



Surikokura:

Development and social change in a Nepali village

2011
Jane Carter

Line drawings by Akhter Shah

Painting (1990) by Sanu Kaji, Adventure Art Gallery, Patan Durbar Square

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The title of this book literally means “Talk of Suri” – or Tales about Suri. Suri is a village in Dolakha District in the middle hills of Nepal – a district that was a focal area for Swiss development assistance from the 1970s until 2010. For a period of 18 months over 1988 – 1989, the villagers of Suri hosted a temporary resident, Jane Carter, who lived with two different families in the hamlets of Nakpa and Surigaon. Twenty years later, she made a number of return visits to the village. In the intervening period, the lives of the villagers have changed both materially, and at a more profound level. The ten chapters of the book explore these changes, both from the perspective of an outsider, and – more importantly – through the stories of Suri people themselves. The experiences of Suri villagers echo a larger picture of social change in Nepal. Their increasing interaction with the outside world, and the challenges and opportunities that this brings, also reflects in many ways the wider experience of rural citizens in other developing countries.

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In my visits to Suri over the period 2007 – 2010, I have always been accompanied by a member of Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project (NSCFP) staff. Sometimes such visits were combined with their work, but more often they demanded personal time over weekends or holidays. My most steadfast, ever-patient companion, and source of much clarification when my Nepali failed me, was Shyam Khadka. Others who have made the trip to Suri with me are Bharat Pokharel, Brahma Dhoj Gurung, Anju Upadhyaya, Anupama Mahat, and (in a consultative capacity) Birkha Chhetry. Mitha Lamichhane helped jog my memory of things past whilst conveying us safely between Kathmandu and Dolakha, whilst Dhruva Pradhan went to great lengths to be supportive – from ensuring the rapid treatment of my swollen leech bites to locating potential artists.

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Glossary

<i>ban</i>	forest (pronounced "bon")	<i>maita</i>	a woman's natal home
<i>bahini</i>	younger sister	<i>mit</i>	close friend, bound in friendship as a blood tie
<i>bari</i>	un-irrigated (rain-fed) arable land	<i>panchayat</i>	until 1990, the lowest unit of government administration and the one-party political system (as established in 1962). The panchayat was replaced by the Village Development Council (VDC)
<i>buhari</i>	daughter-in-law	<i>pipal</i>	tree belonging to the fig family, <i>Ficus religiosa</i>
<i>chautara</i>	resting place	<i>portuka</i>	long piece of white cloth wrapped around the waist as a waistband
<i>chorten</i>	a small Buddhist shrine (Tibetan word)	<i>puja</i>	an act of worship - usually involving the offering of a gift such as food or flowers to a deity. The word is used by both Hindus and Buddhists.
<i>Dalit</i>	generic term referring to all people of so-called low caste (one termed untouchables)	<i>puri</i>	a fried flat bread served during festivities. Richer households use ghee (clarified butter) to fry the bread; poorer households use oil.
<i>didi</i>	elder sister	<i>pujari</i>	secretary
<i>dhero</i>	form of stiff porridge, eaten as a staple. It is usually by heating water, adding millet or maize flour, and then stirring vigorously whilst it cooks over the fire.	<i>salwar kameeze</i>	matching dress comprising a long tunic worn over trousers, usually set off by a long flowing scarf
<i>gai</i>	cow	<i>shradhha</i>	Hindu ritual performed for dead ancestors - particularly parents
<i>ghar</i>	house	<i>sindur</i>	red powder - vermilion
<i>ghee</i>	clarified - that is, heated and separated - butter. The idea of processing it is to improve its keeping qualities	<i>soldar</i>	"gravy" eaten with a staple when there is nothing else - comprising heated water, salt and pounded chillies
<i>goth</i>	temporary animal shelter (sometimes also occupied by humans), usually made with walls of woven bamboo and roofed with braches and leaves - or plastic sheeting	<i>stupa</i>	Buddhist shrine or memorial, usually rounded in shape
<i>hasiya</i>	sickle	<i>tikka</i>	auspicious, usually red, marking placed on the forehead - it may be simply a finger-print of vermilion powder, or a sticker, or a mass of rice and yoghurt coloured red
<i>jaad</i>	local beer made from mixing water with fermented grain - usually millet. It is cloudy in appearance, and slightly sour in taste.	<i>tol</i>	hamlet
<i>Janajati</i>	generic term for people belonging to the many ethnic groups of Nepal - however, the indigenous people of Kathmandu, the Newars, are often not included within it.		
<i>jhankri</i>	traditional healer		
<i>khet</i>	irrigated arable land, usually cultivated for paddy in summer; in winter a second crop may be grown such as wheat or potatoes if sufficient water is available		
<i>khol</i>	black eye-liner		
<i>kosi</i>	large river		
<i>lungi</i>	piece of cloth normally sewn together to form a cylinder, which is then wrapped around the body as a long skirt		
<i>matwali</i>	term used for those who by their caste or ethnic group drink alcohol; less commonly used today than in the past (could now be perceived to be derogatory)		

Acronyms

CFUG	Community Forestry Users Group
FECONFUN	Federation of Community Forest Users of Nepal
SLC	School Leaving Certificate (taken at the end of grade 10)
VDC	Village Development Committee (lower administrative unit of Nepal)



Chapter 1

Why?

