months

²⁵ A social media platform for short-form video content.

pass, I start wearing foundation to conceal changes and dissuade commentary about my skin. As the class ends, I slip on my sliders and exit with Radha Aunty. Placing her hand on my upper back, she echoes Sabina's sentiments "*ārām garchau*" (take rest) before pacing to her home to prepare morning tea.

The Zumba studio is a space where women's bodies reveal themselves outside of the conservative dress code within the streets of Sankhu or the duties and expectations in the home, such as worship, cleaning and preparing food. Absenteeism in the class indicates how the studio is embedded within the rhythms of Sankhu as commitments such as rice planting and festivals take priority. Nevertheless, the 6am, six-days-a-week Zumba class is an hour dedicated to health, socialising and cultivating a relationship to one's body. The mirror in the studio is a metaphor for the self-monitoring and co-participation in observing and caring for bodies. Even without visible signs of menstrual blood, the women in the studio notice the changes in my complexion and menstrual cycle timing, which invariably follows Sabina's. The adaptation of the morning exercise routine demonstrates how within this studio space, menstruation is recognised as an exhausting, painful process requiring care and avoiding heavy physical activity. The space of the Zumba studio raises the following questions: How is the body understood and experienced in Sankhu? What is the significance of bodily care during menstruation? In what ways does menstruation participate in the management of women's bodies?

In this chapter, I explore how menstruation is an experiential, purifying process. First, I argue that in Sankhu, the body is sanctified through embodied rituals such as the *mha pūjā* (body worship) ceremony. Drawing on Csordas's (1994) concept of the "Sacred Self," I demonstrate how practices such as bathing during the menstrual cycle manage the tension between intimacy with the god and the threat of bodily dissolution. Second, by mobilising Ahmed's (2004) conception of emotions surfacing on the body alongside a phenomenological engagement with pain (Jackson, 2011; Throop, 2010), I argue that expressions of menstrual pain delineate bodily boundaries. Third, I show how habits for maintaining the female body, such as aesthetics, reveal the female body as a site of surveillance, regulation and negotiation within the "social skin" (Turner, 2011) of Sankhu. Menstruation is an embodied experience through which Newar women in Sankhu sustain bodily integrity and manage gendered expectations.

Sacred

Quiet voices reverberate across the tall, tightly packed homes as Bikram Uncle places a Sukunda lamp, *karuwa* (water jug), sweeper (broom), *hasa* (winnow basket) and *tānpa*

(pot) against the wall of the upper balcony (see figure 16). Facing east, he sits closest to the right of these ritual implements with his two sons seated eldest, youngest and myself side by side on cushions. Using a paper stencil, we create a mandala for each participant, a geometric configuration of vermilion powder, rice, and black beans. The younger brother leans over to explain that the string with a flame lit in the centre is an *itā*, and the longer it burns, the longer one's life. "You are very lucky," he admonishes. It is unclear if he is referring to the bright flame at the centre of my mandala or my participation in *mha pūjā*. The *mha pūjā* ceremony, unique to the Newar, is a worship of *mha* (body). It occurs on the fourth day of Tihar (*baisek*, October-November), preceded by three days of worshipping ancestors, gods, and Lakshmi (goddess of wealth) followed by sibling worship. Coinciding with *nhu daya bhintuna* (Newar New Year), the ceremony cleanses the body before the year ahead.²⁶ I gaze at the *itā* flame, sheltered from the cool air by the plastic that Bikram uncle prepared to shield the rooftop from the evening wind. Lokisha Aunt, the senior woman in the home, completes her preparations in the *pūjā* room before administering the blessings. Embodied in the *mha pūjā* ceremony are tenets of bodily sacredness and renewal.

Among the Newar, the body is prioritised and celebrated as the core basis of daily life, encapsulated in daily greetings such as "*mha phu lā*" (body is good?). The greeting refers to the physical body and a broader sense of wellbeing, connected to the social body of Sankhu. In this section, I illustrate how worshipping the body through sensory experiences during *mha pūjā* (body worship) cultivates "embodied awareness" (Csordas, 2009). Next, I explore how bathing on the fourth day of the menstrual cycle sacralises the body through sensory awareness of the god within. This sheds insight into how menstruation, as a purifying process, leaves the body vulnerable to dissolution.

²⁶ "Nhu daya bhintuna" means "new year greetings" in Newar language and will be chanted as residents from Sankhu circumambulate the town.



Figure 16 Ritual apparatus of Mha Pūjā ceremony from left: Sukunda (Lord Ganesha lamp), karuwa (water jug made of brass, tampa (clay pot), hasa (basket for farming). Infront are five mandalas of yellow and vermilion powder, rice and seeds, November 2023.

Worshipping the body during *mha pūjā* creates a bodily awareness of the self within the family without the mediation of a priest. The “worship of the self” means “to recognise God in oneself” (Shrestha 2012: 335). Csordas conceptualises the self as the “indeterminate capacity to engage” (Csordas, 1994:5) through awareness within embodied experiences. As an indeterminate phenomenon, self-perception and reflexivity allow Csordas’s interlocutors, as Pentecostal charismatic healers, to “inhabit the charismatic world as a Sacred Self” (Csordas, 1994: 24). The strength of Csordas’s approach is that it removes the distinction between body and self, demarcating how sacredness is located in how the body participates in self-awareness.

As the *itā* burns in the centre of the mandala during the *mha pūjā* ceremony, the body remains part of the “Sacred Self” (Csordas, 1994) expressed through reflections on how long the *itā* burns and the mandala’s qualities as indicators of one’s life. Continuous acts of worship, habitual acts, and the ability to reflect on them create an awareness of the god within.

Bodily awareness is cultivated during *mha pūjā* through interactions between body and substances. For instance, a flower garland and *jajanka* (white string with red end) adorned

before a clay pot filled with flower petals, rice and beans are tapped on each shoulder and poured over our heads; a blessing to wash away impurities. It echoes the blessings on birthdays, where one must consume eggs, fish, meat and alcohol (usually a homemade spirit named *aylā*), each representing elements of the body. The touch on each shoulder focuses on the body in space, an active participant in the world through sensory experience, which in turn collapses the dualism between body and self (Merleau-Ponty, 1945). Among the Newar *mha*, as the body is the self. The awareness of the body through sensory experience, such as consuming food, ritualised bathing and focusing on the mandala as a representation of the person allows interlocutors to visualise their capacities as a Sacred Self. Ritual activities, such as *mha pūjā*, cultivate an embodied awareness of this inner sanctity, the god within.

The *mha pūjā* is complete, the mandalas swept away and the four of us eat a substantial feast of beaten rice, eggs, fish, pickles, and potatoes. Our meals finished, Bikram Uncle administers Lokisha Aunty's ceremony and food. As I watch her complete her worship, I see bright, colourful lights of Tihar across the skyline of Sankhu. The lights of the upper windows in each household signifying how family undertaking their *mha pūjā*, each body sitting according to their status, marked by seniority, gender and closeness to the family. This ceremony feels especially intimate as it focuses on the close family, usually the household, in contrast to festivals such as Dashain, where residents visit their extended family. Consuming food through offerings wraps the participant in the entrenched social obligations and expectations. The concept of worshipping the self during *mha pūjā* appears to be an individual act but is embedded within the broader social body of Sankhu.

Mha pūjā collapses the dualism between body and self in *mha* (body), dissolving bodies in Sankhu. Beyond a singular, biomechanical phenomenon (Lock and Farquhar, 2007) the body is collectively produced as the body social (Mol, 2002; Booth, 2016). Douglas (1975) uses clay as a metaphor to illustrate how corporeality is impressed upon as a reflection of the social body, as values and expectations. Underpinning this perspectives is a distinction between the individual bonded by the body distinct from the self as a reflexive, experiential agent acting on the world (Appell-Warren, 2014).²⁷ The body in Sankhu is a relational being (Strathern, 1990) exemplified by how at birth, Newar are embedded within *gūthi* situating their bodies within this endogamous ethnicity (Michael and Gutschow, 2012) integrated through ritual practices. There

²⁷ Tracing the historically constituted notion of the person in the West, Mauss (1985) conceptualises the “personne” as an internalised, psychological individual reinforced through a Christian lineage. Self-awareness (termed “moi”) becomes separate from the “personne” as a moral being (Carrithers, 1985).

are two categories of *gūthi*. First, *si-gūthi* meet twice a year for a feast, funding the cremation of bodies of its members. Second, a *gūthi* named after its patron god. Every household is a member of these *gūthi* (which can have separate groups of members), whose historical purpose was to finance funerals if a member dies (Shrestha, 2012). Taking care of the body during menstruation is a responsibility towards corporeality in Sankhu.

In the Zumba studio, Sabina noted how she looked forward to bathing at the end of her menstrual cycle. After bathing, she rejoins activities such as worshipping or entering the kitchen. In Chapter 3, I demonstrated how water dissolves the moral and physical impurities of menstrual blood. Bathing on the fourth day cultivates an awareness of the body, and therefore the god within, and washes away impurities leaving the Sacred Self. *Miqveh*, or ritual cleansing, features in Wasserfall's (2015) investigation of menstruation on how laws maintain Jewish bloodlines by governing the *niddah* (menstruating women). There are parallels with Newar society insofar that Newar are concerned with caste and clan lines (Michael and Gutschow, 2012). Among Wasserfall's interlocutors, the term *zava*, meaning woman who oozes, reflects a discomfort with menstruation as a natural process connected with women's health and connected to symbolic death of potential life. According to Wasserfall, ritual cleansing after menstruation manages the uncontrollable by removing bodily and moral impurities. The limitation of this argument is it reduces the practice to controlling women's bodies rather than acknowledging the awareness that menstruation is formative in daily life. For Sabina, bathing on the fourth day cultivates an awareness of the body, and therefore the god within, washing away impurities. Instead of managing the uncontrollable, ritual cleansing among the Newar cultivates an awareness of the Sacred Self.

Rushka, a Newar Shrestha woman in her late 20s, clarifies that after four days of bleeding, the flow of blood will stop. After four days, she washes the pads, her sheets and body so that she is "taja" (fresh). Taja means cleanliness and liveliness and is often used as a compliment. In Chapter 3, I showed how taja describes fresh, flowing menstrual blood. After Rushka bathes, her body returns to its original status, and she may participate in daily life again. This is regardless of whether she is still bleeding. Rushka focuses on the hygiene benefits of feeling clean and changing sheets rather than purification. She lists the actions of bathing without disclosing her relation to the process, allowing her to participate in ritualisation (Humphrey and Laidlaw, 1994) by speaking in terms of hygiene. Using the concept of ritualisation, Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994) highlight the processual act of worshipping during the Jain *pūjā* producing an awareness of the self. Within the context of the Jains, an ascetic religious group primarily in India, they trace the actions undertaken during a Jain *pūjā*, such as the bathing of a statue. The action of bathing creates

embodied awareness regardless of the relationship of the worshipper to beliefs. In the case of Rushka and Sabina, their emphasis on bathing actions and the feeling of *taja* refers to an embodied awareness of ritualised bathing. Ritual bathing creates an awareness of the “sacred self” within the familial, ancestral and social body of Sankhu.

Bodily purification through bathing on the fourth day is a sensory experience. Daya is of Khadgi (butcher) caste and sits forward on the sofa chair in her living room, she explains “We get up early in the mornings, showering our body and changing into new clothes. And you know cold, cold, cold, cold and water, cold and water mix - yeah - and that’s when we are clean, they think.” In Chapter 3, I highlighted how Prekshya and Sabina often deferred ideas with an addendum of “they think,” referring to other members of their family and therefore distancing themselves from commitment to the belief. Meanwhile, Daya’s emphasis on the sensory experience of cold water reinforces an awareness of the body, and by extension the ‘Sacred Self’. “You know in four days we totally get rest...so just resting, sitting, eating, sleeping...” These activities are necessary for the body to endure the menstrual cycle. I asked if she enjoyed relaxing at this time. “It’s not for us, it’s totally not fair!” she exclaims. Daya’s statement expresses how bathing is a responsibility. She negotiates her relationship to the bathing as a mandatory responsibility through her expression of the sensory experience as “cold.”



Figure 17 Mandala during mha pūjā, November 2023..

At the end of *mha pūjā*, the mandala loses its form, the bright flame burning brightly at its centre. Only when Lokisha Aunty has swept the mandalas and the remains dissolved from the balcony floor is the ceremony complete. The sweeping away of the mandala signifies the dissolution of the body as self. A recurring theme in myths in Sankhu is how the body dissolves to achieve a closer relationship to one’s capabilities, shedding the body to the god within (Shrestha, 2012). Narratives of dissolving bodies featured in my own fieldwork, such as at the pool below Vajrayoginī temple where a Vajrayāna priest is who turned into a snake. Unable to revert because he was unrecognisable to his wife, he remains in a pool at the base of Vajrayoginī’s temple. A further example is the story of Svāsthānī devī by Sali Nadi river recounts the king’s wife falling

into the river and becoming a blackened, unidentifiable corpse. This imagery expresses how the body, like the mandala, undergoes dissolution most overtly at death.

The body dissipates during death. In Sankhu, dead bodies are removed swiftly via the gate at Mahadevstan (see figure 18) to the cremation ground by the river (Shrestha, 2012). Women must not attend cremations but I encountered funeral processions, bare foot and with a body covered in a sheet on the way to the cremation ground adjacent to the BlueWaste2Value depot. On one occasion I returned from Sali Nadi river to find a man's body burned on a plinth by the river surrounded by mourners. His foot sticking out from the plinth and the smell of incense masked the burning remains as mourners gather in silence. He had suffered a bad death, a suicide, from a different district. In his own exploration of cremation rites among the Hyolmo in Boudhanath, Desjarlais (2016) observes how cremation rituals are “like a work of polyphonic music” (Desjarlais, 2016:160) in how they facilitate grief and aid the fate of the dead, transforming the existence of the deceased. This “creative making” (Desjarlais, 2016:164) is situated in time: urgency surrounds the removal of corpses from the town, the cremation is determined against the lunar calendar and in the subsequent mourning period, Newars will abstain from festivals for one year after a death in a family household. With the recognition of the body is an awareness of impermanence.



Figure 18 Sidhwakha in Mahadevstan where dead bodies from Sankhu must pass when departing from Sankhu, December 2023.

Menstrual blood lingers, stagnates and coagulates. Though not directly associated with death, it holds parallels with death among the Newar. For instance, after a family relative dies, members must not attend festivals, birthdays or weddings for minimum of 13 days, though many will abstain for at least 12 months in mourning. During menstruation, women must avoid events, heavy labour and touching the gods (see chapter 7). Shrestha (2012) observes how when someone dies, their clothes might be left at the crossroads in Sankhu where spirits are thought to preside. Women may also bring the umbilical cords of children. If someone knows they are about to die, they take themselves to the bank of Sali Nadi river, East of the town (Shrestha, 2012). On the opposite side of the river, away from Sankhu, it is said that one can hear wails from miscarried or aborted fetuses. One interlocutor informed me of how when he was young, his friends dug to see verify the stories of buried fetuses buried and afterwards became very ill. Coagulated bodily matter like corpses must be removed from Sankhu. Lingering bodily matter, including menstrual blood, is inauspicious in Sankhu.

Aside from the disposal of menstrual blood (see chapter 3), the body is cleansed to reify its integrity. “In the body, *majyu*” Niruna *bahinī* explains. ““*juye* means *bhayo*, means *baheko*, *bhutsa*?” (*juye* (new.) means happened, happening, understood?). Niruna highlights how menstruation is situated in time. Similar to death, menstruation is within the lunar calendar and as soon as a woman bleeds she removes herself from festivals and daily life (see chapter 6). Even if a woman bleeds longer than 4 days, she is considered cleansed after the fourth day of bathing. Despite complaints about the inconvenience, Newar women express a sense of responsibility around bathing and justify it as necessary for hygiene. When menstruation takes place, bathing becomes a form “creative making” (Desjarlais, 2016), removing menstrual blood and renewing awareness of the god within. As the mandala dissolves in *mha pūjā* (see figure 17) so does the body during menstruation, with heightened awareness of the body bathed on the fourth day. Menstruation, as embodied dissolution, cultivates awareness of the god within.

Pain

Pain, like menstruation, is seemingly an invisible phenomenon. A woman might tie a scarf around their abdomen to apply pressure on their back and reduce strain. Absence from an activity marks pain, such as when a woman sits on the cushion in the Zumba studio or stays in their bed to ensure maximal rest. The occasional grimace or sigh followed by a groan indicates the menstrual bleed is arriving. Dysmenorrhea, defined by the OED as “painful uterine cramps and other symptom such as nausea, vomiting diarrhoea, headache and fatigue” (OED, 2025), is highlighted as a prevalent

issue through studies conducted in schools in Nepal (Sharma et al. 2016). Chalise et al. (2025) surveyed respondents in Nuwarkot where 80% of respondents experienced menstrual pain. However, the survey is limited in how women can rate their own pain, claiming 30% describe experiencing the worst level of menstrual pain. In a survey conducted among 322 adolescents in Kiritipur, joint pain and breast tenderness are listed as symptoms with a negative impact (Poudel et al. 2023). Although these surveys highlight the significance of pain in menstrual hygiene management, they are limited through the fixed categories they posit in their surveys. There is an “inherent ambiguity to pain” (Throop, 2016: 199) that means to experience pain in part of the body is to create a sense of the body as no longer one’s own. For example, in the opening of this chapter I expressed the arrival of my menstrual cycle through symptoms such as abdominal cramps, Sabina empathised with my menstrual pain and immediately adjusted the session to gentle movements, dissipating the pain under light activity. Radha Aunty’s recognition of hormonal shifts in my face and subsequent advice echoes Sabina to take rest: to take care of my body, to care of myself.

Beginning with the *mha pūjā* ceremony, I demonstrated how bodily rituals cultivate awareness of the god within. I showed how the physical sensations of bathing on the fourth day of menstrual bleeding contribute to this embodied awareness as a temporal marker that is unconstrained by the biological timings of menstrual bleeding. Highlighting the theme of bodily dissolution through death and myths, I demonstrated how the dissolution of the body creates intimacy with the god within threatening disintegration. Menstruation is a painful, exhausting process necessitating rest. Corporeality disappears from awareness except during pain or discomfort (Hockney and Collinson, 2023). In this section, I consider how menstrual pain cultivates an awareness of bodily boundaries and by extension, the body’s impermanence. Pain reconfigures relations in the Zumba studio through bodily observations and acts of care. Therefore, menstrual pain holds moral weight: it marks the female body as needing containment from unmanaged relations (as virtue) and facilitates regulation.

Pain and illness are rooted in spatial conceptions in Sankhu. Pain is managed by space, so space is experienced through pain (Honkasalo, 1998). Honkasalo’s ethnographic work of pain narratives in a clinic in Finland shows how sufferers of chronic pain experience exile and fraud accusations because their pain is liminal, meaning it does not occupy space. Taking this position, situating (menstrual) pain in space - such as the stomach or legs - emplaces pain removing liminality. Illness is perceived as a “societal matter rather than an individual affair” (Devkota, 1984: 19) among the Newar, with agents, including gods, evil spirits and natural causes, responsible for the disease (Devkota, 1984). In Chapter 3, I showed how coagulated menstrual blood if improperly disposed causes illness. For instance, when Suntol *dai*, a Newar resident,

describes the houses in Sankhu, he mentions how when a new house is built, a space must be left for the “*nag*” (snake) that must be “worshipped.” In his family, if there is a parasite, fever or “ear pain or something”, they will worship and throw hot water to the gap in for the *nag* ensuring it is clear. However, revisiting the space, “when you went to the old places, you could get that pain.” The conversation demonstrates the importance of space to allow for the *nag*, a highly revered being, to pass through and how the disturbance of the space may cause suffering for trespasser. Locating menstrual pain in the body and time expressed through “*laste juye*” (New. pain happened), especially when accompanied by heavy bleeding, expresses how menstrual pain is a spatially placed embodied experience.

Pain, as a precursor to menstrual blood, is articulated through the body. When reaching out to friends in Sankhu to meet, a simple message “*mero peṭa dukyo*” (my stomach is hurting) or “*mero khuṭṭā dukyo*” (my legs hurt) signals menstruation.²⁸ When Maya says “*mero peṭa dukyo*” she means, “my stomach is hurting.” On the outskirts of Sankhu, Maya and Padma are two Chhetri women in their early 20s who sit cross-legged on Padma’s bed as I ask about how they experience menstruation. Maya describes how “just like others it always starts with breast pain and then stomach pain.” Padma interjected: “—back pain also.” By locating pain in the breasts, stomach and back, Maya and Padma reaffirm bodily boundaries. Butler (1993) defines menstruation as a process that “stabilises over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity and surface we call matter.” (Butler, 1993: 9). The loss of menstrual blood and associated pain creates awareness of inhabited bodily boundaries (Ahmed, 2004). Through the sensation of touch the skin is a perceiving surface, separating the body from others as a medium of connection (Ahmed 2004). Menstrual pain bypasses this perceiving surface as a liminal sensation. Expressions of “my stomach is hurting” during menstruation reflect a desire to re-establish a surface and bodily integrity.

Menstrual pain is experienced as negation (Ahmed 2004). In Padma and Maya’s expressions, pain is coming from this specific part of the body, as if the body is turning against itself (Jackson, 2011). Padma emphasises that for her, stomach pain is especially bad. Her face contorts into a grimace, “I don’t want to remember” she sighs, signalling an abjection of menstrual pain and by extension, the experience of menstruation. As menstrual pain reaffirms bodily

²⁸ *Dukyo* as the past participle of *Dukḥa*, resonates as a key tenet from Sanskrit as misery caused by suffering through conditioning, sensations and change (Buswell and Lopez, 2014). Although an analysis of the etymological meanings of suffering could be productive, in this discussion I use it as it appears in everyday discourse to refer to physical or emotional pain.

boundaries, it also disintegrates. This tension between the simultaneous formulation and dissolution of the body is central to Cook's (2007) investigation of the role of pain in protective tattoos for monks in Thailand. For lay practitioners the tattoos reinforce the body as a bounded entity through the experience of pain and markings on their skin as a perceiving surface. Monastics, however, transcend the protective power of the tattoos through asceticism. Tattoos and associated pain encompass a tension between solidifying the boundaries of the body and the possibility of bodily transcendence. Menstrual pain endured by women in Sankhu embodies the tension of cultivating awareness of the body and through abjection, its impermanence.

By beginning with the phrase "just like others", Maya invokes a shared, empathic understanding of pain as a relationally produced experience (Throop, 2016). For Maya, women experience pre-menstrual pain in the breast and stomach. The expression of menstrual pain allows another to identify with it while highlighting an inability to experience another's pain. This mental opacity, the understanding that one cannot assume how others think, is central to Throop's (2010) argument on how pain is fundamental to how the Yap understand pain. He demonstrates how concealment reveals how the Yap experience pain as a virtuous, moral obligation. Implicit in the announcement that one is experiencing menstrual pain is that a woman will refrain from demanding physical or social activities, often remaining in bed, or wrapping a cloth around the abdomen and undertaking easier duties. For example, Radha Aunt and Sabina *didi* advised that I take rest when they realised, I was menstruating. Painkillers are discouraged, countered with the advice to drink lots of hot water. Refraining from participating in *pūjā*, cooking or heavy physical activity allows women to recover from this demanding purifying process. Virtuosity is to sustain one's inner sanctity and continuity against the impending forces upon the body such as menstruation. Menstrual pain is addressed through rest as virtuous practice.

In Sankhu, when I discussed my menstrual pain, I was greeted by descriptions from interlocutors of stabbing pains in the legs and in the back. The Zumba studio creates a space where women share the challenges posed by menstrual pain. In Bhaktapur, Tiné (2024) conducted a study on stomach issues such as acid reflux, that pervades the lived experience of Newar women. She argues that the expression of *gastric* is indicative of anxieties concerning social change. Similar to menstrual pain, *gastric* is an ambiguous concept that refers to a range of digestive issues yet menstrual pain participates in the surveillance of women's bodies and reproduction. In Sankhu, bottle of tablets on the shelf within homes displayed the effect of the modern diet. Alongside menstrual pain, cravings signified and countered the mental opacity of pain. On one occasion, I mentioned that I had a craving for Panipuri and was informed that this was a desire for spicy food is a common craving for Nepali women during menstruation. This resulted in a spontaneous trip

to the Panipuri stall in Mahadevstan or Sanagaun. Within conversations on the sensations before menstruation, pain emerges as a mode of discerning the other's experience of self, through empathic experience (Throop, 2012). Cravings and their solution become a shared experience overcoming the ambiguity surrounding menstrual pain.

Menstrual pain participates in the surveillance of women's bodies, signalling that a woman is not pregnant. Sat in Sakwo with Rushka, she comments on how this is the best place to come for privacy because one is left alone. Everywhere else in Sankhu she feels watched, which is why she suggested visiting this resort. Rushka had returned from her job in Kathmandu, emphasising how spending time in the city gives her new perspectives on the conservative society of Sankhu. "Like, we don't have freedom. Even if I stay with you, they [her family] will be calling and from when will you come?...it's late. You have to come." She began to speak faster as she voiced her discontent about how life changed for her after she reached puberty, which she equivalates with her first menstrual bleed. "Simply, yeah this is the main thing they can't express in a word. They don't want to use this word sex, but this is the main thing that is used to create this bias within us. Because boys never get pregnant, right?" Women's bodies in their potential for pregnancy become a site of danger. "There are no abortions...this is the only reason." Rushka's eyes drop to her phone again as she receives a call from her family who are expecting her home, a serendipitous example of how her family will not permit her to stay out late.

Raising her eyes, Rushka continues to explain that before sanitary pads, the older generation used a towel, which they would wash at the end of the cycle. If someone found this towel, then they can create "black magic" threatening fertility. "You are unable to give birth to a baby, your menstruation will stop and you will feel pain in your stomach." Here, Rushka posits the body as a container. The body must be sustained against unsolicited or premarital sex or, through this lens, the consequence is that future relations (children) are prevented. The body is no longer a container during unsolicited or premarital sex. Rushka's grandmother emphasised through pain how carelessness with menstrual waste destroys the body. In balance with preventing pregnancies, there is a safety concern for women in Sankhu due to alcoholism and cases of non-consensual sex. Menstrual pain and symptoms grant surveillance over women's bodies reinforcing expectations concerning abstinence before marriage.

Rushka's observations on the surveillance of women's bodies bares weight against two transformations affecting menstruation and women's bodies in Sankhu. Anecdotally, women are expected to have their first menstrual cycle at age 12-14. Now, girls at age 7 or 8 are increasingly reaching menarche. In Sankhu and in other Newar communities in the Kathmandu Valley, the lowering age of menarche results in girls undergoing puberty rites such as the Ihi and

bārāḥ at a younger age.²⁹ In Chapter 6, I explore the significance of bārāḥ in gendered expectations and shifting relationships to the town. The narratives surrounding the lowering age for menarche and the Ihi ceremony express the ambiguity of when a girl may start menstruating, speaking to a need to control the unpredictability of women's bodies, especially if there is a risk of pregnancy. Lotter and Khanal (2024) note that in the Mulukī Ain menarche never had a clear age category (compared to menopause which is stated at 45) meaning the age status can be shifted between "innocence, play and responsibility" (Lotter and Khanal, 2024: 26). As established through Rushka's discussion, after menarche, there is disciplining of women's bodies with expectations that they respect curfews and are cautious in their company, as well as participating in practices such as avoiding the temple (see chapter 8). The perceived lowering age of menarche means that this surveillance and discipline will begin earlier for which the consequences, at this stage, are unclear.

A second transformation in the regulation of women's bodies is the use of the contraceptive pill. Rushka mentioned how women rarely undergo abortions hence the concern on preventing unwanted pregnancy. Within informal settings, conversations surrounding abortions and the use of the contraceptive pill arose. The oral contraceptive pill is a medication that disrupts hormones to prevent pregnancy by lining the womb or blocking the release of eggs. There is limited use of the contraceptive pill in Sankhu, primarily taken to allow for attendance at important festivals such as a wedding. Discomfort with medicine that affects the natural bodily rhythms is prevalent, especially as an absent menstrual period is problematic and may indicate pregnancy. Since premarital sex is discouraged in Sankhu, the contraceptive pill is unpopular among younger women. Occasionally, the emergency contraceptive pill as medication taken after unprotected sex to prevent pregnancy is used as contraception. Taken after unprotected sex, this medication disrupts hormones to prevent a pregnancy. I encountered recounts in Sankhu of "friends" repeatedly using the emergency contraceptive pill causing stomach pain, delayed menstrual cycles and fears of pregnancy. The use of contraceptives marks friction between ideas of convenience, propriety and femininity in how it disrupts the surveillance of female bodies.

Menstruation is an embodied change in awareness of inhabiting Sankhu, especially through menstrual pain. Through abjection, the boundaries of the body are affirmed in heightened awareness of back, leg or stomach pain. Simultaneously, boundaries between women are dissolved through empathy and shared experiences. Most importantly, menstrual pain elicits menstruation.

²⁹ There is evidence for the lowering age of menarche Nepal is recorded within statistical studies (see for example Rothchild and Piya, 2020). However, further research is needed to confirm the average age of menarche in Sankhu.

With girls approaching menarche younger and the introduction of medications, such as the contraceptive pill, new paradigms emerge, as the menstrual body becomes the site for social change. Menstrual pain becomes a signifier of menstrual blood and a marker of the embodied transformation of women's relationship to their bodies and their place within Sankhu.

Habits

When entering the Zumba studio, the large mirror covering the opposite wall greets us with the reflections. This mirror becomes a means for self-monitoring, reinforcing our awareness of our bodies and those around us forms in space and in the mirror's reflection. Conversing through the mirror becomes a metaphor for the way the female body is habituated in Sankhu. In the dance studio, the body is constantly under a gaze, and yet, it a space where the female body can reveal itself. The dance exercises, with their emphasis on hip movements and transforming the body, bring attention to concerns such as skin or weight. In Sankhu, the body is habituated through expectations where women's bodies are hidden beneath clothes or after certain times of the day through curfews. The gendered body is marked, for instance, in expectations on how women should dress. Women will dress conservatively outside of their homes, many wearing a traditional *Kurta* and a shawl on a cold day. The younger generation cover their legs, chest and shoulders. In the dance studio, the female body is also habituated through the double gaze of one's own self-perception and awareness of those that see the body. Attending Zumba every morning in Sankhu provides a unique space in which women dance together. Outside of the home and the perpetual gaze of the town, the particularities of the gendered body revealed themselves.

In this section, I explore how habits form the female body in Sankhu through self-monitoring, repeated actions and care for the body. Menstruation is part of this habituated process, whereby practices surrounding menstruation contribute to expectations of propriety and moral conduct. Through habits surrounding menstruation, the female body becomes a site of negotiation and social change, a process that continues after menopause.

In Sankhu, women maintain health, weight and beauty regimes speaks through habitual practices determined by age, marital status and caste. The confronting experience of arriving at Zumba and having physical changes commented upon gives insight on the relationship between feminine virtue (how a woman comports and interacts in Sankhu) and the ideal female body in Sankhu. Habits, embodied bodily practices and movements, contribute to the maintenance of the norms and expectations in daily life. By understanding menstruation as a habituated process, routines around menstruation constitute expectations surrounding women as habitus. Bourdieu

(1977) used the concept of habitus to conceptualise embodied habits mutually constituting the environment and bodies. The habits of cleansing, caring and preparing for menstruation enact a collective surfacing of the body. According to Rankin (2003), the primary expectation among women in Sankhu is honour, as a reflection of the household honour. Women sustain the expectations of the gendered body through learned practices, including surrounding menstruation.

We collapsed on the floor of the dance studio, having completed one of our favourite sequences “*Mugabla*,” a ten-minute-long dance zumba sequence following a range of rhythms that most of the room had managed to memorise. Today there were eight Aunties, the dance teacher and me. Radha Auntie turned sideways to the mirror and clasped her stomach, and the other Aunties compared themselves in turn, giving reassuring encouragement. The Aunties completed their morning *pūjā* (worship) before arriving at Zumba with make-up. Women persistently monitor and comment on their weight, worrying that they might be getting “*moto*” (Nep. fat). Younger women preferred to sustain a slender frame. Particular attention is paid to maintaining skin, following online trends. Topics of conversation include prime skin care regimes complemented by attention to wearing make-up. Hair is also a marker of youth and femininity, carefully decorated in flowers and pins during events and worship. Finally, an expectation is that there should be a regular menstrual cycle. If a menstrual bleed is delayed, it raises concerns about health, or even pregnancy. The physical markers of youth, virtue and fertility are moral paradigms in which women living in Sankhu must operate.

The close bodily observations (by other women) are a form of connection, marked by the presence of the mirror as a mode of self-monitoring. The mirror features as a driving presence within a boxing gym in Chicago, where Wacquant (2002) describes how “being seen at every moment” (Wacquant, 2002: 117) means one applies oneself to the shadowboxing. Moreover, he describes the shadowboxing as a frenzy, the mirror creating a heightened awareness of the body’s proximity in space. A similar experience emerges within the studio in Sankhu, where the mirror acts as a place to see oneself in space and in the eyes of others. A panoptic experience that mirrors how the body is surveyed and self-monitored in Sankhu. Even as an outsider without family in Sankhu, I was compared to these standards, and in time, conformed through my choice to wear make-up to morning class. The care and surveillance of the female body, as seen in practices ranging from daily Zumba sessions to conversations about menstruation and skin care, illustrate how women must negotiate these boundaries. Through these practices, women maintain their status within the moral and social hierarchies of Sankhu. Practices of self-monitoring, and gendered expectations materialise the body.

Habits form notions of beauty, as hair and body piercings symbolise integration into the “social skin” (Turner, 2011) of Sankhu. Turner applies the concept of the social skin to body aesthetics with clothes and tattoos as markers of social values. He highlights that the social skin mediates three layers. The first mediation takes place between the individuals. In the example of the Zumba room, beauty notions mediate as the Aunties encourage and compare their bodies. The second layer takes place between the individual and the internalised expectations; how they perceive themselves through other eyes as women. The mirror as a tool for self-monitoring provide a figurative metaphor for this layer as women adjust within its reflection. The final layer for Turner is the boundary between social classes. In the context of the aesthetic markers in Sankhu, and in the Zumba room specifically, caste, class and ethnicity affect how the body is marked and understood. Newar women for instance never wear nose piercings, while a necklace signifies marital status. Women’s bodies mould to demonstrate gendered expectations and a wide range of markers embedded in class, ethnicity and caste, mediated by the social skin.

The absence of menstruation, or menstrual pain, alters women’s spatial and social presence. Radha Aunty, the senior member of the Zumba group, sits on the floor with a tall, elegant posture. Her eldest son is working overseas and the rest of the day she spends in her shop, so she stays a little longer to chat to Sabina and I, the other women return to their homes to prepare lunch. As we discuss menstruation, she exclaims “*free cha*” with a brisk flick of the head and the wrist. Her relief is that she no longer experiences pain and is beyond the bodily rhythms shared by other women in the room. However, she felt many different changes in her body since menopause. Her response to whether she is treated differently in Sankhu since her menstrual cycle stopped “*Gardainer. Pahile pahile dekhi ho.*” (It did not. It is since a long, long time ago.) suggests that her body is no longer defined by menstruation.

Among the Newar, the menstrual body is replaced by a new form of embodied awareness marked through rituals such as the *jancu* ceremony, where Newar men and women are worshipped as gods. As they reach the 77th month, year day and minute, Newar men and women undertake Jancu where the door is painted with the symbol of five Buddhas, birds and a pot of water.³⁰ On the 83rd year, month, day and minute, second, the person is worshipped in a night ceremony. On the 88th year, month, day and minute, they are pulled by their grandchildren through a makeshift staircase through a window. On the 99th year, month, day, second, they step into a large pot and crawl out. The pot is white with a hole at the top and a large hole at the bottom with

³⁰ The five Buddhas are Vairocana, Akshobhya, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, and Amoghasiddhi.

a painting of eyes where “they are reborn.”³¹ When women’s bodies cease to participate in shedding impurities, they cultivate awareness of the gods through rituals alongside men.

