ominous of the city's pending future decays, both environmentally and in human terms.

What has happened to Bagmati (and Bishnumati), a river which Hindus regard as holy, is typical of the fate waiting to deal a debilitating blow to Kathmandu and its parasitic growth. "Sand from its riverbed, hydro-power from Sundarjal, drinking water from Budhanilkantha and Sundarjal, and irrigation water throughout its length—metropolitan Kathmandu takes all these from the Bagmati River. Does the city give anything in return?" asks Dixit sarcastically. "It does—raw sewage generated by hundreds of thousands (of people), untreated effluent from industrial estates, hospital wastes, toxic chemicals and acid from 'carpet washing' plants, pesticides and chemical fertilizer leaching from fields, the detritus of cremation ghat[s]." In addition, Bagmati has long been a popular open toilet, where every morning one can see countless human bodies defecating along its banks.

And the story continues. Air pollution has now emerged as the latest threat to stalk the valley of Kathmandu. So gritty is the air that people are choking on the exhaust of one of the most prized fruits that modernization has bestowed upon humanity: mechanized mobility. Few will question its historical role in helping to overcome the friction of distance and inducing spatial economic growth. At the same time, it is a primary source of air pollution. At the global level, motorized transportation is estimated to contribute thirty-two percent of total CO₂ emissions; in Kathmandu, it is the principal cause because other sources such as coal burning and industrial pollution are still limited. Irrespective of the cause(s), the city has earned a dubious distinction as one of the most polluted Asian cities. Pollution is so bad that on any given day one can feel the hair getting greasy and heavy within a couple hours of exposure to its physical environment. While the dust has always been a problem, the pollution caused by vehicle emissions is a recent phenomenon, a byproduct of Kathmandu's unbridled march of modernity.

Certainly, Kathmandu's physiographic position as a bowl-shaped valley encircled by hills compounds its air pollution. Much of the air pollution generated in the valley remains entrapped within itself. Again, motor vehicles, most of which are very old, badly out of tune, and running on diesel and leaded gas with no emission controls, are the main culprit. Besides their numerical explosion, there are, one vehicle parts merchant explained, two other factors exacerbating the city's air quality: the use of petrol mixed with kerosene (which boosts dealers' profits) and the overloading of commercial vehicles such as buses, trucks, and tempo[s] (three-wheeled vehicles). This latter problem is further aggravated by the city's undulated terrain as it places additional pressure on the already overloaded engines. Whenever they climb even a slight slope, they belch out so much dark smoke that it can temporarily obstruct one's visibility.

Until two decades ago, Kathmandu enjoyed no more than 10,000 vehicles. In 1987, nearly 26,000 registered vehicles roamed the valley. The number had climbed to 60,000 by 1992: 22,000 light, 6,300 heavy, and 25,700 two- and three-wheelers. Currently, there are probably 75,000—90,000 vehicles. Himal reports that, "Exhaust from about 30,000 vehicles alone amounts to 22,000 tonnes per year of carbon dioxide, 22,000 tonnes of carbon monoxide (and) 2,000 tonnes of nitrogen dioxide." Simply expressed, the problem of pollution is literally getting out of sight. "November," remarked Brian Whyte, a long-time observer of Nepali tourism, "used to be the month for mountain watching [for Western tourists], once the morning fog lifted. This past November, there was not a day when the mountains were absolutely clear."22

Losing Shangri-La?

What we can discern, at one level, from this historical perspective on Kathmandu's physical degradation, is that it was no Shangri-La to local residents. Notwithstanding its artistic glory, it was mostly a parasitic administrative hub that thrived on the surplus extracted from outside the valley, a city littered with human excreta. In this sense, the rhetorical question of "Losing Shangri-La?" is moot, for there was no Shangri-La to lose in the first place. The whole notion of Kathmandu as a Shangri-La was a typical Western concoction, an imaginative geography laid over this fertile valley, where the traditional mode of life endured despite its urban characters, where the line between city and countryside blurred.

Yet, at the other level, we can't ignore this image of Shangri-La—and hence the implication of its potential loss—simply because it has been deeply ingrained for four decades and because it has been an important source of both money and misery. Once a pure myth, the image has now become a sort of everyday reality—easily evoked for public consumption. It has been highly commercialized, and hence deeply socialized even among the native residents as part of their own imaginative geography. Nowhere is the commercialization of