Why does a young Western woman choose to live in a Nepalese village for over a year, far from contact with friends, family and the comforts of modern life? In fact there are many foreigners who have made a similar choice, although it becomes less and less easy to find such remoteness anywhere in the world. Still, if the choice I made over 20 years ago needs an explanation, a brief encounter made recently on a train cruising towards Zürich airport perhaps helps to provide one.

As I was gazing at my laptop screen, a middle-aged man and a younger woman entered, and took up the seat opposite me. They seemed to be work colleagues, and were deep in discussion. “You have to learn”, the man said to the woman as he sat down, “to ask the right questions” – and he proceeded to illustrate his point from personal experience. He was on assignment to an African country, with a fixed amount of time to fulfil his task, working within a government department. It annoyed him that the employees always arrived late each morning, the reason seemingly being that public transport was difficult and unreliable. One day he announced to his colleagues, “we will buy bicycles, and everyone can cycle to work in the cool early morning”. No one demurred – with the exception of one lady who shyly admitted that she didn’t know how to ride a bike. “Then you can learn!” he said, beaming at her. The bicycles were ordered, and duly delivered – but the late staff arrivals to work continued. When he enquired about the bicycles, the man was enraged to be told by the (male) administrator that they had been dispatched to a provincial department. Eventually he found out that riding a bicycle was culturally taboo for women, and the administrator had wished to save the mainly female staff from acute embarrassment and ridicule. “So”, concluded the man on the train, “I have learned that one should avoid making any assumptions, and try to understand the local situation – to ask the right questions before doing anything.”

What the man had said would probably bring at very least a wry smile to the lips of any current development professional¹. Put so simply, it is easy to appreciate why merely buying bicycles was not going to reduce the late arrivals to work. Yet such “bicycle stories” – of inappropriate interventions based on outsider assumptions – are a common problem in development work.

Twenty years ago, I had already had my first taste of work in developing countries, and it had dawned upon me that

technical inputs alone are rarely sufficient to have a long-lasting positive impact. This realisation was prompted in part from my own experience, but also by a growing body of then quite new literature about “participatory development”. This argued the need to first enquire and try to understand the views and knowledge of local people before attempting any intervention. Once understanding of the local situation has been gained, development activities could then be planned and implemented together with the local people.² It sounds obvious now – notwithstanding a degree of intrinsic naivety. At the time, as a young person hoping to become a development professional, my main wish was to first *better understand*. So it made sense to channel this urge into a doctoral study, and to arrange to conduct fieldwork in a Nepali village. Another motivation was more personal, and combined a sense of adventure, excitement, curiosity, and challenge. I wanted to prove to myself that I could live for a prolonged period in very basic conditions, communicating solely in a language that I had first to learn.

As for doing my research in Nepal, it was the obvious choice for many reasons. I am a forester, and Nepal was at the time one of the leading countries in the world promoting a national programme of community forestry. It still is. I already knew a number of people working in forestry development in the country. Of course the images I had in my head of a Nepal of towering mountains, emerald green paddy fields and smiling people were an added attraction. Nepal was the first developing country I ever visited (as an undergraduate student at the age of 19), and I had been overwhelmed by everything I saw that first time, especially the friendliness of people who so lacked material resources.

What I learned from living in the Nepali village of Suri was a great deal about the realities of village life, and a cultural and religious setting very different to my own. This also prompted greater realisation of my own cultural background and general good fortune in many aspects of life – something that is all too easy to forget in day-to-day comfortable Western living. Though my research was on the use of forests and trees, this formed only a small part of the overall learning experience of living in the village. In writing the pages that follow, I have sought to give voice to the villagers – to not only describe some of the daily challenges of their lives, but also to explore the huge changes that have occurred over the past twenty years.³