Radha Aunty dismissed the idea that there was any formal change in the community but her role among other women shifts to a senior caregiver. For example, Daya, based in her shop, emphasised how when she is menstruating her mother takes over the shop because she no longer bleeds. The mother’s obligation towards her daughter shifts because she no longer menstruates. The aging body reconfigures relations, from a menstruating body to senior caregiver. In what Lamb terms “post reproductive life phases” (Lamb, 2000: 204) women transform their gender through altered spatial movements, attendance of public rituals and spending more time out of the home. Lamb’s (2000) ethnographic work on gendered transformations among elder women in Mangaldihi, India, highlights how aging is part of a broader social transformation signifying new roles. Women thus experience aging as a shift in their role in the family, no longer needing to follow expectations relating to menstruation. With the example of Ratna Aunty, however, she is “free” of her body but must still manage menstruation. Among the Newar, the responsibility shifts from managing their body to assisting others.

To this point, it might appear that women are integrated without friction into the social skin of Sankhu. However, habits surrounding menstruation demonstrate that this process is negotiated by each woman. Turner’s (2011) concept of “bodiliness” refers to “the tensions and mutual catalysis of these forces as the together constitute the embodied being” (Turner, 2011:117). Turner goes beyond the object of the body (and therefore Bourdieu) to determine the frictions, tensions and transformations that form an embodied being. Concerning managing menstrual waste, this demonstrates how the female bodily habits, as seen in practices ranging from daily Zumba sessions to conversations about menstruation and skin care, illustrate how women negotiating the frictions between expectations of female propriety. For women of reproductive age, this includes expectations of health, related to fertility, and before marriage, virtue as abstinence. Even in a space predominantly absent of men women abide by bodily standards. These embodied learned routines, from beauty practices to sanitary waste disposal, negotiate bodily boundaries and gendered expectations in Sankhu

Perched outside BlueWaste2Value depot on leaning on her motorbike, Lashmi *didi* highlights that the main challenge they (Sankhu) are facing is “to change their habit” from burning

³¹ If a Newar woman is married and her husband reaches these ages, she will undertake Jancu with him. If a woman is unmarried or widowed, she will complete the ceremony when she reaches the respective ages.

waste. When I asked residents about certain actions, I was answered with the statement “*Yo hamro bani ho*” (It is our habit). *Bani*, meaning habit in Nepali refers to repeated actions as well as disposition and character. Lashmi is close friends with Rushka and Sabina and work full-time. Unlike her friends, who express dreams of moving overseas, she wishes to stay in Sankhu, marry and maintain a home. Justifying her use of the menstrual cup as part of this “habit” in reducing waste, she feels her generation needs to take responsibility. Despite worshipping regularly and participating fully in ritual life in Sankhu, Lashmi focuses on the practical issue of waste management. For her, habits need to be cultivated as a disposition towards the environment and greater benefit of Sankhu.

Sabina, the dance teacher in Sankhu, illustrates how moral expectations around menstruation are situated within aspirations and specific relationships to the gods. Having spent years travelling to Kathmandu and dreaming of moving abroad, she balances participating in ritual practices, such as bathing during menstruation, with challenging expectations in Sankhu, for instance preferring to wear shorts despite her mother’s protest. Her dance studio embodies this balance as a space to celebrate traditions, such as Newar traditional dance, while also providing a space for the Aunties to socialise and exercise outside of the home. Her relationship to worship deepened after a bereavement, informing her commitment to worship and decisions around sanitary waste. She describes menstrual blood as “dirty” and something to be hidden reflecting a moral responsibility to her household. Sabina’s embodied practices, as habits, express how menstruation is a site for negotiating expectations over the female body.

Rushka, by contrast, emphasised a distance from these practices as belonging to her “grandmother”. Yet, she still follows practices around menstruation, such as bathing and careful disposal of sanitary waste which continue to enforce bodily boundaries. In chapter 3, I discussed how menstrual blood, once separate from the body can attract *sarāp* (curse) or the wrath of a *boksi*, an amorphous, feminine figure that can harm through illness. Rushka observes these norms, expressing distance from the beliefs, demonstrating how habits persist as bodily care. Through habitual routines, women like Rushka negotiate the expectations of being a Newar woman expressing generational differences.

In Sankhu, women like Laksmi, Rushka, and Sabina have different relationships to menstruation, even though they share the same age, ethnicity, and upbringing. These habits surrounding menstruation constitute female bodiliness in Sankhu, as they negotiate the tensions and frictions between expectations of female propriety, self-monitoring, and bodily expression. Viewed through this lens, menstrual waste forms the female body in Sankhu.

“You have the perfect body.”

After months of rehearsals, Sabina posted a video of our dance sequence on the studio Instagram account. On seeing Rushka, she exclaimed that she had seen the video and declares “you have the perfect body.” In Newar society in Sankhu, the “perfect body” is concerned with physical form and how it marks social virtue, moral standing and adherence to the standards of being a woman in Sankhu. At the same time, Rushka and Sabina in their negotiations of clothing, observations of curfews and critical perspectives towards the conservative aspects of society exemplify how the female body is a site of negotiation in Sankhu, embodying tensions and transformation. This chapter began with my entry in the Zumba studio. Sabina and the Aunties recognised I was menstruating from changes in my body and adapted the dance exercises. Menstruation, as embodied awareness through pain, care and bathing exposes the interstices where tensions and transformations concerning morality, the female body as a container in Sankhu.

By drawing on phenomenology, this chapter demonstrated how menstruation participates in the sacralisation of the body. By cultivating a sensory awareness through ritualised bathing, the bodily experience of menstruation signifies the purifying process restoring the body to the Sacred Self. Menstruation creates awareness of intimacy with the god within, revealing the body’s vulnerability, and potential dissolution. Ritualised bathing on the fourth day manages this tension. Menstrual pain further enhances this tension, reinforcing bodily boundaries participating in the abjection of the body. On one hand, women take care of their bodies and a break from heavy labour. On the other hand, menstrual pain facilitates surveillance of the women’s body so bodily changes are monitored and maintained to ensure embodied expectations around female propriety. Despite a hidden process, menstruation becomes visible through the awareness of others and self-monitoring embodied in the metaphor of the mirror in the dance studio. Habits ensure that moral and gendered expectations of the female body are sustained providing a space of negotiation. As women pass menopause, they are worshipped alongside men in rites of passage as they age while also taking responsibility for ensuring younger generations take care of their bodies during menstruation. In Sankhu, women are responsible for managing the female body by containing it through beauty regimes, curfews and managing menstruation.

In the previous chapter, I focused on the material qualities of menstrual blood discerning how the properties of menstrual blood in Sankhu as dirty, dried and dangerous embody moral concerns in Sankhu. Concealing, capturing and disposing of menstrual waste contains its contaminating qualities. This chapter demonstrated how actions of bathing, rest and care manage the body’s integrity. Ideals of feminine virtue embodied through habits manage and contain

boundaries. In the following chapter, I focus on the domain of the home and how practices around menstruation embedded within rhythms of labour containing women within this space.

Chapter 4

Home: Flowing

Niruna Shrestha invites me to her home, stating that it is the easiest place for us to talk. She sits cross-legged on her bed, the window open to a small alley behind her house as a dress form mannequin overlooks our conversation. Despite the sun reaching its midday peak, the concrete buildings shield the alley creating a cool breeze through the room. As a fashion student and small business owner, she spends her time in her childhood bedroom working on designs. “It’s not that easy” she sighs, “that’s why I’m stuck here.” I ask if there were any practices she must follow during menstruation in her house. “They are not, not too strict. My parents are not too strict about that,” she responds. Gesturing upwards, Niruna explains that during menstruation in her household, aside from the kitchen, one cannot enter this room named *dyah chhen* (New. god house).³² Niruna clarified. “[During menstruation] I can go everywhere, but not in kitchen, okay? I can go there and eat but I cannot enter the kitchen... especially the cooking area and the refrigerator...and not temple, I guess, yeah.” On one occasion in her memory, however, Niruna was holding her sister and entered the kitchen out of habit. “I was like, my god, I’m like, I’m on my period.” Not knowing the consequences, she repeats “I’m so sorry, god” as she reverses from the space.

Every morning and during festivals, a household member - usually the senior woman within the home - climbs a set of steps from the kitchen floor to the *dyah chhen* concealed by a curtain or door, devoted to a family god. In Chhetri-Brahmin homes this room is called *pūjā ko koṭhā* (worship room). Within Newar homes, the emphasis on *dyah* highlights the house as the potential abode of the god. After the morning pūjā, Niruna hears her mother sweeping down the stairs from top to bottom and out the front door. Clean spaces are inviting and respectful for gods and visitors. Below the *dyah chhen* is the kitchen, followed by the bedrooms of senior family members on the next floor, and children on the first floor. The ground floor is reserved for shopfronts, storerooms or lodgers. Niruna’s bedroom, as the daughter of her home, is located on the first floor. Although there is a particular room delineated for worship, the entire home serves as a space where the gods may be present, meaning it must be maintained. As Niruna’s mother sweeps the home from top to bottom, dust expels into the streets of Sankhu.

³² *Dyah* refers to the divine reality as “god”, *devī* or *deva* refers to specific gods, for example Vajrayoginī *devī*.

Daily life is situated within *chhen* (home) in Sankhu. Schneiderman et al (2024) highlight how *ghar* in Nepali denotes house and home as a material and experiential form, affectively charged as a site of belonging. *Chhen* is used in daily speech, for instance “*ji chhen wanego*” (I go home) encapsulating the family unit, the space for worshipping the gods and insinuates traditional Newar architecture (Saveswar, 2016). In contemporary Newar homes, often distinguished by latticed facades, the *dyaḥ chhen* signifies the heart of the building (Dungana and Kawan, 2023) allowing the gods to enter. The architecture of the home in Sankhu mirrors a bodily container with its spatial hierarchy signifying a social hierarchy (Douglas, 1975). Beyond symbolism, Newar sustain a continual relation to dead relatives within their homes visible through pictures blessed with *tīkā* lining stairs or living room cabinets (Saveswar, 2016). When a Newar resident in Sankhu dies, they are cremated outside the town (Shrestha, 2012). Nevertheless, their *hansa* (New. soul) remains in the home worshipped the following year and thereafter annually at the public festival Saaparu (Nepali: Guy Jatra).³³ The space of the home raises the following questions: How does avoidance of the cooking area and food during menstruation maintain the home? How do material changes to properties, such as the 2015 earthquake, affect household rhythms during menstruation? What does menstrual waste disposal reveal about the home in Sankhu?

In this chapter, I move through rooms to investigate how practices surrounding menstruation coagulate the home in Sankhu. Starting in the kitchen, I investigate how women, like Niruna, refrain from cooking or handling food during their menstrual bleeds. Drawing on the concept of “menstrual kinship” (Saba and Robinson, 2022), I analyse how menstruation redistributes household labour among its members with marriage as a key point for shifting these practices. Turning to the bedroom, the tasks of cleaning sheets and managing menstruation as “ritualised care” (Aulino, 2019) negotiate public and private. Here, I reflect on how the 2015 Gorkha earthquake shifted the boundaries sustained by menstruation. The kitchen and bedroom become spaces emplacing (Mol, 2008) women within the home, the bathroom is perceived as a “non-place” (Sprague, 2018). Menstrual waste as a shared responsibility is managed by distributed labour. Expelled from the enclosed bathroom as *bagcha* (flow), it reifies the home as a container.

³³The Nepali term *aatma* (soul) arose in everyday speech among my interlocutors when reminiscing about the pre-earthquake homes.

Kitchen

Lying on the firm mattresses positioned on the floor, I hold my Nalgene water bottle filled with boiling water against my lower abdomen and close my eyes. Through the wavering latticed windows I hear the morning soundscape of *pūjā* bells and rice steamers and senior women from each household undertake their morning routines of worship, sweeping and preparing morning tea. I hear an insistent knock. As I open the door, Lokisha Aunty calls “*au au*” (come up) as she clambers to the top floor, disappearing before I can respond. I drag myself upstairs, hungry and drained. Hesitating at the kitchen door, I explained that my period arrived that morning. She looks at me, “*peṭa dukyo?*” (stomach hurting?). I nod and she gestures to my usual chair to eat rotis. Once I finish my meal, she indicates that I clean my dishes. I gather the steel plates and cups, crouching at the outside tap positioned on a small balcony. She hovers in the doorway advising washing the small items over the large items to conserve water and inspecting their cleanliness. This moment marked an important shift indicating an integration into the space marked through the disclosure that I was menstruating. As Lokisha Aunty oversaw the dish cleaning, my status shifted from guest to lodger and hereon I washed the dishes after dinner. After stacking the crockery in the dish rack situated behind the tap, I return downstairs to my Nalgene bottle no longer radiating heat and fall asleep against the quiet afternoon soundscape of Sankhu.

To understand the variation of practices surrounding menstruation in Sankhu, I focus on the kitchen situated below the *dyah chhen* as the central nexus of family life in Newar homes. First, I show how avoiding the refrigerator and gas stove redistributes household tasks. For example, brothers and husbands assist with cooking during the menstrual bleeds of female members in the household. I then show through food waste management how substance such as menstrual blood must not contaminate the home. I discuss the shifts when women move into their husband’s home renegotiating practices within the kitchen. The responsibility for sustaining practices surrounding menstruation concerns all household members, emplacing them within the home.

Practices surrounding menstruation vary depending on castes and households in Sankhu. For instance, in Newar Brahmin homes, women must avoid the kitchen, *pūjā* rooms and eat their food separately. In Newar Shrestha homes it is common to also avoid the kitchen. Newar Manandhar and Khadgi castes might allow entry to the kitchen but redistribute household activities such as cooking and worship. All castes will avoid temples and *pūjā* rooms during menstruation (see Chapter 7). Douglas (1975) hypothesises that the higher the caste, the stricter the avoidance practices to maintain purity and order. In Sankhu, there appeared to be a correlation between the

quantity of spaces avoided during menstruation increased the higher the caste. However, conceptualising under “strictness” or moral codes ignores how households, and women, cultivate their relationship to these avoidance practices within material space of the home. The boundaries of the kitchen space are negotiated between each caste and household reconfigures the kitchen space.

Food waste management indicates broader concerns towards the responsibility within the kitchen. Food waste, compared to menstrual waste, is visible in the home meaning it can give insights into how substances are disposed in the home. When completing a meal in Newar homes, it is customary to wash the plate in an exterior tap. In Chapter 3, I introduced the concept of *jhuto* through my conversation with Sabina, delineating how the concept connotes contamination through dissolving bodily boundaries. The risk of consuming food from a tarnished plate is the disintegration of the body through illness. Utensils, such as the *anti* (waterspout) with a long spout prevents contamination of food or water. If one leaves soiled plates in the home without washing up, inauspicious forces, namely ghosts might gather. Sabina describes how if one goes into the kitchen without washing hands then “our ancestors come and haunt you”. Sabina explains: “yeah, I used to believe it. Like my old house...if we leave dirty dishes in the sink then out ancestors will come...” she laughed as her sentence trailed off.

Food, gathered on the plates, risks attracting the ancestors, which she later specified as “white ghosts” pulling on her ankles. Sabina frames this risk within her “old house”, a temporal framing that evokes nostalgia for her pre-earthquake home. Maintaining distance from the belief through the statement “I used to believe it” and suggesting this is something her mother and sister experienced, she highlights how *jhuto* is embedded within responsibility for familial relations. Flowing downwards, water dissolves this threat by washing the plates preventing *jhuto*. However, if a woman is menstruating and touches the water source (such as the large plastic containers of filtered water, there is a risk of dissolving the boundary with the water and contaminating the home. Only flowing water washes away menstrual blood (see Chapter 3). By avoiding the kitchen during menstruation, especially water sources, avoids menstrual blood as *jhuto* dissolving these boundaries.

Food waste is removed from the kitchen and dissolved outside the home. In the pre-earthquake homes in Sankhu, food waste collected in a *bahal* (shared courtyard) between the homes. Niruna and Daya independently recounted the putrid smell of rotting vegetables that gathered which would later be used for composting and crops. They explained that they missed that smell because it reminds them of their houses before the earthquake. Now, the food waste within the central homes in Sankhu is gathered in a small plastic bag and handed over as

“degradable” waste to be composted at the BlueWaste2Value facility. Daya, who mentioned how she blocked the pipes with sanitary pads in Chapter 3, describes how “in my home, personally, four days we cannot go in the kitchen. We cannot cooking...because all the food things, oil is here.” Oil, used for cooking, is an especially risky substance for contamination because of its intimacy with food and flowing quality. Food waste is minimised with a custom to finish food on the plate and leftovers (untouched food) used to make pickles or juices. The careful management and disposal of food indicate the importance of avoiding contamination of the hearth.

As she speaks on practices surrounding menstruation, Niruna clarifies that she must avoid the “cooking area” and the “refrigerator”. The equipment where food is handled constitute the hearth of Niruna’s home (Carsten, 1997). The hearth is central to Carsten’s (1997) analysis of the Malay where she mobilises the concept of shared substance to argue how sharing food around a hearth constitutes a household, as opposed to kinship. Food, similar to blood, is a substance of relatedness among the Newar (see Chapter 3). Among the Newar, consuming food from the hearth temporarily dissolves boundaries between its consumers and the home. As a guest, one must finish all the food on their plate and ensure it is washed outside. This extends to ancestors exemplified by how Niruna’s father offers food to the side of the place before eating. Only a male can undertake this task and it is imperative that she does not touch her father during menstruation in case of contaminating the food offering. She clarifies that “most of the Newar people just do that...they put a bit aside.”

After the death of her grandfather, her father performed a mantra and from that point he is treated like a god because of his close dealings with “the ancestors, with the God...something holy, I guess spiritual.” Niruna’s qualification as “something spiritual” reflects the ambiguity of the gods. Before a meal, her father places six components of his meal on the side of the plate as an offering to the ancestors. At this time, Niruna explains, one cannot start eating nor sit near or touch her father during menstruation. “For the debt.” The debt she is referring to is the expectations of the living to feed the ancestors. Debt is an obligation that forms a relation, as obligation, between two entities (Graeber, 2010). The act of offering food during mealtimes therefore creates an ongoing relation between the living, as the family, and the dead, as the ancestors. The food offerings and avoidance during menstruation reifies the boundaries of the home against the ambiguous, formless presence of the ancestors and gods.

Woman predominantly remain in the home, unless attending a specific event such as a party, working in their shops or worship resulting in a gendered division of space (Rankin, 2003). When viewing the home as an economic unit for reproduction, the concealment of domestic labour becomes an act of sustaining the dominant economic order and exploitation of women (Engels,

1884). Marxism provides a useful vocabulary, mobilised within feminist research (Brown, 2012), on the division of labour and domesticity but remains limited because it bases its understanding of power and hierarchy as a material relation rooted in the mode of production (and reproduction). Rather than focusing solely on reproduction within a historical materialist framework, Arendt (1958) argues that the home is rooted in labour focusing on the distinction between public and private. The home, whose subject is the family, is distinguished from the political realm through care and management of the household. This holds weight within the context of the Newar in Sankhu because of how women remain in the home (Rankin, 2004). Domestic labour, which includes daily worship, creates an connection to the home and its ancestral lineage. Unlike men, who will pass time in their tea shop or junctions (meeting points), women will primarily socialise between homes, restaurants or in spaces such as the Zumba dance studio. Taking the lens of the home as labour, menstruation as labour participates in the home.



Figure 19 Sukunda lamp and plates with food during birthday ceremony, November 2023.

Niruna describes how if her mother and her were both menstruating, her brother cooks. When a woman cannot enter the kitchen, family members will ensure that redistribute labour especially around cooking. “But he will give anytime same food.” It amuses her that her brother must take over the cooking because usually it is undertaken by her mother or herself, she

expresses that prefers when she can cook for herself. This redistribution of labour around menstruation is termed by Sabu and Robinson (2024) as “menstrual kinship.” Within Kerala, India, where women avoid the kitchen during menstruation, menstrual kinship highlight the intimacy and care from feeding and looking after menstruating women. Redistributed labour, produced through care during menstruation, creates intimacy. In Niruna’s joke about her brother’s cooking, she expresses an intimacy towards her brother through the light teasing, highlighting that he ensures her mother and herself are fed during menstruation. This was the tone among women in Sankhu, who emphasise the joint enterprise within the household of ensuring everyone is fed joking their cooking as better. Among men, many learnt how to cook caring for the family members at this time and saw it as an unquestioning aspect of their responsibility towards the home, expressing care for their mothers, spouses and sisters.

When Newar women marry, it is customary they move to their husband’s home and assume the domestic responsibilities of the daughter-in-law, especially stringent for the first month of marriage, such as waking up at 4am to complete morning *pūjās* (worship). The bride’s reluctance as she leaves her home, even if she has fallen in love, marks this transition echoing how brides previously were given as gifts in exchange for a dowry (Gellner, 1991).³⁴ Newar communities throughout the Kathmandu Valley hold different dialects and traditions. Nevertheless, Newar women will hold close relationships to their maternal homes, frequenting them during festivals, pregnancy or for a break. Women sometimes visit during menstruation as it would not disrupt the ritual labour of the home (since they would not be participating anyway) and use it to rest and connect with family. Meanwhile, men will usually stay in their natal home for all their life, a responsibility that for some can feel restrictive. In Sankhu, some women choose to remain unmarried but will undertake domestic duties within their homes, adapting to a different labour pattern resonant to their status as senior woman in the home.

In her monograph on the Parbatiya (Chhetri-Brahmin households in Nepal), Bennett (1983) explores the shifting status of women within the domestic domain.³⁵ She highlights how women are treated as subordinate to men within this society, yet inside the home the daughter-in-law is treated to the most challenging work because her threat towards the agnatic integrity of the home. Signified through the games played during entry to the home at marriage, there is tension between the daughter-in-law and the senior woman in the household. Bennett deepens her analysis

³⁴ It is considered inauspicious if the bride does not cry at her wedding.

³⁵ The Parbatiya refers to an indo-Aryan ethnic group as ancient speakers of *Khas* language. Chhetri-Brahmin homes, with whom Bennett undertook her study are encompassed within this ethnicity though there are further castes.

observing how the daughter-in-law uses strategies to navigate this tension, such as the level of intimacy with her husband or through joking with other women. Since the daughter-in-law, on return to her natal home, will be treated with care and without expectations around labour, Bennett highlights that she will accept her status within her husband's home. The strength of Bennett's analysis is that she shows how women negotiate these tensions while reinforcing her central tenet: women's sexuality though necessary for children threatens the agnatic structure of Parbatiya households while simultaneously to reproduce them. The promise is that eventually the daughter-in-law may become a senior woman as an honour and thus have power over her household. Yet, Bennett notes how couples can choose to move and start their households, diminishing the power of seniors in the family. This tension, between care and control, is central to the maintenance of the home.

A parallel tension presides within Rankin (2004) analysis of women's position within the economy of Sankhu. Honour is the presiding concern for women whose presentation and behaviour reflect their household. According to Rankin, after marriage women are secluded within their homes in tension with shifting expectations towards education and their futures. Stories of elopement are common in Sankhu, especially among older generations, where men and women went to Kathmandu to marry hoping that this would then have to be accepted by their families, even if the husband or wife was not deemed appropriate because of caste, or status. Samira Aunty expresses how she found the transition to her husband's home especially difficult. In her mid 30s and an avid dancer at Zumba, we sit on the rooftop of her home as she brings out a beer glass of tea, having seen me use the large glass at the tea shop. Arriving in Sankhu as part of an arranged marriage, her husband's parents expected her to assume a more "traditional" role, wearing *kurtā* (tunic garment), staying indoors and abiding by practices concerning menstruation. By negotiating through the question of menstruation, Samira Aunty forms menstrual kinship with her husband and in-laws, even though she was challenging the expectations of a daughter-in-law. Although she formed a household with her husband as a solution to this tension, she maintains close relationships with her extended family. Within her new household, she practices uses the kitchen but avoids the *dyah chhen* while continuing to abide by practices within her in-law's home. In this way, intimacy and care also underscore rather than solely strategies or resistance.

Among the unmarried, there are also reservations around the expectations of a daughter-in-law. Chetna Aunty is highly accomplished as a senior accountant during my placement in Sankhu in 2019. Since the 2015 earthquake, she had worked hard to rebuild her home for her family. Yet, poised on the stall in her shop, describes herself as "lazy" because she prefers to wake up later, at 7am as part of the habits explored in Chapter 4. This self-deprecation refers to

an imagined ideal of women waking up early. In the same breath, however, she describes how she fears marriage because she would have to wake up early and right now, she enjoys the balance of her full-time job and family life. As a daughter of a home in Sankhu, on the surface there are fewer expectations celebrated through Ihi ceremony and Surya Dashein (see Chapter 6). According to Bennett, among the Parbatiya this is because daughters of a home pose no threat to its patrilineal line. However, daughters follow early morning routines so they can focus on their studies or work.

Among Newar households in Sankhu, there are expectations surrounding education, contributing to household labour (or working in the shops) and respecting norms around menstruation. When a Newar woman marries her husband, she disentangles from labour patterns as the daughter-in-the-home to the husband's home. Characterising this as seclusion, Rankin's (2003) observations of women in Sankhu highlights how education is valued for women but after marriage, women are unable to find employment because of their domestic duties. Instead of reducing the transition from natal to husband's home through the threat the sexuality poses to an agnatic kin structure, as Bennett posits, menstrual kinship encapsulates how labour emplaces women.³⁶ By creating intimacy with family members through redistributed labour, menstruation managing menstruation, along with the rhythms of domestic labour, roots women within their husband's homes.

Sat in the back room of DeHakuz, a single fan battling to move the dense and stagnant monsoon air. In the restaurant, the Television plays Hindi films all day, the sounds of fights and exaltations a dramatic backdrop to the peaceful rhythm in the restaurant. I spent many hours here with a coke from a 40-year refillable glass bottle writing up notes. Now, Sungal *dai* and I needed peace and quiet to undertake the interview we planned for months, a plate of momos and two cokes placed on the table, I switch on the digital recorder. Active within social enterprises in Sankhu, Sungal highlights his family's delight when he said he would marry his wife who would move to Sankhu from Bhaktapur. In her maternal home, his practiced taking rest during her menstrual period and avoiding the kitchen. In his home, this was also customary as Shrestha caste. Sungal no longer wanted to practice what he viewed as a form of discrimination and used the upcoming marriage as an opportunity to have a conversation with his parents about the practices undertaken in his home. His wife could maintain her job in Bhaktapur while contributing to the domestic tasks in the home. Later, his wife expressed the challenges of maintaining this lifestyle

³⁶ The relationship between labour and situatedness is highlighted in Bolt's (2012) investigation into how migrant workers in Zimbabwe find their sense of place through their work termed "rooted production." Rootedness also features in Cowan's (1990) characterisation of gendered labour within factories in Gurgaon, India.

and the difficulty of balancing responsibilities, having taken annual leave from her job to participate in the town's festivals and perform her duties as a wife such as morning pūjā or preparing lunch. No longer would they follow these practices. Sental pauses, as he receives a call from his family to be home soon.

Moving into a husband's home marked a significant and profound change in a Newar women's life. Behind the exaltation and excitement at romance is a marked reality that Newar women experience a distinct change of status in moving into their husband's home, with expectations that they conform to the family. Marriage is a catalyst for redefining boundaries and practices during menstruation. Men are significant in these shifts as menstruation is a shared responsibility for men and women.

Bedroom

Niruna and I sit in her childhood bedroom as we discuss menstruation. The walls are painted in a dark blue contrasting to the colourful bedding on her bedspread rolled at the end of her bed. The shelves behind are packed with textbooks, sketchbooks and albums with her design materials in boxes under her desk. She has the smallest bedroom, alleviated by the large window under which her bed is positioned opening the space. Until she marries or moves overseas, she will remain in the room she grew up in. Her home was rebuilt since the 2015 Gorkha earthquake damaging or destroying most homes in Sankhu (Shrestha et al. 2017). With new concrete structures emerging from the rubble, practices around menstruation shift within this space as privacy is redefined.

In this section, I locate my analysis within the bedroom, or the sleeping room space within the home. I consider how the bed becomes an extension of body, encapsulating ideas about women's behaviour within the home. I discuss how the choices surrounding washing the sheets and the leakiness of beds are forms of "ritualised care" (Aulino, 2019) containing the dissolving capacity of menstruation. Nostalgia for pre-earthquake homes indicates how practices surrounding menstruation are embedded within the built environment.

On one occasion, I visit Maya's home in Sulke Khola, slipping off my sliders and walking upstairs. She calls out to me from her bedroom and I perch on the end of the *khata* (bed) with a hard, large wooden frame with a layer of cotton mattresses. The bed is a locus for menstruation practices. As evidenced by my conversation with Niruna, most of my interviews and conversations took place sat on interlocutor's beds. Van Dongen (2007) reflects on how conversations with interlocutors in old age homes in South Africa take place on the bed. Donga observes how the beds are transformed to spaces for presentation of the public self, concealing

intimacies of daily life while holding memories and vulnerabilities, such as unkempt hair, dentures or unmade sheets, the bed. This resonates with my experience in Sankhu. This chapter began for instance in Niruna's bedroom. Visiting women meant sitting on their beds. For example, at the back of Maya's bed is a large shelf she folds out with combs, perfume and make up. This space within the home is where she keeps her personal items, gifts and letters. The state of an unkempt bed, indicative of trust, time of day and the menstrual status of the woman.

The bed features in the prologue of Mol's (2008) ethnography on diabetes and healthcare in the Netherlands. Mol introduces the example of a patient who does not want to get out of bed. She reflects on how a liberal paradigm, following what she terms the "logic of choice" views this as reasonable because there is no harm to others. Mol, however, concedes that to allow the patient to remain in bed is in direct contradiction with the "logic of care". Through her consideration of morality among patients, she locates medicalisation and treatment within broader imperatives of citizenship. This moment within the space of the hospital ward demonstrates how the bed is a space of negotiation, constituted through practices, intimately related to bodily needs (sleep and rest) and at the cusp of public and private. Bodies become vulnerable in beds but continue to be within the rhythms and responsibilities of the household.

The presentation of the bed is an indicator of moral virtue in Sankhu. I am sat downstairs in my host home in Ukhatar writing notes on my laptop. Prekshya's older sister, Pallava *didi* wanders in, as was common. In the daytime, bedrooms become public spaces between members of the household. I was often told that the acceptable reasons for spending time alone in the bedroom is for illness, heartbreak or menstruation. Pallava walks over and inspects Asmita's bed with a tightly rolled duvet, blanket and pillows positioned at the top. "*Ramro*" (good) she comments. She wanders over to mine: I am sat on the duvet laid flat on the bed "*na ramro*" (not good) she remarks. Noting that I am working, she departs without another word. Her commentary on the state of the bed extends to two points: first, the extent to which the bed has been prepared for public display. Second, the bed as an extension of the presentation of the (female) self. To prepare one's bed indicates that one is upholding the timings and responsibilities of a woman. In Chapter 4, I explored how the imagination of women must sustain habits to maintain their body as a container. Here, the bed becomes an extension of the body, indicating feminine virtue.

An acceptable exception for an unkept bed during daytime is if one is menstruating. First, to allow the body to rest and second, to contain the polluting potential from menstruation. Sat on her bed, Maya, who is Chhetri points to the plants perched on her desk. She is a keen gardener, cultivating a plethora of plants stacked on her rooftop. "Some say that if we touch in a period time, that plant will die" she says. Maya laughs, dismissing the ideas as "nonsense" and

attributing the belief to her “mother and grandmother...because it’s their education.” Her preface of “some say” distancing herself from this belief. The bed, as a temporary extension of the body facilitates rest. However, it becomes a leaky container during menstruation with the risk of contaminating the home.

In Chapter 4 I discussed how women must wash themselves after four days allowing them to reintegrate into daily life. The same process applies to the bedclothes. Usually, it is sufficient to wash the thin cotton sheets lining the bed. However, women recounted how they used to wash the large thick blankets that line the beds. These heavy materials took a long time to dry, especially in winter. The sheets are far more convenient. Rushka is emphatic on how she doesn’t need to avoid the kitchen while menstruating still washes her bed sheets after four days. “I just need a clean sheet, for hygiene, okay?” In her analysis of laundry practices, Pink (2005) observes how identities and moral outlooks are formed intersubjectively through washing processes. Beyond a practical concern, washing clothes is formative of how people understand themselves. For Rushka, under the explanation of hygiene, the physical residue of menstrual bleeds is dealt with by cleaning the bedsheets.

Beyond habits, bed maintenance during menstruation is best understood as a form of “ritualised care” (Aulino, 2019). In her ethnographic account of how women care for the elderly in Thailand, Aulino gives the example of two women who carefully bathe an elderly person but are ambiguous as to whether they believe it gives them merit. She observes how they are focused on the task and practices of care at hand. The strength of this argument is that it prioritises the significance of ritual, while demonstrating that people can have ambiguous and contrasting relationships with that ritual. Framing this as care collapses the means-goal orientation to the action: care is both the means and end of the ritual. Washing the bedclothes is a form of ritualised care, collapses the means-end relationship to the gods and focuses on the action itself. This lens is useful for understanding practices surrounding menstruation because women referred to these as “only for hygiene”, focusing on the practices themselves rather than explanations. Maintaining the bed through folding the duvets and washing the sheets after menstruating is a form of ritualised care for the bed preventing menstrual waste from leaking into the home.

The bodily experience of menstruation in Newar housing redefines women’s bodily perceptions and status within the domestic sphere. In her work on menstruation among Ethiopian Jews in Israel, Anteby (1999) captures these negotiations through the repeated idiom of “In Israel, there’s blood in the house” (Anteby, 1999: 182). She explores how Ethiopian Jews in Israel struggle to continue their practices of isolating women during menstruation and after childbirth. Immigrants to Israel were not provided with additional rooms for menstruating women, causing

disagreement with Israeli bureaucrats. Menstruating women sheltered in the corner of shared houses, wearing white cotton shawls and were brought food by children. She observes the expression through verbal discourse “she is ill” and the spatial distancing creating a separation from the menstruating woman. Yet, this boundary is constantly modified, for instance, with the introduction of a second bathroom. In Sankhu, menstruation is negotiated through verbal, spatial and bodily conceptions constituting the domestic sphere. For example, the expression of “*nachune bhayo*” (not touching happening) to show the presence of menstruation expresses the displacement from space.

Practices surrounding menstruation are integrated into the material structures of houses. This is central to Gurung and Lotter’s (2024) documentation of changes in Eastern Nepal since the 2005 law banning *chauppadi*. Women used to isolate in a separate menstrual hut, named *chhau goth* (menstrual cave) to prevent contamination of their family members or household. Following the ban, new home architectures were designed to create a downstairs room with a door outside but no interior door. In this way, the occupant is deemed outside the home even though it is technically within the structure and not breaking the law. Thus, the physical boundaries were redrawn because of menstruation constituting the built environment. In Sankhu, there is a reverse effect where material shifts following the 2015 earthquake modified menstrual practices.

Nostalgia pervades Sankhu, the echoes of the 2015 earthquake haunting the dusty alleys. Visible from the rooftop are empty spaces where land disputes prevent replacement homes, a shop covered in a temporary roof, the foundations of a home, the decrepit ruins of a structure with its stone and mud frame. Sankhu, once had a maze-like quality, resembling a conch with clearly defined details. Children ran round the lanes between the homes, the forests and Sali Nadi river marking the boundaries of their existence. The homes were warmed by wood burning stoves and presence of *hansa* (soul) rooting the family with ancestors. Every day, the clay floors, cool on the feet, are washed over with water after the morning *pūjā* creating a bright, red hue. At night, Sankhu communities seek refuge in their homes away from the myths of tall ghosts and beings that roam the Valley. The 2015 earthquake marked a distinct rupture across the Kathmandu Valley fundamentally shifting social life and redefining the home. The earthquake echoes through the daily lives of Sankhu residents. Families sold their farmland to finance reconstructed homes (see chapter 8), implicating practices around menstruation.



Figure 20 Pre-earthquake Newar house in Sankhu partially reconstructed since 2015 earthquake, December 2023.

Lakshmi *didi* perched on her scooter, her eyes scanning the cremation ground next to the BlueWaste2Value facility. She recounts how her family used to share one room and that she misses those old homes. Due to the close living quarters with the family, during menstruation, it was imperative that one did not share the same room to avoid touching family members. She describes the large room she slept in with her family: mother, father and brother. She preferred it then because she felt close to her family. However, during menstruation it was difficult because she shared the room with multiple family members. Niruna had explained that one must not touch her father at the kitchen table while menstruating because of “something spiritual”, Lakshmi also had to mind this risk and find alternative sleeping arrangements. In some homes, women described sleeping in the animal shed, visiting another home, or sleeping in a separate part of the house. Now, they either visit their relatives or isolate in their room, when it is especially stringent that the male members of their family do not see them. One important note is that the senior women in the home (post-menopause) will often sleep with the youngest boys because there will be no disruption during menstruation. This expresses family members’ seniority and intimacy and care as menstrual kinship within the space.

