

A place of one's own

PHOTOS NayanTara Gurung Kakshapati

TEXT Diwas Kc





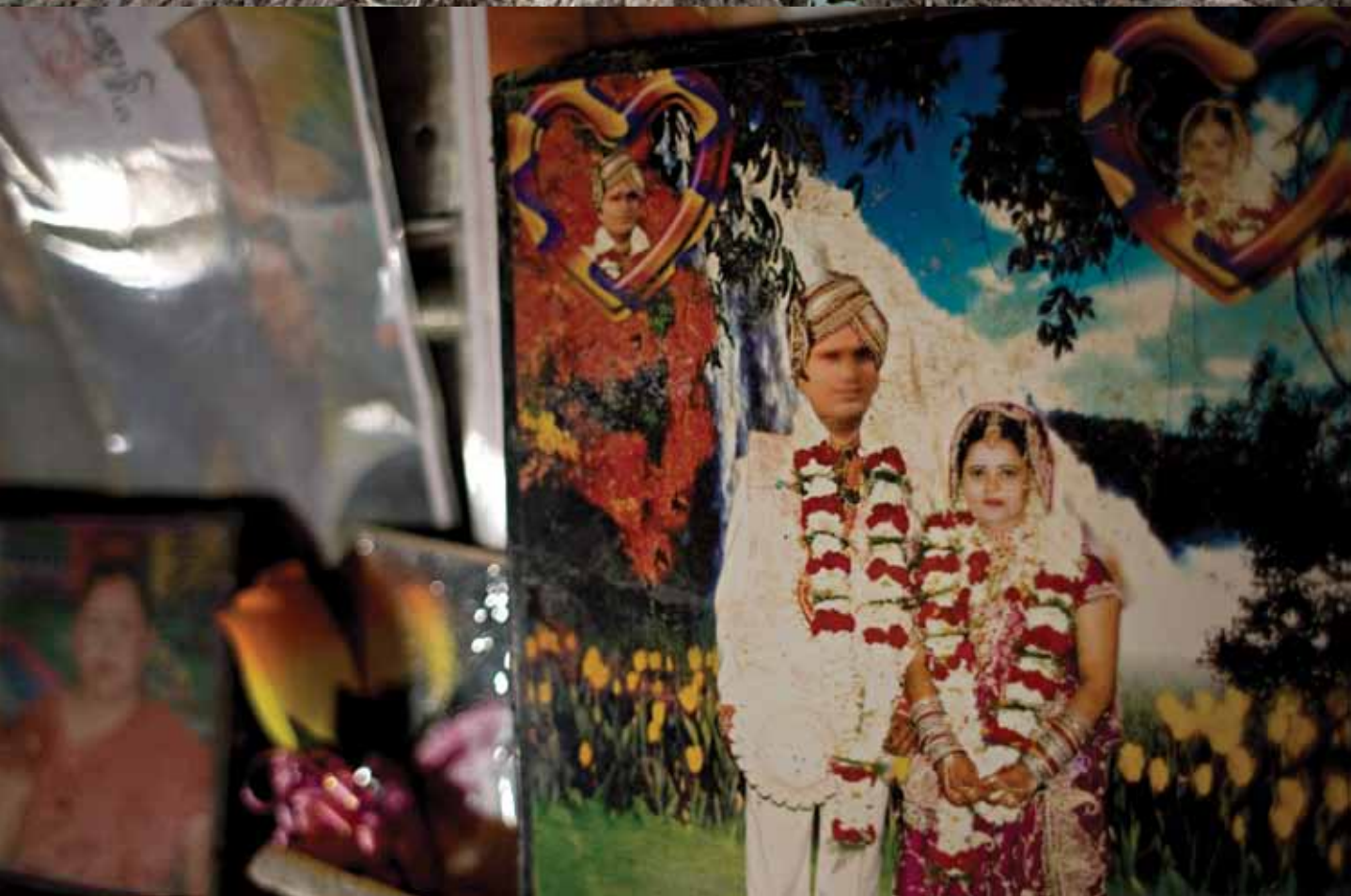
The image of Sundari Devi on her small, squatted plot of paddy. Government land by a highway in Bardiya. The earth is freshly tilled. Already the peak of monsoon, but there's no sign of rain other than a few scattered clouds. A pipe borrowed from a neighbour noisily pumps water from a rapidly emptying canal nearby. On this side of the canal, an electricity pole hints of possible peril. Not far away is Sundari Devi's hut, where her several grandchildren are playing or finishing their homework. The setting is not dazzling by any means, and the moment a humdrum one of peasantry. But the image of Sundari Devi standing rigid on that land outlasts the banality of the moment. The memory of a cultivator and her companions hustling and quibbling, of the rut of labour that is underway, is obscured. What is a passing, perishable instant of work is rendered still, stable. Sundari Devi appears firm, dominating the landscape behind her.