An important – indeed essential – resource for this account was the numerous tightly packed aerogrammes that I wrote to my mother during the time that I lived in the village. The very concept of aerogrammes seems antiquated now. Thin single blue sheets, folded in three and then stuck together by licking little glued flaps – they have disappeared from Post Office counters. In saving the thoughts that I penned to her, Mum preserved many details and small incidents that I have since forgotten or that had morphed in my memory. I also realised when I started to write that it was impossible to cut myself out of the narrative – because I saw and listened to the villagers through my own eyes and ears, inevitably coloured by my own values and perceptions. They, in turn, undoubtedly sometimes gave me versions of events that fitted their own values or interests, or what they thought I would want to hear.⁴ This said, if you live in a village for some time, you get to know who likes to embroider stories and who tells them more directly; what subjects elicit concealed or idealised responses, and which ones are readily shared. You learn not to ask stupid questions, at least.⁵ Above all, if you are living in a village, you can observe for yourself, even if you are never truly neutral in so doing. You influence and are influenced – although to some extent you can choose how much this happens.

That train to Zürich airport in which I overheard the bicycle conversation was taking me to catch a plane to Delhi, and thence to Kathmandu for professional purposes. Work visits to Nepal in the last few years have given me the opportunity to return to Suri on a number of occasions, even if each has been frustratingly short. During these visits, I kept a diary of what I heard and saw.

What follows in these pages is a set of personal observations and reflections around the then and now – personal to the individuals whom I got to know, as well as to me. Since I have worked in development in the interim period, it seemed logical to organise the chapters according to particular topics that emerged as important. Some reflect broad trends in rural development, whilst others are more specific to Nepal. Yet the aim is not to explore what specific changes development interventions have brought. It is to reflect more broadly on what has happened in Suri, and rural Nepal, over 20 years – and to share something of village life with those who have not had the opportunity to experience it at first hand.

Diary extract – journey to Suri (April 2008)

The sky is a deep, clear blue, reflected far below us in the fast-flowing turquoise waters of the Tama Kosi river, glinting in the sunlight. It is early in the morning, and we have left Charikot, the headquarters of the hill district of Dolakha in central Nepal, and are bumping along the dusty dirt track that counts as a road. The road is relatively newly made, but already well rutted from constant use by buses and lorries packed with people and loads that defy any imaginable safety norms. By contrast, my companions and I are sitting in the spacious luxury of a Land Cruiser, the white paintwork

of its bonnet and sides emblazoned with the large red shield of Switzerland. Such a prominent display of nationality is in fact unusual in Swiss development cooperation. It became necessary during the years of Nepal's civil conflict to distinguish project vehicles, even from a distance, from army or police patrols – which were vulnerable to ambush. We are on our way to visit a number of community forest user groups supported through the Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project (NSCFP) – of which several are located in Suri. The dirt road will take us as far as the small market settlement of Singati, from which the lower reaches of Suri are just three hours walk away.

Twenty years ago almost to the month, I set off from Charikot on foot, with a bulging rucksack full of provisions on my back, and a letter from the Chief District Officer tucked carefully into a side pocket. The letter was addressed to the Pradhan Panch or head of what was then the panchayat (now Village Development Committee, VDC) of Suri. It introduced me as a student wishing to live in the village, and requested him to give me any necessary support. I had chosen Suri for a variety of reasons, based on available information and preliminary visits to a number of potential villages. The factors in the decision included the mixture of people living there; relative remoteness and limited development activities; and the apparent openness of local leaders to an uninvited foreign student.⁶

Suri was then a strenuous eight hours walk from Charikot. As I strode out alone down the steeply stepped path to the roaring Tama Kosi at the bottom of the valley and then continued northwards along its banks, people seeing me called out "A Swiss is coming, a Swiss is coming!" My reply was always a greeting, followed by a refuting of my assumed nationality – "I'm British", I would insist. I'm not sure where else in the world a foreigner would be immediately assumed to be Swiss, but Dolakha district has been one of the centres of Swiss development cooperation in Nepal for over thirty years. Perhaps partly because of this, I was confident that as a lone young foreign woman, I could walk into a village and be welcomed, fed and accommodated – and even have to insist that I pay. That confidence was well-founded: all my memories are of being treated with warmth and kindness.

Returning twenty years on, I now have a Swiss passport in my (much smaller) backpack, two daughters waiting for me back in Switzerland, and a job with the Swiss non-profit making organisation Intercooperation – which manages the NSCFP. Since living in Suri for some 18 months from 1988 to 1990, with a short return visit in 1991, circumstances prevented me making any further visit to the village until September 2007.