When women talked about practices surrounding menstruation, they spoke about the “old” homes as intermingled with their childhood memories. Niruna, the fashion designer, plucks

a photo album from the shelf and flips through the pages. She turns the page to an image of women crowding around a girl undertaking Surya Dashein, a ceremony that takes place before menarche where the girl marries a god (Allen, 1975). In Chapter 6, I explore the gendered self-transformation that takes place during this ceremony. Here I focus on how women narrate the space. Niruna focuses on the blue walls in the background and the red, clay floor, speaking of the old ladders to climb up to each floor. During *bārāḥ*, the girl will isolate from the sun, unable to see her father and brothers. Before the earthquake, this might mean visiting a separate household to have a space to isolate. Now, most girls will shelter in their childhood room with the windows blocked. The ceremony marks a distinct liminality. If a girl dies during her Ihi ceremony, then she must be buried under the stairs, haunting the home. Burial among the Newar only takes place during untimely and inauspicious deaths. The memories of these floors, compared to the concrete or laminate floors in the new buildings, speaks to a broader nostalgia of how Newar life has fundamentally changed from the floor up. The collapse of the buildings represented more than a loss of structure, but a connection to *hansa* and a shift in social life. Practices surrounding menstruation embody the temporal ruptures, such as the earthquake and the forms of continuity through ancestral relationships.



Figure 21 Residents pass by new properties built post-earthquake in Sankhu, May 2023.

In contemporary Newar homes in Sankhu, there will be lodgers, shops, or empty rooms awaiting future family members. With migration to Sankhu, many of the rooms are taken up by lodgers. Therefore, the boundaries of the home are shifting, implicating the boundaries of practices around menstruation. Family life is reconstituted through menstrual kinship. Women retreat to the bed as an extension of their bodies, which they must later contain. Within the new structures, most women have their own room meaning that they can isolate in their bedroom during their menstrual bleed. During menstruation, women report increased ability to rest within the comfort of their bedroom. Yet, a nostalgia pervades for the intimacy of family life before the earthquake. The privacy of separate bedrooms comes at a cost: it fundamentally shifts the core of family life, embedded in the materiality of the home.

Bathroom

The bathroom is the space, in the household where menstrual blood is exposed. Women and girls prefer to handle menstruation in their own homes, where they can privately change and dispose of sanitary products (Kaur et al., 2018). When Sabina or Daya described how they managed menstrual blood, these practices take place in their bathrooms, crouched at the lower sink, scrubbing menstrual pads with the feet. This chapter has introduced the *dyah chhen* as an access point for the gods, the kitchen as a space of shared labour and the bedroom as an extension of the female body whose management contains menstrual blood. In this section, I describe the heuristic for bathrooms in Sankhu through an ideal type model, to present the variations of “private” bathrooms, connected to the home. I then conceptualise toilets and bathrooms as enclosures; a space that temporarily contains menstrual blood through its capacity as a “non-place” (Sprague, 2018). Within this enclosed space, women choose whether to self-declare their menstrual cycle, rendering the bathroom as a significant space for women to embody the “menstrual labour” (Owens, 2024), as ritualised care, towards the home. The bathroom becomes a key space for menstrual labour, differing from the kitchen in that it allows expulsion from the home. Instead of being a place of enactment, it is a space of flow.

Bathrooms, and by extension toilets are controversial spaces in Nepal, as open defecation continues to take place across the country, with public toilets often unhygienic and unsafe (Bhatt, 2019). In Newar language, toilets are referred to as *charpī* meaning “shit” as the receptacle of excrement. In Sankhu, residents such as Suntol *dai* recall how bathrooms used to be outside the home because of concerns about pollutants and excrements. For Suntol *dai*, this is evidence that the attitudes within Sankhu can change, as now, the majority of homes in Sankhu

have one, if not multiple, toilets. For women, this makes a significant difference. For instance, Lakshi *didi* recalls how she used to not want to go out to the bathroom at night. Instead, she would wait until the morning. Now, she can visit the bathroom whenever she needs.

In his analysis on the architecture of the Newar in Khokana, Nepal, Shrestha (2000) posits how the power of women over household expenditure affected the rooms which received investments. Shrestha's suggestion is that the investment into bathrooms and kitchens suggests that women have influence over household expenditure. Building toilets indoors participated in a broader project to improve sanitation facilities, which as an unintended consequence, created a safer space for women to use at night (Shrestha et al. 2024). Yet, to the contrary, the lack of investment in menstrual waste disposal facilities and spaces to manage waste contradict this hypothesis.

Within Sankhu, most homes have multiple bathrooms, allowing for the family to use one and for visitors and workers to use a bathroom situated on a lower floor. As Pink (2008) writes, bathrooms display hygiene preferences, ailments and what they keep hidden. In one home, entering the upper bathroom, there is a seated receptacle toilet, a mirror, a shower built into the wall with a washbasin and metal shelves packed with toothpaste and toothbrushes. Surrounding the shower, and on the floor, are broken shampoo sachets. On the small windowsill in the back corner is a blue plastic bag, tied tightly. Traces of the occupants are within this room and specifically in the bag, which contains the gathered menstrual products of its inhabitant. The upper bathroom in a home is reserved for the family or for guests and contains traces of hair, packages and personal items. In larger homes, multiple bathrooms allow for floors to be rented out to families while maintaining a separate bathroom. The bathrooms usually have running water; heated from solar panels on the rooftops of the homes. The space usually includes a bidet, decorated in bright, colourful tiles with attention on making it an inhabitable space.

The lower bathroom in each home is available for workers, guests or lower castes. Most strikingly, these bathrooms are kept simple with no traces of the occupants or users. The exterior bathroom at the dance studio served the dancers and the shop workers. These bathrooms tended to be rudimentary with concrete walls, a low tap for water, a squat toilet and a bucket with a smaller bucket for washing after excretion and to pour down the toilet basin. There is an increased sense of transitoriness to these spaces, as they are spaces for the function of excretion. Often these external bathrooms might lose the function of running water, served by an exterior water tank. There are rarely traces of the family with no toothpaste or packages. As gendered spaces, these become especially challenging for managing menstrual blood as one has limited light and space

and will take their products to be disposed later. Even when visiting homes, women will prefer to return to their house to manage menstruation.

Cavanagh (2010) considers the “hygienic imaginary” of queer bathrooms; how bodies are imagined. Questioning the discernment and monitoring of transgenders in bathrooms, she interrogates the multiple ways bathroom spaces are designed to assert gendered norms, becoming visual and auditory mirrors (*surveiller*) for interlocutors. Drawing on Kristeva’s theory of abjection, where toilets become spaces to assert the self over that which is lost from the body. Cavanagh argues that bathrooms become a space where abjection reifies gendered ideals. For instance, she considers how the toilet receptacle creates an auditory marker for genitalia during urination, while the closed stalls of female bathrooms contain the white, feminine body, which in the Canadian context, Cavanagh argues is treated as an epitome of purity. Cavanagh grounds Kristeva’s theory in the point on how the design of the toilets, such as the ability to close the stalls, a material enactment of gendered ideals. Containing the toilet is an extension of the body.

The relationship between the bathroom designs in Newar homes and the containment of the body bares weight against the management of menstrual blood. The bathroom spaces determine the use of products like the menstrual cup. Lakshmi prefers to use the menstrual cup for environmental reasons but after she must boil water to sterilise this. She does this in the kitchen because her family take no issue with the cleaning of a menstrual cup in this space. Others raised concerned about the menstrual cup. For example, Daya exclaimed when evaluating whether to use the menstrual cup “If you’re in your home, fine, but if you’re in someone else’s bathroom, like how are you gonna use it?” The labour involved in physically managing menstruation combined with how it is navigated in the home constitutes “menstrual labour” (Owen, 2024). Owen (2024) posits how menstruation is relegated as non-work compared to forms of public, economic labour. The choices surrounding menstruation relate to a sense of responsibility towards the home, negotiated with family members. In the bathroom used by the family, menstrual blood hovers, lingers, marked by the presence in the blue plastic bag. By contrast, the lower bathroom demands of its bodies to be quick in disposing of its excrement. Within the hygienic imagination of Sankhu, the bathroom is the space where women manage menstrual blood and their gendered selves through menstrual labour as avoidance, separation and disposal.

Yet, the bathroom, unlike the bedroom or kitchen, holds a different status within the home. From the foregoing discussion, I have presented the kitchen as emplacing household members through distributed labour, and the bedroom as a space oscillating between public and private, managed through ritualised care. Menstruation participates in these spaces through avoidance, washing and rest. The bathroom, however, holds an alternative position as a transient,

disembedded room. While undertaking ethnographic work in the women's bathrooms in St Andrews, Sprague (2018) conceptualises toilets as a site of utility and mobility termed "non-place". Distinguishing between place as relational, historical and identity-based against indefinable spaces that are non-place, Sprague observes a contradiction between how the university toilets are imagined as non-places but form a sense of student identity and social connection. This phenomenon of a non-place as formative of identity in how it is managed indicates how menstrual waste participates in Sankhu.

In Sankhu, many families shared bathrooms, and personal items such as sanitary pads might be stored in the bedroom, such as in the shelf of personal items behind the bed. A non-place could therefore be understood as privacy, while the rooted place of the home involves entanglement in the family. The bathroom is a space where menstrual waste is hidden but intimately connected to the home, a locus of bodily management and a responsibility to the household, dictated by water and facilities. By enclosing the bathroom space, it becomes a temporary non-place, distinct from the rooted place of the home, allowing for the disposal of excrement, and crucially, menstrual waste.

Equipped with running water, women prefer to be at home so that they can manage their menstruation cleanly. For instance, Sabina finds using the menstrual cup easier with access to clean water. The small sewers in Sankhu, however, mean it is easy to block the toilet. For instance, in Chapter 3 Daya reminisces how she accidentally blocked the toilet with her sanitary pads. Blocking the bathroom prevents the flow of bodily waste away from the home. Pickering (2010) argues that bodies, as porous entities, use the leaking toilet to affect the place. Enactment, a concept from Mol (2002), describes how an action creates a relation between an actor and an object. Flushing the toilet is an enactment with the toilet. However, the water dissolves allowing the next user to use the toilet without bodily disintegration with the previous user or their menstrual blood. The toilet prevents enactment by enclosing the room and flushing as a temporary non-place, distinct from the home.

Conversely, the *charpī* reinforces the historical, relationality of the home. Within the home women are watched and follow the expectations related to their status in the home. By entering non-places, such as toilets, and closing them there is a temporary separation from the home in this "non-space". Here, menstrual blood (alongside other bodily fluids) can be expelled through the sewers, the used pads gathered and removed with household waste, sustaining the home.

“Our home is like a temple.”

Niruna’s brother rushes into the room and invites us upstairs to join their mother making rotis. Niruna swings her legs off the beds and stretches out concluding “our home is like a temple.” With this statement, she is making two declarations. First, the home is a space connected to the gods through *dyah chhen* and rooted in ancestral relations. Second, the home must be maintained and cared for just like a temple. This means keeping it clean, respecting boundaries during menstruation and dispelling polluting forces, such as menstrual waste coagulating within the home.

In this chapter, I moved figuratively from the *dyah chhen* to the kitchen, sleeping room and bathroom to demonstrate how menstruation is managed in these spaces. Within the kitchen, women avoid the spaces where food is handled or water dispensed. Once used, food waste shares *jhuto* quality of dissolving potential similar to menstrual blood potentially attracting malevolent forces or the discontent of ancestors. Yet, food waste (which should be minimal) will be collected and dispersed as “wet waste” outside the home, echoing how it used to be gathered in the courtyards composting in the space between homes. Menstrual waste, however, must be disposed separately from other forms of waste. As women move into their husband’s home, they are emplaced, or rooted, through labour rhythms. This shift becomes a crucial moment for negotiating practices around menstruation.

The bedroom is a dynamic space challenging the distinction between public and private posited by Arendt, where the public is the political domain. The bed is a space that shifts depending on how it is kept. During menstruation this is particularly significant as it becomes a temporary extension of the body. Washing the linen on the fourth day of menstruation, similar to bathing in the previous chapter, becomes a form of ritualised care towards the home through how it contains the contaminating potential of menstrual blood. The 2015 earthquake dramatically shifted practices around menstruation coinciding with the sleeping room arrangements.

Within the home, the bathroom holds a particular status as non-place. Variations occur across bathrooms with the upper bathroom, used by the family, containing traces of people through personal items and bodily residue, including menstrual waste temporarily contained in blue plastic bags. These transient spaces, with the door closed, become enclosures for managing menstruation allowing it to flow with other forms of body waste outside of the home. Dried menstrual blood is problematic if it stains a sanitary pad. If menstrual waste gathers in the home it may attract inauspicious forces. With Niruna’s father’s close interaction with the gods, this could be devastating in how the menstrual waste may disembody the home turning it into a non-place. To

counter this, managing menstruation concerns distributed labour, ritualised care (through washing linen) and careful disposal in the bathrooms.

Among the Newar, there is variation between castes with avoidance of the kitchen practiced among Shrestha and Brahmins. However, to characterise this as restrictions disregards how practices surrounding menstruation participate in the home across castes and ethnicities. By viewing menstrual practices such as avoidance through the lens of labour, as ritualised care, I engage with the multiple ways menstruation is managed, highlighting how women relate to different practices “only as hygiene” or “some say that”. Moving through the thesis, this highlights how menstrual waste management and containment is an active negotiation by women in Sankhu.

In the next chapter, I step out into the public gaze of the town. Focusing on the worship of pre-menarche girls and menarche rituals, I explore how menstrual waste is integrated into the town’s rhythms.

Chapter 6

Town: Menstrual Rhythms

Dressed in a red and gold *sāri*, her head covered with a veil, the young girl shuffles behind her mother leading her with an iron key named *tācha* into the morning sun. Accompanying the girl is a small pink doll shielded from sight under the red, chiffon material. The sound of photo shutters fills the air as the procession pauses to face the sunlight. The rooftop of the tall pre-earthquake building bathes in sunlight and sweet incense aromas hang in the air as a small crowd of family members, priests and friends gather. For the last twelve days, the girl and her doll have been living in darkness. Hidden in her childhood bedroom, the windows are boarded up so she neither has contact with the sun nor male members of her family. The ritual known as *bārāḥ* (New.) or *gufa* (Nep.) translates as ritual seclusion and cave respectively, referring to her retreat into this liminal space as her body changes.³⁷ Conducted prior to menarche, this liminal living marks her transition from girl to woman in Newar society.

The veil lifts from her face, her eyes close as she soaks in the sun's rays. A voice from the crowd murmurs: "She looks like a bride." Bracelets clinking, floral headpieces adorn her hair, her face painted with makeup as she sits with her back against the wall holding a demure expression with eyes cast down; a spectre of her future self when she might marry a man. Today, she is marrying a god embodied in the sun: Lord Surya (sun god). The ritual is administered by *vājrcārya* and mirrors a wedding ceremony as they instruct the girl and her family how to proceed. Her hands poised in front of her, she accepts offerings of flowers and rice, pouring them over the sun engraved rock embodying the god. A cloth is placed over her face to draw *tīkā* (blessing) above her forehead, marking married women. A *mala* (garland) of orange flowers over her head and the god shows their union. A large doll with a pink skirt blessed with *tīkā* as her "*sāthī*" (Nep. friend) accompanies her throughout. When the ceremony is complete, the bride chats with her sister and stands for photos with her family before descending the steps down to the streets of Sankhu.

³⁷ In this chapter I use the Newar term *bārāḥ* for consistency as it refers to the ritual seclusion undertaken by Newar girls before menarche. Occasionally the Nepali term *gufa* is used interchangeably during interviews.



Figure 22 Newar girl undertaking Surya Dashain in Sankhu, March 2023.

The procession walks together to the *tole* temple, as residents peer out their windows or look up from their phones perched in front of their shops.³⁸ Self-conscious of my informal clothes as I was dressed for *holi* celebrations that afternoon, I hide behind my camera and take photos of the procession. Having completed the *pūjā* (worship) at the Lord Ganesha temple, the girl totters in small heels distributing water at the raised stone mounds towards her home.³⁹ The ceremony complete, we receive a feast from her family of beaten rice, potato, curry and curd; her mother and female relatives serving the food. She receives gifts, including a dress to wear at her party the next day where hundreds of relatives and community members are invited to celebrate her transition. For now, she retreats to her bedroom playing with her sister and the doll. The cardboard placed over the windows pulled back permits a thin sunbeam to cast its light on the newly initiated girl. The space of the town raises the following questions: what do menarche (first

³⁸ Tole refers to the physical space (there are eight tolas each with a square, meeting space, god house and tea shop) as well as the community associated with this space.

³⁹ The raised stone mounds are named *vedis* ritually mark the entrance and exit to home street of humans (Tiwari, 2002)

menstrual bleed) rites reveal about menstruation in Sankhu? What is the significance of women's absence from festivals and events during menstruation?

Menstruation, as *mahināvārī* (monthly turn), is situated in time: bodily rhythms, the lunar calendar and public life. This chapter, mirroring the ritual process of *Surya Dashein*, enters the public gaze where the absence of menstruating women in festivals and daily life is an expected, necessary yet disruptive part of Sankhu. First, I investigate the living goddess of *Kumārī*, moving beyond Allen's (2010) hypothesis that the institution serves to control women's sexuality. Drawing on Arendt's concept of publicity and Geertz (1980) discussion of the theatre state, I demonstrate how pre-menarche girls embody *Kumārī*, thus celebrated and legitimised under the collective gaze of the town established through its role as a witness. Second, menarche marks a liminal status managed through the *bārāḥ* ceremony as a ritual marker. Leaning on Butler (1990), I illustrate how the temporary containment of pre-menarche bodies is integral to gendered self-formation. Third, I demonstrate through Lefebvre's (1992) theory of rhythm analysis how menstruation structures patterns of work, festivals and calendrical rhythms within the public spaces in the town, drawing women into the town's rhythms. *Mahināvārī* contains menstrual waste integrating girls and women into the rhythms of Sankhu. Menstrual waste is celebrated as integral to the town.

Kumārī

The sun dips below the horizon as Prekshya and I reach the trees at the edge of her village wrapped in red thread. She hops over the wall and circles the trees exclaiming that it was not fair that Newar girls get three marriages and “we,” referring to Chhetri women, “only get one.” Newar girls marry three times. First, the Ihi ceremony where Newar girls are married to Lord Vishnu, or in Buddhist interpretation Suvana Kumara with betel nuts as a witness (Gellner, 1991).⁴⁰ The popular interpretation is that this prevents girls becoming a widow and participating in *sati* because they are first married to the god.⁴¹ Characterising the Ihi ceremony as “play-acting” (Wilson, 2010: 65), there is a sense of hilarity around the “minutely choreographed” (Wilson, 2010: 61) marriage

⁴⁰ Ihi ceremony is made up of the word “ei” (time) and “hī” (blood). In Nepali, the ceremony is referred to as “bel bibaha” referring to marriage to a fruit.

⁴¹ Sāti is when widows throw themselves on the funeral pyre of their husband.

to ritual stand-ins.⁴² The second marriage outlined in the opening of this chapter is *Surya Dashein*, when a girl will marry the sun-god having completed twelve days of ritual seclusion in *bārāḥ*. The third, and optional marriage, is to a man. Many women in Sankhu, however, choose to remain unmarried.⁴³

Before undertaking these marriages, a pre-menarche girl is considered as *Kumārī* denoting an embodiment of Taleju devī, the patron goddess of Newar Hindus in the Kathmandu Valley. In this section, I begin by investigating the institution of *Kumārī* as the living goddess, where a selected prepubescent, pre-menarche girl is worshipped and concealed within palace gates. My encounters with the living goddess in Sankhu illustrate her presence in daily life as an embodiment of its continuity as a Newar town. Meanwhile, I attend the *Kumārī pūjā*, where Newar girls are worshipped for their virginal (pre-menstrual) status. Moving beyond Allen's (2010) argument that the primary concern is the control of unmarried women's sexuality, I demonstrate how the publicity of *Kumārī pūjā* and containment of the living goddess reify the town.

Dust disperses within the quiet streets of Sankhu. Dogs drape under the limited shade offered by plastic tables at the tea shop or unoccupied door frames. Only a few hours prior, the streets filled with celebrations and chantings for *nhu daya bhintuna* (Newar New Year). It is also Tihar, the festival of lights, marked by fairy lights hung across the buildings. Under their colours, artists and residents in each *tole* create large-scale works in powder, seeds or beans depicting gods or sacred images, such as a conch. A friendly competition for the best composition follows precise geometrics, all devoted to Vajrayoginī. My exhaustion from helping with the mandalas until 3am the previous night weighs into the dust filled paths under the stagnant heat but I must record the mandalas before they disappear. Reaching Illa *tole*, I approach the raised brick platform. The night before I crouched here for hours sprinkling vermilion powder onto the stencilled pattern around the face of a child with a red banner across the forehead, a pensive expression below the third eye (see figure 16). I raise my camera to photograph the mandala. As I adjust the settings to accommodate the bright sunlight, two international tourists with their guide advance towards the platform and peer over the plastic barrier. "This is Lashmi goddess" the guide states. I look up

⁴² I did not witness the Ihi ceremony, possibly because it is expensive and performed collectively with other ceremonies like Bratabhanda or Jancu, I encountered the betel nuts at a wedding. Placed in front of the bride, the betel nut is distributed to the groom's family during her marriage as a symbol of her commitment and entrenchment to her natal home.

⁴³ It was often commented upon among residents in Sankhu how there is a higher number of unmarried women. It was suggested that it is because they do not want to depart from the town.

from my camera, confused. Lashmi goddess is the Hindu goddess of wealth worshipped on the third day of Tihar. As the group moves on through the town, I gaze into the eyes of the mural. The night before, its artist repeatedly explained that this is *Kumārī*. His confusion highlights the conflation of goddesses and folding of the Newar deities into Hindu categories. The mandala of the living goddess, alongside the eight other mandalas will be walked over by dogs, damaged by the wind, disintegrating into the dust of Sankhu, its labour invisible. Its artistry, forgotten. Its creation an act of devotion toward Vajrayoginī. Its disintegration, a reminder of impermanence.



Figure 23 Mandala of Kumārī in Illa tole, November 2023.

Kumārī, as a living goddess, denotes the embodiment of Taleju *devī*, occasionally equated with Vajradevī (Allen, 2010).⁴⁴ Each Newar city has a designated living goddess; a pre-menarche girl selected from a Newar Shakya, the high Buddha caste (Allen, 2010).⁴⁵ With twelve *Kumārī* in Nepal, the tradition creates a link between worshippers and the gods (Maharjan, 2024). The State funds the national *Kumārī* in Kathmandu and Patan where she “lives a ritual life until puberty” (Letizia, 2013: 33). The close relation between the palace and *Kumārī* legitimises the

⁴⁴ Vajradevī is a term for Vajrayoginī, the local and founding goddess in Sankhu.

⁴⁵ Newar Buddhist priestly caste. Shakyas are lower priestly caste than Vājrcāryas and do not need to undertake *vājrcārya* initiation but will often participate in monastic duties such as temple caretaking.

reign of Hindu Kings by subsuming the Newar institution since the Malla dynasty (1201-1779) yet has caused human rights controversies concerning the impact on the child (Letizia, 2013). *Kumārī* must be pre-menstrual to embody the goddess. After she menstruates, the goddess leaves her body through menstrual blood and the girl returns to a layperson's existence though she remains inauspicious. In Chapter 8, I demonstrate how the body is an unstable container during menstruation. According to Allen (2010), to be pre-menstrual is treated as synonymous with virginity. *Kumārī* embodies a tension between the female role and "dangerous sexuality" (Allen 2010:234). Allen's (2010) contention is that the ambiguity surrounding the sexuality of an unmarried woman makes her dangerous. By controlling the living goddess through her proximity to the palace and appearance at annual events such as Indra jātrā, this danger is harnessed as political power.

Tourists or devotees can visit at an allocated hour to catch a brief view of *Kumārī* on the balcony at the *Kumārī ghar* (Nep. house) opposite the palace. Outside the white palace in Baneshwor, an idle guide asks, "You want to see *Kumārī*" and points towards the latticed, wooden house. I am ushered into the small courtyard. Large signs written in English instruct that no photos can be taken. A silence descends upon the small crowd peering upwards under the open sky. She might appear at any moment. A pause. Is she coming? She might choose not to reveal herself today. And then, a collective breath. A young girl dressed in red leans over the balcony. Her make up echoes the mandala, a large banner and dark kohl lining her eyes. *Kumārī* is a young girl with 32 features such as doe-like eyes, broad forehead and a body like the Banyan tree. She stares at the group with a fierce, focused demeanour. For her to smile, or worst laugh, is a terrible omen. A few moments longer and she retreats into her home. The structure of the latticed windows position at a slant allows the ability to look out obscuring the viewer. To glimpse *Kumārī* is auspicious but this is rare as she has scheduled days receiving home tutoring, protected by the caretaker family. Her allure and sacredness sustained through the act of containment.

The latticed window is a metaphor for the containment and mediation of the visibility of the living goddess. The institution of *Kumārī* is primarily a political branch symbolising and facilitating palace control over the populace (Letizia, 2010). She participates in spectacles and parades, such as during Indra jātrā, where *Kumārī* accompanied by Bhaireva and Lord Ganesha is paraded through the streets as part of the "theatre-state" (Geertz, 1980). The ritual spectacle is accompanied by drums and large carriages, its grandeur and sense of historicity demonstrating a unity between Newar Buddhist Shakyas and the Hindu governance of Nepal. Geertz (1980) argued how audacious spectacles of grandiosity are a crucial mode of statehood in Bali, hinging on rivalry and prestige. Through this lens, the controlled visibility of the institutionalised living goddess

becomes a formative part of statehood ensuring legitimacy by enveloping *Kumārī*, a Newar goddess, within Hindu legitimacy. Her appearance towards tourists in Baneshwor might suggest her status has renegaded, on the contrary, this theatricality participates in the entrenchment of governance. The controlled visibility of *Kumārī* is an important tool of governance in contemporary Nepal.

A *Kumārī* also resides in Sankhu with an annual appearance worshipped in Shalka *tole* before Dashain (Shrestha, 2012). On the night of her worship, I am at Padma *didī*'s home in Sulke Khola celebrating her brother's birthday. The family invite me to stay the night to avoid walking back to Sankhu in the dark. At 10pm I receive a text from Ashkar *dai* inviting to the *Kumārī pūjā* taking place at midnight. I share my frustration with Padma that I am missing an important ceremony. She suggests checking facebook where there is a livestream. Opening facebook, a young girl with vermillion powder on her forehead and toes, dressed in red *sāri* carried through Shalka *tole* to the central *dyah chhen* (god house) is brought fruits and offerings.⁴⁶ A small crowd visit her, but since it is night, most residents are in their homes. She is the daughter of a *vājrcārya* who takes care of Vajrayoginī temple and is selected for 32 physical attributes including no scars and no menstrual cycle. Unlike the *Kumārī* in Kathmandu, she lives a regular life besides that one night of worship until menstrual blood leaves her body, and with it the goddess. Rather than institutionalised governance, the Sankhu *Kumārī* represents ongoing devotion to Newar worship in Sankhu. The palace is long gone, there is no king but a *Kumārī* remains, her appearance adapted to the demands of the time. The nighttime worship of the institutionalised *Kumārī*, as the established living goddess of Sankhu contrasts to the collective *Kumārī* worship of pre-menstrual girls.

Under the protection of their maternal homes, all pre-menarche girls are venerated through *Kumārī* worship, denoting the quality of purity, association with the goddess and their status as virgins, referring to pre-menstrual and pre-sexual relations (Allen, 2010). *Kumārī* worship in Sankhu holds the position of fitting into both categories as annual celebration as well as a life-rite for girls of a particular status (Van Gennep, 1909). Focusing on girls' puberty rites, Turner (1969) argues how rituals solve "crisis brought on by this contradiction between norms" (Turner, 1969: 13) regarding a structural tension between matrilineal descent and unilocal marriage. Through this lens, ritual processes such as *Kumārī* resolve a contradiction between divine purity and dangerous sexuality. Building on Turner's analysis which accesses shifts between social statuses, I will now highlight public spectacle as legitimising celebrating girl's bodies.

⁴⁶ A small house with a shrine at the centre of each *tole* used for ritual activity

Samira Aunty arrives at Zumba in a smart green Kurtā with silver jewellery. She is planning to go to the *Kumārī pūjā* and invites me to join. She is mother to two boys but wanted to contribute and participate in the ceremony. I ask if I should wear anything particular and she responds anything is fine, so I put on my fading skirt and await a phone call. At 8am, I walk to Sun *tole* where Samira Aunty perches on the step. There is a tent set up to the right with children sat on mats with their parent, none older than a few years and all dressed in thick make up and smart clothes, despite the increasing heat. Their accompanying parents and guardians are dressed in either a *kurtā* like Samira Aunty or *sāri*. Cleanliness and aesthetics are important for presenting their best self to the gods (see chapter 8). A man approaches me holding his daughter in his arms, thick kohl outlining her eyes. “Will you take a picture of my *Kumārī* ?” he asks. The visibility of the tent and its attendees dominating the *tole* become a ritual spectacle of devotion. This time, instead of boasting statehood, the spectacle expresses respect to the gods. Yet, there remains a “metaphysical theatre” (Geertz, 1980:104) that intensifies the sacred space of the town. No longer a tool of statehood, the rivalry becomes a devotional spectacle towards the gods.



Figure 24 *Kumārī pūjā* in Sankhu, July 2023.

The *Kumārī* worship is a public ritual overseen by the town. Publicity is integrally linked to visibility (Arendt, 1958). In Chapter 4, I drew on Arendt’s conception of the home as constituted through labour, rooting families in Sankhu with broader lineages. Private acts of managing menstruation participate in the constitution of the home. Arendt conceptualises the

public as synonymous with the political realm arguing that what protects private lives is situatedness within a location, such as by owning a house, meaning one can participate in public affairs. The public realm, as “a body politic” (Arendt, 1958: 41) is concerned with visibility and appearance, as the act of participating in a public event. To make an appearance as *Kumārī* is to reintegrate into the political and public domain. To become visible in the public domain is a form of collective embodied awareness, marking the sacredness of the girl and the town.

The teashop, as the epitome of Arendt’s *polis*, the public and political domain, is a space primarily occupied by men. With a long wait, I suggest Samira Aunty and I go for tea at chalakhu *tole*. She sits poised on the edge of her chair turned towards me watching me take tea. The teashop, at the centre of chalakhu *tole*, becomes the locus of “everyday sociability” (Cowan, 1990). Sustaining the boundaries between public and private, everyday sociability refers to the routine actions of daily life. Cowan (1990) draws on the concept to argue how social norms concerning female sexuality and autonomy are embedded within informal interactions. During her ethnographic fieldwork in Sohos, Greece, she follows the women inside to consume sweets, contrasting this to how the men remain in the coffee shops drinking bitter coffee. Samira’s discomfort under the perceived gaze of the town as we take tea characterises everyday sociability of women in Sankhu. Within the public domain, activities such as avoiding the teashop and awareness of the town embody concerns about feminine propriety venerated in *Kumārī pūjā*.

Sanctioned participation in the *Kumārī* worship reinforces ideals of feminine purity and the sanctity of pre-menstrual girls. Returning to the *Kumārī pūjā*, a videographer striding up and down the rows families as the worship unfolds through giving and acknowledgement of each child. First one must worship at the shrine devoted to Lord Ganesha on the right-hand side by offering some money, sweets and touching one’s forehead. Photographers document the ranks of children, restless in the increasing heat. We queue and I greet Asus *dai* who is holding a large plastic cannister of sweets. I copy him by following Samira Aunty as she gives money and I give sweets. We first worship at the shrine, (giving money and sweets, receiving *tīkā* in return) and then follow the line. Samira taps each girl on the head and her own head as a blessing before giving the money. I follow with the sweet sometimes in patient cupped hands or into a pouch held by the parent with ranks of sweets, chocolates and cash inside. Samira Aunty asks their age; some children a few months old, other a few years old. Through this process, Samira Aunty, Asus *dai* and I participate in the public spectacle of *Kumārī* worship. As each girl is “seen” through the actions of giving and worship they are acknowledged within the town. The everyday sociability throughout their worship confirms the sanctity of pre-menarche girls in Sankhu. This publicity, in

contrast to the containment of the institutionalised *Kumārī*, participates in a rhythmic awareness of the town.

Kumārī worshipped a living goddess indicates how pre-menarche bodies are perceived as stable containers for embodying gods. Once menarche arrives, the god departs through menstrual blood. The spectacle for worshipping *Kumārī* in Kathmandu participates in legitimising the Nepal State. In Sankhu, *Kumārī* is worshipped annually at night embodying the continuation of Sankhu as a Newar town. The spectacle worshipping pre-menarche girls during *Kumārī pūjā* express devotion to the gods, the town and female bodies. A pre-menarche body is contained within the town.

Bārāḥ

Descending the stairs after a feast celebrating the completion of the *surya dashein* ceremony, Suntol *dai* gestures to a small room where the bride undertook *bārāḥ*, ritual seclusion avoiding the sun and male relatives before her presentation on the rooftop. Her childhood bedroom remains dark, a thin stream of light piercing through a tear in cardboard hanging from the windowframe. For twelve days, the cardboard prevented sunlight entering the room. At eye-level, pinned to the right of the doorframe within the room is a small grey, faceless doll representing a *khyāḥ*, a malicious spirit fed rice during *bārāḥ* to protect the girl from harm. A second blonde doll with a pink dress sits with the new bride on her bed as her “*sathī*” (friend) during the days of concealment. Now, the bride, doll and her sister sit on the bed completing drawings. Over the last twelve days her female relatives will have visited to keep her company. A makeup box sits on the counter from the preparations that morning from which her mother painted her face with painstaking precision. This ritual of concealment must take place before her first menstrual bleed. An emergency ritual can be used if menarche is reached before *bārāḥ* necessary as girls reach menarche at a younger age. In the Introduction to this thesis, I describe my encounter with the room in Patan where the Jyāpu society facilitates the collective *bārāḥ* of 50 girls. This option is popular because of the expensive of the ceremony for the Jyāpu society, it is an opportunity to sustain, and display Newar culture. In Pharping, one girl described that instead of confinement to a room she visited a Buddhist monastery for 14 days. In Sankhu, most girls will undergo the *bārāḥ* within their bedroom.

Having emphasised the sanctifying spectacle of *Kumārī*, I now explore the significance of the hidden ritual of *bārāḥ* entrenching women within Sankhu. According to Allen (1982), the *bārāḥ* is a purifying ritual that neutralises the dangers of sexuality of unmarried women. Deepening his argument, I illustrate the significance of fear during *bārāḥ* as narratives of managing

fear contain the dangers of menstrual blood. Second, the space of seclusion reconfigures gendered relations. Highlighting the importance of play, I show how *bārāḥ* creates a space for negotiating relationships embodying ideals of femininity witnessed by their female relatives. Third, I argue that *bārāḥ* is a process of self-making (Butler, 1990) as girls internalise a gendered self in Sankhu. *Bārāḥ* activates affective forms of surveillance, notably fear, play and reflection, to integrate Newar girls into gendered norms. Within the contained, concealed seclusion of *bārāḥ* the girl undergoes a personal, negotiated transformation before presentation to Sankhu.