There is a part of her persona and her past that is accessed by this steadied representation of Sundari Devi and her land that is otherwise not possible. The image rewards her with a sense of security, permanence and proprietorship that fits the kind of person she is. Brazen, tough and assertive, she prevails in this squatter colony. She towers over the land like it is her prerogative. **This is the sense of authority with which, in her fifties, she is still trying to reinvent her life** – a life that is otherwise a saga of landlessness, homelessness, illegality and marginality.

Sundari Devi is a member of the Badi caste, a Dalit group originally engaged in pre-modern enterprises of entertainment, which ended up in this place after many occasions of dislodgement. Badis cannot own land or farm, as casteist logic went once, because they made it infertile. An ambiguous 'they', in Sundari Devi's words, would not even let the Badis step on farmland. She remembers her childhood in the hills of Dailekh not with a feeling of belonging but as a sequence of vagabondage. With the underdevelopment of the Badi communities in mind, she begins her story in this way: *Noone cared for us. People called us beggars. Badis didn't have homes. Without land it didn't make sense to settle down. We gathered our clothes and went wherever there was a harvest. Some families let us stay in their cowsheds, otherwise we slept in the fields or found coves in the hills.* A praedial motif dominates her account; earth, resources and labour are its main icons. Perhaps for that reason she has forsaken a personal voice, choosing instead a collective narrative. *The men among us fished or made madals and smoking pipes, and we women took these products to the villages, exchanging them for grain. When there was an upper-caste wedding, we'd wear our best clothes and go dance all night long. Next morning we'd ask for charity. Families with lahures gave bigger gifts. That is how the Badis made a living.*

Having described the livelihood of landless Badis in Dailekh, she quickly refutes the idea that these vocations were work. *We never worked, we weren't allowed.* Work was that special condition that came from being attached to land. This critical attribution of futility to the past is ironically what gives so much meaning to her memory. Her account is less about a





group overrun by the uncontrollable cruelty of a corrupt society and more about one that experiences and explains its oppression in the form of redundancy – as being worthless and expendable. Hers is a people that chased harvests across the Nepali terrain, as if it knew all along that its historical destiny was to pursue permanence and property.

Of course, Sundari Devi is recounting this at a time of unprecedented democratic assertions by the lower castes and classes of Nepal. Like most Badis, she is not ignorant of the entitlements that are possible through the government. She was one of the clamorous protesters who descended on Kathmandu last year to pressure the state to acknowledge the rights of Badis. Indeed, the amalgam of memory and identity so distinct in her narrative must itself emerge from the long, disruptive engagement with the modernising state that began in her childhood.