The current visit has particular significance, with the red of the Swiss shield on the vehicle being very much the colour of the moment. Red has become here the colour of hope. The results of the long-awaited vote for the Constitutional Assembly have been coming in, and it is clear that the Maoists have won a landslide victory. Yesterday as we drove up from Kathmandu to Charikot, red Maoist flags fluttered from



houses, red Maoists slogans of victory had been scrawled across all available surfaces, and buses thronged with red-attired Maoist supporters headed past us to the capital. Women in red saris or salwar kameezes; men in red T-shirts, red bandanas tied round their heads, many also with red sindur powder smeared onto their faces and into their hair – all were going to celebrate. Late last evening, the results for Dolakha district were announced – both seats won by Maoists – and the noisy jubilation in Charikot went on long into the night, making sleep difficult to find (especially for someone experiencing jet-lag; I arrived in Kathmandu two days ago).

The talk amongst my companions – driver Om Dai, forestry colleagues Birkha and Shyam – is of New Nepal, and of what change all these newly elected representatives are going to bring. There is still some wonder about the extent of the victory. The Maoists are credited with an excellent election campaign, with young cadres going out into the villages, using catchy rhyming slogans that appealed widely. “Arulai heryon patak – patak, Maobadi lai heraun yas patak” – “Others got many chances, now let’s give the Maoists a chance”. To me, the red flags and red-adorned supporters are reminiscent of 18 years ago, when the “revolution” occurred and the one party panchayat system was overturned – but the degree of hope and fervour is palpably greater this time. So much has been lost in the interim.

Driving up yesterday, there were a few reminders of some of that loss. The most obvious example was the agricultural development centre at Dandapakar, painstakingly built up with Swiss development support over many years – the first work having started well before the road, also built with Swiss support, reached the area. When eventually handed over to the government some fifteen years ago it was an integrated set of buildings staffed by competent local professionals. In the course of time, and as a result of the pressure on government infrastructure during the armed conflict, the Agriculture Department handed over the centre to the Police. The Maoist rebels duly attacked the Police, and now all that remains of the buildings are a few empty shells. Many of the buildings are not even that – the plots are laid bare, even the stones taken for other construction.

It seems ironic that the incoming Maoist government will presumably be seeking to re-establish an infrastructure that its cadres put so much effort into ruthlessly destroying. Of course, though, it is the human loss – the many lives extinguished and the many more lives permanently damaged by trauma and loss – that is the most tragic legacy.

Much more positively, the tarmac surfaced road – all the way to Jiri – has become a major, well used thoroughfare, and with its carefully channelled watercourses and solidly reinforced embankments, rarely suffers any major earth-slips. Plantations of pine and alder either side of the road, established with the support of what was then the (Swiss) Integrated Hill Development Project (IHDP), are now near or approaching maturity. We stopped to chat with men harvesting one such pine plantation – an interim thinning, leaving selected trees to mature for a final harvest – and were told that the area is a community forest. That timber will bring them very significant revenue to invest in community activities. The other positive point to note is that, despite the deaths, the human resources of Dolakha are substantial. Many women and men have benefitted from training and scholarships for further education, equipping them for a different future.

Whilst my colleagues continue to ponder the electoral results, my own thoughts take a different tack. I am having trouble in getting my brain to “click into” Nepali; in my sleep-deprived state, German words keep floating unhelpfully into Nepali sentences. I have changed into village dress, as this is what I always wore in Suri – a short-sleeved blouse (inevitably the tailor has stitched it too tightly as I failed to ask for it to be loose), a patterned cloth serving as a long skirt (lungi) and a white cloth (portuka) wrapped around my midriff. The portuka not only serves to help keep the lungi in place, but also as a surrogate set of pockets in which to stuff a purse, keys, a snack, or anything else that a woman might like to have on her person, ready to hand. The cloth is new and starched and feels uncomfortable against my skin; indeed instead of the desired effect of making me feel more at ease, my whole outfit feels strange, as if I’m dressing up. I noticed a number of smartly turned out young women giggling at the sight of me in Charikot. The place has mushroomed into a quite a sophisticated district town compared to the sleepy collection of buildings along one main street that it once was.

The Land Cruiser rounds a bend, and there stretched out in front of us, clear and glistening with fresh snow in the morning light, is the mountain that defines the local landscape, Gauri Shankar. A beautiful Lamupuchari (a long-tailed magpie) flits through some alder trees; behind them, winter wheat is ripening on the terraced fields. Along the road we pass a man leading a young and frisky male buffalo, and a group of women carrying head-loads of split fuelwood to be stacked at home ready for the monsoon. They all smile. This is the Nepal of my more idealised memories; the scene could all be taken from a photo twenty years ago. Talk in the vehicle has turned to the pinkly blossoming Koiralo⁷ tree by the roadside and the excellent chutney that can be made from the flowers. My tiredness lifts; I’m returning to familiar territory.



whom – can usually be discussed openly for hours, at least if the persons concerned have no reluctance about divulging their caste.