A sense of danger pervades *bārāḥ*. Tales of malicious spirits, untimely deaths and isolation shroud the ritual refracting the dangers of menstruation. Sabina, the dance teacher, introduces her views on *bārāḥ* with the statement “that’s the conservative thing.” I ask about the grey, faceless doll pinned to the girl’s wall during *bārāḥ*. “We draw something like a ghost:



Figure 25 Khyā drawing during *bārāḥ*, March 2023.

khyāḥ.” Sabina explains. The doll *haray khyāḥ* is a malicious spirit notorious in Newar folklore. “Yeah, I used to believe it. Like my old house there were, I think, I wasn’t even born at that time...like good ghost and bad ghost, like white and red ghost.” Sabina highlights that this was part of her “old” home, before her existence, distancing herself from the concept without fully dismissing it. “I don’t know about that but my Mum used to tell me that story. And my sister has felt that too.” The feeling she refers to is that the white ghost might pull their legs causing mischief. The

red *khyāḥ*, however, represented by the doll pinned on the wall or the drawing is

threatening. Speculating on the sexual connotations of the *khyāḥ* visiting the virginal girl, Allen (2010) suggests that confinement during the *bārāḥ* diffuses the dangers of uncontrolled sexuality embodied by the *khyāḥ*. According to Allen, the ritual names an inauspicious condition, in this case the presence of the *khyāḥ* embodying the invisible action of malevolent forces before they can inflict themselves. The process of locating malevolence in the *khyāḥ* before menarche constitutes the danger associated with menstrual blood.

If a girl dies during *bārāḥ* she must be buried underneath the home. Sat opposite Rushka *didi* in Sakwo, she starts with the caveat “You, you don’t believe”, as if preempting my doubt. She leans forward and in a hushed tone explains, “Black magic draw that girl into death. If a girl dies in bed or in that room, she’s not allowed to see, not even male person is allowed to see her. So they have to dig that room and put her in the ground floor.” Rushka further clarifies that this black magic is shared with the amorphous witch form, *boksi*, that curses if they obtain menstrual blood. The fear, embodied in the *boksi* and the vulnerability around the girl dying during *bārāḥ* signifies a broader concern. According to Turner (1969), fear during liminal experience signifies a collective response to managing threats. In this case, the collective response is towards the threat of menstrual waste. This expands Allen’s (1975) argument that *bārāḥ* manages the danger of sexuality for unmarried women, to a broader fear of uncontained relations. Placing a girl who dies during *bārāḥ* in the ground floor contains the inauspicious threats to that space, just as containing menstrual blood temporarily reduces the threat of *boksi* (see chapter 3). Sat within the remains of her pre-earthquake home, a woman recounted descending the stairs (now the upper floor is missing) and thought she saw a figure and in fright spilled hot water on herself. She associates her fear with the possibility of girls buried under homes. Fear is embodied in this encounter with the figure as lingering traces of a dead body.

The inauspicious condition of unexpected relations embodied in the *khyāḥ* is placated through feeding the doll before eating. Sabina mimics pinching rice, lifting her arm and feeding the doll (or drawing). Characterised as mock-menstruation (Samuel, 2001), insofar that it embodies the dangers of menstruation through *khyāḥ* or the threat to the girl, *bārāḥ* facilitates domestication and control (Samuel, 2001). Rushka clarifies: “Because that’s why we create the *khyāḥ*...we worship him to not to put any harm to that girl so she will be securely come out after twelve days. So we worship the black magic.” Through the practice of feeding the *khyāḥ*, the girl protects herself, and her household from malevolent forces. Rothchild and Pya (2020) suggest that Newar have greater acceptance of menarche but perceive menstrual blood as a polluting substance that needs to be hidden. Placating fear by feeding the *khyāḥ* invokes responsibility for the town. Later, this extends into actions informing disposal methods for menstrual waste, such as spitting and cleaning sanitary pads (see chapter 3). Through feeding the *khyāḥ*, the girl is shielded from harm and undertakes the responsibilities for managing the danger of menstrual waste.

The theme of ambiguity pervades scholarship on *bārāḥ*. For Allen (2010) the ambiguity around *bārāḥ* is expressive and indicative of female sexuality. Emmrich (2014) critiques Allen for overstating the importance of sexuality. Supporting Emmrich’s critique, within the narratives and reflections on *bārāḥ*, sexuality never arose in discussion with my interlocutors.

For Emmrich (2014), he suggests that the ambiguity derives from how the ritual manuals are unclear themselves over the timing and contexts of *bārāḥ* “struggling to come to terms with Buddhist rituals for Newar girls” (Emmrich, 2014: 103). Emmrich’s analysis shows the re-writing of how to deal with menstrual blood through *bārāḥ* and the devotion to female members of the households. Taking this further, my contention is that the ambiguity is necessary and integral to the ritual so that women have the space to undertake their gendered transformation and reformulate their social bonds within Sankhu. Only if the girl is committed to her transformation, through the ambiguous ritual process of *bārāḥ*, can she complete the pre-menarche ritual ahead of her first bleed. It is the moral sense of obligation, responsibility and selfhood that is cultivated through this ambiguity that later transpires in the management of menstrual waste.

Undergone 15 years prior, fear dominates Niruna’s memories of *bārāḥ*. Niruna, the fashion designer invites me to her home to show her sketchbooks filled with fashion designs. Leaning over to her bookshelf, she pulls out a small photo album exclaiming that this was from *Surya Dashein*. Pointing to the blue walls and clay floors of her pre-earthquake home, she gazes at the photo describing how her friends could undergo *bārāḥ* at the school premise. “But I had to stay alone...and I was so scared.” Her isolation created fear of what befalls her during the concealment from daylight. In male initiation ceremonies, fear embeds ideas of masculinity and male bonding (Schlegel and Barry, 2017). For instance, fear and isolation feature in the male Bratabandha ceremony where Newar boys take a bow and arrow and must catch in the forest.⁴⁷ Niruna’s vulnerability stemmed from isolation. Being alone creates the possibility of unwanted encounters creating dependency on (familial) relations. The fear within the hidden space of ritual prepares the gendered self for public legibility and more importantly, embeds girls such as Niruna within the town.

Fear participates in cultivating awareness of danger. However, it also facilitates levity and play, negotiating desirable relations within the town. During the *bārāḥ* girls are frequented by female relatives to keep company, reminiscing about time spent playing with friends. Sat on the floor of the Zumba dance studio, Samira Aunt, Ratna Aunt and Lasika Aunt recount their experiences of *bārāḥ*. They emphasise how they never get a chance to dress-up or put make up on, but during *Ihi* and *bārāḥ*, they feel like a princess. It is a unique time to undertake hobbies like drawing and dressing up. In Rushka’s words, “we have to play; we have to pass time

⁴⁷ Now boys will dress in ascetic clothing during Bratabhunda often holding a symbolic bow and arrow. As part of the process they may run away from the household and their uncles will chase after them before returning in a procession where they will change into their finest clothes.

for twelve days.” Playing to pass time with female relatives may seem an adjunct to the *bārāḥ* ceremony. “We play so many stones, something like that” recounts Sabina. These moments of playing with stones, drawing or dressing up embody norms around femininity creating close social bonds. Bronkhorst (2012) considers how play features in ritual through spontaneous play, play-acting and rule governed games. In Geertz (1972) infamous essay on “deep play” where he considers how humour and gambling around illegal cockfighting symbolises idioms of Balinese masculinity demonstrates how gendered norms emerge through the seemingly frivolous and peripheral aspect of ritual. Yet, ritual levity (Raj and Dempsey, 2010), actions during ritual that are simultaneously playful and serious, hold an integral role in this liminal space. Play, as a significant aspect of *bārāḥ*, deepens relations between girls against the ambiguous threat of unwanted relations.

Despite closer relationships forming with female relatives, women recall the experience separation from their fathers and male relatives during *bārāḥ*. Rushka describes how “we are not allowed to look at boys or even hear the sounds of boys.” In *bārāḥ* girls must not look, hear or touch male relatives, a challenging part of the process. “We have to stay in a room.” This seclusion transforms their status within the home. Emmrich (2014) emphasises the significance of status through his textual analysis of the Ihi ceremony. Building on Allen’s (1975) discussion, he highlights how the girls perceive themselves through these rituals as religious beings. In particular, he argues that the significant component to the ritual is how the girls hold a “pre-sexual persona” and then through the ritual reach a status where she can conceive. This holds weight against my argument that through *bārāḥ*, the danger of unwanted relations is contained. Separating from male relatives and isolating the girl evokes the potential of danger that is countered through female relatives. Rushka affirms, “only our mum, sisters, yeah, only their faces.” Her emphasis on visibility, “seeing faces” speaks to the intimacy and recognition with women, men’s faces must be hidden. The emphasis is on the girl not “seeing” rather than not being “seen”. The absence of male face preserves a space of where the girl’s gendered self-making is witnessed and therefore negotiated by women.



Figure 26 Presentation at Lord Ganesha temple after Surya Dashein including “sathi” doll. March 2023.

The narrative histories around the photos of the *Surya Dashein* express a nostalgia towards the pre-earthquake homes in Sankhu, their younger selves and the ritual significance of *bārāh* within Newar communities. Chetna *didi* ran upstairs to fetch a small album of photos, flipping through each one and pointing out people I might recognise expressing nostalgia at the old clay floors of the pre-earthquake homes. Turning to a page where she is dressed in a red and gold dress, surrounded by family with eyes cast down, she recalled her delight when she undertook *bārāh*. Photos lining the halls, blessed with *tīkā*, or shown on a phone capture cultivated relations with deceased relatives. The tactile sensation of clay floors and family presence within the photo are an anchor towards public legibility as a Newar woman.

As Chetna flips the small photo album pages containing her *Surya Dashein* ceremony, Chetna explained that she did not really understand what was happening during *bārāh*. For her, it was not a scary experience because her friends visited and she received gifts. Yet, echoing accounts of other women, “things just felt different.” Chetna recounted being unable to look into a mirror for the duration of the experience and how she did not recognise herself when she saw herself again. In Chapter 4, the mirror in the zumba room becomes a metaphor for self-making. Here, again, the description of not being able to look in the mirror speaks the fundamental

transformation Chetna endures as an affective, sensory experience. The experience of women transforming their bodily understandings is core to Perlanes and Ndaferankhande's (2020) analysis of menarche rituals in Malawi. They argue that menarche rituals become a space for an intelligible performance of gender identity. This resonates with Butler's (1990) emphasis on the performative aspects of gender whereby a disconnect emerges between the "felt" self and the expectations embodied in the mirror causing her to not look at herself. To do so is to see herself through the gaze of Sankhu, the legible woman within the photograph she holds between her hands.

Rushka, who did not have a photo album at hand, emphasises that "I didn't have much of a clear vision or memories [of *bārāh*]." For Rushka, there is a responsibility associated with *bārāh* as a challenging period in which one must face oneself. "It is a long procedure that twelve days. It is not that easy." She focuses on how there is a specific diet regiment one must follow. "From starting four days we cannot eat salt. We only have milk. Then once four days we have to take bath early in the morning." This disciplining of the body is a form of care of the self, which in, forms the self. Foucault (1975) argues how power is exerted through the disciplining of the body exerted through structures such as the panopticon in which people internalise norms and expectations. Under the gaze of Sankhu, there is a strong analogy to this argument. In the public space, the weight of the gaze imposes its performance upon the body; subjectivation within the town. Within the hidden space of *bārāh*, actions form the gendered self, such as bathing, eating and abstaining. "We have our time." States Rushka. "We are not allowed to watch movies." This process is a unique period of transformation. Rushka criticises how "now for instance, they can watch movies, see their phones, its like they can hear sounds." The ritual seclusion necessitates the transformation taking place through the actions during *bārāh*. "It's just a formality to put them inside." Rushka emphasises habits cultivated during *Bārāh*, the gendered self reconfigures relations within the town.

The presence of the second doll is a significant mechanism in gendered self-making. Sat next to the girl in her red *sāri* (dress) is a pale doll in a pink dress (see figure 26). On her forehead, she is blessed with a *tīkā*. She will have accompanied the girl throughout the ceremony. The pink doll serves multiple purposes. It accompanies the girl during her *bārāh* ensuring she does not feel alone. It allows a form of mimicry as the girl can add make-up and socialise the doll just as her mother and relatives will be preparing her for her marriage to the god. Niruna explains how "if you stay alone, yeah in that *gufa* you have to make another doll. I had a doll." I asked what happened to it. "My Aunt just threw it away...maybe that's superstition..I didn't want to throw it away." The "*sathi*" doll becomes an agent of transformation and is thrown away as the girl enters her new form as a menstruating woman, even if it might be some months before she physically

menstruates. There is a “process of iterability” (Butler, 1993: 60) meaning how the pink doll is adorned with a fine dress, make-up and *tīkā* mirroring the girl’s emerging appearance until disposed as a signifier of the “constitutive restraints” (Butler, 1993: 59) this girl must now uphold. The “sathi” doll, though appearing as existing prior to the ritual, is coagulated through the ritual process, just as the girl’s body is formed within Sankhu.

Stepping out into the sunlight, the girl’s veil is removed and she looks up, eyes, closed, into the March sunlight. All women reenact this moment on reminiscing about their *bārāḥ*. Placing their arms out, wrists up and opening their chest as if they could still feel the sunlight on their face. Sabina recounts the moment: “and in the last day we come outside dressing as a bride...priest is ready for the ritual and when he says look up at the sun we take off our shawl and then after the ritual is finished.” This moment of unveiling reveals a woman who through ritual seclusion has transformed. Beyond a rigid status shift resolving contradictory norms (Turner, 1969) and containment of unimpeded sexuality (Allen, 2010) is the transformation of a gendered body attuned and embodying the expectations of a Newar woman in Sankhu negotiated within the hidden containment of *bārāḥ*. Ambiguity embedded within the materiality of menstrual blood through *bārāḥ* facilitates gendered self-transformation.

Turns

Vari, meaning turns or time, marks the rhythms of social life in Sankhu. All residents are situated within the seasonal turns that echo down the valley. Sitting at the teashop by Sali Nadi temple, I ask when the next festival will arrive, pointed towards the worn calendar indicating Nepali dates. At each full moon, the large moon dominates the sky over the Sankhu Valley. There is a spatial understanding of time, as it is possible to know who would be in a particular space at different moments. At 7pm, from my window in Shalka *tole*, I hear regular group of *bhajan* singers gather in the central god-house, the occasional call of the conch reverberating through the still night, against the cicadas from the jungle, against the steaming of a pan. The sounds of Sankhu murmur reassuring the lone listener of its presence, until all is quiet, and only the street dogs feed into the sounds of the night. Lest there be a jatra, or a god, or a bride, circling the town. After completing the twelve days of seclusion and marriage to the sun-god, the girl takes a round of the town, a small procession following her. Now, when her first menstrual bleed arrives, she and the town protected. Now, when the time is right, she is ready for a third marriage: to marry a man.

From the foregoing argument, I have considered the presence of *Kumārī* in Sankhu, embodying ideals of purity as potential within prepubescent girls. Next, I considered how ritual

seclusion during *bārāḥ tayegu*, facilitates transformation of the gendered self within Sankhu. I will now draw on Lefebvre's theory of rhythmnanalysis to consider how menstruation, as *mahināvārī* (monthly turn), and by extension menstrual waste, entrenches women within the town's rhythms.

The sounds of the city reverberate with Lefebvre's (1992) rhythmnanalysis, where rhythm located in the body is inseparable from time. In his musings on the Parisian soundscape, he posits how time is intrinsically connected to space, the cyclical and the linear. The view from the window is as much a frame to distance and oversee the rhythms of a town as much as it is a participation. Thus, the boundaries of external and internal collapse. The viewer from the window is as much a participant as those that circle the town. "Would it be the feeling of the spectacle that appears spectacular?" (Lefebvre, 1992:42). Lefebvre's question speaks to the affective, participatory aspect of events, just like when the bride is presented to the town. Hearing the events is to participate in Sankhu's rhythms. Disruptions to the temporal frameworks of Sankhu, such as seasonality, are referred to as divine intervention such as the delay of monsoon rain for rice planting attributed to Indra (god of water). Festivals such as Indra Jātrā become means to demonstrate devotion and ensure that the agricultural rhythms, embedded in the ritual calendar of Sankhu are sustained. Temporal blockages such as the disruption to rituals, for instance, not completing a full round of the town or a ritual once it is started are dangerous because it creates the build-up of inauspicious or malevolent forces. For instance, during *bārāḥ tayegu* if the girl dies, stopping the ritual unexpectedly, she must be buried instead of cremated and might haunt the home. Interruptions are tangible threats to the rhythms of Sankhu. Menstruation participates in the "feeling of the spectacle," the rhythms, constituting daily life in the town.

Mahināvārī, meaning monthly turn, refers to the rhythms of menstruation, further habituating daily life in Sankhu. Women's participation in household labour, rituals and worship depends on their menstrual cycles, as they withdraw into their homes to take rest and avoid heavy labour or contact with the gods while menstruating. Each cycle determines how women engage with the town's festivals, agricultural seasons and daily rhythms. Participating and relating to time through menstrual cycle gives embodied access to the temporal rhythms of the town. Lefebvre deepens his theoretical framework by crossing the notion of rhythm with the secret and the public, again collapsing the boundaries between the two. "Secret rhythms" are physiological processes, the unsaid, invisible. "Public rhythms" are ceremonies, the heard, the visible. And yet both are rooted in the knowledge and experience of the body: "The body produces a garland of rhythms" (Lefebvre, 1992: 31). The image of "garland," a circle, indicating the repetitious, cyclical aspect. *Mahināvārī* as a "secret rhythm" participates in the rhythms of Sankhu as much as publicity. This

resonance is represented through the three marriages of Newar women which anchor the individual in broader rhythms.

The third marriage, to a man, marks a transition into a new town and domestic responsibility, as Newar women move to their husband's home. The wedding procession makes legible this temporal shift into new "public rhythms." Backed against the wall, wails of a new bride fill the air as she clutches her younger brother. Her family carries a simple grey suitcase to the car, a symbol of her life as she shifts to her new home. Drums and trumpets join the symphony of sounds and neighbours lean out of their balconies to watch the procession collect the bride. I am beckoned to join behind the car. Here, family and friends walk forlornly, the brother consoled by his relatives as they grieve their daughter leaving the household. We reach Bhaudvāraka,, the Southwest gate where the bride usually leaves the town, but since her husband is in Sankhu, it is not necessary to leave. Her father-in-law promises her father she will be taken care of before turning away to walk to their home. Sabina turns to me: "now we join the groom's side and dance." We pass the car as it struggles over the loose earth to the Southeast of the town. This family has gained a *buhārī* (daughter-in-law). Another round of the town and we arrive at the groom's home, his mother, who must not attend the wedding, waiting outside with the priest. Under the glimmer of photo flashes and confetti, the bride is led into the house with a large, iron key; the same key from the *bārāḥ*. In her red sārī, hair braided in a latticed bun and gilded with golden ornaments, she echoes the bride at the Ihi ceremony or *Surya Dashein*. I wonder if she thought about this moment at that time. As she disappears into the home the crowd dissipates. Her life will be different now with the responsibilities of a married woman and its "secret rhythms" as the girl's life changes with the arrival of her menstrual cycle.

As a girl passes through each ritual phase, there follows a new temporal framework for being a woman in Sankhu. For Newar women when they marry, this is one of the biggest changes for moving into the husband's home. Emphasis on the importance of getting up early is a marker feminine virtue and the difference between married life, and life in one's natal home. The expectation to undertake domestic labour and host everyone (women always eat last) instead of

celebrating festivals as in their natal homes. In Chapter 5, I described how Chetna, for example, noted that she did not want to marry because she would lose her daily routines, which for now involved the peaceful hour of 7am. The morning soundscape from 4am is marked by the sounds of sweeping, cooking and worship, usually undertaken by women. For those with full time jobs, an early start still allows the morning worship and domestic chores to be completed. The only exception to this is when a woman is on her menstrual cycle at which point she is encouraged to rest longer as another member of the household takes over the pūjās. Newar women often visit their natal homes during this period, especially in the first year of marriage.



Figure 27 Newar girl participates in Narsingha worship, September 2023.

Menstruation conditions experience through how it entangles women's menstrual bleeds within the rhythms of Sankhu. Menstruation is an integral part of the (hidden) cycles of Sankhu in how it removes women from ritual participation requiring adjustments in family and community life. Douglas (1966) argues how "regular observances have the effect of a ritual" (Douglas, 1966: 80) meaning any habits are rituals. Menstruation and the habits of withdrawing from labour, bathing and resting is a ritual. Douglas (1966) posits that rituals are temporal framing devices that act as a control for experience, in how interlocutors know what is happening next. Menstruation is an integral part of the temporal rhythms of Sankhu, the menstrual rhythms of women holding a formative role in the annual ritual calendar and daily routines. Absence of a menstrual cycle is concerning because it indicates poor health or possible pregnancy, disrupting the rhythms of Sankhu. The flow of menstrual blood coincides with the flow of rhythms.

During festivals, women will take on the ritual labour in the household, preparing food, offerings and famously rice beer. Sat across from Nheela Aunty, Sushma Aunty and Sabina *didi*, I asked in which festivals they participate. They laughed together and Sabina translated "you participate by cooking." Sabina explained that she goes to her family and relatives but Nheela and Sushma practice in their homes during that period "cooking, cleaning and making." "Do they have

a favourite?" I asked, familiar with the vivid and enthusiastic descriptions of Tihar or Vajrayoginī *jatra* (chariot procession) from my previous interviews with unmarried women. Sushma Aunty explained that she has always wanted to see the Vajrayoginī *jatra* since she moved to Sankhu twenty years prior but she cannot go because of the family. She must stay indoors and prepare the food as part of her responsibilities within the home. "Responsibility", Sabina repeats.

Menstruation poses a dual dynamic. On one hand, it gives the Aunties an opportunity to rest during the festival period. On the other hand, it excludes them from broader community life. Women do not have time for public affairs because of their domestic responsibilities and closer relationship to the gods. Yet, they explained that historically the reason women undertake more ritual labour (including fasts and long periods of worship) is because they have more "free time." A friction emerges between the women's choice to participate in these menstrual rhythms integral to the town while removing themselves from public gaze. Within this friction, women negotiate these rhythms, forming themselves in Sankhu.

"Don't you recognise her?"

Gathered in the kitchen of a family, we sat at the newly purchased table. It felt strange no longer to sit on the floor. Having finished a meal to celebrate the birth of baby girl, a new member of the family, we enjoyed some beers and a game of Uno. A small hand reached out for a set of cards. "Don't you recognise her?" I looked up from the game. Sitting across at the table is the girl with her mother from the *bārāḥ* ceremony I attended earlier that year. "See how much she has changed," the same voice commented. Her face had changed and she was much taller, sitting upright at the table without the playful disposition I had seen last at her celebration. To recognise is to see and to know. By recognising her, I was seeing this girl in her transformed status of a menstruating woman in Sankhu, embedded within its rhythms. This recognition does not occur in isolation but within the town's public view.

Menstruation, as *mahināvārī*, refers to the menstrual rhythms endured in Sankhu. A temporal concept, it is intrinsically integrated into a concept of space, and that space is the domain of the town. This chapter, much like the girl entering the sunlight after *bārāḥ*, stepped out from the domain of the home into the space of the town. Initially, girls worshipped as *Kumārī*. Pre-menarche girls are embodiment of a goddess, and therefore of divinity in their relational potential. However, with the onset of menarche they lose this intimacy with the gods that must be cultivated through ritual practice. Within the hidden space of *bārāḥ* girls internalise the gendered norms reconfiguring relationships with other women, the men in their household and with themselves. This transformation of the self preempts the onset of menarche. The lived experiences of Newar

women show that rituals such as *bārāḥ* do not solely transition a girl from one social status to another. Instead, they reveal an ongoing process of negotiation where women are continuously moving between themselves, embodied in nostalgia, dusty photo albums and faded memories. The hidden habits of menstruation of *bārāḥ* or “secret rhythms” are as significant as the ceremonies or “public rhythms” (Lefebvre, 1992). The panoptic gaze of the town upon the virtue of girls as *Kumārī*, the expectations after menarche and their marriage, in turn, forms and legitimises the town. Sankhu, as a seeing town, formed through *mahināvārī*, the participation in rhythms.

Menstrual waste is managed through the shared rhythms of Sankhu. Virtue, embodied by *Kumārī*, celebrates the integration of pre-menarche girls into the town. Menarche rituals, such as *barha tayegu* instil gendered expectations and of the danger of menstrual blood as forming unintended relations. Responsibility for menstrual waste is situated and managed by the town, a fundamental aspect of Sankhu. The responsibility to plan around the menstrual cycle is a key facet of ritual devotion for woman in Sankhu, affecting their lived experiences and relationship to the gods. In the next chapter, I consider how avoidance of temples during menstruation cultivates intimacy with the gods.

Chapter 7

Temple: Menstrual Boundaries

The chorus of two-headed drums, cymbals, shrill pipe and harmonious baritones pierce into the night, echoing across the rooftops of Sankhu. Tonight, the gods might enter the space in the upper room of Chalakhu *tole* resting house blessed by the priest to prevent evil forces entering. Poised cross-legged on a cushion on the back corner of the upper room, Ashkar *dai* leans over to inform me of his surprise and my good fortune that I am invited to these rehearsals. I am equally surprised as the only female and foreigner in the room. Members in the room ask for a second time if I am enjoying myself and if this is useful for my research. Children lean over the window on the balcony, a faint breeze gives relief to the humid July evening in the room filled with musicians and singers. Three preselected Shrestha boys practice their divine, historic sequences mimicking the dance teacher. In one month, the musicians, singers and dancers will take a round of the town, performing in each *tole* a choreographed set of sequences until dawn. The dancers are embodying the gods Devī, Caṇ ḍa and Bhairava and all at once, Vajrayoginī: her temple lights visible through the back window.⁴⁸ After the rehearsals end at 9:30pm, Ashkar escorts me across the square home to Shalka *tole* where Lashika Aunty unlocks the door. Dogs bark curiously until they recognise us. Ashkar *dai* informs me that I can join any of the rehearsals this month, except during menstruation when I must not enter the rehearsal room. My presence at the *devī pyākhan* (god dances) permitted as long as I am not menstruating.

Two weeks later, I lie on my bed curled up with excruciating cramps. Heavy rain peppers the windowpanes producing a pleasant, damp smell infused from the forest. I listen to the distinctive harmonies echoing through my window and receive an invitational text to the rehearsals followed by a beer at the teashop. I feel guilty and relieved: on one hand, I am disappointed to miss the rehearsals but on the other hand, I can legitimately stay in bed. Allowing me into the *devī pyākhan* rehearsal space indicated trust that I respect the boundary, irrespective of my personal beliefs because of my previous demonstration of understanding and adherence to customs. I

⁴⁸ Devī is considered a manifestation of Kālī, Hindu goddess of destruction and time. Caṇḍa as a manifestation of Durga, a manifestation of Devī. Bhairava is associated with death. It should be noted that there is an ambiguity and fluidity between the gods embodied in *devī pyākhan* but that what remains consistent are the themes of time, death and dissolution.

respond that I cannot attend because my stomach hurts (analogous for menstruation), falling asleep to the *devī pyākhan* chorus echoing across the evening Sankhu soundscape.

Avoidance of the *devī pyākhan space* while menstruating elicits a “ritual boundary” (Shrestha 2012: 490). Instead of viewing avoidance as a separation between the sacred and the profane (Durkheim, 1912), Shrestha (2012) observes that rituals delineate boundaries in Sankhu, thereby intensifying its status among residents as “the most sacred place in the world” (Shrestha, 2012: 490). Across ethnicities and castes in Sankhu, women must avoid pūjā rooms, temple spaces or deities during menstruation. Among chhetri communities, this boundary is expressed in the concept of *chhui hunu* (untouchable), idiomatically referring towards menstruation. Among the Newar, the term *thiye majyu* (New. touching prohibited) and *nachune* (not touching) express untouchability during menstruation. In the caste system, untouchability refers to the exclusion of lower castes such as the Dalits, from religious and social participation such as sharing food or water, because of their polluting status (Kafle, 2023). Instead of inherent impurity, the temporary avoidance of women from spaces like the *devī pyākhan rehearsal* room upholds ritual boundaries, protecting residents and the gods from harm. The space of the temple raises the following questions: Why must women avoid spaces the gods during menstruation? How does the avoidance of gods during menstruation reveal the moral experience of menstrual waste?

In this chapter, I argue that women’s avoidance of deities during menstruation is an active engagement with the sacred as embodied awareness of impermanence. Vajrayoginī is the venerated goddess of Sankhu, her iconography drinking blood from a skull cup encapsulating expansive power that poses blessings when approached intentionally, or harm - even death - if uncontained. Douglas (1966) provides a useful vocabulary to highlight how menstrual blood shares the “creative formlessness” of untethered power contained through avoidance. I explore how this power is harnessed through rituals and tools, such as masks during the *devī pyākhan*, extrapolating the risk posed by the instability of the menstruating body as an unreliable container for the gods. This inability to embody or touch the gods during menstruation excludes women from ritual authority roles at the temples. Yet, I demonstrate how women cultivate intimacy with the god occupying the heart as the locus of moral experience (Zigon and Throop, 2014). Negotiating the ritual boundary of avoidance during menstruation becomes an ethic of care (Tronto, 1994; Mol, 2008) that protects Sankhu from harm.

Vajrayoginī

Multiple gods are embodied at the *devī pyākhan*, all devoted to Vajrayoginī, the local and founding goddess of Sankhu, whose temple is visible through the window at chalakhu *tole* resting house. In the upper temple of Vajrayoginī, the air is humid, heated by candles either side of the shrine. Here, Vajrayoginī stands in her red and gold attire, a necklace containing Cakrasaṃvara draped on her neck, the sword given to Manjushree tied behind her right hand, a dharma wheel on her left and on her head, the crown with feathers worn by the *devī* dancers.⁴⁹ Two guardians accompany her in the form of a tiger and lion to whom one must pay homage when seeking audience with the god. In the lower temple, visible from the window, sits the red-faced goddess self-arisen from a volcanic rock, touched only by the priest mediating offerings and blessings at the door. Within the upper temple, I glance at her face, avoiding staring, her eyes fixed ahead. To meet her gaze and for her to blink is a terrible omen. She may grant blessings, unharnessed, her image and gaze may bring terrible consequences, even death. Importantly, one must never enter her temple space during menstruation, though no sign will instruct visitors on this matter.

In this section, I demonstrate how menstrual waste threatens the containment of the goddess potential, transformative power. First, I consider how the gods are omnipresent in how they may reveal themselves at any moment in Sankhu. With the example of Vajrayoginī's iconography, I characterise her transformative power as "creative formlessness" (Douglas 1966), which uncontained, can have devastating effects. This power, however, can be harnessed through cultivating a relationship to the gods through action, such as playing instruments or sacrificing animals. Sacrificial blood reaps blessings by creating an intentional relationship to the god. Menstrual blood, however, shares the quality of "creative formlessness" (Douglas, 1966) in its capacity to dissolve boundaries (see chapter 3). To uphold the ritual boundaries of Vajrayoginī temple, women must avoid the space during menstruation.

Vajrayoginī is a fierce tantric goddess, venerated by Hindus and Buddhists across Sankhu as the local and founding goddess (Zanen, 1986). Her gaze is felt in Sankhu. Sitting taking tea in Chalakhu *tole*, her eyes stare from a mural, posters advertising the Vajrayoginī *jatra* or the temple overlooking the town. Her domain is the Sankhu Valley, entrenched in myths of the founding of the Kathmandu Valley, Saalambutar, Sali Nadi and Indrayani as protector temples to her Valley (Moore, 2020). Each temple is abode to a multifaceted goddess situated within the landscape of Sankhu (Moore, 2024). For instance, Svāsthānī *devī* whose abode is Sali Nadi river

⁴⁹ Cakrasaṃvara is a tantric god representing skillful means. His consort is Vajrayoginī.

is worshipped during an annual fast (Birkenholtz, 2018), encapsulates beauty, potentiality and fear (Gupto, 2015). As a bodhisattva, Vajrayoginī embodies enlightenment as the wisdom goddess (English, 2002).⁵⁰ By visualising oneself as Vajrayoginī, one becomes familiar with her “state of consciousness...aiding in the delicate work of inner transformation.” (Landaw and Weber 1993:6). Her ferocity is underscored by her compassion as the protector goddess of Sankhu.



Figure 28 Vajrayoginī devī is carried around Sankhu during Vajrayoginī jātrā, April 2023.

In Sankhu, the gods may reveal themselves at any moment. These entities form the town, as “the result of a collaborative effort that entails human-divine interdependence.” (Owens, 1995:236) For example, Prekshya recounts the story of Svāsthānī and how a beggar arrived at the door of a woman before revealing themselves to be a god and cursing the family. Concerning Vajrayoginī, she roams the hills as she pleases in different forms, in one case spotted dancing in chalkakhu tole as three small children, giving way to the *devī pyākhan* (Shrestha, 1996). The founding myth of Sankhu is that Vajrayoginī revealed herself as an old woman instructing King Shankadev on how to design the town.⁵¹ This notion of possible interaction with a god raises the risk of potential offence or favour. There is no guarantee a wish will be granted, but if one engages

⁵⁰ A bodhisattva is a person or entity who has obtained the qualities of buddhahood, but postpones going to Nirvana (a transcendent state released from cycle of birth and death) to guide others to enlightenment (awakening).

⁵¹ For a thorough analysis of the MSM as the founding myth of Sankhu, see Moore (2024).

in sincere, proper worship, there is a potential for intervention from the god. Conversely, transgressing a god, such as entering the temple space during menstruation carries the risk of offence. This potentiality is a defining attribute of the gods such as Vajrayoginī.

The gods power, situated within the landscape through icons and stupas, is activated through intentional actions such as playing music. This “emplaced power” (Moore, 2024) is evident as I spend the morning walking with Deepa during *gunlā* (Buddha Month) as musicians from her caste walk to Vajrayoginī temple, playing flutes and drums as they circle the stupas and temples of Sankhu, activating vibrations around the gods to which the body can align through sound. As we sip tea combating fatigue from the morning worship, Deepa explains how playing music, circling stupas and touching the god’s icons with *tīkā* blessings cultivates a relationship to the gods. “We only play gods songs, yeah, and we all play the Buddha’s song.” Deepa is Khadgi (Butcher) caste, meaning that they participate in these songs to compensate for their profession of killing animals. She emphasises that “there is not Hindu, no Buddhist, no Christian. We are equal, just worshipping, worshipping.” The practice of worshipping cultivates the relationship to the gods, rather than concern for the categories and labels around what religion. “Yeah, we are Hindu, but what’s behind? We celebrate every festival and worship all goddess.” Her clarification that she is Hindu speaks to how this becomes an access point to the gods. Beyond emplaced icons, the god’s power is situated within forms, such as natural spaces, human bodies or dreams (Gupto, 2015). “Behind” is the transformational, felt vibration of the sacred.

The visibility and tactile qualities of sacrificial blood marks the boundary of Vajrayoginī temple. There is a Mankal shrine, a rock representing Lord Shiva below Vajrayoginī temple on the outskirts of her temple domain. The residue of sacrificial blood flows down the steps making my sandals lose grip marking the steps with blood to the familiar, anthropophonic sounds of screeching goats. In Pharping, the banning of sacrifices creates animosity between Newar and Tibetan worshippers (Tuladhar-Douglas and Bowman, 2022). In Sankhu, no blood must be spilled within the boundaries of Vajrayoginī temple as she is non-violent. To undergo a sacrifice, one must take the animal to the lower red goddess temple for a blessing and descend to the Mankal shrine that marks this boundary. During festivals, queues of devotees hold their prospective sacrifices of quivering goats and chickens, blessed at the temple. Herbert and Mauss (1981) argue how the object of the sacrifice (sacrifier) is consecrated as a point of communication between the sacred and profane removing a threat from the social group. In Sankhu, residents claim that the goats are substitute for human blood. Taking Herbert and Mauss’s ignore the significance of the remaining blood. Why may sacrificial blood stain the steps on the feet of pilgrims to Vajrayoginī temple but menstrual blood must not pass the Mankal shrine? Outside the boundary of

Vajrayoginī's temple, the animals must be alive during the sacrifice, blood pumping from the severed neck over the god. The bloody remains on the ground temporarily stain the earth as interlocutors consume beaten rice, fish, eggs, meat and alcohol served in a large basket. The confronting visibility of blood pouring from a decapitated animal indicating an ongoing, mediated relationship to the gods, life and the wishes of good fortune.



Figure 29 Iconography for Vajrayoginī devī in book displayed by vājracārya, July 2023.