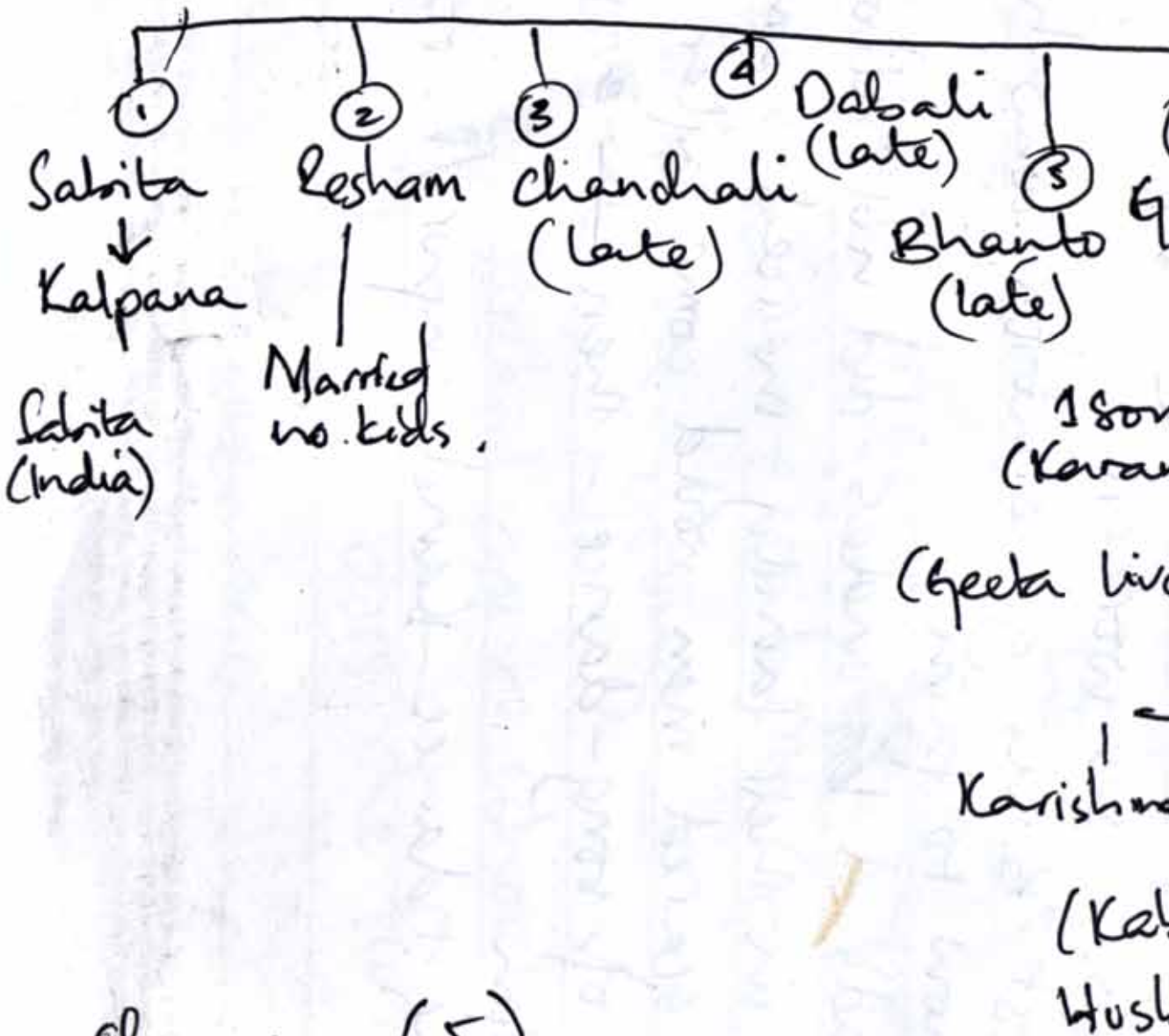
She talks about how she wound up in the plains of Bardiya from the hills of Dailekh.
Still in her mid-teens, she had recently been married off to her aunt's son, whose previous marriage had been childless.