- 6 I took to heart, and studiously tried to avoid, Robert Chambers' observations on the six biases of "rural development tourism". They are: spatial bias (urban, tarmac, roadside); project bias; person bias; dry season bias; diplomatic bias and professional bias – to which he now adds security bias, certainly a pertinent one in the case of Nepal (Chambers, 2008 *Revolutions in Development Inquiry*, Earthscan, London, UK). In fact I fell clearly into one of the traps he predicts: that of not making regular visits to the village after my studies.

- 7 *Bauhinia variegata*

Endnotes

- 1 Description by Somalian-born Aayan Hirsi Ali of learning to ride a bicycle in Holland provides poignant insight into why riding a bicycle is socially unacceptable for women of her country (see Hirsi Ali, A., 2007, *Infidel*). My point in quoting the anecdote is not to open a debate about whether it is appropriate to provide women with support to do something that is considered taboo in their culture. It is intended to illustrate that what may be considered normal in one culture can represent a strong social statement in another. This may not be immediately obvious.
- 2 For example, see Chambers, R. (1983) *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* Longman: London Lagos New York and Chambers, R. (1997) *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last* Intermediate Technology Publications, London.
- 3 When I started thinking about the changes that have occurred in Suri and putting them in the perspective of changes in the country and even more globally, I started to read or re-read some of the vast body of literature that already exists on changing village lives. A particularly important piece of work in this regard is Critchfield, R. (1994) *The villagers Changed values, altered lives: the closing of the urban-rural gap* Anchor Books, USA.
- 4 A thoughtful book about how Nepali villagers communicate has been written by a Jesuit priest, Father Miller. He explores in detail the need of individuals to maintain prestige and to conceal what is socially unacceptable in the village setting. His argument is that since there is virtually no physical private space in a village, verbal privacy (not telling the literal truth, which a Westerner might quickly dismiss as lying) is essential for harmonious social relations. The point here is that there are many different ways to communicate – it is certainly not that Westerners have a greater claim to truthfulness See: Miller, C.J.(1990) *Decision-making in village Nepal* Sahayogi Press Pvt Ltd, Kathmandu, Nepal. Second edition.
- 5 For example, personal finances are (unsurprisingly) always a difficult topic, whereas family details – who is related to



Chapter 2

Suri: How the village came to be

I first perceived Suri rather naively, seeing it as exemplifying a pattern of rural existence that had changed little over succeeding generations. The truth is more complicated; like many villages in rural Nepal, Suri has undergone huge changes over the previous century. Rather than a timeless collection of people and hamlets, the village has been in a state of constant flux and evolution. Yet before embarking on the history of settlement in Suri - as far as it may be pieced together - some introduction to the place is needed. This extract from an early letter describes the village as it first appeared to me, in 1988.

Aerogramme home - written sometime in August-September 1988

I've realised that I haven't properly described to you how one reaches Suri after crossing the Tama Kosi river. The suspension bridge isn't the best one I've ever used, but it's OK - it doesn't sway too much, and most of the planks are in place - it's easy to avoid the gaps where a piece of wood is missing. On the other side of the bridge are clustered a few houses and tea shops¹, and it's from here that one leaves the main valley path to follow a narrow winding one upwards. It passes first through some rather miserable, stony terraces, and then into stunted pine forest - dipping into broadleaved forest where there's a little more moisture. At present these places are alive with small black leeches - it's best to walk quickly. After some one to two hours of uphill plodding with the roar of the Tama Kosi gradually fading from the ears, the path rounds into a side valley and finally opens to a scattering of houses amongst un-irrigated fields (bari). This is Mulabari, the first settlement - the name actually means "radish field". Right now the fields are green with maize and millet; of radishes I have seen no sign!

Anyway, the path leads on and upwards, towards a rise on which stands a pipal² tree. This is also where the primary school is located - though I must say it's not a very inspiring sight. The building is a stone rectangle divided into rudimentary classrooms; the windows are holes in the wall, and the roof itself is pockmarked with holes - it's no match for the monsoon rain. I guess I make an intriguing creature to behold - or maybe just a diversion from boring lessons - anyway, every time I've passed so far the school children have spotted me coming, and rushed out to stare. Dressed in a semblance of school uniforms, they all seem rather grubby, with perpetually runny noses. Usually one or more of the teachers also strolls out to make polite enquiries. Obviously they like to keep themselves informed of village comings and goings. It didn't strike me immediately, but unlike many villages, Suri has no tea shop. I

guess this is because it's a little "off the beaten track". Anyway, the result is that the chautara (stone seating place) beside the school seems to serve as the point of social exchange, comment and news.