The transformative potential of Vajrayoginī and blood is encapsulated in her iconography. Sonam and I visit the upper temple to ask about the goddess. Under the gaze of the yellow-faced goddess, the *vājrcārya* brings out a copy of the *Maṇisailamahāvadāna* (see Figure 30) and places it next to another book pointing to the iconography for Vajrayoginī, on the left side of the page (see Figure 29).⁵² Each time Sonam and I ask a question he answers through the books. The *vājrcārya* explains that this image is specific to the Sankhu goddess. Key features include a young, naked woman leaning on her left leg with her second leg outstretched, crushing Kalirati and Bhaireva. Surrounded by fire, she looks up and forward, representing her view on the path to freedom and enlightenment, the large staff balanced on her left shoulder represents the consort Cakrasaṃvara and outstretched leg position as the union of



Figure 30 Frontcover of *Maṇisailamahāvadāna* presented by Vāracārya

⁵² Since departing from Sankhu, I have been unable to find out the name of the second book but it remains in public access on the shelves in Vajrayoginī temple.

compassion and wisdom (Rhie and Thurman, 1991). Her long flowing hair symbolises her youth and verocity as she drinks blood from a skull cup from her right hand. The *vāracārya* turns the page to an image of two inverted triangles with the iconography of Vajrayoginī at the centre (see Figure 30). There is a ritual diagram to meditate on Vajrayoginī, with to an inverted triangle that represents the womb, with a 6-pointed geometric shape (Klasanova, 2016). The imagery of the womb and blood demonstrate how substances associated with reproduction, such as menstrual blood, are potent because they signify life force and vitality.



Figure 31 Ritual diagram to meditate on Vajrayoginī presented by Vajrāchārya, July 2023.

Blood seeps into Vajrayoginī's iconography and presence expressing her transformative potential. Douglas (1966) characterises the potency of dirt, and by extension menstrual blood as a symbol of "creative formlessness" (Douglas, 1966: 212). Creative formlessness refers to indefinable, placeless states that represent growth and decay. Within Douglas's focus on the symbolic is an explicitly Durkheimian understanding of the sacred as society becoming aware of itself. To take this thread imposes a functionalist perspective on blood as sustaining order in society. However, her concept of "creative formlessness" when grounded in the materiality of sacrificial or menstrual blood characterises how its amorphous form is power.

Central to Douglas’s theorisation is that “the sacred is contagious” (Douglas, 1966: 26) meaning this formlessness can spread between entities by dissolving boundaries. The formlessness of blood and by extension, the god’s power is indefinable, fluid and transitional. Within this formlessness lies the potential for new forms.

Despite her compassion and non-violence, mismanagement of Vajrayoginī’s power has dire consequences. The formlessness of Vajrayoginī’s power and its creative potential is dangerous. On one occasion during my stay in Sankhu, a man’s death was blamed on the replication of Vajrayoginī’s image and the Vajrācārya consulted to confirm whether *pūjā* must be undertaken. If uncontained, menstrual blood as creative formlessness dissolves the boundary between god and human with dangerous consequences, resulting, at worst, in death. During the Vajrayoginī *jatra*, the yellow-faced goddess is placed in *gufa* (cave) for five days.⁵³ This practice mirrors the ceremony before Menarche for Newar girls connects her to her natal home (of Sankhu) and contains her expansive power. Menstrual blood, through formlessness shares the dissolving potential of the gods.



Figure 32 Mural of Vajrayoginī in Chalakhutole painted by local artists, December 2023.

⁵³ In chapter 7 I discuss Bārāḥ when Newar girls undergo twelve days of ritual exclusion. Here I use the term *gufa* (cave) as this was how the 5 days of worship within the building was referred to by interlocutors.

Menstrual blood is absent and invisible across Sankhu. The sacrificial blood stains the earth until dogs and the wind press it into the earthy floor, menstrual blood is hidden, concealed and disposed. Blood pours from the decapitated body of the goat over the shrine of Nasadyah, god of dance and music, and onto the dusty ground. The sacrifice is to obtain the blessings upon the *devī pyākhan*. The small courtyard shadowed by three storey homes fills with onlookers crouched on the steps overlooking the small stupa opposite the shrine. Four men hold the goat's corpse as one upturns the severed head offering *tīkā* (blessing) from the remains. The goat's head presented with blood coagulating in the decapitated neck. I look away as my stomach turns and accompanying onlookers reach for the blessing. Bright, oxidising blood pumps from open arteries in the neck, accompanied by a familiar stale scent, resonant with the air lingering in the alley behind the butcher shops. I hop out of the way as the carcass is taken through the arch, the bloody trail marking the floor. Sacrificial blood when poured over a shrine has the chance to reap blessings accessing the creative formlessness of the gods through intentional action. Menstrual blood expelled from the body threatens the integrity of Vajrayogini's space because it shares the dissolving potential of her power.

Masks

Three dancers stand shivering under the red shelters as the rain subsides around 11pm: it is unclear if the shivering is from the rain or the continual embodiment of the gods. One dancer is dressed in a red *jāmā* (skirt) with a black mask and hood concealing the face. The accompanying dancers wear red masks. Through the materiality of the masks, the gods inhabit the children. The boys will dance all night without exhaustion through the god's bestowing strength. At each break, the boys sit in the chairs and accept offerings, with adjustments made using a cloth to conceal their human faces and fanning their necks. I ask Ashkar *dai* if girls or women perform the *devī* dances and am told a definitive "no." Only boys and men embody goddesses "because of menstruation"; gods must not inhabit a menstruating body. Probing further, I am met with the deferral to "I don't know, it is our culture."

In this section, I explore how the menstruating body is an unstable container for harnessing the god's power. First, I demonstrate how the god's power is harnessed through ritual tools, such as the masks during the *devī pyākhan*. I build on my discussion of "embodied awareness" (Csordas, 1994) in Chapter 4 to argue how the bodily experience of masks and dances intensifies this awareness. The unstable body during menstruation is an untenable container for the god's power. This creates gendered ritual authority as only men can become priests. Building on

Shrestha's (1996) argument on the importance of the hidden during the *devī pyākhan*, I argue that the ritual boundary created by the concealed absence of menstruation is significant for cultivating a relationship to the gods.

The gods possess a vast and creative power harnessed through rituals and tools, including masked dances and sacrifices. The ornate masks of the Newar are "sacred, alive and empowered" (Toffins, 2015: 7) displaying craftsmanship of copper, metal and paper mâché (Toffins, 2015). Each mask, such as during the *devī pyākhan*, represents a god that will temporarily inhabit the masked dancer. Under the supervision of a priest, the correct *pūjā* ensure the containment of the god within the body. Malik (2009) avoids the concept of possession arguing that the inhabiting of the gods during ritual performances such as the *devī* dances is embodied consciousness (Malik, 2009). For example, Malik explores the qualities of the Shiva dance where the dancer takes on the qualities of Goludev (incarnation of Lord Shiva). He characterises the dance as a "ritual of embodiment". Connect to a higher creates a shift of the self. In chapter 4, I drew on Csordas to demonstrate that sacrality emerges through 'embodied awareness' during rituals such as *mha pūjā* (body worship). By embodying the gods, their power can be harnessed within the body.

The god must inhabit a stable body. The unique experience of wearing the masks creates an embodied and disassociated sense of self (Seligman, 2010). Among the Condomole in Brazil, Seligman argues that the bodily reactions, such as getting hot wearing masks, displaces performers from themselves creating intimacy with the possessing force. His focus on the physiological reaction for religious self-transformation reveals the importance of the body as a stable container during masked dances such as the *devī pyākhan*. The performers must be young boys, Shrestha caste and will participate for multiple years. When boys or men wear the masks, such as during the *devī* dances, Narsingha worship or Lākhey, assistants will fan under the masks as the person inhabited will endure challenging physiological conditions under the weight, heat and endurance from the ritual.

The inhabitation of the god allows the superhuman endurance of such conditions, such as the boy's ability to dance continuously, and with verocity throughout the night. The actions of fanning, teasing and adjusting the masks become important caretaking acts creating intimacy with the god (Pintchman, 2010) ensuring the body as a container remains stable. During the rain, a small altercation arose over whether to skip a section, but the full sequence must be completed. To leave the sequence incomplete could risk terrible danger. For instance, a historic death of a performer during the final dance, where the demon is killed, is excluded from the sequence, its

absence an exemplification of the potential destruction of uncontained intimacy with the god. Only a stable container, such as the boys with youth and stamina can embody the gods.

Menstruation destabilises the body. From a physiological perspective, leaning on Seligman's discussion on physiological reactions during rituals of embodiment, menstruation creates various physiological reactions that threaten the contained harnessing of the god's power. In Chapter 4, I discussed how the liminality of menstrual pain is emplaced by women by locating it in the body parts creating an embodied awareness of bodily boundaries. An unstable body may threaten the processes of "embodied awareness" (Csordas, 1994) undertaken during ritual embodiment meaning the body will no longer be a container. This is also a viable explanation for why women who have passed menopause do not embody the gods. Although they are worshipped through ceremonies such as *Jancu* (see chapter 4), at senior ages their bodies will not sustain he embodiment. However, it must be noted that when I asked for explanations I was deferred to "it is our culture." The ambiguity as to why women cannot embody gods is part of how this formlessness is sustained. This sense of ambiguity reinforces the unpredictability of a menstruating body.

The instability of the body during menstruation and how the god leaves is further



Figure 33 Narsingha embodied through boar mask accompanied by Lakshmi and Saraswati goddess, September 2023.

exemplified by *Kumārī*, the living goddess, embodied by a pre-menarche girl without a painted mask. *Kumārī* does not require a mask because her 32 physical attributes, include pre-menarche status, means the goddess is inherently embodied instead of temporarily channelled through a mask. The goddess she embodies is Taleju Bhawani, the patron goddess of Newar communities. In Chapter 6, I discussed how pre-menarche girls are worshipped as *Kumārī* in Sankhu, embodying ideals of feminine purity. In Sankhu, the current *Kumārī* is the daughter of the *vājrcārya* priest who manages the temple. However, she lives with her family in the temple and only embodies the goddess on the midnight *pūjā*. Her time as *Kumārī* will end when she reaches menarche as the goddess leaves her body through the loss of blood. Girls cannot embody gods because the god leaves the body through menstrual blood.

With the body during menstruation as an unstable container, women are forbidden to touch the gods during menstruation. Gellner (1991) conceptualises how the distribution of religious power as a centrifugal relationship. At the centre is the locus of moral superiority where *vājrcārya* and Brahmin *pūjāri* take initiations permitting them to interact with the power located at the centre. The *vājrcārya*, as householder priests (Gellner, 1992) maintain families and live within the town sustaining their priestly duties such as caring for Vajrayoginī temple. Within Sankhu, the *vājrcārya* and Brahmin *pūjāri* are consulted on any issues relating to worship as embodied knowledge, living the *dharma* (religious duty). When asking questions on Newar Buddhism in Sankhu, I was deferred to the priest who used questions as opportunities to teach through metaphors, spreading the dharma with inherent ambiguity in their responses or in the case of the *vājrcārya*. During my conversation with the *vājrcārya*, he constantly referred to the book plucked from the small shelves as he delivered information that would appear available to anyone. Through their exclusive ability to perform key rituals and embody deities, with women excluded during menstruation, male priests hold the highest ritual authority, reinforcing their central role in religious and community life.

Whereas men embody the divine through ritual actions and authority, as priests, embodying deities or undertaking specific roles during festivals, women cultivate their relationship to the gods through caretaking responsibilities, fasting and negotiating the boundaries such as around menstruation. According to Gellner's model, women possess the god at the periphery as healers or mediums, allowing for healing illness but associated with a lack of control. Gellner's (1991) spatial model facilitates a conceptualisation of power as part of a landscape where the concentration, in spaces such as temples, necessitates male authority. Yet, it neglects how women also cultivate a relationship to this concentration of power in hidden, alternative ways. For instance, during Narsingha worship, the priest wore the mask for Narsingha, embodying the God, as queues of Newar women in designated roles marked by objects - sweepers, incense, peacock feathered fans - cleansed the route before the god. Women engage with the gods through prayer and avoidance during menstruation.

Menstruation, through how it is hidden, cultivates a relationship to the gods in Sankhu. Through his analysis of the *devī pyākhan*, Shrestha (1996) posits how the invisible rehearsals create layers of protection on the dancers, necessary for the inhabiting of the gods during the *devī pyākhān* (Shrestha, 1996). Regardless of shortening length of the public performance reduced from 3 days to 1 night, the potency of the dances remains through the rehearsals. These practices fit within broader patterns of Newar worship, where the unseen and unspoken are as integral as the visible rituals. The act of containing the gods power in a hidden, exclusive space, is

as significant as the public performance. and avoidance during menstruation participates in this containment.

Taking this further, the avoidance of menstrual blood from the temple and performances participates in worship. When I was instructed not to join the Devī dances during menstruation, I reproduced these boundaries through my own choice to remain absent. Ashkar's reminder of the boundaries of my access to the devī dances demonstrated the responsibility towards protecting the space, musicians and dancers. Protection is the act of keeping something safe, implying that the concept must be in parallel with danger. Dua (2019) mobilises the concept of protection within the context of maritime interaction on the Indian ocean, highlighting how protection is a "temporary form of connectivity and possibility" (Dua, 2019: 22). Protection, through Dua's definition, is a means to create a temporally limited relationship to the gods, hinging on potentiality. Excluding menstrual blood from spaces where gods may be present cultivates an intimacy through protection. Gods' cans protect humans from danger, women must protect Sankhu and gods must be protected from the impurities of menstruation. In Sankhu, menstrual blood is integral to the cultivation of relationships to the gods.



Figure 34 Khyāh, Kavacha and Beta during Devī pyākhan, September 2023.

During the *devī pyākhan*, the precise, choreographed and controlled movements of the gods contrasted to the chaotic, improvised nature of the ghosts: Khyāh, Kavacha and Beta. Kavam the skeleton lifts his legs to the sides moving right to left. Beta stands on his head, as Khyāh

(the spirit on the wall during *bārāh* in Chapter 6) rolls around the floor crashing into his fellow performers. These actions mirrored the descriptions of interactions with ghosts in Sankhu, blocking paths and alleys or making people sick. Interactions with spirits are usually accidental, with descriptions of the materiality of a malevolent force as squidgy or stuck, usually involving getting ill afterwards. The presence of the spirits in the *devī pyākhan* are a form of ritual levity (Raj and Dempsey, 2010) for the audience evoking the gods power over the presence of malevolent forces. To deal with an encounter with a malevolent spirit, one must chant a mantra (often towards Hanuman) and hold the god in the heart.

Heart

As I enter the gate at Suryabinayak temple, I glance back to Lalita Aunty, with whom I strolled through the village. She is menstruating and cannot enter the temple space. An accomplished professional, she pioneers within women's health and environmental conservation. Even taking a long walk during menstruation is uncommon as often women prefer to remain in their homes. I gaze back to see her sat on the wall, her feet lifted looking out at the food stalls and vendors lining the road. What principles inform her avoidance of the temple during menstruation? What can the experience upholding these boundaries inform us about menstrual waste?

During my stay in Sankhu, there were rare transgressions surrounding avoidance of spaces and events during menstruation. At festivals, for instance women might delay announcing their menstrual cycle to participate in an event. Alternatively, women may distance themselves from perspectives by deferring to their family members. From the foregoing argument, I have established that menstrual blood shares the expansive power of the gods. This power can be harnessed for blessings and good fortune but untethered, can be dangerous. I will now consider how the gods inhabit the heart as the centre for moral experience (Zigon and Throop, 2014) in Sankhu. Leaning on the concept of "moral experience" (Throop and Zigon, 2014) I explore the predicaments and feelings associated with avoiding the gods during menstruation. Therefore, I reveal the management of menstrual waste as an affective, moral experience.

Greeted in the living room, Maya gives me a hug and whispers to me that she is menstruating but I must not say anything. She will tell her mother that her period arrives tomorrow. Today, she wishes to participate in Tihar. It was rare that I encountered these traditions of norms, partially it took time to build relationships where I might be informed and they are rarely transgressed. Butler (1990) argues that the iteration of norms proceeds through abiding, but also, through their subversion. Classifying these moments of resistance enunciates identifiers for power

relations, including gender. For Maya, the main reason she avoids the kitchen is because of her mother and so if she is in her home that she participated in these boundaries. Yet, when it came to the festival, she negotiates this by planning to announce her menstrual cycle the following day, as her mother would be expecting it. To characterise transgressions as resistance is a “romanticisation of agency” (Abu-Lughod, 1990). Abu-Lughod (1990) demonstrates how evocative and subversive poems among the Bedouin appearing as resistance reaffirm expectations around women. Viewed through this lens, Maya’s concealment of her menstrual bleed reaffirms the broader patriarchal institution of exclusion. Yet, despite attending the festival while menstruating, Maya never visits a temple during menstruation.

Ascending the stairs, I knock and enter Prekshya's room to invite her for a late afternoon stroll to Indrayani temple. “Tomorrow, okay? Today, I am on my period,” she explains. Prekshya’s assertion that we should visit the temple the next day is an active negotiation and reification of relationships with the gods. When I asked what might happen if one transgressed a boundary during menstruation, Prekshya explained that there are opportunities to reverse a mistake. During Teej, a Hindu festival for married women, they take a bath and then collect in a group and pray in the river. Then one can do a *pūjā* with a Brahmin *pūjarī*. “After that the priest will tell a story about menstruation. If you have done mistake in menstruation, if we are listening that story then mistake will be gone.” Prekshya posits how if one takes the action of transgressing a boundary during menstruation, one can have that mistake removed through the act of listening to the *pūjarī*, removing the consequences of that transgression. Prekshya caveats with “in our religion our grandmother, grandfather say that.” Her qualification that this is an ancestral tradition offlays her personal engagement with the belief.

In her polemical response to a feminist conception of agency, Mahmood falls into a form of cultural relativism since just as Padma and Prekshya have different negotiations of menstrual boundaries, so will women in Cairo. Nevertheless, Mahmood's argument invites an engagement with the aspirations and expectations surrounding avoidance of spaces and the gods during menstruation. Padma never overhauls boundaries when menstruating but adapts them to her practice. Mahmood (2004) argues that the notion of agency constituting the feminist subject ignores how women relate to practices, such as veiling and worship among women in Cairo (Mahmood, 2004). The choice to veil becomes a critical expression and participation in piety. The women are cultivating their religious self and relationship to Allah. Likewise, solely viewing the lack of self-declaration of resistance against the older generation risks creating a narrative whereby mothers perpetuate inequality and daughter’s resist. Through the concealing of

menstruation, women can cultivate their relationship to the gods. With this lens, Maya and Prekshya, as Chhetri women, negotiate menstrual boundaries cultivating relationships to the gods.

Among the Newar, when climbing the steps to Vajrayoginī temple, one will be greeted with “*Tara Maa*” (Mother Tara), referring to the god carries within as Ugra Tārā and Vajrayoginī.⁵⁴ According to Parish (1991), the emotional life of the Newar is “dynamically embodied in affective experience: (Parish, 1991: 315) with moral action, animated by *nuga* (heart) as a metonymic expression of inner sanctity. Parish (1991) argues that the heart becomes a metonym for understanding the self, through the presence of “divine agency” (Parish, 1991:316). This moral agency reveals itself when Suntol *dai* describes how he participated in Svāsthānī *Vrata* where one has to keep one’s mind clean.⁵⁵ After thinking a bad thought, he found a hair in his food that evening meaning he could not eat contaminated food since he was on the pilgrimage, meaning that he could not eat that day. When I asked women whether they might participate in Svāsthānī *Vrata* (fast), they never gave a fixed answer as it is inauspicious to commit to a pilgrimage verbally if one does not then attend. Willing with one’s heart can bring about blessings, or negative consequences, as the god within is witness.

A breeze enters the open window as the afternoon sun cast shadows on the back alley behind Niruna’s room. We had finished making rotis and returned downstairs to her bedroom. Niruna explains how despite her mother wanting her not to touch the kitchen or food, she once made a mistake. I asked if anything happened. “I don’t know exactly, but after that I just prayed to God: sorry, sorry! I was just holding my sister and I was there in the kitchen and just out of habit you see. And I was like, my god, I am on my period.” She repeated her repent “I’m so sorry, God.” I asked her what might happen when someone enters the kitchen during their period. She paused. “No one know the exact, like in God. If you tell them, something bad will happen.” It is not a case of telling in a literal sense, but the god might realise what has happened. By praying to the god immediately, Niruna hoped to assuage any consequences, ambiguous to the action. This moment of prayer highlights the connection between action and awareness, located within the self. Niruna does not visit a temple but turns to her inner self, to her “heart” embodying the space where moral sins and self-monitoring takes place; the god everpresent in the regulation of her actions.

⁵⁴ Vajrayoginī is also considered by Sankhu residents an incarnation of Ugra Tārā, a fierce Buddhist goddess associated with compassion.

⁵⁵ In Sanskrit, *Vrata* means “religious observance” meaning devotion of the mind and heart towards the gods. In the Svāsthānī *Vrata* this is demonstrated through fasting, walking to temples and awareness of one’s thoughts.

The presence of ancestors contributes to the experience of divinity through everyday interactions. Niruna explains “We have to feed the crow as well. Do you know about that on your period?” During menstruation, a woman cannot touch food, the kitchen, or her father, who is offering the food to the crow. Animals, especially gods, crows and monkeys have their own lives and hierarchies and are intermediaries between humans and the divine, worshipped directly during *Tihar* or serving as substitutes during sacrifices. “By it being old, kind of Holy spirit type. In Nepal, crow is related to spirit, yeah, you know about this?” She was surprised when I shook my head and continued. “The person who died will come like as a crow, yeah. Not as a messenger, visiting. So it relates to the dead. I don’t know if you are understanding?” Encouraged, Niruna clarified excitedly. “That is why you cannot touch if you’re on your period, and then you touch the food, or touch crow, touch the food that was going to the crow, they just said you cannot do that. It’s bad, okay?”

Niruna is clarifying the feelings of responsibility towards the crow, as connected to her ancestors. In Chapter 5, Niruna explains how she avoids her father during menstruation because he is connected to “something spiritual.” The feelings of ambiguity around that “something” are embedded within an “ethics of care” (Tronto, 1999). Care featured in my analysis of washing the bedclothes where women can distance themselves from beliefs while upholding actions. Taking Tronto’s understandings of care highlights the sense of responsibility towards entities. In Mol (2008) discussion of the logic of care among hospital wards, she explores how care emerges from the negotiation of frictions conflicting logics. An action, such as ensuring a patient stays in bed may strike a contradiction to their autonomy. Within this disconnect, the ethic of care arises as patients and hospital wards create new relationships that balance these logics. In the case of Niruna, it is the cultivation of the relationship to the crow that instils the ethics of care.

To transgress the gods, such as by entering a temple during menstruation, is to create *pap* (sin). Daya offers spicy buffalo as she explains how “our mother, grandmother, think they think of if you touch there, if you cooking, if you touch God, it’s *pap*. You know, sin” She emphasises this as her relative’s belief as she repeats the word “*pap, pap, pap...pap* and you’re going to hell. When you die you’re going here.” The iteration of *pap* is an echo of the voice of her family. In light of the god inhabiting the heart, Daya expresses *pap* as “moral experience” (Throop and Zigon, 2014). This approach moves beyond concepts such as “moral agency” to explore moods and sentiments as the delineators of moral experience. Throop and Zigon (2014) critique framings of ordinary ethics in everyday, mundane practices (Das, 2012) as creating a binary between transcendent and imminent action mirroring Durkheim’s distinction between the sacred and profane. Instead, moral experience highlights the feelings of responsibility. In the case of Daya, it

is the fear of *pap* combined with the feeling of ambivalence towards the idea that delineates her actions. The moral experience of responsibility, ambiguity and fear create an ethics of care towards spaces and family members during menstruation.

The moral experience of avoiding spaces during menstruation shifts feelings of confusion or ambivalence towards active engagement with the sacred, rather than viewing it as a binary of resistance. After describing *pap*, Daya clarifies: “I don’t think we can directly change it [avoiding spaces during menstruation], because that concept is built up from the ancient time...but some of the people are trying to change these things. I guess even my friends are doing the same things, even in the menstruation cycle, they used to take *tīkā*.” Daya distances herself from these actions by deferring the ideas as deriving from her ancestors as “ancient time.” Through this framing, Daya demonstrates how the upholding of moral expectations around menstruation through generations. Her friends challenge expectations by taking blessing. This moral experience of ancestral presence as a source of responsibility is negotiated through practices surrounding menstruation, such as avoidance.

Sat on Samira Aunty’s balcony, I asked why one must not touch the god during menstruation. “This respect God, it goes to only this. I guess when you fast, when you do things like fasting and dress up nicely, you’re kind of showing your best self to the god. But when you’re menstruating and not as nice, then you want to stay further away.” In Chapter 4, I established how the body is experienced as the self among the Newar. During menstruation, the body is leaking this matter meaning the body is “not as nice”. Samira Aunty’s explanation towards menstruation locates the avoidance of the gods during menstruation as located in the moral experience of “showing your best self” referring to dressing smart, wearing make-up and presenting the body as sustained through the habits of feminine propriety in Sankhu (see Figure 35). This relocates untouchability in the moral experience of avoiding spaces as concealing and presenting the body, as self. “Maybe that.” Samira follows. Her addendum to her explanation expresses the ambiguity around this perspective, demonstrating that this is a relationship she must form on her terms to the gods.



Figure 35 Newar women with hair braided and dressed in sari throw rice as offerings during Narsingha worship, September 2023.

In the introduction of this thesis, I began with the pilgrimage where women were unable to attend because they were menstruating. Through the lens of caste, these actions are complicit in caste oppression. However, through moral experience, untouchability during menstruation is an active engagement with the gods. Newar women negotiate avoidance of spaces during menstruation through moral experience. The feelings of responsibility, obligation and confusion surrounding these practices is formative of their sense of self, as the body. Through this moral experience, women cultivate a relationship with the divine within, serving as a monitor of their actions. Managing menstruation is an affective experience located in sentiments of fear, responsibility and ambiguity.

“The negative side of the gods.”

As the light fades, Rushka sits forward as she characterises the act of using black magic to make families sick. “It’s like on the negative side of the gods.” The perversion of the gods’ power, such as through *boksi* or black magic, threatens bodily integrity. Instead of a binary between good and bad, Rushka is describing how the dissolving potential of the gods can be destructive. In the same vein, avoiding temples during menstruation reinforces the ritual

boundaries of these spaces. Intentional actions such as sacrificial blood instils blessings and the creative, relational potential of the gods.

In this chapter, I began with how across ethnicities and castes in Sankhu, women must not enter temple spaces or touch the gods during menstruation. By exploring how menstruation is situated within the iconography of the local and founding goddess of Sankhu, Vajrayoginī, I demonstrated the untameable, expansive power of the god and how it must be contained. Menstrual blood, as “creative formlessness” (Douglas, 1966) embodies this power, producing a repelling effect towards the gods. Women avoid temple spaces as embodied boundaries preventing the dissolving potential of menstrual blood protecting against dangerous consequences, even death. Due to the destabilising, physiological effects of menstruation, women cannot embody the gods during events such as the *devī pyakhān*. This excludes women from positions of ritual authority which are managed by the *vajrācarya*.

Building on Shrestha (1996) argument on the importance of the invisible during the *devī pyakhān* as evoking the affective experience integral to the dances and engagement with the gods, I argue that avoidance of spaces during menstruation is another layer. Avoidance of spaces during menstruation is integral to cultivating the embodied boundaries delineating relationships to the gods. In my discussion of the heart as the locus of moral experience, the god within, I demonstrate how women negotiate these avoidance practices with examples of attending festivals or taking *tikā* during menstruation. Through the moral experience of menstruation, women cultivate their bodies and therefore themselves through embodied awareness the self, body and impermanence. Managing menstruation, and therefore menstrual waste, is an affective experience as the sacred.

Returning once more to the *devī pyakhān*, large crowds gather as the hour approaches 6am. Most women have completed their morning *pūjās*, the occasional sound of steam from a rice cooker behind the music, crowds and dancers breaking the usual routine soundscapes, so familiar after 4 months living in Shalka tole. I step onto the raised brick platforms feeling fatigue after watching the *devī pyakhān* since 9pm the night before. Now, the dancers perform the final dances, their sequences with new rhythm meeting the crowd exaltation. Suddenly, the lights turn off. A power cut, frequent during the monsoon season. There is a contemporary threat to the bodily integrity of Sankhu, represented by the electric lights, cookers and a sign with “Nepal Electricity Authority.” In the penultimate chapter, through the lens of menstrual hygiene, I explore how infrastructures extend into the town revealing the impact of unmitigated property development and menstrual hygiene interventions within rapid urban expansion.

Chapter 8

Urban: Menstrual Hygiene

Walking along the dusty, pebbled path from Sanagaun to Ukhatar, I pass a ditch where plastic gathers. The thin stream tugs at dumped sliders, plastic bags and old noodle packets charcoaled by half-lit fires. The air is thick as sunlight refracts in a warm, hazy glow from the plumes of pollution produced by Kathmandu stagnating in the dry winter air. As I take my camera out to record the image, I hear a call behind “*namaste didi*” (greetings sister), turning towards a cheerful wave from a neighbour, Sita. She often joins for “*aga time*” (fire time), a colloquial phrase Prekshya the daughter in my host home invented to refer to time spent huddled round the fire in winter, reminiscent of how she gathered with her neighbours before rebuilding their homes post-earthquake. On these evenings, Sita sits silent staring into the fire with her two brothers, attempting a few English phrases. As she hurries to catch up, clutching a small blue plastic bag, I ask her about her day and if she is returning from school. She replies that she had not been in school that day. Her pace matches mine as we stroll past the cow sheds producing milk for the local tea shop to the echoes of predictable barking from the dog tied to the neighbouring home.

Thud. My neighbour’s rhythmic pacing stops. A rustle, and I turn to see her stooped over with the blue bag split in her hand and its contents scattered on the ground. She grabs a bright orange packet partially wrapped in newspaper and folds it into the split bag. I recognise the Whisper branded sanitary pad. To conceal the menstrual pad, akin to how alcohol is concealed, the shopkeeper wrapped it in a piece of old, tattered newspaper leaving a distinctive dusty residue on the fingers, before placing it into the blue plastic bag. If male, the shopkeeper leaves the purchase on the counter, and rather than taking the money in the hand as is usually customary, right hand supported by a gentle touch of the elbow with the left hand, indicating respect, he gestures to the counter and places the money on it. Sita gathers the spilt contents on the path, holding the broken bag close to her body and covering the sanitary pad. I say nothing and we continue walking down the pebbled path as I glance back at the exposed plastic on the wayside.

The blue plastic bag splitting marks an infrastructural breakdown revealing the purchased products, the layers used to contain the packets and that Sita, or someone in her household, was menstruating. Infrastructure holds together components through a shared function (Larkins, 2013). The sanitary pads, tattered newspaper and blue plastic bag form the infrastructures facilitating menstrual hygiene. According to Amin and Thrift (2002) technologies form the “city”

in this case the urban metropolis of Kathmandu. Taking Larkin's definition, together these technologies are infrastructure. These infrastructures, alongside trends towards urban residence, lead to an "increased visibility of women" (Momsen, 2004: 172) in new spatial roles from the division of labour, gendered relations and resource use (Momsen, 2004). Infrastructural breakdown, such as power outages, water shortages or lack of access to toilets unequally affects women's experiences (Truelove and Sabhlok, 2014). Datta (2016) frames these shortcomings as a form of infrastructural violence where disconnections or absence of infrastructure marginalises, heightens risks and places pressure on women's time. Inadequate hygiene facilities, knowledge dissemination and waste facilities present a form of infrastructural, or "intimate violence" (Datta, 2016) towards menstrual hygiene. According to UNICEF (2019), the three components of menstrual hygiene absorbent materials, privacy and disposal facilities with emphasis on safety and convenience. How then do menstrual products extend into women's lives in Sankhu? What is the relationship between menstrual hygiene and urban expansion? How do women navigate interventions and products for managing menstruation?

In this chapter, I demonstrate how menstrual products, as technologies extending into women's lives allowing discreteness, accessibility and travel (Appel, 2018) forming the urban metropolis. First, I demonstrate that women's choices of sanitary products in Sankhu as "intimate infrastructures" (Schwenkel, 2018) reveal a growing middle class. Building on Bear's (2015) argument that infrastructure works on time, I show how women temporally frame product choices through nostalgia, future aspirations and needs. Second, leaning on Petrayna's (2002) conceptualisation of "biological citizenship" demonstrates how knowledge infrastructures mark the ideological extension of the urban into the lives of women in Sankhu. Third, I show how disposal in Sankhu transforms the spatial roles of women, where women's bodies become a form of infrastructure (Truelove and Sabhlok, 2014). Menstrual hygiene infrastructures reveal the subject positionings of women against urbanisation within the Kathmandu Valley.

Products

A sleepy afternoon in Sankhu, the sun journeys towards the West casting long shadows occupied by stray dogs resting peacefully on their sides, their limbs stretched out against the dust filled paths. The dust coating the counter reveals itself as the light sinks into a warm, golden glow. The packages of sanitary pads peer out the dusty counter through the brown hue formed from years of air pollution from the road. The eclectic shop offers noodle packets, food and hair accessories. Pressed against the glass behind the sketched patterns of dust are packages of sanitary pads

surrounded by brightly coloured companions, each marking a different brand, and thus, different possibilities. Orange marks the most popular brand Whisper; imported from India: affordable, modest, functional and popular for its high absorbency advertised through its claims of leak protection and “germ-lock” technology. The packaging includes an image of its hidden, wrapped sanitary pads lined up like jailed convicts, expressing its ability to contain. Bright pink signals the presence of Safety, a Nepal based brand, notably bulkier but containing a “cotton cover pulp.” No glimpses into its contents, just a lotus pattern. A few other colours might be available, such as the tranquil tones of dark green, still Whisper but promising a hygienic, odourless experience. Only in Kathmandu or Sathimart (supermarket brand) down the road can one encounter more brands or other products such as Safety tampons (non-applicator) focused on “swim, play or dance” or the menstrual cup made of 100% medical grade silicone. Across the shops of Sankhu, there are no shortage of the bright colours signifying sanitary pads.

In this section, I explore the choices and preferences for sanitary products for women in Sankhu. I consider how the affordability of sanitary pads appeals to consumers participating in a growing middle class. However, building on this, I show that comfort plays a primary role in brand preference where the sensory, material experience of pads mean users form attachments. Yet, the “cloth” remains popular despite the availability of sanitary pads. With new products such as menstrual cups entering the market, I argue that women are framing their choices through temporal registers of Sankhu’s historicity, future aspirations and present needs. Menstrual hygiene infrastructures reveal how menstrual waste is situated within product choices based on class, comfort and self-fashioning.

Having completed our morning Zumba class, Usha, Manisha and Parbitra Aunty sit on the floor by the speakers. Samira Aunty stayed behind with Sabina to help translate, familiar with my questions from our previous conversations. I asked about their preferential menstrual product. “*kopada*” (cloth) Usha Aunty replies. Sabina clarifies “old cloths,” sharing that she also used cloths when she was younger. Predicting my next question, Samira Aunty asks, “*kina change pad garne. sajilo?*” (why change to pad? Is it easier?). “*Sajilo*” (easy) they chorus. However, sanitary pads used to be expensive “for us” Usha Aunty adds. Manisha Aunty asks “*kati parsa*” (how much?). “40npr” Samira responds. “*hora?*” (really?). Parbitra Aunty explains that “*aghi*” (before), disposable pads were 40npr and “*ahile*” (now), they are at least 80npr.⁵⁶ The exclamation around menstrual products express nostalgia and financial strain of these conveniences. The consumption of mass-produced consumer goods, such as sanitary pads, establishes oneself as part

⁵⁶ Npr (Nepalese rupees) is the official currency in Nepal.

of the emerging middle class in the urban spaces of Nepal (Liechty, 2003). In her analysis of market trade in Sankhu, Rankin (2003) posits how market forces mean houses have surplus to finance goods meaning women purchase commodities in a “class-based regime of value” (Rankin, 2003: 122). Through this lens, sanitary products mark the expansion of the urban into Sankhu through participation in consumer culture of the middle class of Kathmandu.

The visibility of sanitary pads in shop counters and their “biographical possibilities” (Kopytoff, 1983), expresses how sanitary pads are productive and contingent objects, meaning the colours, materials and brands participate in choices and trajectories of women in Sankhu. Appadurai (1986) argues that objects carry social messages in the large-scale politics of reputation, where political and commercial interests impose themselves through commodities. As a commodity on the shelf there is no prospect of pollution. The risk of contamination is during purchase when it is handed across the counter. The shopkeeper becomes a “critical agent” (Appadurai, 1986:33) sending the social message that the material has transformed as a product with the capacity to move and extend into the lives of women. The variety of colours on the packets of sanitary pads conceal how the primary means and expression of participation is cash. As the middle class expands, it homogenises with the consumer culture of Kathmandu. Through this lens, the choice of disposable sanitary pad is participation in the urban middle class.