Around 50 or 60 Badis were living on public land in Dailekh Bazaar at the time. She recalls a group of visiting foreigners: *We had never met Americans, we were bewildered to see them. They had come to see us, and they took our photos. We figured they had come to chase us out of the field, so the same night all of us packed and quietly left to relocate by a river outside the village. Next day the village head came to tell us that the Americans had come to resettle us in Surkhet. He told us that land and food were being doled out to Badis. We left immediately. In Surkhet we saw the Americans again with a general. The general brought us to Bardiya and put us on rations in exchange for lamps and smoking pipes for the Americans.*

This was the era of the heady doctrine of *bikas* and the paradoxical notion of 'monarchical egalitarianism' under the Panchayati system, which was vigorously penetrating rural economies through village development programmes. In the late sixties and early seventies, precisely the period Sundari Devi arrived in Bardiya, the western Tarai came into sharp focus for the government. Land was available for clearance and new towns like Nepalgunj and Dhangadi were prospering under regional development plans. The spectre of the Americans in Sundari Devi's story adds another crucial bit of detail – the international fellowship of the national ventures. American, Indian, Chinese and Soviet aid had all begun in earnest. And the government hoped to flourish by allowing Cold War skirmishes to touch the likes of Sundari Devi in the hinterlands of Nepal. Americans, especially, were heavily involved in the rehashing of the landholding structures and the resettlement of the landless in the west.

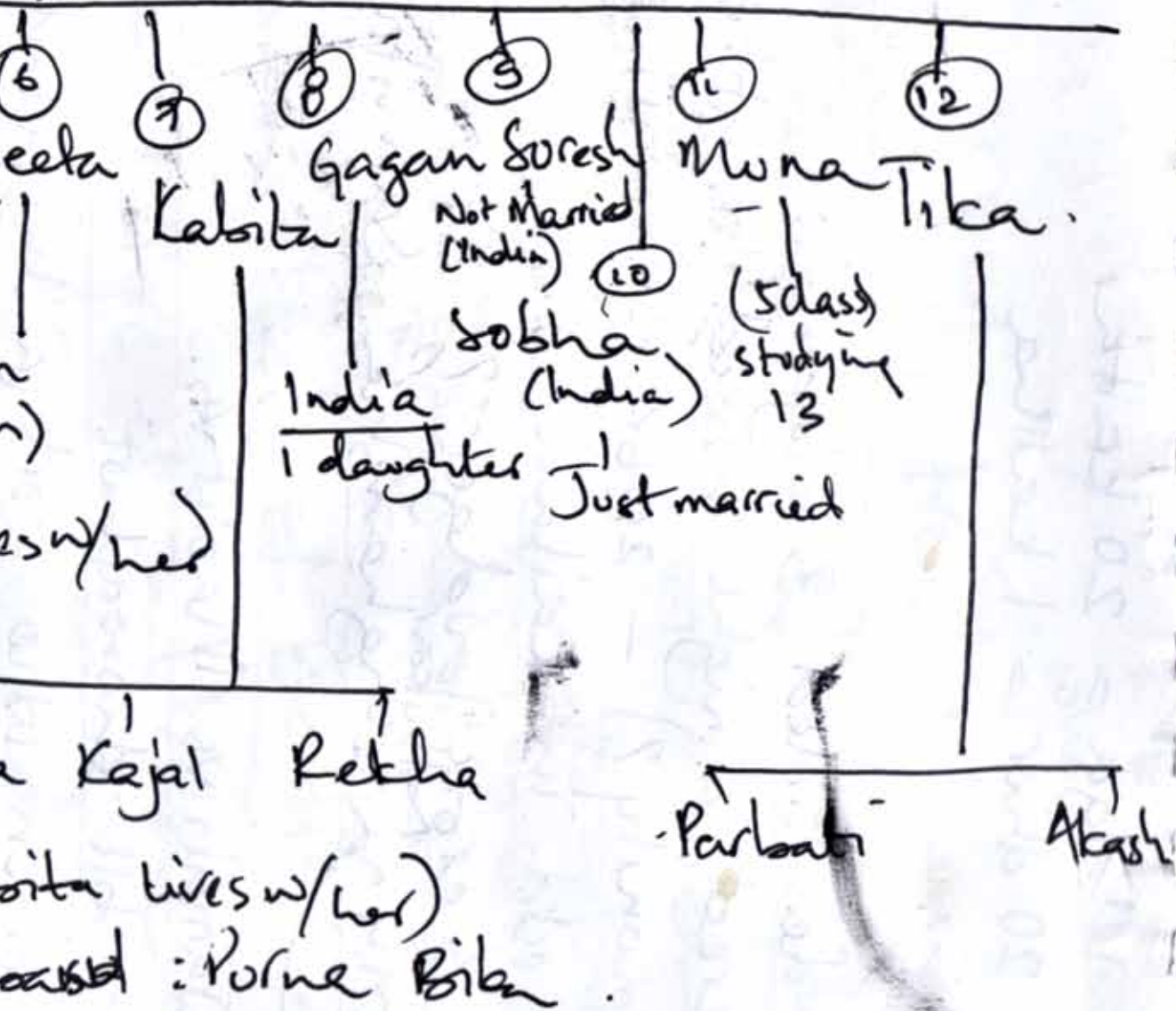
Sundari Devi's own experience of this seems to have led to further displacements, as state programmes tottered and most of the new territory made available by the state for the landless began to succumb to traditional forms of power and ownership. Even in the latest squatter colony she lives in, there is an underplayed tussle between the *sukumbasis* (the landless) and the *hukumbasis*, an ironic derivative used for landholders. Sundari Devi is