Resting at the chautara under the pipal tree, one has a fair view of the vertical sweep of Surigaon, which I take to be the main settlement of Suri. Far below, the terraces of irrigated paddy fields (khet) stretch towards the valley bottom in an emerald green swathe. Dotted above the khet, amongst bari fields, the white-washed stone houses of the mainly well-to-do, higher caste Chhetris stand out prominently. Here and there poorer dwellings are also visible - roofed with thatch instead of stone; some, like that of Ashok and Birmaya Sunwar, are only simple mud-walled huts. I think it's only some of the Sunwars who have such poor homes. The Kamis [blacksmiths] and Damais [tailor-musicians], who are the main members of the low castes in the village, generally have stone houses - but what is noticeable is that they're grouped in distinctly separate hamlets, away from the other castes. Looking upwards from the chautara, the terraces of maize and millet continue, although the steeper slopes are wooded. Here and there along the upper ridge of the valley side are clusters of (Buddhist) prayer flags, located by small chortens (shrines). The Tamang houses are readily picked out amongst the higher fields, as they are mud-washed a rusty red, rather than white. The Sherpa houses, by contrast, are white like those of everyone else, but actually you can't really see them from the chautara - you have to continue on.

It's inevitably getting late by the time I reach Surigaon, but Nakpa, where Yermu is located, is another couple of hours further up the valley. Still, I like the evening time, with people returning from working in the fields, the smell of wood smoke beginning to fill the air, and the cicadas whirring noisily. Around 5 o'clock they start to make a sort of "kirii kirii kirii" sound, which I'm told announces the time to cut fodder and tie up the animals for the evening. Certainly that's what people are doing. There's also a bird called a Nyauli that makes a particular sort of mournful call as the shadows lengthen. Somehow the whole effect is very calm and reassuring - I think I'm falling under the spell of rural life here."

To go back to the time before settlement, the area would have been thick forest - unbroken but for places where root-hold was impossible, and the trees gave way to bare cliffs. When I asked villagers about the distant past, they conjured up a frightening, dark forest full of wild animals, especially bears and "tigers" (a word that seemed

to describe a variety of large cats – apparently none of them striped, but spotted). With very little cultivable land at the valley bottom, and steep, rocky, north facing slopes, the terrain would have been quite inhospitable. Most likely the early settlers practiced a hunter-gathering lifestyle, along with a system of slash and burn agriculture. This would have entailed the heavy work of clearing plots in the forest, and then growing what crops they could for a few years - until the yields declined through reduced soil fertility and infestations of weeds and pests. Then they would have moved on to clear another plot.

The first inhabitants almost certainly belonged to the group of hill people or *Janajatis* known as Sunwars or Surels – people with their own language and customs, who were scattered in the vicinity of the Tama Kosi, but never occupied a large area³. Back in the 18th century, the Sunwars/Surels practised a form of communal land ownership, known as *kipat*, and probably lived a life largely undisturbed by outside influences. Outside influences inevitably arrived, however. In Kathmandu, the judicious combination of politics and armed conflict led to one Privity Narayan Shah establishing Nepal as a kingdom in 1769⁴. Adopting the usual means of State expansion, he organised the levying of taxes and investigated means to exploit resources and otherwise generate revenue for the State coffers. Metal deposits, especially gold, were discovered in the Tama Kosi area, and as a result it was invaded by a wave of settlers seeking work in the mines. The Sunwar/Surels reacted to this influx in a manner that, with the benefit of hindsight, proved disastrous for them.

Feeling that they were being exploited because of their ignorance of the Nepali language, representatives of 12 Sunwar/Surel villages, including Suri, decided to approach the administration for assistance. By then the hereditary Prime Ministers (Ranas) had taken power, so their petition was addressed to the ruler of the time, Jang Bahadur Rana. In it, they requested permission to convert to Hinduism, and for Brahmins and Chhetris⁵ to settle in their area and teach them Nepali. Apparently they also agreed to give up the tax free status of the valuable paddy fields (*khet*) on their traditional communal land.

Chhetris duly arrived – in some numbers. They settled on the best land (the *khet*), and began cultivating it by plough – an innovation they apparently introduced to the area. Many of the first Chhetris to settle in the area belonged to the Khadka clan, and it is the Khadkas who came to be the most powerful group in Suri. Requiring craftsmen to make their tools and attend to other socially demeaning tasks, the Chhetris brought with them members of the occupational castes, in particular Kamis to forge and mend metal implements, and Damais to sew their clothes and play music at their weddings. They also had slaves, who were eventually freed by law, if not fully in practice. Today they are known as Bhujels. The Chhetris allowed their menials to settle on poor quality land at a discrete distance from their own homes - close enough to be on hand when needed, but otherwise largely out of sight.