Manisha interjects that she finds the pad uncomfortable at times because of the stickiness. With the cloths, there is no stickiness. “*Kun brand?*” (which brand?). Usha, the most outspoken, responds “Safety.” Similar to Samira Aunty, rashes in monsoon season are of great concern and the cotton material in Safety address this. There is a pause. Talasa Aunty follows: “Whisper” (referring to the brand). “*Ramro, sajilo.*” (good, easy.) Usha echoes, referring again to the convenience, efficacy and disposability of this absorbent brand. Libiron and Lepawski (2022) suggest how disposability is taught to consumers depending on the infrastructure, such as the packages, that can be thrown away. The packaging that surrounds the Whisper or Safety brands facilitates its “easy,” convenient usage. The social message that disposability carries is convenience, speed and discretion (Appadurai, 1986). “Easy” becomes disposability.

Perched on the rooftop of her home, Samira Aunty, with whom I attend the *Kumārī pūjā*, brings out a tray with biscuits. We sit on the rug and bathe in the morning rays. She loves the peace in this place characterising it as “like a retreat”. Her children are at school and husband at work, so we had some time. After discussing the changes in the area such as newly constructed buildings visible toward Vajrayoginī temple, I steer the conversation towards menstruation asking what product she prefers during her menstrual cycle. She responds directly “pad” as a heuristic for disposable sanitary pads. “*Dherai din samma rakhda chai itching huné ani ahile chai tyo problem*

akocha. Aba sachi rya chu menstruation cup use garum ki sachi rya chu.” (The pads cause itching when used for a long time. Now, I am facing such problems. I am thinking of using the menstruation cups soon.) Samira prefers to use the Safety brand with cotton material meaning it is comfortable depending on the heaviness of her menstrual cycle. Sipping her tea, Samira explains *“Ahile yo deute moigne kasai period chai derai regular, aghi pachi justai regular chai na huné raicha. Tyai bhayera chai, khasai hole chi lagdaina dinko matlab dherai flow na huné bhayera chai tyai tik lagcha.”* (Now, these two months my period has not been very regular. Before when period is not regular the flow is less so I don’t need to change it regularly.)

Samira’s explanation how the sanitary pad intimates her menstrual cycle resonates with “intimate infrastructure” (Schwenkel, 2018) meaning that it is an affectively charged technological system. The intimacy concerns how attachments to brands and materials embody values around convenience and hygiene. Attachments, such as to menstrual brands like Safety are based on the product potential, such as its promise of care, discretion and comfort. Whisper has a floral, clinical smell purposefully to conceal the unhygienic menstrual blood. Smells cultivate strong associations and relations to temporalities and place (Pink, 2008). The smell of sanitary products, like Whisper sanitary pads which are perfumed, form an intimate infrastructure through the smell’s resonances. Comfort, through the commercial advertising of the sanitary pad, evokes ideas of cleanliness and femininity. Yet, the smell of the perfumed pads is so visceral it might attract dogs barking or women expressed fears they might be smelt on the bus. By viewing Samira’s choices through the lens of intimate infrastructure, sanitary pads extend into the lives of women in Sankhu through how women form attachments to brands. The affective charge of sanitary products, as intimate infrastructures, resides in their material form.

The justifications for the choice of products from women around availability, price and comfort reveal broader forces imposing themselves on the lives and how they, in turn, work on these infrastructures. With infrastructures mobilised to manage populations, such as in the example of pipes extending into the home as a social and representative extension of the socialist State (Collier, 2011), the visibility and availability of sanitary pads in Sankhu extend into the lives of women. Investigating the aesthetics of pipes extending into homes as a social and representative extension of the socialist state in Russia. Collier’s discussion resonates with how Gupta (2015) presents rural villages are connected to the national grid in India through cables. In both cases, infrastructure, as pipes or cables, connects communities to political forces through material forms. She posts how electricity marking a growing middle class in India facilitates the physical extension of the State into people’s homes. In Sankhu, I initially suggested that the purchasing of sanitary products participates in a growing middle class. The sensory experiences of smell and comfort, the

pads extend into women's lives as intimate infrastructure. Yet, leaning on Gupta and Collier's arguments highlights how through the material forms of sanitary products, as infrastructure, are urban governance.

Nevertheless, sanitary products therefore also facilitate negotiation of governance. A temporal register reveals itself through Ratna Aunty, who practiced yoga with Sabina and I in Chapter 4, account of menstrual products. Ratna Aunty speaks in a brisk manner as she recounts "*pahile*" (In the old time) how she used the cloth and "*ahile*" (now) they have pads. Regardless, she must wash them both before giving them to the dustbin collectors. "They wash it in order to not feel disgusted." Sabina clarified. Ratna reminisces how, before, "pad chaina!" (No pads!), following, in contrast to the accounts of Usha Aunty, "*pad dherai garo cha*," (pads are very difficult) adding that "*cloth dherai garo ho*." (the cloth is very difficult). For her, not having a menstrual period means she is "free" from bodily rhythms (see Chapter 4) and dealing with "*garo*" (difficult) sanitary products. Asked what brand, Ratna pauses. "*Pahile?*" (too long ago?) Sabina offers, before turning to me asserting: "Long time ago." "Whisper!" Ratna interjects.

The cloth is a heuristic for any piece of torn fabric, usually from an old dress used to catch menstrual blood. The temporal register, as "old" refers to its association with older generations and as a reused object. This resonates with how in India, clothes are woven as an act of creation and worship (Bayly, 1986). Tarlo (1996) argues how the constant choices surrounding clothes in India, historically situated within ideas of colonialism and expectations of female propriety become a means of identity formation. As women choose their clothes, they participate in historically situated ideas. Niruna in her discussion of sanitary pads explains that "in past day, and when I started my period, back then, the pad, we didn't use pad, okay? Because there is the cotton fabric, a piece of cotton fabric. I used that." Only when her sister started using the pad did Niruna switch product, choosing "safety" because of the cotton properties. The cotton resonates with the comfort provided by the old cloths. In Sankhu, the menstrual cloths are torn from old clothes repurposed into an item of concealment. Menstrual cloths embody the labour and creation within the used clothes that absorbs menstrual blood. To choose the "cloth" is an affective commitment to Sankhu's historicity embodied in layered infrastructures.

The "old cloths" from repurposed materials contrast to the disposability of sanitary pads. One former embodies labour as the other contains the infrastructure of its quick removal. In her analysis of the speeding up or slowing down of the plights of fisherman on rivers in India, Bear (2015) demonstrates how infrastructures work on time. She shows how the fisherman navigate obstructing bureaucracies that facilitate their catches within the river's physical terrain. Through this lens, the "cloths" and sanitary pads, as infrastructure, work on time. The menstrual cloth is

affectively charged as a nostalgic remnant of the past, “the pad” – cheap, available and disposable – offers ease and convenience. Yet, there is a tension in how the disposability built into the sanitary pad is inconvenient in Sankhu. In Chapter 3, I discussed how Daya and Sabina must wash their disposable sanitary pads to prevent anyone touching their menstrual blood. Disposability carries with it a “technical and spatial fantasy” (Hawkins, 2001:10) that becomes something to be managed. In its attempt to treat menstruation as a technical problem with the sanitary pad as a technology to remove blood (Hawkins, 2001), the sanitary pad works on time by offering a swift disposal of menstrual blood.

Among the youth of Sankhu, the “cloth” embodies a further temporal register. Sitting opposite each other in De Hakuz, the fan whirred gently. I put on my jumper and hot chiya arrives; the cool, dry winter days saturating the restaurant. Arya has just completed her bachelors and lives with her brother in Sankhu. She is 21 and dreams of earning enough money to build her own home in Sankhu. The efficacy and absorbency of the pad is the motivation of her choice of product. “I use Whisper,” referring to the sanitary pad brand “it works for 24 hours.” “*Sajilo?*” (easy?) I ask, echoing the answers of Usha, Manisha and Tulusa Aunty. “Normal” she responds, referring to how easy it is to use the pads. Leaning across the table, she shares that if ever she has a problem she will use cloths. At the breakdown of the sanitary pad, as intimate infrastructure, the “cloth” becomes a baseline means to ensure that she can manage her menstrual cycle, a safety net, rather than an evoking of the past. In this sense, Arya is working on infrastructure by using her sanitary product choice to create the infrastructure that serves her needs. The sound of the fans pauses in De Hakuz and the TV goes quiet. The restaurant owner looks up from his phone, now disconnected from internet and there is a pause. Arya, a migrant herself to the town, working for a living and distinct from Newar communities in Sankhu may not hold the same anxieties as the Aunties but continues to use the “cloth”. In the same way that she creates a safety net for herself, working for a living and taking care of her brother, she holds the “cloth” to protect herself from future infrastructural breakdown. The “cloth” becomes a pragmatic tool mirroring the strategies for navigating her future in Sankhu.

With new products introduced to Sankhu, such as the menstrual cup, new opportunities arise to work on infrastructure by adapting technologies into the existing practices in Sankhu. Laskshi *didi* and I perch on motorbikes as she explains her choice to change the menstrual cup is an investment because it saves her money and it is better for the environment. The menstrual cup is minimum 800 npr but the choice for investment meets Lakshi’s astuteness

for financial concerns, with a master's in accounting.⁵⁷ Beyond the one-side trajectory delineated by Leichty where consumption choices are concerned with establishing in the urban middle class, Lakshi frames her choice within broader responsibilities towards creating waste because of the built-in disposability of “pads” and encourages her friends to do the same. Price indicates her commitment to the environment and her participation in the middle class.

The justification of product choice around comfort exposes how women negotiate the biological realities of their bodies, with varying flows and discomfort from rashes, through the choice of product. This “biological citizenship” (Petrayna, 2002) refers to how people refashion themselves through their practices within biopolitical regimes as governance that manages the body. Specifically, Petrayna explores the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster when in 1986 a nuclear power station in Ukraine exploded causing the spread of radiation and abandonment of the town. Petrayna discerns how bureaucracy and economic interests constitute the disaster as an impersonal force, depoliticising and pressing on the bodies suffering from radiation. The bureaucratic and legal attempts to regulate the aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster attempts to make bodies predictable through medical statistics and categories. Under the refracted effects of the Chernobyl disaster, her interlocutors refashion themselves within this biopolitical regime from victims to citizens in the wake of Chernobyl.



Figure 36 Woman walks through Sangaldvāraka. On the right is a sign for Nepal electricity authority, December 2023.

⁵⁷ As of the time of this fieldwork in 2023, the available brand for menstrual cup is Safety.

Sankhu is a markedly different context to Chernobyl, yet Petrayna's argument speaks to how sanitary products are one technology by which the urban, as the metropolis, extends into Sankhu as an impersonal, commercial force. As intimate infrastructure, sanitary pads are brought into the rhythms of women's lives through smell, comfort and ease. The disposability of the product signifies an impersonal force providing a technology to remove menstrual blood. The biological realities of women's bodies, as menstruating, becomes a depoliticised, technical problem. Through the material decisions around comfort, women refashion their subject positionings. Yet, women also negotiate product choices through their lens of future aspirations (safety net), nostalgia (historicity) and needs (comfort). Moving between products, instead of passively participating in a middle-class consumer culture, women assert their relations to menstrual products, thus refashioning themselves. The impersonal force of urbanisation mediated through the "series of containments" (Petrayna, 2002: 217), producing the biological regime in which women refashion themselves through their choice of sanitary products.

Knowledge

Perched on the side of the desk, I am delivering a session on waste management in collaboration with BlueWaste2Value. Through the manager's connections to the private school, we were granted access to deliver the session in the summer months. The afternoon sun threads through the windows, the pale-yellow concrete walls leaning in towards the classroom of around 20 students from class 10 (age 15-16). There is difficulty setting up the projector searching for an extension lead. I introduce myself. "What is your favourite food?" someone asks. "Pani puri" I reply to a room of delight. The projector connected, the teacher introduces me to the class as speaking on women's health. I feel a little embarrassed as I did not want to patronise the class, but I step forward to ask what they understand from the term "Menstrual Hygiene Management". The class is heavily gendered with the boys sitting on benches to my left, the girls to the right. "It is a natural process." One of the boys speaks up, saying he is familiar because of his mother and sister. I set up a quiz on acronyms and the students struggle with the answers. "It is not discussed in our culture," the teacher exclaims. At this point, one of the girls stands up straight and offers her view that there are lots of pads available meaning she has never missed school.

With the focus on products alone insufficient for changing attitudes in Nepal (Parker and Standing, 2024), schools in Nepal remain key infrastructures for menstrual knowledge dissemination (Mukherjee et al, 2020). The spread and creation of knowledge around menstrual hygiene is a form "knowledge infrastructure" (Edwards et al, 2013) referring to the technologies,

resources and systems for disseminating information. Within Sankhu, there are multiple knowledge infrastructures: the formal school space, familial knowledge and workshop interventions. In this section, I discuss the dissemination of menstrual hygiene knowledge in schools in Sankhu. Second, knowledge dissemination around menstruation through family, peers and the internet. Finally, how workshop interventions become pedagogical spaces to negotiate the dynamics. Menstrual waste participates in the knowledge infrastructures of Sankhu as a space to refashion oneself.

The workshop focus was to raise awareness and discussion surrounding waste management in Sankhu. Knowledge infrastructures reveal themselves only when the classroom empties. Suntol *dai* delivers his presentation for BlueWaste2Value on waste disposal, lifting a wastepaper bin in the classroom to explain the difference between “wet waste” and “dry waste.” The students listen until the bell rings out, its shrill signal piercing down the corridors. Suntol packs the projector and speaks about possible future waste workshops with the teacher. The class dismissed, eight girls from the class approach and perch themselves on the desks to share about their experiences of menstruation. The same girl who spoke up during the class expressed herself with confidence, explaining that she sometimes uses pads and sometimes uses cloths. They did have sanitary pads available in the school but the quality was not good so they prefer to buy them. The main problem is in summer it gets very humid. This is when she prefers to use “the cloth” because it is more comfortable. I asked if any had ever missed school because of their menstrual cycle and they all shake their heads. Another girl speaks up that she has used the menstrual cup. The main difficulty is that the facilities in the school make it difficult to change pads or a cup so they need something with good absorbency. When speaking of menstrual pain, all share a grimace in collective memory of that feeling but none of the students ever take painkillers.

In my discussion of sanitary products, I argued that they participate in a biopolitical regime of women’s bodies, drawing on Petrayna’s (2013) concept of biological citizenship to argue how women participate and form themselves through sanitary products. In 2019, the Nepal State demonstrated a desire to promote menstrual hygiene by distributing free sanitary pads to 1.3 million girls framed as supporting girl’s educational aspirations (Water Aid, 2020). By ensuring access to free sanitary products, girls would be less likely to miss school during their menstrual cycle. With the argument that sanitary products are a form of infrastructure, their mass provision by the Nepal State is experienced through infrastructure as “infrastructural citizenship” (Lemanski, 2018). However, within the schools in Sankhu, the girls described these pads as inadequate for menstruation, preferring brands such as *Whisper* because of its absorbency. This experience of service provision by the State reflects a disconnect and distrust prevalent since the 2015 earthquake

(Shrestha et al. 2017). Yet, infrastructural citizenship expresses how girls and women participate in the State through pedagogical spaces.

The school marks a gendered space where girls must renegotiate the choice of menstrual products, water facilities, privacy and knowledge. Temporally speaking, schools are an intimate infrastructure in how they are evocative through the buildings, sounds and memories. In the case of Sabina, the dance teacher, she reminisces on how she had to sit at the desks perched on her side to allow her substantial cloth and pad. Although she never missed school, and with her confident nature found the incident “hilarious” it remains a mark upon her memory as a space in which she must navigate her menstrual cycle. The silences, sideways glances, and statement from the teacher indicates a communication disjuncture within educational institutions. Rushka’s statement summarises the crushing weight of these spaces as upholding conservative ideals within the town. “Their teaching pattern is the same. Yeah, there is nothing changed. Like they are just pretending to be changed, but nothing is changed. So they will get the same education that I got from them.” The girls’ volunteering to discuss menstrual hygiene after the class demonstrates a desire for expression compared to their reticence within the mixed gendered space. Within the quiet conversation of its female students emerges how menstrual hygiene knowledge infrastructures are a site of negotiation and self-fashioning against the infrastructural citizenship within schools.

Outside of school, families often share knowledge about menstruation. For example, Prekshya explained how her mother had thought she had lost her virginity when she rode her bike and that is why she had started menstruating. Throughout my conversations with women such as Prekshya in their 20s across Shankharapur, knowledge on menstruation is deferred to family members, “forefathers” or an ambiguous “they” or “the society [of Sankhu].” In Sabina’s case, she defines her mother and sister as a primary reason for the habits she follows now. With these expectations in tension with Sabina’s aspirations in business and travel, and Prekshya’s plans beyond her master’s, both measure a critical distance through these addendums without relinquishing their devotion to the gods. The ambiguity within these addendums as the “forefathers” expresses a hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). Hegemony is useful for reflecting on how knowledge becomes accepted. In Sankhu, the hegemony of the “forefathers” impresses upon women, like Prekshya and Sabina, must redefine themselves against these expectations embodied within how they choose to apply knowledge on menstrual hygiene.

For Maya, sat on her bed in Sulke Khola, negotiating her mother is the primary reason for upholding expectations around menstrual hygiene. “Slowly it’s changing.” She explains. “And this is good.” “You feel it its good?” I ask. “The change is good. Not that tradition.

Superstitions, beliefs.” She is not blaming her mother, though with humour expresses frustration at having to follow certain expectations but recognises how these beliefs are shifting within the broader social landscape. Embedded within knowledge infrastructures around menstrual hygiene is a drive for autonomy, dreams and the “work of hope” (Pederson, 2012) of women in Sankhu. Hanging out with youth in Ulaanbaatar, the capital city named “urban Mongolia,” Pederson follows them as they spend a day exchanging credits and debt throughout the city. Their mode of transport, an old Cadillac car, becomes a metonym for youth aspirations and the shared experience of connecting within this economic, urban milieu. Through this lens, menstrual hygiene participates in the work of hope for women in Sankhu. Their distancing from their “forefathers” or “it is our culture” through addendums distinguishes from their future aspirations towards the future, located within interactions and conversations around menstrual hygiene.

This work of hope through menstrual hygiene is also shared by senior women in Sankhu. New possibilities for managing menstruation reveal themselves in informal conversations outside formal pedagogical settings. Usha Aunty, Manisha Aunty and Parbitra Aunty reconsider new ideas embedded within the possibilities of the menstrual cup. In the dance studio space, following on from our conversation on menstrual products I asked if Samira or Manisha had used a menstrual cup. With a quizzical look, they turn to Sabina and she mimes the process of folding and inserting the cup into the body using her hands to show each step in the action, as she had explained to me. When there is a lack of access to infrastructure, women will step in through social care and informal financial redistribution (Datta, 2016). In this line of argument, Datta (2016) defines “intimate infrastructures,” instead of evocative, sensory forms creating attachments (Schwenkel, 2016) as replacement services. Moreover, Datta posits that a lack of formal infrastructures coincides with gendered, infrastructural violence. For instance, in Kerala, India, the absence of sewers meant women had to dig pits for waste disposal placing them in vulnerable positions. In the case of the Zumba studio, the lack of access to menstrual cups is replaced with knowledge dissemination between the dancers.⁵⁸ Within this space women redefine their infrastructural citizenship, and therefore themselves, through their choice and knowledge of menstrual products.

⁵⁸ It should be noted that Tiktok was also a growing mode of knowledge dissemination in Nepal until it was banned in 2023. Rabin’s (2024) study demonstrates the growing influence of social media on youth menstrual health education. Concerning menstruation, my interlocutors never cited TikTok as a form of knowledge hence I do not discuss it here. However, it would be productive to explore this further.

On a separate occasion in Samara resort, Suntol describes an intervention undertaken through Sankhu Leo club, a social enterprise group in Sankhu. I had encountered the Sankhu Jaycees and Sankhu Leo club at waste clear-ups and blood donation activities throughout my stay in Sankhu. “We make sanitary pads through local clothes because this safety, what it's called branded things also make allergies for girls, so that might be a problem.” In an investigation of menstrual hygiene interventions in Nepal, Baumann et al. (2018) claims blanket menstrual health programs are insufficient because they ignore the diversity of practices between castes and ethnicities as the primary driver of menstrual knowledge. Within the Sankhu Jaycees example, the protocol for sharing knowledge operated on the “Teach-the trainer” model of UNDP; to teach a portion of students who could then teach others. “We teach them how to make a sanitary pad in our room and how we can use it and reuse it.” I asked if it was a successful campaign. “It’s good...whenever we teach those things to them, so they get little knowledge. But little knowledge about the menstruation cycle.” Supporting Baumann et al. (2018), Suntol highlights how the campaign is useful for including women but expresses the need for specific approaches towards knowledge around the menstrual cycle.

Workshop interventions are reliant on pre-existing knowledge infrastructures. In Sankhu, workshop interventions by NGOs frequent the town inviting residents to participate with the promise of a free lunch. It is the final day of the USAID Environmental workshop, focused on pollution and waste. The warm, humid air hangs stagnant as I enter the large hall behind Samara Gardens. The round tables lined up with a display of colourful items made from recycled materials. This event has many female interlocutors since they have availability in the daytime. Ratna Aunty spots me and waves me over to sit with her group. This is the fourth session. The leaders walked over and asked if I was part of the NGO. I replied that I was living in Sankhu and continued to chat with the aunties from Zumba. The sessions are to establish active members of the community who might facilitate future leadership and community advocacy around the issues of waste and pollution. The weight of Petrayna’s (2002) approach is that it acknowledges citizenship as participated in by the impersonal force and peopling navigate bureaucracies, rather than just the sole extension of the State. Workshop interventions reach into Sankhu participating in (knowledge) infrastructure citizenship. Nevertheless, Ratna Aunty and the female attendees bend the space to socialise, constituting themselves through these knowledge infrastructures.

As the Nepal State, international NGOs like USAID and the urban metropolis extend into Sankhu through workshops and knowledge dissemination, women renegotiate this infrastructural citizenship. For women in their 20s, menstrual hygiene knowledge participates in their imagination of future aspirations. For women and girls across Sankhu, spaces such as the

Zumba studio, informal networks and workshops create opportunities for new knowledge dissemination around menstrual hygiene. To this end, models such as Teacher-to-Training are effective because of how they engage and mobilise existing socialites.

Disposal

Reaching the steps outside my host home in Sankhu around 7:00 am, I encounter Lokisha Aunty descending the stairs holding a small plastic bag. “*Phohor ayo*” (waste coming) she utters, pointing towards the square. I rush upstairs and grab the black bag of plastic, packages and containers I collected over the past week. The shrill, repetitive auditory signal of the van announces its arrival down the street. I run downstairs joining men and women clutching small plastic bags as they walk towards the van. Once a week, the BlueWaste2Value van follows a fixed route around Ward 7, coinciding with Sankhu town, collecting waste from households who pay the membership. Two employees stand in the van and take the waste from each community member throwing it to the back, occasionally emptying out the contents. Each subscription paying member are instructed to separate their waste into “Dry waste” and “Wet waste.” Residents specify that they will hand over a closed bag inside the bag with the dry waste containing washed menstrual pads to the BlueWaste2Value van. The van stays in the square a few moments before advancing into the next *tole*. My neighbour greets me asking if I had taken tea as we walk back our homes. The bags are thrown to the back of the truck as it continues its slow journey towards the depot, a steel structure on government land next to the cremation grounds by the river. The roof shields its workers from the sun but during warm days, especially in monsoon season is a smell of decay. Dogs feast on rotting food and as flies hover. The waste workers separate recyclable materials – to be sold to vendors – from non-recyclable to be transported and dumped in Narwakot in Bidor municipality, Bagmati province, approximately 70km from Sankhu. Any organic materials, terms “wet waste” is added to the composting machine that rumbles within the room. At the front of the BlueWaste2Value is an office and a small garden with plant pots made of plastic bottles and a small seating area from used tyres.

The foregoing discussion on menstrual hygiene established through the lens of infrastructure how schools, sanitary products and workshops facilitate the extension of the urban, and therefore the State, into women’s lives. Women use temporal framings of sanitary products, deferral of ideas to family or “forefathers” and appropriation of workshop space. In this final discussion, I focus on disposal infrastructures within Sankhu because it is part of the UNICEF 2019 definition of menstrual hygiene. Disposal is best understood through an infrastructure lens,

as it situates the removal processes within systems, technologies, and facilities (Elledge et al. 2018). I will now consider how disposal transforms the spatial roles of women in Sankhu through menstrual hygiene.

Disposal facilities across the Kathmandu Valley are considered inadequate to deal with its rapidly expanding population resulting in groundwater contamination (Karki, 2015). The BlueWaste2Value facility established in Shankharapur municipality in 2018 is a collective initiative across the Kathmandu Valley to deal with waste. These exist in tandem with multiple modes of disposal in Shankharapur municipality. Informal wastepickers collect scrap metal and items, usually attached to bicycles to resold. These have no interactions with the BlueWaste2Value collections but participate in the disposal infrastructures of Sankhu. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, the lack of roads access to Ukhatar meant residents must find alternative disposal methods such as burning waste or transporting it to dumpsites. Waste collection has also had stigma associated with it as within caste roles, waste collection is associated with low, untouchable castes (Pandey, 2004). The informal wastepickers carry such a stigma while BlueWaste2Value, as a social enterprise connected to Kathmandu and workshops in the town does not hold the same concern. Schwenkel (2018) observes a similar phenomenon in her analysis of urban infrastructure in Vinh, Vietnam. Focusing on mass housing, she observes how Vietnamese workers do not get as much stigma for handling garbage because the residents are migrants to the area. In the “choreography of waste removal” (Shwenkel, 2018: 347), the boundaries become blurred between official and informal waste collection, thus reducing the stigma towards waste workers. Applied to Sankhu, this argument suggests that the dependencies across these different disposal infrastructures disintegrates caste-based roles, expectations and stigmas.

Recent disposal infrastructure present possibilities and problems for residents. Walking daily through Sulke Khola, plastic and packages pile on the riverbank especially accumulating in dry season. With no disposal truck in this village, most residents burn their domestic waste, scarring the landscape with its charcoal remains. Passing through the Chhetri village, I jump back and forth over an obstacle course of metal wiring, drillers pausing to allow me to hop to the road banks. The road is in the process of being pitched (concreted) meaning trucks can now visit, including waste collection vehicles. Speaking to residents in Sulke Khola, the road is convenient for waste collections, as sanitary waste can be handed to the truck rather than dumped or burnt elsewhere. Yet, it also brought concerns about speeding, as trucks bypass the Sankhu

highway, sand mining from the riverbanks and further development in the area. The tension between convenience and risk produces new trajectories for its residents.



Figure 37 BlueWaste2Value truck collects waste in Sanagaun, January 2023.

Menstrual waste disposal infrastructures in Sankhu built according to urban architects have more facilities than “unplanned areas” (informal settlements) (Aide-Vide and Brown, 2022). In their study on menstrual hygiene in Milawe, Aide-Vide and Brown highlight that in “planned areas” women have switched to disposable pads because of availability but due to concerns about witchcraft, prefer to avoid the municipal disposable units. As urban planning reconfigures social relations (Scott, 2011), the new roads participate in the menstrual hygiene infrastructure in Sankhu. Within Sankhu, there is access to sewer facilities, restaurants and resorts (with public toilets) and roads for the BlueWaste2Value truck. Newars in the central areas of Sankhu access these infrastructures affecting disposal methods.

This morning routine surrounding the BlueWaste2Value waste collection highlights how residents participate in disposal infrastructures in Sankhu. Although the van is scheduled to arrive around the same time each week, irregularities means that one must wait for the sound of the van to announce its arrival, responding immediately, or risk storing waste for another week. This sense of waiting at any moment creates anticipation and unpredictability measured by pre-emptive engagement, such as preparing bags in advance and adjusting morning routines to accommodate the van. Entering the square clutching bags of waste is a moment where waste is

simultaneously visible and invisible; the curiosity of what a neighbour might be disposing, concealed within the blue plastic bags sold in a shop. Having unburdened ourselves of the waste, disposal creates an opportunity for a morning chat with other residents in the square as the domestic spills out into the square materially and socially for a moment.

Disposal infrastructures dramatically changed in Sankhu following the 2015 earthquake. Before the earthquake, Newar communities were built around a courtyard. At the centre of this courtyard were piles of organic waste, including food leftovers and farming deposits. Residents reminisce on the distinctive smell of rotting food. Smell enplaces people within a space (Pink, 2008). Residents express their connection to Sankhu through these old homes and sense of shared space with their neighbours. Under contemporary disposal infrastructures, the absence of the smell signifies a displacement from urban encroachment. This “odour displacement” (Hernsaw, 2013) is a form of control and governance within “urban smellscape” (2013). New buildings, disposal units and bypasses create a dispersion of Newar community, as represented by the empty courtyard spaces replaced with municipal and provincial modes of governance, through waste collection, as well as market forces from Kathmandu. As disposal infrastructures extend into Sankhu, they extend urban governance. Yet, new socialities emerge as neighbours use the opportunity when the BlueWaste2Value van arrives to speak and catch up after dropping off their bags of waste. Furthermore, similar to the expressions surrounding the “cloth,” by reconciling change through sensory memories revitalises a sense of belonging to Newar life in Sankhu.

BlueWaste2Value holds a particular position in this space as a social enterprise established in Kathmandu, yet its Shankharapur branch is ran by Sankhu residents with unmatched knowledge of the area and a desire to improve waste management in Sankhu, upholding its identity against the encroaching metropolis. This is further exemplified by efforts to dispel pollution that reaches from the city. Sat with Suntol *dai* from BlueWaste2Value, he emphasises how Sankhu community produce different kinds of waste compared to the past. Suntol focused on the blue plastic bag handed out at shops and how before residents would use paper bag. He emphasises the unintended consequences of switching to the convenience products like sweets, noodles or plastic that accumulates as “dry waste”. First, the bag is harmful for health, alluding to how plastic causes health problems. Second, he describes how “the beauty of public places is decreasing” because of the presence of “dry waste”. For instance, he cites how the rivers are depleted from salmon. “Dry waste” in particular, as opposed to “wet waste” (biodegradable organic foods and matter) expresses a pollutant on the landscape as recent phenomenon related to overconsumption especially of “junk food”. Last, his practical concern for farming problems, with plastic in the fields inhibiting

irrigation and contamination of crops. His dream, he explains, is that everyone will be a member of BlueWaste2Value allowing for a clean environment.

Waste work therefore becomes an act of fulfilling community responsibility active citizenry (Stokes, 2024). With regular waste clear ups in Sankhu, the participation in these events becomes “garbage citizenship” (Frederiks, 2018). In Dakar, Senegal, Frederiks analyses how the breakdown of infrastructures concerns citizenship rather than solely technical failings making visible breakdowns in neoliberal policies with infrastructure participating as an affective register within the landscape. For instance, the dirtying of places and how bodies are enlisted into disposal practices becoming polluted. Frederik’s analysis emphasises the affective properties of disposal infrastructures. This speaks to how disposal infrastructures participate in the affective quality of bodies and spaces. Daya, for example, cleans out her menstrual blood so that the wasteworkers at BlueWaste2Value do not have to handle her menstrual waste. The risk associated with threats such as *boksi*, is balanced with the moral experience of responsibility to ensure the waste workers avoid her “nasty blood.” The wasteworkers will have to handle and sort whatever is collected at the waste facility. However, through these practices, there is a sense of sorting and participation in the garbage citizenship of Sankhu. The precarity and stigma for waste workers is removed through the “waste habitus” (Schwenkel, 2018) cultivated through disposal methods. Waste habitus refers to the habits by citizens. Thus, women, through menstrual waste disposal participate in the infrastructure and therefore citizenry of Sankhu, within a hygienic imagination of removing bodily matter from the town.

However, one barrier for Suntol is that the BlueWaste2Value membership is deprioritised compared to other household purchases, especially as women manage disposal but men manage finances. This echoes Datta’s (2016) observation that women are affected by infrastructural limitations because their needs are deprioritised. In India, “drainage” (sewer systems) cause suffering for women in the home. In Sankhu, there is a tension between how menstrual waste is a shared responsibility with labour, as care, distributed throughout the household (see Chapter 5) and how disposal of menstrual waste is managed by women alone. The small pipes especially affect women. For example, Daya laughed with embarrassment at how she once blocked the pipes by putting the sanitary pads down the toilet. However, the consequence of having menstrual waste stagnant in the home, physically (blocked toilets) an existential threat to the home’s integrity. Women, like Daya, must find alternative disposal methods to prevent the risk of accumulating malevolent forces or preventing access to the toilets. Daya expresses how she was relieved once the BlueWaste2Value truck became available because it facilitated sanitary

waste disposal without a risk of blocking the pipes. BlueWaste2Value displaces the responsibility of her menstrual waste disposal it onto the social enterprise.

Displacement of responsibility express how women's bodies participate in urban infrastructure *as* infrastructure (Truelove and Ruszczyk, 2024). Based on ethnographic work in Bharatnagar, Nepal and Dhanghadi, India, they determine how women's bodies take the place of infrastructure. For example, in Nepal, they observe how the mother's groups for credit and saving schemes as well as social support and cleaning campaigns in the Bharatnagar. In Dhanghadi, India, volunteers help offer safe pregnancies and childcare. Their analysis provides three crucial insights useful for understanding disposal in Sankhu. First, how civic participation can be understood through concrete acts and social collaboration instead of belonging to a predefined territory. Second, how hierarchies appear in groups formed through social networks marked by caste, kinship or gender. Third, how the provision of these services is often invisible. The tension that emerges is how these groups become spaces for empowerment, facilitating access to services, and infrastructural violence, where infrastructure causes harm and marginalisation (Datta, 2016). These tensions are present in disposal infrastructure surrounding menstrual waste in Sankhu.

With menstrual waste irrevocably connected to the body (see chapter 3), taking the lens of bodies as infrastructure reveals how menstrual waste dissolves the boundary between women and urban infrastructures. When disposal infrastructures are lacking, women must manage disposing of menstrual waste themselves. This dynamic emerges in Alda-Vide and Browne's investigation into menstrual waste infrastructures in Lilongwe, Malawi, where they observe how women are burdened with a responsibility to find space to dispose of menstrual waste. The small sewers, lack of bins and collection services means women must find alternative ways for menstrual waste disposal. In Malawi, many opt for burning sanitary pads, but Alda-Vide's and Browne's interlocutors highlight that this is a challenging process because of inadequate privacy against people seeing their menstrual waste. In Chapter 3 I discussed how menstrual waste, as menstrual blood, is separated from the used sanitary pad through washing. These washed sanitary pads are disposed within the BlueWaste2Value facilities or in areas where families cannot be reached, burnt or disposed separate from household waste. Taking Truelove and Ruszczyk lens, their bodies become infrastructure in the absence of waste disposal systems for menstrual waste. Yet, this labour is invisible, meaning it remains peripheral in urban policy interventions.

Specific technologies to deal with sanitary waste are developing in the region. In one school, there had been an incinerator installed to allow for sanitary waste disposal. The initiative means that girls can place the pad within a hole in the wall and then it is burnt at the end of the day. However, the problem is the incinerator quickly became blocked and second, even

when working, released dangerous smoke into the air. Baral et al. (2017) deem the effectiveness of sanitary pad incinerators but highlight that without chimneys and ventilation systems, air pollution is released into the air. Despite treated as a solution for schools, incinerators were insufficiently situated within available infrastructures. Students continue to dispose of their sanitary pads in their homes, carrying them in their bags and disposing within their households. Technologies, such as incinerators, hold a promise of some efficient futurity but remain a dream. This work of hope is embedded in these infrastructures (Appel, 2018). In the meantime, these failing technologies demonstrate the disconnect between lived experience, infrastructures and gender in Sankhu.



Figure 38 Bags of sorted plastic at BlueWaste2Value depot, June 2022.