Devi
Sundari Badi



Chunaru (5)
~~(Daughter of~~

Gyan Bahadur Kadi



much aggravated by the government that on the one hand, dismantles old configurations of livelihood and interposes itself as the liberator, the provider and the giver of all entitlements, and on the other hand, only accommodates the exhortations of the lower classes through slipshod, quasi-legal and discriminate arrangements.

And yet there was much Sundari Devi gained in Bardiya by entering the fold of the state. Not least the awareness that she deserved better and ought not to be held back because she is Badi, but also the language – as well as the forum – to make her grievances heard. Even though she was the mother of 12 children, she went headlong into politics. Both she and her husband first managed to hold posts in the village development committee and later gained some clout through the latter's membership in the Nepali Congress. Today she is able to walk around the villages of Bardiya with an air of authority about her, meting out verdicts against the oppressors of women and Dalits.

But what kind of daring must it have taken Sundari Devi to dream of such power? The nerve of this woman, this untouchable of untouchables, whose type debauch themselves in cheap prostitution. To infringe so obstinately on the space of those who first ruled as literates and aristocrats and later as developers and democrats. Such ambition must involve great risks and a greater disregard for consequence. She defines her hardheaded outlook of the time as this: *Pachhi je po hunchha*. Whatever may happen.

So that image of Sundari Devi on her small, squatted plot of paddy. The land that does not belong to her. That surprising self-assurance of Sundari Devi is what the image accesses. It is nevertheless a self-assurance that masks much. The loss of her husband and a son to the bitter feuds of politics is concealed. So is the pain of her inability to save her daughters from falling into the same snare of poverty, abuse and bondage as many other Badi women. For all her bossiness and standing in the neighbourhood, men already patrol her shanty waiting for her last daughter to come of age. Meanwhile, there are the six or so grandchildren her daughters have left in her custody. They bring back harrowing stories of prejudice in school. The aspirations Sundari Devi has for these grandchildren are almost distressing. There is an overwhelming feeling that things may not improve, at least not fast enough. This occasionally sends Sundari Devi into fits of tremendous anger and frustration; her deep sense of injustice provokes awesome bursts of articulacy. But all this is sidelined for a moment and Sundari Devi appears as if in full control. ©