Whilst the new settlers were happily establishing themselves, the Sunwars still retained much of their communal land. This they were to lose, however. The known fact is that in 1918, the five Sunwar headmen of Suri signed a deed renouncing all rights to their *kipat*, and that this land was then given by the Rana government as a tax-free grant to a certain Colonel Dal Bahadur Khadka, in recognition of his distinguished services in the army. The colonel seems to have played a pro-active role in this turn of fortunes. According to the Sunwars, he invited the unsuspecting headmen to a big feast, at which he regaled them with food and drink. He himself drank nothing, but this would not have raised eyebrows. One of the ways by which Chhetris and Brahmins demonstrate their ritual superiority is to abstain from alcohol – the drinking classes being known as *matwali*⁶. Once the Sunwars were well and truly drunk, the colonel got them to put their signature to the document renouncing their rights, which he then used in his petition to obtain the land himself.

What all the other Sunwars thought of their headmen is not recorded, but those summarily dispossessed of their land had little option but to migrate – a trend that has continued ever since⁷. This mass out-migration was not an isolated event specific to Suri; it was happening all over the middle hills of Nepal in the early decades of the 20th century as the growing population no longer had sufficient land to feed themselves. The poor and dispossessed headed for new lands to settle in Darjeeling, Sikkim, Bhutan, and other parts of India.⁸

The system of tax-free land was abolished in Nepal not long after the overthrow of the Ranas as national rulers in 1951 and the return of the monarchy for their final period of reign. This actually favoured the Chhetris further, as they were able to buy up the land titles to the best lands, consolidating their formal position as the village landlords. By the late 1980s, their power hold was broadly uncontested throughout most of Suri (with the exception of two distant settlements of Sherpas and Gurungs); the only issue was which of the different families or clans of Khadka and Karki Chhetris had the upper hand. This issue came to the fore in local elections of panchayat representatives under what was then the one-party State, but otherwise simmered in the background of outwardly friendly interactions.

The Sunwars were not the only hill people to populate Suri. The waves of immigrants associated with the 18th century mines (who had first precipitated the headmen's ill-advised petition to the Rana regime) also included Tamangs and Sherpas. They were probably people with no or very little land, seeking to make a new life for themselves. The Tamangs, traditionally horse traders in times gone by, and the Sherpas – today of course well known for their active role in mountaineering expeditions – share both Buddhism, and a tendency to live on the higher, less productive slopes. They may well have occupied better land in Suri earlier on; however, by 20 years ago, much of the land cultivated by the Sherpas was owned not by them, but by the Chhetris,

for whom they farmed as share-croppers. With half the yield going to the cultivator, half to the owner, it is not a system from which it is easy to break out. Like the Sunwars, the Sherpas and Tamangs complained of Chhetri trickery, saying that their forebears had been persuaded into signing papers when drunk. The Chhetris themselves did not altogether deny this, saying that those who drank alcohol had lost much of their land to them through idleness and drunkenness.

Another small, separate group that arrived at some point in the 19th century were Gurungs – traditionally, shepherds owning large flocks of sheep that they grazed in a pattern of seasonal migration. The Gurungs built themselves a nucleated settlement on the hillside in one of the further reaches of Suri, a closely woven hamlet that stood in sharp contrast to the scattered dwellings of almost everyone else. (The Tamangs are the one other group who, in Suri, also tend to live quite close together). One more group, the Newars – the original inhabitants of Kathmandu valley, who are generally renowned for their strong entrepreneurial sense - took up residence somewhat later. It was perhaps not those who had business foremost in their minds who settled in Suri – they came to buy land and cultivate it, arriving in the mid 20th century at the time the Sunwars were leaving. Finally, and most recently, a few Bahun (Brahmin) families moved into the village in the 1970s. As the highest caste (traditional priests), their confidence in their ritual superiority meant that they quickly established themselves as influential households in the locality.

Viewed from a political perspective, the history of Suri is a striking tale of the State systematically favouring one group

and failing to guard or protect the rights of its other citizens. Furthermore, it is not an isolated case – only a rather stark example of an inequitable, indeed highly discriminatory, process that happened throughout the middle hills. What seemed remarkable twenty years ago was the apparent lack of resentment amongst those who had lost so much – especially the Sunwars. General hardships of life – whether caused by the weather or by the actions of one's ancestors – seemed broadly accepted as something that could not be changed. There was a certain sense of fatalism, reinforced by the Hindu, and to a broad extent also Buddhist, religious duty of accepting one's allotted status at birth.