In June 2022, the employees lamented that the waste “could not be shifted” because roads are washed away from heavy monsoon rains meaning they cannot reach the dumpsite. However, they must collect waste from the homes so they continue to pay memberships. The precarious reliance on material infrastructures is subject to seasonal shifts and breakdowns. Disposal infrastructures, especially surrounding menstrual waste, demonstrate the fragile dependency upon roads, committees and municipal resources. Yet, “The waste never stops” is repeated as a mantra at the BlueWaste2Value facility, expressing that regardless of festivals, life events, weather and challenges, there is one inevitability; the waste will continue to accumulate. Women bear this burden as their bodies participate *as* infrastructure to deal with menstrual hygiene. Their bodies become extensions of the urban infrastructures expanding into Sankhu.

Women's choices of concealment, products and embodied knowledge negotiate this extension into temporal layers that define menstrual waste as part of the infrastructure of Sankhu.

“Have you been to the public toilets?”

Cross-legged and upright, Ratna Aunty clarifies to Sabina *didi* and I that one of the main changes she has seen in Sankhu is that “*aghi*” (before), there were neither toilets nor taps in the homes. She had to go all the way outside to get water and use the public toilets which she describes as stone or brick constructions with a drop-toilet.⁵⁹ At night, it was too dangerous and scary to visit the bathroom. Now, everyone has toilets in their homes and they are much cleaner than before. Ratna Aunty clarifies that today at the public toilets you can see so many people dumping their used sanitary pads everywhere. “Have you been to the public toilets?” Sabina asks. “You see that they throw there. It is not nice.” Before with the cloths, it was “*ramro huncha*” (is good) because everyone washed their cloths. Now, there is so much waste around these places. “*Kosta phohor bakicha!*” (*How much waste is left!*) Ratna Aunty declares in exasperation.

Ratna's Aunty's exasperation at the public toilets, disposal and products expresses the engulfment of space and nostalgia for a time before disposable pads. The feelings of disgust and quantities of used sanitary pads entering public spaces is illustrative of the gendered effects of urbanisation. Managing menstruation at home remains preferable to dealing with it in the public domain. Women are forming new spatial roles (Momsen, 2004), such as leaving the home from the mobility provided by menstrual products instead of taking rest during menstruation. Menstrual products as “intimate infrastructure” (Shwenkel, 2018) - affective, sensory attachments chosen and adapted by women in Sankhu - are embedded within the facilities and built environment which, in turn, governs women's bodies. The “cloth,” “pad” or “cup” becomes mechanisms positioning women within the urban populace of Kathmandu. The dissemination of knowledge around menstruation reveals contradictions between formal pedagogical environments and family pressures. Products, knowledge dissemination and disposal, as infrastructures, show how the urban metropolis reaches towards women under the impersonal guise of menstrual hygiene. Women

⁵⁹ A drop-toilet is a non-flushing receptacle with a seat apparatus over a hole. Chemicals may be added to decompose excrement and prevent odours.

modify themselves against unmitigated property development and interventions reframing menstrual waste as a site social change within Sankhu.

In the final chapter, I draw conclusions across the containers of this thesis – blood, body, home, town, temple and urban – to argue how women situate themselves within the flow of menstrual waste in Sankhu

Chapter 9

Conclusion: Body Dust

With the afternoon sun sunk below the horizon, a coolness swept through Niruna's bedroom. "*Majyu*," she states. I had asked how she would refer to menstruation. "In the body, *Majyu*," she repeats. "You mean body, like *mha*?" I ask. I had misheard the sound. She laughs, acknowledging that they sound similar. "And *jyu*?" Niruna sits back. "*dhū* means dust. *dhūlo*." Niruna clarifies that *dhū* might refer to waste: the bags carried to the truck; filth collected on the side of the road. "You know *dhūlo*?... like the sweepings." She refers to the grey dust swept from the top of the house at of the door each morning, forming from bodily presence, cooking deposits and the heavy, clouded air that swarms from Kathmandu.

This thesis began with the untouchability of menstrual waste. At the morning pilgrimage with the members of Happy Soul Dance Studio, three women cancelled because they were menstruating. Menstruation, as *thiye majyu* (must not touch) reifies a processual, temporary emergence of boundaries of the person, demarcated through actions such as avoidance. Viewed through the lens of caste, women's participation in these practices internalises caste oppression among the Newar. Yet, the meanings of menstrual waste in Sankhu are co-constituted and expressed across caste and ethnicities. Niruna and I's miscommunication shifts *majyu* as untouchability to *mha dhū*: body dust. Homophones are common in Newar language, as concepts are distinguished through spoken and situated contexts. The concept of "body dust" captures how the physical shedding of menstrual blood brings awareness to an embodied dissolution. Menstrual waste - as dust - is an amorphous substance contained for instance, in a bathroom basin, sanitary product or clothes. To bleed in Sankhu is to be in Sankhu.

This concluding chapter draws together the containers of this thesis - blood, body, home, town, temple and urban – to show how menstrual waste is understood and experienced in Sankhu. To this end, I use three processual, material concepts: coagulation, dissolution and dilution. Taken together, these material properties of menstrual waste generate affective qualities contained, expelled and negotiated by women in Sankhu. First, I discuss how menstrual blood becomes tangible when coagulated. Menstrual waste is experienced as fear and ambiguity attracting malevolent forces. It therefore must be hidden and contained through sanitary products. Second, menstrual waste threatens bodily integrity with dissolution, experienced as the sacred. With a responsibility towards bodily integrity in Sankhu, women manage menstrual blood with water, enclosed spaces and rhythms. Yet, despite these efforts, menstrual blood lingers and

remains. The third process of dilution expresses how menstrual blood permeates daily life in Sankhu. Women experience menstrual waste as a site of transformation. Through habits, sanitary products and disposal methods, they negotiate and situate themselves within Sankhu and the shifting Kathmandu Valley. Following these conclusions, I consider methodological implications from an ethnography of menstrual waste. I reflect on the limitations of this study, opening reflection on future avenues for research on menstruation and reproductive health in Nepal and internationally.

Coagulation

Menstrual blood coagulates. Coagulation refers to the “the act or process of forming or uniting into a mass” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2025). The water evaporates; blood thickens and solidifies, for instance absorbed by a sanitary towel or a contained by a menstrual cup. My encounters with menstruation in Sankhu consisted of a grimace, a scarf around the waste, a comment at stomach pain or, just as in the opening example of the pilgrimage, absence from events or labour. Among the Newar, coagulation expresses stagnation and blockage. For instance, it is inauspicious to stop a ritual that has been started, block a water source or allow bodily matter to remain in Sankhu. The accounts of wails of buried foetuses across the river from miscarriages (see Chapter 4), the fears of girls buried under the houses if they died during *bārāḥ* (see Chapter 6) or encounters with “sticky” ghosts where the streets converge echo the concerns towards menstrual blood. In Chapter 3, I demonstrated through the disposal of Sabina and Daya how coagulated menstrual blood on a sanitary pad risk attracting the wrath of a *boksi* and is disgusting for the waste workers. In Sankhu, menstrual blood is problematic if it dries outside of the body.

Menstrual waste is experienced as fear and ambiguity in Sankhu. In Chapter 6, I discussed how the ambiguity surrounding *bārāḥ* and the *khyāḥ* evoke fear among its participants. During *bārāḥ* the *khyāḥ* is placated by feeding it rice, as the gendered body in Sankhu is formed through the inclusion of a “sathi” doll. The doll participates in the ceremony alongside the girl instilling a sense of care and companionship to counter fear. Fear of pregnancy dominates the containment of women’s bodies through curfews following menarche. In Chapter 4, these expectations are reinforced through surveillance, expressed through the metaphor of the mirror in the Zumba room. Avoidance practices prevent risks to the household but the consequences of transgressing these boundaries is ambiguous. For example, in Chapter 7, Daya accidentally enters the kitchen and apologises to the god. Fear and ambiguity surrounding coagulated menstrual waste means women use disposal practices to contain potential risks.

The choice of sanitary product is concerned with the capturing, concealing and avoiding leaks as a temporary container. Drawing on Aulino's concept of "ritualised care", in Chapter 5 I argued how women can undertake an action without forming a clear belief around its meaning. For Sabina and the Aunties at Zumba, the menstrual cup offers a convenient means to keep menstrual blood fresh and inside the body as long as possible. Within the home, actions such as avoiding the kitchen during menstruation, washing sheets and managing menstrual blood within the enclosed space of the bathroom reify the home. Sanitary pads are a popular alternative chosen for their absorbency, to contain the blood. The "cloth," a euphemism for a piece of fabric for capturing menstrual blood is used as a back-up solution alongside the sanitary pad. The implications of these findings is that they inform product designs and sanitary products. Nevertheless, such products can only be made available with attention to water facilities for washing sanitary products. Coagulation expresses how menstrual waste solidifies into a visible form, refracting the hidden part(s) of the self, *as* the female body. Sanitary product choice and disposal therefore is care of the body, as self, in Sankhu.

Dissolution

Menstrual blood dissolves. Among the Newar, movement and dissolution, when intentionally managed through place, space and heart are positive aspects exposing the practitioner to their impermanence, and therefore the sacred as embodied dissolution. Fresh, running blood is associated with the "moral materiality (High, 2013) of vitality and life, like the donated blood at the Sankhu Jaycees programme in Chapter 3. In Chapter 7, I discuss the iconography of Vajrayoginī to argue how menstrual blood shares the "creative formlessness" (Douglas, 1966) of the god's power, in its capacity to dissolve boundaries. When harnessed, the gods are embodied through masks. When unharnessed, this formlessness dissolves boundaries expressed through the quality of *jhuto*. Each god, in its multiple forms, is an access point to the landscape of formlessness. Menstrual blood has the same dissolving capacity as the gods that can destroy and create.

Although menstrual waste is treated as the responsibility of the household through distributed labour, it is women who must manage their menstrual bleeds through product choices, self-disclosure and practices. In Chapter 3, Sabina describes how she must spit on the blood before washing it down the sewer, after which there is no risk of *boksi*. Washing the body and sheets on the fourth day, as well as washing away the menstrual products ensures that running water, which shares the term "*bagcha*" (Nep. flow) with menstrual blood, dissolves the relational capacity of menstrual blood. Within the home, spaces are enclosed to manage these threats where death is

possible. The bathroom is one such space where its design and function facilitate the expulsion of menstrual blood and reifies the home as an abode for gods, ancestors and families. During *bārāḥ*, the ritual seclusion into a childhood room ensures the transformation takes place away from men and within this enclosed space. The girl then returns into the gaze of the town as a witness, reifying Sankhu, where she will participate in its “secret rhythms” (Lefebvre, 1992). Temporary containers, water and ritual bathing facilitate the dissolution of menstrual blood.

Dilution

Despite the attempts to expunge menstrual blood from Sankhu, menstrual blood lingers and remains. Dilution describes the act of “making thin, fluid or weaker by the admixture of water” (OED, 2025). Fluidity as “an intricate, entangled material phenomenon” (Finke and Nakas, 2022: 8) encompasses a process on “diverse spatial-temporal scales” (Finke and Nakas, 2022: 8). Fluidity connotes a harmonious, unproblematic expression of movement within spatial (Finke and Nakas, 2022). Dilution, however, encompasses first, how traces of menstrual blood linger and second, how it weakens over time. Dilution accommodates the lingering of menstrual blood despite its attempted removal.

Newar women experience menstrual waste as a site of negotiation. In Chapter 8, the availability of disposable sanitary pads is an extension of the impersonal force of the urban into women’s lives. In Chapter 6, I introduce *Kumarī*, a girl who embodies the living goddess. After she bleeds, the goddess leaves her body and she remains inauspicious. Within *bārāḥ*, a doll accompanies the girl through the ritual seclusion and presentation to the god and town as her “sathi.” After the ceremony, the doll must be disposed. In Chapter 4, I showed how following menopause women share the ritual practices of men and are worshipped through *Janku* but take a new responsibility caring and monitoring younger women in Sankhu. Yet, new forms of contraception and earlier menarche is impacting conceptions of the body and therefore girls in Sankhu. The material precarity of menstrual hygiene infrastructures, such as the blue, plastic bags or disposable pads embody urban encroachment in the Kathmandu Valley.

Women use intervention spaces, such as workshops to renegotiate their sociality and spreading knowledge on menstruation through pre-existing relations refashion their positions in Sankhu. For example, they distance themselves from conceptions of menstrual blood within their families. Through addendums deferring to their ancestors, forefathers, parents of an ambiguous “they say that” women within younger generations consistently distance themselves from assumptions around menstruation but leave space to continue following practices on their terms.

Framing through the lens of hygiene means that women can use these discourses to continue avoidance practices without accepting the values. For example, In Chapter 5, I discussed how Daya and Rushka wash their bedclothes on the fourth day framed through hygiene and convenience. The introduction of products such as the menstrual cup are opportunities to share knowledge and refashion bodily boundaries. Within spaces such as the Zumba room, women refashion expectations surrounding menstruation, feminine virtue and their futures in Sankhu.

Waste ethnography

A late June day and I had spent 6 months in Sankhu. I am invited to help “build the ghosts” in Chalakhu *tole* in Sankhu for Guthamuga festival. Bales of grass are knotted together into standing figures with human resemblance. One piece sticking out of the “shoulder” and touching the “hip”. Each had a different mask or face (one included a bike helmet) and genitalia made of vegetables. A cheer “*wala wala*” (New. they are coming, they are coming!) and women brought offerings from their home casting them into the fire in front of each figure. Ashkar *dai* suggests we take tea at the tea shop. As we sit, children shout, beating the figures as they are dragged across the dirt, face in the dust. Following the group to Sali Nadi river, the same figure is drowned in the river, the helmet against the riverbank (see Figure 39). Each *tole* had a different figure, representing a malevolent force, disposed in a different place: one hung from the tree near Vajrayoginī gate, another dumped upstream. Ashkar *dai* informs me that it is to expel the ghosts, or malevolent forces that may have accumulated during rice planting season as residents worked in their fields. The women sweep their homes as part of the town’s expulsion of malevolent forces and disposal. The persistent rhythms of expulsion and reification visible in each container, from the body bleeding to the home sweeping, to the town cleansed of malevolence.



Figure 39 Drowned figure from Guthamuga in Sali Nadi river, June 2023.

Waste is an integral aspect of the methodology for this project. In Chapter 2, I discuss how on arrival to the field, I documented and photographed plastic, wrappers or objects that seemed out of place. I recorded the waste management infrastructures in Shankharapur municipality and interviewed residents on disposal narratives. The advantage of long-term participation is that it broadened my perspective of waste from municipal matter to engage with multiple understandings of waste in Sankhu. The absence of sanitary waste, compared to other forms of waste became an analytical tool for this research raising the following questions: Is this thesis an ethnography of (menstrual waste) or a waste ethnography? What is the difference between investigating waste as an ethnographic object and using it as a lens for accessing insights into people's lives? What might be the limitations of using waste as a framework within ethnographic research? In this methodological reflection, I posit triangulating waste, feminist and experiential ethnography (see Figure 40) to access menstrual waste in Sankhu.

Discard studies offer a vocabulary and approach for engaging with waste but is limited by its focus on infrastructure (Alexander and O'Hare, 2023). With a misunderstanding of Douglas's argument as waste as "matter out of place" her arguments are flattened into analysis of spatial displacement (Reno, 2015). Nevertheless, discard studies acknowledges that waste "happens across multiple systems, events and terrains" (Liboiron and Lepawski, 2022: 53). In this vein, Brox et al. (2020) advocate for investigating waste among Buddhist practitioners to highlight how waste is integrated into religious morality, spatial practice and to complicate waste as a category. In the introduction of this thesis, I problematised the category of sanitary waste as narrow and expanded it into translations of menstruation in Sankhu. Departing from rationalisations of waste management and linear temporalities, I considered how menstrual waste influences daily life in Sankhu. Using Steng's (2014) concept of "sacred waste" as a point of departure, I highlighted how sanitary waste is difficult to dispose in Sankhu as a charged residue that must be disposed but cannot remain. In Chapter 3, I begin with the appearance of a menstrual stain, mobilising Brox's (2020) concept of afterlife to explore the dangers of menstrual waste. Following how menstrual waste appears and disappears in daily life (Alexander O'Hare, 2023) accesses menstrual waste as an ethnographic object.

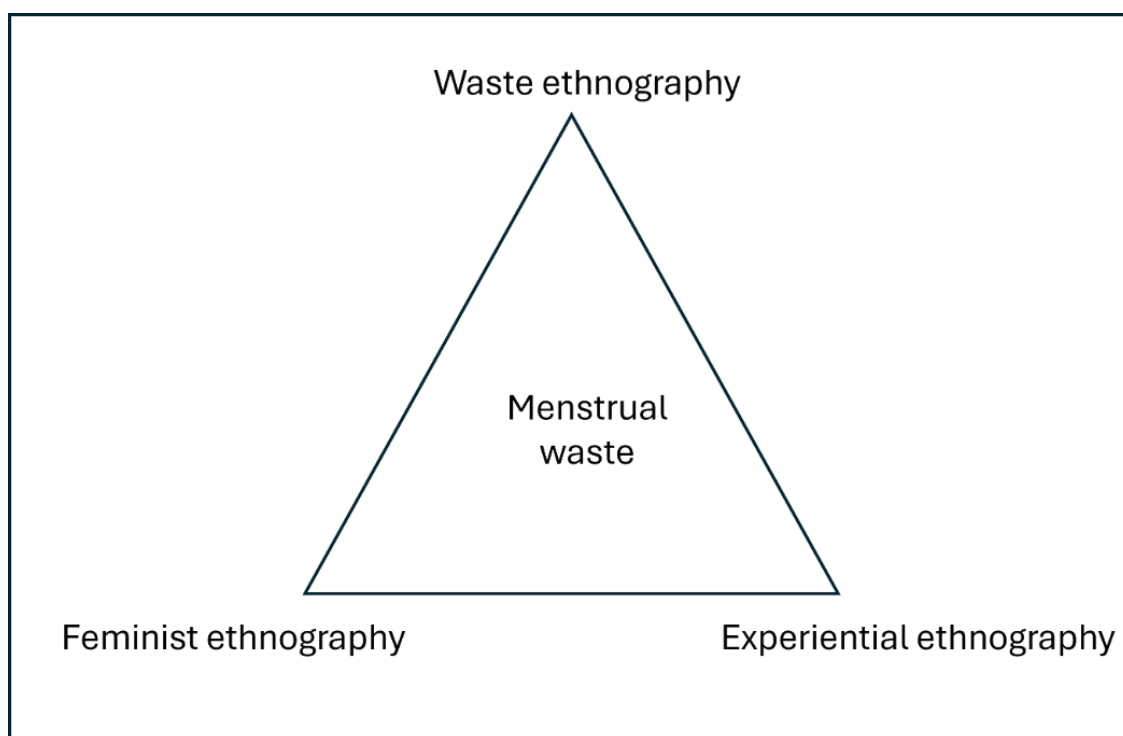


Figure 40 Diagram of methodological approach to an ethnography of menstrual waste. Waste , feminist and experiential ethnography provide a triangulated framework for engaging with menstrual waste.

To focus solely on waste overemphasises the material, the dirty or the discarded. First, I define a waste ethnography as framed through the themes of leakage, breakdown, failure, dust and containment permeating the thesis.⁶⁰ For example, in Chapter 3 I focus on the fear of a stain and Daya accidentally blocking the pipes. Dust pervades the thesis in the Kumārī mandala in Chapter 6, the sweepings from the home (see Chapter 5) or the air pollution from Kathmandu (see Chapter 8). The spatial-analytical framing as containers, from the sanitary product catching blood, to the home containing the family, to the town as a container for its residents is mirrors how menstrual waste is managed and conceptualised across these different planes. Hawkins (2001) discerns how managing waste through technologies concerns the self conceptualising how a waste fetishism displaces the alienated self onto discarded objects. Through the lens of waste ethnography, the processual phenomenon of coagulation, dissolution and dilution to indicate the amorphous ambiguity that menstrual waste embodies across multiple containers from sanitary products to the Kathmandu Valley.

⁶⁰ Within the WASTE research project, researchers were tasked to produce waste ethnography. I am grateful to my supervisor Dr Trine Brox and research colleagues within the waste project for our conversations interrogating the definition of waste ethnography.

Experiential approaches access how the body and self are conceptualised in Sankhu. Drawing on Merleau Ponty's (1945) approach to the body as an embodied perceiver, conceptualises how the body is formed through experience. To access the "flesh" (Merleau, Ponty, 1945) as the perceiver, I used experiential theory and ethnographic writing, focusing on the embodied sensations of living in Sankhu. By drawing on methods from sensory ethnography (Pink 2008), recording smells, sounds, walking and disconnects between my experiences and those of my interlocutors (Desjarlais, 1992) created space to understand the lived experience within a menstruating body in Sankhu. Among the Newar, the body is experienced as synonymous with the self formed through embodied boundaries demarcating daily life. Therefore, experiential methods accessing the feelings and sensations of living in Sankhu engages with how menstrual waste is experienced as part of the body.

Finally, I frame this thesis as a feminist ethnography because of how it prioritises the narratives of women focusing on gendered analysis. Using a narrative style within the thesis, I highlight the practices, addendums and tensions through which women negotiate their position in Sankhu. Menstruation as a gendered experience exposes the vulnerabilities, strategies and obligations among women that extends beyond a technical disposal of sanitary products. Yet at times, focusing on the technical disposal of menstrual waste (such as hygiene) reveals a strategy for women to negotiate their position in Sankhu. Taking a feminist approach highlights the embodied field (Coffey, 1999) my positionality as a researcher (Stacey, 1988) and the expectations women face in Sankhu. Specifically, drawing on material feminist theory highlights menstrual blood and its influence in women's lives as an active force upon the world as an intrinsically gendered substance. Through menstrual waste, it is possible to "periscope" (Hiemstra, 2016) onto the lives of women in Sankhu. Thus, the methodological implication of this thesis is that to access menstrual waste demands a triangulated framework of waste, feminist and experiential ethnography.

Futures

A panel discussion broadcast on national television consists of five men, two women and a presenter. One woman on the panel empties her bag revealing disposal pads advocating for the convenience of reusable pads. This act on live television is a symbolic exemplar, bringing problems that women hide and manage alone into the public gaze. An impassioned speech by a schoolgirl about the lack of hygiene facilities in her school is met with declarations for intervention by the municipal leader. Audience criticism of raw materials as "toxins", concerns about the

distribution of products and references to climate change catalyse the crowd to a unified chorus of the event slogan displayed on the printed posters: “we are committed!” The commitment within the National Menstrual Day is towards the future surrounding menstruation in Nepal.

This thesis makes a unique contribution to the lived experiences of Newar women in Sankhu, stemming from long-term participatory methods with an empathic understanding informing this ethnography. In this section, I outline the limitations to this research making suggestions for future avenues for research on menstruation, reproductive health and women’s health in Nepal and internationally.

First, due to my positionality as a woman in her mid-20s, my primary and closest interlocutors were a similar age with the majority interviewees in their 20s. Due to my connections through Zumba, I obtained formal interviews with women such as Ratna Aunty in her 60s. These gave insights into differing experiences of menopause. In Nepal the average age of menopause is 48.7 years with records of severe symptoms that are accepted as normal (Rajbhandari et al. 2017) with limited information on health care needs in Nepal (Adhikari and Bhurtyal, 2022). In their challenge towards biomedical models of aging, Parker et al. 2014 highlight the importance of including aging populations in policy initiatives in Nepal to provide appropriate care and services.

In reverse, I did not interview any under 18s within this research. My research is informed by conversations and interactions through participant observation in Sankhu. However, for this study I refrained from interviewing under 18s due to ethical concerns around addressing sensitive topics. I would have needed a guardian present and with many seniors in Sankhu unable to speak English, this presented logistical difficulties until I developed adequate language abilities. For the scope of this study, perspectives of women in Sankhu presented insights into contemporary experiences and positions in women. Nevertheless, in Chapter 8 I discuss how within the context of the school and with permission of the teachers and BlueWaste2Value there was discussion on WaSH facilities within the schools. Focus group discussions in these spaces enhances insights on *ihī* and *bārāh*, generational shifts and girls relationships to their bodies, redefining age and status. This contributes to contemporary understandings of how ideas about menopause and menarche have shifted since the Mulukī Ain (Lotter and Khunal, 2024), thus indicating the position of women in Sankhu.

Caste is a central yet embedded aspect of this thesis. I began this thesis by discussing untouchability the political sphere in the Kathmandu Valley. This thesis is built on findings from numerous households primarily from Shrestha and Dangol caste as the primary interlocutors. The Jyāpu caste has a strong activist presence in Kathmandu, evidenced by the museum in the introduction of this thesis. Therefore, their involvement in this study partially pertained to

promoting the interests against the government in Nepal. Nevertheless, the long-term trusting relationships within Sankhu off balanced this dynamic and gave insights towards their own critical disposition around caste activism. I also had one Dalit interlocutor whose rejections of avoidance practices around menstruation indicate her standing as a Christian in Sankhu. However, further insights could be gained by incorporating I encountered and discerned findings from castes and ethnicities in the area, such as Tamang households.

Language is a large dimension of this research. A strength in this work is that I learnt the languages within the field, allowing for an embodied understanding within broader ritual and cultural practices. Yet, this study would benefit from fluency in both languages. For instance, sensitivity towards the classifiers of objects in Newar language could give insights into perspectives of animate objects, such as the “sathi” doll in Chapter 7. Additionally, as an experiential ethnography, I do not lean on texts during this thesis. A strength is I prioritise the narratives of women in Sankhu. Concepts of interconnectedness, suffering and wellbeing could be deepened with Vajrayāna Buddhist texts to consider where ideas depart from the textual analysis. For instance, the “sathi” doll during the *bārāḥ* is a new phenomenon practiced only in Sankhu and is absent from the ritual manuals. Emmrich’s (2014) research into the menarche manuals surrounding *bārāḥ* is indicative of the insights that can be gained from situating ethnographic work within the textual presence surrounding these norms. This thesis remains complementary to research with a textual focus prioritising perspective of residents within Sankhu.

A limitation is the engagement with the materials of sanitary pads and associated products. In Chapter 8, I mention through the lens of women which material make up the “cloth” but it could be useful to trace sanitary pads and materials from manufacture to disposal, especially the significance of plastic. Kopyoff (1986) argues how object centred biographies enunciate how interactions with the object transform over time and place. For instance, tracking the journey of a sanitary pad from creation (in the case of disposable pads often made in India), through purchase, consumption and disposal (washed and stored at Nuwarkot) provides a complementary perspective of sanitary products.

Throughout my fieldwork, pain was a significant theme and access point to menstruation. In Chapter 4, I discuss Padma and Maya’s relationship to pain, arguing that bodily boundaries are produced through abjection. Yet, my ethnographic work on pain is comparatively thin next to other material because of how it arose indirectly in moments where women were absent from events or commented about their stomach hurting or described severe pain in their legs. What pain is normalised and what pain is indicative of endocrine disorders? To what extent is there awareness of endometriosis or polycystic ovarian syndrome? What cross-cultural implications could there

be for research on pain and menstruation? To enhance and further this research, pain prevention methods, such as “*tato pani*” (hot water) and the rejection of painkillers could reveal health and endocrine disorders.

In my discussion of care on Chapter 4, I alluded to the use of contraception. These discussions only emerged in my fieldwork in informal, private conversations where women disclosed their use of contraception. The availability of contraceptives, and the emergency contraceptive pill in Nepal is transforming women’s relationships to menstruation and sex (Bhandari et al. 2019). Further research into the availability, implications and attitudes towards contraceptive medication and their effect on the female body, building on the findings from this thesis could be productive. Further, my conversations with interlocutors brought up the question of abortion and miscarriages. When I visited the tree across from Sali Nadi river, I found a small stretcher which I was told was in memory of a miscarried or aborted foetus. These narratives and material remains generate insights into understandings and experiences of fertility, reproductive health and gendered expectations. Through my discussions of menstruation, I encountered stories of women in different towns who underwent abortions after extramarital sex. Due to an increase in extramarital sex and continued stigma around pregnancy outside of marriage abortions rates are at 42 per 1000 women aged 15-49 (Puri et al., 2016). My research could be extended into investigations into abortions, miscarriages and contraceptives.

Within the scope of this study, I prioritise the perspectives and understanding of women in Sankhu to investigate the position and experiences of Newar women. Nevertheless, living in Sankhu gave insights into male perspectives on menstruation and associated themes. For example, I interviewed 4 men within senior positions in Sankhu and in Chapter 5, I showed how men play a significant role in changes towards avoidance practices during menstruation when they marry. Incorporating male perspectives on bodily fluids such as menstruation and avoidance practices would enhance these insights. Kustiani and Hunt (2012) argue that in Buddhism, menstrual blood has no value and is deemed a biological normality. This thesis has challenged this argument through my ethnographic data in Sankhu. However, among the Newar semen and menstrual blood are understood as reproductive fluids (Subedi, 2012). Therefore, research on semen and disposal methods could complement this research on menstruation and religion as well as insights on understandings and experiences of masculinity in Sankhu.

Since leaving Sankhu in January 2023, there have been numerous changes, most notably youth migration. Youth migration is a significant shift in the Kathmandu Valley with 771,000 youths obtaining permits for foreign employment in 2022-23 (Department of Foreign Employment). Baumann et al. (2025) investigate the adaptation of practices around menstruation

among the Nepali diaspora in New York. In Sankhu, Happy Soul Dance Studio is closed replaced by a school ran by its senior students so that Sabina, the dance teacher, could study a master's in business studies in the US. Rushka accompanied her husband to Europe to work as he studies for his masters. In these spaces, these men and women access new bodily rhythms, economies and expectations, negotiating the diaspora communities and their relationships to their families. For instance, Rushka is struck by how in Denmark nobody asks if she is menstruating. Since there are no monthly festivals in her new home, she no longer removes herself from temples or cooking during menstruation. For her, menstruation is more “invisible” than in Sankhu. Exploring diaspora communities, such as Parker et al. (2025) study of menstruation practices in New York, would be productive in showing shifts and perspectives surrounding menstruation.

Nevertheless, for Lakshi *didi*, a Newar woman born in Sankhu, her plan is to work full-time, marry and build a home in the town. Meanwhile, Aasha migrated to Sankhu 2 years prior and works full-time in Kathmandu with the hope to own a house. Usha Auntie hopes to one day witness the Vajrayoginī *jātra*, and Ratna Auntie expresses that she would like to visit her son overseas. Manisha Auntie jokes about leaving Sankhu but continue to participate and adapt in its transformations, evident by their interest in the menstrual cup. As demonstrated in Chapter 8, the temporal framings of menstrual products as “*pahile*” and “*ahile*” are temporal framings through which women situate themselves in Sankhu. Further research into how women negotiate these products, spaces and practices will give insight to the futures of women in the Kathmandu Valley.

On my final visit to Vajrayoginī temple, I circumambulate the lower temple, receive a blessing and take one glance at the red goddess. As we descend the steps, Sabal *dai* declares “you will carry Vajrayoginī in your heart.” In English, this sounds like a comforting metaphor for caring for a place. At the conclusion of Shrestha's (2012) ethnography of Sankhu, he predicts that the town will become a suburb of Kathmandu. To the unknowing eye, the boundary between Sankhu and Kathmandu is indiscernible. In 2023, pollution engulfs the town, frequent road accidents occur from large, blue trucks on the concreted roads and international meditation retreats enclose the caves next to Vajrayoginī temple inaccessible to residents. The plastic bags and abandoned items in Sali Nadi river after the Svāsthānī melā represent the encroachment of Kathmandu upon Sankhu (see figure 41). However, Sabal *dai*'s words carry a deeper meaning. Holding Vajrayoginī, the mother goddess of Sankhu is to carry Sankhu in the body, beyond its physical boundaries as an embodied place.



Figure 41 View downstream of Sali Nadi river from Svāsthānī temple in Sankhu, Nepal. January 2023.

As the monsoon arrives, Sali Nadi will wash away these remnants of the blue plastic bags, candles and shampoo sachets towards Kathmandu. The midday sun beats down upon the Newar town of Sanagaun as I sit on the balcony overlooking the bright blue buildings rebuilt since the 2015 earthquake for Kusal *bhai* had invited me to his family home for lunch. The breeze passes through the funnel of buildings towards the vast trees enclosing Indrayani temple. A woman sweeps dust from the door of her house into the street. I ask about Sali Nadi river: as a snake that winds through the Kathmandu Valley; a site for the legend of Svāsthānī; a lady. Why these multiple meanings? Kusal *bhai* points to the cup of water on the table, “where does that come from?” he asks. I point to the jug on the table. “And that?” they indicate towards the filter on the kitchen side. “And who knows where that comes” gesturing outwards. “The river? The mountains? The clouds? That is like this history, it is all the stories together and they are all part of each other.” The cup, jug and filter are containers coagulated against an amorphous flow. As menstrual waste dissolves and the river flows from Sankhu, so too carried in our hearts, within our body, a container from dust. *Majyu*.

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Appendix I: Glossary

aatma (Nep.): soul.

ahile (Nep.): now.

ārām garnu: (Nep.) to take rest (verb).

anti (New.): Vessel used to store aylā.

aylā (New.): homebrewed Newar spirit usually made from rice. Served at festivals and special occasions as well as everyday consumption.

bahal (New.): Shared courtyard.

bahinī (Nep.): younger sister.

bagcha (Nep.): flow (verb). Moving liquids including water, river or menstrual blood..

bārāḥ (New.): ritual seclusion before menarche for Newar girls.

bārāḥ tayegu (New.): doing ritual seclusion (verb).

bhai (Nep.) younger brother.

Bhairava: deity worshipped by Hindus and Buddhists associated with protection, death and transformation.

bhajan khala (New.): Place for singing bhajan, hymns.

Brahmin: high, Hindu caste.

bratabhunda: Hindu ceremony undertaken by boys where they receive a sacred thread. Typically it is undertaken between 10-14 years old although this can vary for families.

bodhisattva: a being that has reached Buddhahood but delays enlightenment to help free others from suffering.

boksi (Nep): refers to a feminine, malevolent force that might curse an individual if obtains part of their body, such as hair or menstrual blood.

boksa (Nep.): may be used to refer to male version the malevolent force or entity, though less common.

Cakrasaṃvara: Vajrayana tantric deity representing skillful means. His consort is Vajrayoginī.

chaku: red, chill sweet popularly made and distributed from Sanga, a town in the East of the Kathmandu Valley.

charpī (New.): toilet, shitter.

chhau goth (Nep.): menstruation cave (noun). Usually a small shed or hut where a women will isolate for the first four days of her menstrual cycle.

chhaupadi (Nep.): Hindu practice where women are prohibited from participating in activities while menstruating.

chhen (New): home.

chhui (Nep.): Untouchable. Term used during menstruation primarily among Chhetri households.

Chhetri: High caste historically associated with warriors.

dai (Nep): older brother.

Dalit: low, untouchable caste which often faces discrimination or marginalisation.

dāna: gifts, alms.

deva: god.

devi: goddess.

dharma: religious duty, the teachings of the Buddha.

dhūla (New.): dust, sweepings, filth.

ḍiḍi (Nep): older sister

dukḥa: grief, pain, suffering.

dvāraka (New.): door, gate

dyah̐ (New.): god, supreme divinity.

dyah̐ chhen (New.): god house (noun). A room dedicated to the god at the top of the house.

ghar (Nep): house.

gufa: cave. Used to refer to the ritual seclusion before a Newar girl's reaches menarche (see bārāḥ).

gunlā (New.): Buddha month.

gūthi (New.): group, funeral association.

Hāku patāsi (New.): Newar female traditional dress consisting of a black sari with red border.

hasa (New.): flat basket for farming.

hansa (New.): soul.

hī (New.): blood.

Itā (New.): hand woven cotton string soaked in oil with flame burned during mha pūjā ceremony signifying life.

Jajanka: cotton string with red cloth. Used among Newars during mha pūjā and important ceremonies signifying life.

jamla (New.): skirt.

Janku: Newar ceremony celebrating and worshipping men and women when they reach certain ages.

jātrā: chariot procession

jhuto (Nep): polluted (noun or adjective). Used to refer to soiled dishes, food that has been touched or menstrual blood.

Jyāpu (New.): Newar farming caste

kaagko hulma bakulla (Nep.): A crane among crows, a Nepali proverb for when someone sticks out from the crowd.

karuwa (New.): brass water jug.

Khadgi: Newar butcher caste.

khola (Nep.): river.

khyāḥ (New.): Malevolent, mischievous spirit in Newar folklore.

khutṭā (Nep.): leg.

Kumārī (New.): institution of the living goddess and premenarche girls.

kurtā (Nep.): tunic garment worn by men and women.

kwā mawo (New.): dried blood. Refers to a brown stain from menstrual blood. If a woman starts bleeding brown blood, her menstrual cycle is considered to have started.

Lākhey (New.): Demon from Newar folklore. At festivals, a Lākhey will be represented by a large mask and may chase children.

lastā juye (New.): heavy menstrual bleed, to have pain from menstruation.

lhā (New.): water.

Lord Ganesha: Hindu god of wisdom.

Lord Shiva: Hindu god of destruction.

mahināvārī (Nep.): monthly turn, menstruation.

mala: garland.

melā: gathering. The term is popularly used to refer to a festival where pilgrims will worship at a temple.

mha (New.): body.

mha pūjā (New.): body worship (noun). Ceremony that takes place during October or November.

moto (Nep.): fat.

Mulukī Ain: Law code instigated during the Rānā regime including policies on menstrual exclusion.

nachune (Nep.): untouchable, menstruation.

nag: snake.

namaste (Nep.): Respectful greeting acknowledging god within.

Narsingha: Incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

Nepal Samvat: Lunar calendar of Newar people.

pahile (Nep.): before, in the old times.

peṭa (Nep.): stomach.

phohor (Nep.): connotes dirty or impure, waste.

pun̄ya: blessing, merit.

pūjā: worship

pūjā koṭhā (Nep.): Worship room. Used to refer to the room on the top floor of the house devoted to the gods.

pūjarī: A Hindu priest who performs pūjā.

pyākhān (New.): ritual dance.

ragat (Nep.): blood.

sathi (Nep.): friend.

sarāp: curse.

sāri (Nep.): A cloth draped as a garment for a woman usually worn for special occasions.

saphā (Nep.): clean.

Shrestha: Newar caste historically merchants.

Sukunda (New.): Brass, ornamented lamp with inscriptions of Lord Ganesha.

Surya Dashein (New.): Second marriage for Newar girl where she marries Lord Surya after completing 12 days of ritual seclusion.

tācha (New.): iron key.

tānpa (New.): clay pot.

Tapālan (New.): Newar male traditional dress consisting of a long shirt and fitted trousers.

thiye majyu (New.): Not permissible to touch, menstruation.

ṭikā (Nep.): a coloured mark or dot on the forehead symbolising a blessing.

tole (New.): a physical space as well as the community associated with this space.

Ugra Tārā: fierce form of Buddhist goddess associated with compassion.

Vajrayoginī: Tantric goddess who is a bodhisattva and the founding and protector goddess of Sankhu. She is also worshipped by Hindus as a manifestation of Parvati.

Vajrayāna Buddhism: school of Buddhism associated with the “thunderbolt” (as wisdom) and uses esoteric and tantric practices to reach enlightenment.

Vajrācārya: Newar Buddhist high caste. It also refers to individuals who have undergone tantric consecration and perform ritual duties within Newar communities.

Appendix II: Interview Guide, Participant Information Sheet and Consent Forms

Interview Guide

KØBENHAVNS UNIVERSITET
INSTITUT FOR TVÆRKULTURELLE OG REGIONALE STUDIER

INTERVIEW GUIDE
FOR SANITARY WASTE
RESEARCH PROJECT



Before the interview:

- Briefly introduce myself and the purpose of this research.
- Sierra Humbert, Ph.D. student at the University of Copenhagen, Research Affiliation at Kathmandu University.
 - Ethnographic study – part of a collective research project on WASTE and RELIGIOUS PRACTICES. These interviews will inform my findings from living and participating in daily life in Sankhu from January 2023-24.
 - Purpose of the research:
 - 1) Produce an updated ethnographic study of everyday life in Sankhu/Shankharapur (with a focus on women's experiences)
 - 2) Inform NGO and local authority action towards waste management and especially menstrual hygiene management
- **Confirm that they have signed the consent form, that they understand that they will be anonymised by default for this research.**
- Confirm that they are happy to be audio recorded, and start recording.
- Explain that I am interested in hearing their experiences and views of waste, menstrual hygiene management and everyday life in Sankhu/Shankharapur.
- Inform them that the interview will be semi-structured, meaning that it will be like a conversation so they can discuss the subjects that feel most relevant. The interview will be conducted in English but they are welcome to refer to Nepali terms where necessary.
- **(This will be a walking interview – we will be walking around Sali Nadi on a route discussed beforehand but they will be leading the way.?)**
- Remind them that they do not have to answer any questions that they are not comfortable with, we can stop the interview at anytime and they may ask any questions before, during or after the interview.

Interview Guide:

1. [Starting at the home]: Tell me about yourself

- Ask about what it was like to grow up in Sankhu
- Age, religion, Qualifications, Family
- Current studies/work – Dance school details – founding, development, goal
- Tell me about your daily routine: What time waking up? Do you visit anywhere? Where do you spend most of your time? How does it change?

2. Tell me about your community

- Where? Who? Caste? – Denatole?
- What events does the community undertake together?
- Temples, institutions, schools
- Could you tell me about the other communities in the area?
- Could you tell me about Sankhu? Prompts include: What are the temples and significant festivals for you in Sankhu?

- What are the main festivals and rituals you participate in on an annual basis?
3. Could you tell me about the main changes you have observed in Sankhu and Shankharapur?
 - a. Prompts include: Architecture, Traditions, Landscape, Jungle, Generations
 - b. Could you tell me about your experience of the earthquake? What was life like before the earthquake? How has it changed?
 - c. What, if any, are the main changes you have observed in Sankhu (concerning the experiences of women)?
 4. Could you tell me about your experiences as a woman growing up in Shankharapur?
 - a. What are the main rituals growing up?
 - i. Specifically Ihi ceremony
 - b. What are the main challenges?
 - c. What expectations do you feel are there for you?
 5. As you are aware this study is focusing on Menstrual Hygiene Management. Could you talk me through what practices you undertake when you are on your period? Prompt to explain more about why she undertakes these practices.
 1. Could you tell me about the practical side of menstrual hygiene management? Which products? Availability?
 2. Could you talk me through your sanitary waste disposal?
 6. Please can you describe what you consider as waste?
 - a. Please can you talk me through how you dispose of waste?
Possible prompts include a) Household waste b) Industrial/waste relating to business, c) personal waste d) other
 7. Please can you describe to any environmental or social issues that Shankharapur/Sankhu faces?
 8. What, if any, are your plans, goals and hopes for the next year? 5 years? Future?
 9. Is there anything else you would like to share in relation to what we have discussed today (daily practices, landscapes, waste, sanitary waste?)

After the interview:

- *Thank them for participating in the interview. Give them any gift/compensation for their time.*
- *Remind them about the date they can withdraw their data and confirm that they are happy for me to contact them for any follow-up interviews.*
- *Remind them that they can also get in contact with me at any time if they have any questions.*

Walking Interview Guide

KØBENHAVNS UNIVERSITET
INSTITUT FOR TVÆRKULTURELLE OG REGIONALE STUDIER



INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR SANITARY WASTE RESEARCH PROJECT

Before the interview:

- *Briefly introduce myself and the purpose of this research.*
 - Sierra Humbert, Ph.D. student at the University of Copenhagen, Research Affiliation at Kathmandu University.
 - Ethnographic study – part of a collective research project on WASTE and RELIGIOUS PRACTICES. These interviews will inform my findings from living and participating in daily life in Sankhu from January 2023-24.
 - Purpose of the research:
 - 1) Produce an updated ethnographic study of everyday life in Sankhu/Shankharapur (with a focus on women's experiences)
 - 2) Inform NGO and local authority action towards waste management and especially menstrual hygiene management
- ***Confirm that they have signed the consent form, that they understand that they will be anonymised by default for this research.***
- *Confirm that they are happy to be audio recorded, and start recording.*
- *Explain that I am interested in hearing their experiences and views of waste, menstrual hygiene management and everyday life in Sankhu/Shankharapur.*
- *Inform them that the interview will be semi-structured, meaning that it will be like a conversation so they can discuss the subjects that feel most relevant. The interview will be conducted in English but they are welcome to refer to Nepali terms where necessary.*
- ***This will be a walking interview – we will be walking around Sanagau on a route discussed beforehand but they will be leading the way.***
- *Remind them that they do not have to answer any questions that they are not comfortable with, we can stop the interview at anytime and they may ask any questions before, during or after the interview.*

Interview Guide:

1. ***[Starting at the home]: Tell me about yourself***
 - Ask about what it was like to grow up in Sanagau
 - Age, religion, Qualifications, Family
2. ***[Walking towards edge of village] Tell me about your daily routine***
 - What time waking up? Do you visit anywhere? Where do you spend most of your time?
 - How does it change?
3. ***Tell me about your community***
 - Where? Who? Caste?
 - What events does the community undertake together?

4. *[Stopping at land/previous earthquake home]* Can you tell me about your experience of the earthquake? What was life like before the earthquake? How has it changed?
5. *[Walking towards Newar Communities]* Could you tell me about the other communities in the area? *[Trees]* Can you tell me about the trees?
6. Could you tell me about your experiences as a woman growing up in Shankharapur?
 - a. What are the main rituals growing up?
 - b. What are the main challenges?
 - c. What expectations do you feel are there for you?
7. What are the main festivals and rituals you participate in on an annual basis?
8. *[Walking past the waste area in Sanagau]* Please can you describe what you consider as waste?
 - a. Please can you talk me through how you dispose of waste?
Possible prompts include a) Household waste b) Industrial/waste relating to business, c) personal waste d) other
9. *[Looking towards Sankhu]* Can you describe that landscape in front of us?
 - a. Could you tell me about your knowledge of Sankhu? Prompts include: How often do you visit? What are the temples and significant festivals for you in Sankhu? Who are the communities in Sankhu? What is their religion?
10. *[Walking towards Indrayani temple]* Could you tell me about Indrayani Temple? Could you tell me about the Jatra we attended here in April?
11. *[Sitting at Indrayani]* As you are aware this study is focusing on Menstrual Hygiene Management. Could you talk me through what practices you undertake when you are on your period? Prompt to explain more about why she undertakes these practices.
 - a. Could you tell me about the practical side of menstrual hygiene management? Which products? Availability?
 - b. Could you talk me through your sanitary waste disposal?
12. *[Walking towards the other temple (via jungle or main street)]* Could you tell me about the main changes you have observed in Sanagau and Shankharapur? Prompts include: Architecture, Traditions, Landscape, Jungle, Generations
13. Please can you describe to any environmental or social issues that Sanagau/Shankharapur/Sankhu faces?
14. What, if any, are your plans, goals and hopes for the next year? 5 years? Future?
15. Is there anything else you would like to share in relation to what we have discussed today (daily practices, landscapes, waste, sanitary waste?)

After the interview:

- Thank them for participating in the interview. Give them any gift/compensation for their time.
- Remind them about the date they can withdraw their data and confirm that they are happy for me to contact them for any follow-up interviews.
- Remind them that they can also get in contact with me at any time if they have any questions.

Consent Form

KØBENHAVNS UNIVERSITET
INSTITUT FOR TVÆRKULTURELLE OG REGIONALE STUDIER



CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN SANITARY WASTE RESEARCH PROJECT

Thank you considering taking part in this research. Please complete this form after you have read the **Information Sheet** and/or listened to an explanation about the research. If you have any questions please ask Sierra Humbert (sierra.humbert@hum.ku.dk) before you sign the consent form.

Title of Study: Experiences of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) and sanitary waste in Sankhu, Nepal

Department: Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies

University: University of Copenhagen

Name and Contact Details of the researcher: Sierra Humbert, sierra.humbert@hum.ku.dk

This study has been approved by the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee at the University of Copenhagen.

I confirm that I understand that by ticking each box below I am consenting to this element of the study. I understand that unticked boxes mean that I DO NOT consent to that part of the study.

SECTION	STATEMENT	
1.	I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet and that this forms the basis on which I consent to the processing of the data collected during this study.	☐
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time and without giving any reason.	☐
3.	I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data until 31st December 2023 .	☐
4.	I consent to my interview being audio recorded.	☐
5.	I consent to participating in photos and/or videos in this project.	☐
6.	I understand that the data (including audio recordings, photos and transcripts) will be stored securely on a password encrypted hard drive and/or Copenhagen S-Drive. The data will be securely archived according to existing data legislation in Denmark.	☐

Page 1 of 2

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7.	I understand that all personal information will remain confidential. I understand that confidentiality will be respected unless there are compelling and legitimate reasons for this to be breached. I would inform you of any decision that might limit your confidentiality.	☐
8.	I understand that the information I share will be anonymized for this research.	☐
9.	I understand that the information I have submitted may be integrated into the student thesis, publication(s) and teaching.	☐
10.	I am aware of who I should contact if I wish to lodge a complaint.	☐
11.	I am happy to be contacted for future research connected to this project (until January 2025).	☐
12.	I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.	☐

You will be given a Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time. The researcher will retain a copy of the form.

 Name of participant Date Signature

Sierra Humbert

 Name of researcher Date Signature

Consent form (Devanagari)

Translation by Asmita Khulal.

K Ø बेनहाभन्स युनिभर्सिटी

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सहमति फारम

सेनेटरी फोहोर अनुसन्धान परियोजनामा सहभागिताको लागि

यस अनुसन्धानमा भाग लिनु भएकोमा धन्यवाद। तपाईंले पढिसकेपछि कृपया यो फारम भरनुहोस्। **जानकारी पाना**र/वा अनुसन्धानको बारेमा व्याख्या सुने। यदि तपाईंसँग कुनै प्रश्नहरू छन् भने कृपया तपाईंले सहमति फारममा हस्ताक्षर गर्नु अघि Sierra Humbert (sierra.humbert@hum.ku.dk) लाई सोध्नुहोस्।

अध्ययनको शीर्षक: साँखु, नेपाल मा महिनावारी स्वच्छता व्यवस्थापन (MHM) र सेनेटरी फोहोर को अनुभव

विभाग: कर्स-सांस्कृतिक र क्षेत्रीय अध्ययन विभाग

विश्वविद्यालय: कोपेनहेगन विश्वविद्यालय

अनुसन्धानकर्ताको नाम र सम्पर्क विवरण: सिएरा हम्बर्ट, sierra.humbert@hum.ku.dk

यो अध्ययन कोपेनहेगन विश्वविद्यालयको मानविकी अनुसन्धान नैतिकता समितिको संकायले अनुमोदन गरेको छ।

मैले तलको प्रत्येक बाकसमा टिक गरेर अध्ययनको यो तत्वमा सहमति जनाइरहेको छु भनी मैले बुझ्नेको कुरा पुष्टि गर्छु। मैले बुझ्ने कि अनटिक बाकसहरूको अर्थ म अध्ययनको त्यो भागमा सहमत छैन।

खण्ड	स्टेटमेन्ट	
१.	म पुष्टि गर्छु कि मैले जानकारी पाना पढेको र बुझ्नेको छु र यो आधार बनाउँछ जसको आधारमा म यस अध्ययनको क्रममा सङ्कलन गरिएको डाटाको प्रशोधन गर्न सहमत छु।	☐
२.	म बुझ्छु कि मेरो सहभागिता स्वैच्छिक छ र म कुनै पनि समयमा र कुनै कारण नदिई फिर्ता लिन स्वतन्त्र छु।	☐
३.	म बुझ्छु कि म सम्म मेरो डाटा फिर्ता लिन सक्षम हुनेछु २७th जुन २०२२।	☐
४।	म मेरो अन्तर्वार्ता अडियो रेकर्ड गर्न सहमत छु।	☐
५.	म यस परियोजनामा फोटो र/वा भिडियोहरूमा भाग लिन सहमत छु।	☐
६।	म बुझ्छु कि डाटा (अडियो रेकर्डिङ, फोटो र ट्रान्सक्रिप्टहरू सहित) पासवर्ड इन्क्रिप्टेड हार्ड ड्राइभ र/वा कोपेनहेगन S-ड्राइभमा सुरक्षित रूपमा भण्डारण गरिनेछ। डेनमार्कमा अवस्थित डाटा कानून अनुसार डाटा सुरक्षित रूपमा संग्रह गरिनेछ।	☐

७।	म बुझ्छु कि सबै व्यक्तिगत जानकारी गोप्य रहनेछ। यो उल्लङ्घन गर्न बाध्यकारी र वैध कारणहरू नभएसम्म गोपनीयताको सम्मान गरिनेछ भनी म बुझ्छु। म तपाईंलाई कुनै पनि निर्णयको बारेमा सूचित गर्नेछु जसले तपाईंको गोपनीयतालाई सीमित गर्न सक्छ।	☐
८।	यस अनुसन्धानको लागि अज्ञातता ऐच्छिक छ। कृपया निम्न विकल्पहरूबाट एउटा चयन गर्नुहोस्: (क) मैले भनेको कुनै पनि शब्द वा मैले दिएको जानकारीको सम्बन्धमा मेरो वास्तविक नाम र भूमिका/सम्बन्ध प्रयोग गर्न म सहमत छु। (b) म अनुरोध गर्दछु कि मेरा टिप्पणीहरू अज्ञात रूपमा प्रस्तुत गरियो तर मेरो भूमिका/सम्बन्धलाई मेरो टिप्पणीहरूसँग जोड्न अनुमति दिनुहोस् (तर मेरो पदको शीर्षक होइन)। (c) म मेरो भूमिका/सम्बन्धको उल्लेख नगरी मेरो टिप्पणीहरू गुमनाम रूपमा प्रस्तुत गर्न अनुरोध गर्दछु।	☐ ☐ ☐
९।	म बुझ्छु कि मैले पेश गरेको जानकारी विद्यार्थी थेसिस, प्रकाशन(हरू) र शिक्षणमा एकीकृत हुन सक्छ।	☐
१०।	यदि म उजुरी गर्न चाहन्छु भने मैले कसलाई सम्पर्क गर्नुपर्छ भन्ने बारे मलाई थाहा छ।	☐
११।	म यस परियोजनामा (जनवरी 2025 सम्म) जोडिएको भविष्यको अनुसन्धानको लागि सम्पर्क गर्न पाउँदा खुसी छु।	☐
१२।	म स्वेच्छाले यस अध्ययनमा भाग लिन सहमत छु।	☐

तपाईंलाई कुनै पनि समयमा राख्न र सन्दर्भ गर्नको लागि सहमति फारम दिइनेछ। अनुसन्धानकर्ताले फारमको प्रतिलिपि राख्नेछ।

सहभागीको नाम	मिति	हस्ताक्षर
सिएरा हम्बर्ट		
अनुसन्धानकर्ताको नाम	मिति	हस्ताक्षर

Consent form for organisation

KØBENHAVNS UNIVERSITET
INSTITUT FOR TVÆRKULTURELLE OG REGIONALE STUDIER

CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATION IN SANITARY WASTE RESEARCH PROJECT



Thank you considering taking part in this research. Please complete this form after you have read the **Information Sheet** and/or listened to an explanation about the research. If you have any questions please ask Sierra Humbert (sierra.humbert@hum.ku.dk) before you sign the consent form.

Title of Study: Experiences of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) and sanitary waste in Sankhu, Nepal

Department: Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies

University: University of Copenhagen

Name and Contact Details of the researcher: Sierra Humbert, sierra.humbert@hum.ku.dk

This study has been approved by the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee at the University of Copenhagen.

I confirm that I understand that by ticking each box below I am consenting to this element of the study. I understand that unticked boxes mean that I DO NOT consent to that part of the study.

SECTION	STATEMENT	
1.	I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet and that this forms the basis on which I consent to the processing of the data collected during this study.	☐
2.	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time and without giving any reason.	☐
3.	I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data until 31st December 2023 .	☐
4.	I consent to my interview being audio recorded.	☐
5.	I consent to participating in photos and/or videos in this project.	☐
6.	I understand that the data (including audio recordings, photos and transcripts) will be stored securely on a password encrypted hard drive and/or Copenhagen S-Drive. The data will be securely archived according to existing data legislation in Denmark.	☐

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7.	I understand that all personal information will remain confidential. I understand that confidentiality will be respected unless there are compelling and legitimate reasons for this to be breached. I would inform you of any decision that might limit your confidentiality.	☐
8.	I understand that any information I share will be anonymised by default for this research. If you would like your organisation/affiliation to be shared please select the following option: I request that my comments are presented anonymously but give permission to connect my organisation with my comments (but not the title of my position).	☐ ☐
9.	I understand that the information I have submitted may be integrated into the student thesis, publication(s) and teaching.	☐
10.	I am aware of who I should contact if I wish to lodge a complaint.	☐
11.	I am happy to be contacted for future research connected to this project (until January 2025).	☐
12.	I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.	☐

You will be given a Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time. The researcher will retain a copy of the form.

Name of participant	Date	Signature
Sierra Humbert		
Name of researcher	Date	Signature

Participant Information Sheet

KØBENHAVNS UNIVERSITET
INSTITUT FOR TVÆRKULTURELLE OG REGIONALE STUDIER

INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS IN STUDY ON SANITARY WASTE



Title of Project: Experiences of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) and sanitary waste in Sankhu, Nepal

Name of the researcher: Sierra Humbert, Ph.D. student

Contact Details: sierra.humbert@hum.ku.dk

This study has been approved by the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee at the University of Copenhagen.

My name is Sierra Humbert and I am a Ph.D. student at the Department for Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies at the University of Copenhagen. I would like to invite you to participate in this research project, which will provide data for my Ph.D. dissertation and relevant publications.

This research project will be running from February 2022 to 2025, with data collection taking place May to June 2022, and January to December 2023.

The purpose of this research is to contribute to an understanding of the relationship between religious practices and waste management. In particular, my focus is on women's experiences of menstrual hygiene management (MHM) in Sankhu, Nepal.

The aim(s) of this research are as follows:

- To create a detailed account of women's experiences of daily life in Sankhu, especially relating to menstruation.
- To understand the role of religious practices in the generation and interpretation of sanitary waste.
- To inform NGO and local authority action towards menstrual hygiene management.

The primary method of this study is participant observation. From May to June 2022, I will be based in Kathmandu and following popular routes in the Kathmandu Valley. The purpose of this is to familiarise myself with the area and consolidate my research questions. From January to December 2023, I will be participating in daily life Sankhu to access the full breadth of experiences relating to menstruation, sanitary waste and religious practices in the Shankharapur municipality in Nepal. The purpose of the participant observation is to enhance my understanding of religious practices amongst the Newars: any observations made while participating will be anonymous. To enhance this study, I plan to conduct individual and/or joint/group interviews with Sankhu residents and people travelling through Sankhu. These interviews will take place in-person and will be recorded using a portable recording device. Recorded interviews will be transcribed and the recording will then be destroyed on completion of the final project. All interviews will be automatically pseudonymised unless explicit permission is given to record the name/role/affiliation of the participant. Any field notes made during the process will be anonymised at the source and destroyed at the end of the project.

I will also be documenting this research with photos and videos. You can give consent on whether you would like to be included in these photos on the consent form. There will be no identifiable details for any photos included in the final dissertation or publications.

If you agree to be interviewed, we will have a preliminary chat to discuss the research project and make arrangements for a time and place to meet. You will also have the option to arrange for a follow-up interview for any further reflections.

Confidentiality is of the upmost concern during this study, as you may choose to share sensitive information. Confidentiality will be respected unless there are compelling and legitimate reasons for this to be breached, such as risk of harm to a person. If such disclosure is necessary, I would inform you of any decision that might limit your confidentiality.

The benefits of this study is that it will contribute to a broader understanding on menstrual hygiene management (MHM) in Nepal. For Shankharapur Municipality, this research is an opportunity to raise awareness on waste management and menstrual hygiene management. For the wider public, this research will contribute to an understanding of contemporary religious practices in the Kathmandu Valley as well as the generation and interpretation of sanitary waste.

Please contact me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like further information.

If you decide to participate in this research project, you are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. You may withdraw your data from the project up until it is transcribed for use in the final report (**27th June 2022**).

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering taking part in this research.

Data Protection Notice

All data will be collected and stored in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Danish Data Protection Act. To ensure compliance, all data will be held securely during the study and only viewed by myself and my supervisor (Dr. Trine Brox). Your personal data will be treated with the strictest confidence and will not be disclosed to any unauthorised third parties. The results of the data will be published in anonymised form unless identifiable data is explicitly authorised. All data will be archived at the end of this project (9th February 2025) according to existing data legislation in Denmark.

Further information on the University of Copenhagen privacy protection policy is here: <https://informationssikkerhed.ku.dk/english/protection-of-information-privacy/privacy-policy/>

If you wish to make a complaint about the conduct of the study you can contact the Data Protection Officer at the University of Copenhagen: dpo@adm.ku.dk

You will be given a copy of this information sheet.

Participant Information Sheet (Devanagari)

Translation by Asmita Kulal.

K Ø बेनहाभन्स युनिभर्सिटी
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जानकारी पाना
सेनेटरी फोहोरको अध्ययनमा
सहभागीहरूका लागि



परियोजनाको शीर्षक: शंखरापुर, नेपाल मा महिनावारी स्वच्छता व्यवस्थापन (MHM) र सेनेटरी फोहोर को अनुभव

अनुसन्धानकर्ताको नाम: सिएरा हम्बर्ट, पीएच.डी. विद्यार्थी

सम्पर्क: sierra.humbert@hum.ku.dk

यो अध्ययन कोपेनहेगन विश्वविद्यालयको मानविकी अनुसन्धान नैतिकता समितिको संकायले अनुमोदन गरेको छ।

मेरो नाम सिएरा हम्बर्ट हो र म पीएच.डी. कोपेनहेगन विश्वविद्यालयको क्रस-सांस्कृतिक र क्षेत्रीय अध्ययन विभागमा विद्यार्थी। म तपाईंलाई यस अनुसन्धान परियोजनामा अनुसन्धान सहायकको रूपमा भाग लिन आमन्त्रित गर्नु चाहन्छु, जसले मेरो पीएच.डी. को लागि डेटा प्रदान गर्नेछ। शोध प्रबंध र सान्दर्भिक प्रकाशनहरू।

यो अनुसन्धान परियोजना फेब्रुअरी 2022 देखि फेब्रुअरी 2025 सम्म चल्नेछ, डाटा संग्रह जनवरी देखि डिसेम्बर 2023 सम्म हुनेछ।

यस अनुसन्धानको उद्देश्य धार्मिक अभ्यास र फोहोर व्यवस्थापन बीचको सम्बन्धलाई बुझ्न योगदान दिनु हो। विशेष गरी, मेरो ध्यान साँखु, नेपाल मा महिनावारी स्वच्छता व्यवस्थापन (MHM) को महिला अनुभवहरू मा केन्द्रित छ।

यस अनुसन्धानका उद्देश्य (हरू) निम्नानुसार छन्:

- साँखुमा महिलाको दैनिक जीवनका विशेषगरी महिनावारीसँग सम्बन्धित अनुभवहरूको विस्तृत विवरण सिर्जना गर्ने।
- सेनेटरी फोहोरको उत्पादन र व्याख्यामा धार्मिक अभ्यासहरूको भूमिका बुझ्ने।
- महिनावारी सरसफाई व्यवस्थापन तर्फ गैरसरकारी संस्था र स्थानीय अधिकारीलाई जानकारी गराउने।

यस अध्ययनको प्राथमिक विधि सहभागी अवलोकन हो। जनवरी देखि डिसेम्बर 2023 सम्म, म नेपालको शङ्खरापुर नगरपालिकामा महिनावारी, सेनेटरी फोहोर र धार्मिक अभ्यासहरू सम्बन्धी अनुभवहरूको पूर्ण विस्तारमा पहुँच गर्न दैनिक जीवन साँखुमा सहभागी हुनेछु। सहभागी अवलोकनको उद्देश्य नेवारहरू बीचको धार्मिक अभ्यासहरू बारे मेरो बुझाइ बढाउनु हो: सहभागी हुँदा गरिएका कुनै पनि अवलोकनहरू बेनामी हुनेछन्। यस अध्ययनलाई बढाउनको लागि, मैले साँखुका बासिन्दाहरू र साँखुबाट यात्रा गर्ने व्यक्तिहरूसँग व्यक्तिगत र/वा संयुक्त/समूह अन्तर्वार्ता गर्ने योजना बनाएको छु। यी अन्तर्वार्ताहरू व्यक्तिगत रूपमा लिनेछन् र पोर्टेबल रेकर्डिङ उपकरण प्रयोग गरेर रेकर्ड गरिनेछ। रेकर्ड गरिएका अन्तर्वार्ताहरू ट्रान्सक्रिप्ट गरिनेछ र अन्तिम परियोजना पूरा भएपछि रेकर्डिङ नष्ट गरिनेछ। यस अनुसन्धानको लागि पूर्वनिर्धारित रूपमा सबै अन्तर्वार्ताहरू स्वतः अज्ञात हुनेछ। प्रक्रियाको क्रममा बनाइएको कुनै पनि फिल्ड नोटहरू स्रोतमा अज्ञात हुनेछ र परियोजनाको अन्त्यमा नष्ट गरिनेछ।

म यो अनुसन्धान फोटो र भिडियोहरू संग दस्तावेज पनि गर्नेछु। तपाईंले सहमति फारममा यी तस्बिरहरूमा समावेश गर्न चाहनुहुन्छ कि छैन भनेर सहमति दिन सक्नुहुन्छ।

यदि तपाईं अनुसन्धान सहायक हुन सहमत हुनुहुन्छ भने, हामीसँग अनुसन्धान परियोजनाको बारेमा छलफल गर्न र भेट्नको लागि समय र स्थानको व्यवस्था गर्न प्रारम्भिक कुराकानी हुनेछ।

अनुसन्धान सहायकको रूपमा, तपाईंले अनुसन्धानकर्तालाई निम्न कुराहरूमा सहयोग गर्नुहुनेछ:

- अन्तर्वार्ता र अनौपचारिक कुराकानीको क्रममा अनुवाद आधारभूत
- नेपाली शब्दावली सिकाउने
- अन्तर्वार्ता, तस्बिरहरू, रेकर्डिङहरू, परियोजनासँग सम्बन्धित घटनाहरू समावेश तर सीमित नभएसम्म डेटा सङ्कलनमा सहयोग गर्दै
- मुख्य साझेदारहरू र सूचनादाताहरूसँग सम्पर्क राख्नुहोस्
- परियोजनाको सम्बन्धमा रिपोर्टहरू लेख्नुहोस्

कृपया ध्यान दिनुहोस् कि यी सेवाहरू अनुसन्धान परियोजनाको क्रममा परिवर्तन हुन सक्छ। अनुसन्धान सहायकको सेवा, कल्याण र व्यक्तिगत विकाससँग सम्बन्धित कुनै पनि कुरामा छलफल गर्ने अवसरको रूपमा अनुसन्धानकर्ता र अनुसन्धान सहायकले नियमित बैठकहरू (महिनामा कमतिमा एक पटक) गर्नेछन्। तपाईंलाई यो अनुसन्धानकर्तासँग कुनै पनि बिन्दुमा ल्याउन स्वागत छ।

अनुसन्धान सहायकका लागि अनुसन्धानकर्ताद्वारा आवास उपलब्ध गराइनेछ, र तपाईं प्रति हप्ता कमतिमा २ रात अनुसन्धानकर्तासँग बस्नुहुनेछ। यद्यपि, यदि तपाईं कुनै पनि अवधिको लागि बिदा लिनु आवश्यक छ भने, कृपया अनुसन्धानकर्तालाई ७ दिनको सूचना दिनुहोस्। अतिरिक्त प्रशासनिक टाढाबाट पनि काम पूरा गर्न सकिन्छ।

यस अध्ययनको क्रममा गोपनीयता सबैभन्दा ठूलो चिन्ताको विषय हो, किनकि तपाईं संवेदनशील जानकारी साझा गर्न छनौट गर्न सक्नुहुन्छ। कुनै व्यक्तिलाई हानिको जोखिम जस्तै बाध्यकारी र वैध कारणहरू उल्लङ्घन नगर्दासम्म गोपनीयतालाई सम्मान गरिनेछ। यदि यस्तो खुलासा आवश्यक छ भने, म तपाईंलाई कुनै पनि निर्णयको बारेमा सूचित गर्नेछु जसले तपाईंको गोपनीयतालाई सीमित गर्न सक्छ।

जस्तै, तपाईं अनुसन्धान सहभागीहरूसँग सम्बन्धित संवेदनशील डेटा र जानकारी भेट्न सक्नुहुन्छ। तपाईंले ह्यान्डल गर्नुहुने कुनै पनि डाटा जनरल डाटा प्रोटेक्शन रेगुलेशन (GDPR) र डेनिस डाटा संरक्षण ऐन अनुसार सङ्कलन र भण्डारण गरिनु पर्छ।

यस अध्ययनको फाइदाहरू यो हो कि यसले नेपालमा महिनावारी स्वच्छता व्यवस्थापन (MHM) मा फराकिलो बुझाइमा योगदान पुर्याउँछ। शङ्खरापुर नगरपालिकाका लागि यो अनुसन्धान फोहोर व्यवस्थापन र महिनावारी सरसफाई व्यवस्थापनमा चेतना जगाउने अवसर हो। व्यापक जनताका लागि, यस अनुसन्धानले काठमाडौं उपत्यकाका समसामयिक धार्मिक अभ्यासहरूका साथै सेनेटरी फोहोरको उत्पादन र व्याख्या गर्न मद्दत गर्नेछ। तपाईंको लागि, यसले अनुसन्धान अनुभव दिनेछ र शैक्षिक क्षेत्रमा वा NGO क्षेत्रमा भविष्यको अनुसन्धान कार्यको लागि सम्पर्कहरू सिर्जना गर्नेछ।

कृपया मलाई सम्पर्क गर्नुहोस् यदि त्यहाँ केहि स्पष्ट छैन वा यदि तपाईं थप जानकारी चाहनुहुन्छ भने।

यदि तपाईंले यस अनुसन्धान परियोजनामा भाग लिने निर्णय गर्नुभयो भने, तपाईंले परियोजनाको अवधिमा सिर्जना गरिएको कुनै पनि डाटा फिर्ता लिन सक्नुहुने छैन। यद्यपि, अन्तिम प्रतिवेदन (१ जनवरी २०२४)।

यो जानकारी पाना पढ्नुभएकोमा र यस अनुसन्धानमा भाग लिने विचार गर्नुभएकोमा धन्यवाद।

डाटा संरक्षण सूचना

K Ø बेनहाभन्स युनिभर्सिटी

INSTITUT FORTV Æ RKULTURELEOGREGIONAL ESTUDIER

सबै डाटाहरू सामान्य डाटा संरक्षण नियमन (GDPR) र डेनिस डाटा संरक्षण ऐन अनुसार सङ्कलन र भण्डारण गरिनेछ। अनुपालन सुनिश्चित गर्न, अध्ययनको क्रममा सबै डाटा सुरक्षित रूपमा राखिनेछ र म र मेरो पर्यवेक्षक (डा. ट्राइन ब्रोक्स) द्वारा मात्र हेर्नेछ। तपाईंको व्यक्तिगत डाटालाई कडा विश्वासका साथ व्यवहार गरिनेछ र कुनै पनि अनधिकृत तेस्रो पक्षहरूलाई खुलासा गरिने छैन। पहिचान योग्य डाटा स्पष्ट रूपमा अधिकृत नभएसम्म डाटाको नतिजा अज्ञात रूपमा प्रकाशित गरिनेछ। यस परियोजनाको अन्त्यमा सबै डाटा संग्रहित गरिनेछ (9th फेब्रुअरी 2025) डेनमार्कमा अवस्थित डाटा कानून अनुसार।

कोपेनहेगन विश्वविद्यालयको गोपनीयता सुरक्षा नीतिको बारेमा थप जानकारी यहाँ छ: <https://informationssikkerhed.ku.dk/english/protection-of-information-privacy/privacy-policy/>

यदि तपाईं अध्ययनको आचरणको बारेमा उजुरी गर्न चाहनुहुन्छ भने तपाईंले कोपेनहेगन विश्वविद्यालयको डाटा सुरक्षा अधिकारीलाई सम्पर्क गर्न सक्नुहुन्छ: dpo@adm.ku.dk

तपाईंलाई यो जानकारी पानाको प्रतिलिपि दिइनेछ।