In terms of human dynamics, the population of Suri is a complex melting pot of generations arriving and leaving. The apparently long established, traditional way of life is actually one that evolved in the 20th century, and is still changing. Some of the changes proved far greater than perhaps anyone would have imagined. I wish I had systematically asked people when I lived in the village for their predictions of the future. The only ones that I remember being volunteered are of better road access and electricity – both of which have at least partially been fulfilled. No-one made predictions of social change.



Endnotes

- 1 Familiar to anyone who has visited rural Nepal, a tea shop is perhaps more accurately described as a small restaurant. Those recalled in this extract offered little more than sugary sweet tea (milky or black, depending on the availability of dairy products) and perhaps some pounded rice (*chiura*) on which to chew. These days there is greater choice – prominent items being fizzy drinks, chow chow noodles, and biscuits. Leaning back on a wooden bench whilst the tea is boiled up on a wood fire and then strained into glasses, the tea shop is a place to stop and rest, to chat, and to observe the rest of the world passing by.
- 2 *Ficus religiosa* The *pipal* tree is often found at resting places as it affords a pleasant, dappled shade and is revered as the tree under which Buddha attained enlightenment.
- 3 It was commonly held by the villagers that the name 'Suri' is derived from 'Surel', who were the group of Sunwars who settled in the area. The Sunwars used to tell me that the names Surel and Sunwar were interchangeable - though in fact they are distinct groups with different though closely related languages. Surel is the accurate term, and the one that those belonging to this group are now using by preference.
- 4 A very readable account of the history of Nepal is provided by Thapa, M. (2007) in her book *Forget Kathmandu An Elegy for Democracy* Penguin Books, India. First published 2005; revised 2007.
- 5 The Hindu caste system can be understood at very different levels of complexity, and the finer details certainly surpass my understanding. Manjushree Thapa (see footnote 4) writes of Nepal's population that, "The truth is that this is a complicated country, its 26 million people an intricate social tangle. Best estimates have 90-odd caste and ethnic nationalities living in the country's 150,000 square kilometres (less than 20 per cent of which is arable), speaking 71 languages and dialects...." Put at its simplest level, the Brahmins represent the highest caste, traditionally the priests – also known as Bahuns. Next in the hierarchy are the Chhetris, who were originally the warrior caste and are commonly land owners; the hereditary prime ministers and their descendents also belong to this caste. At the bottom of the hierarchy are the Dalits (formerly known as untouchables), who include Kamis (blacksmiths), Damais (tailor-musicians), and Sarkis (leather workers and handlers of carcasses). The numerous ethnic groups or *Janajatis* were slotted into the middle of this system, regardless of whether they were Hindu or not (some, like the Sunwars, found it opportune to convert to Hinduism). Three groups: the Bahuns, Chhetris and the Newars (the original inhabitants of Kathmandu valley) have cornered power, wealth and influence over the country since it was unified into a State. They broadly continue to do so to this day.
- 6 Although quite common 20 years ago, the term *matwali* is hardly used today – and depending on how it is used, could be interpreted as an insult.
- 7 According to one researcher, probably over 60% of the original families left Suri between 1925 and 1941 to seek work and new lands in India: Fournier, A. (1974) *Notes preliminaries sur des populations Sunuwar dans l'est du Népal* in: *Contributions to the Anthropology of Nepal* Furer-Haimendorf, C. (ed) (1974). Much has been written about the exodus from the hills during the 20th century, which some writers named "the great turnaround" See for example: Goldstein, M., Ross, J. L. and Schuler, S. (1983) "From a Mountain-Rural to a Plains-Urban Society Implications of the 1981 Nepalese Census," *Mountain Research and Development*, Vol. 3, No. 1: 61–64.
- 8 There are plenty of parallels elsewhere, of course. The most obvious example in European history is the eighteenth and nineteenth century exoduses of people from poor rural areas – sometimes prompted by dire circumstances such as the Irish potato famine – in search of new opportunities elsewhere, notably in the USA.



Chapter 3

Feudalism at an end? The fate of Yermu

Definitions of feudalism can be debated at length. Yet feudal – in terms of the relationship between a wealthy landlord and serfs - was the word that came most readily to my mind when trying to describe the social structure of Suri at the time I lived there¹.

In the Suri of the late 1980s, land ownership was not only concentrated in the hands of the Chhetris, but in one household in particular: Yermu, in the hamlet of Nakpa. It was to Yermu (the name was used as much to describe the family as the physical location) that villagers came if they were in need of a loan or another favour, if some dispute between neighbours could not be resolved, or if they wanted to hear and contribute to political gossip. The Yermu family, with Karnak Bahadur Karki at its head, was the centre of the community. What Yermu didn't know was probably not worth knowing - or if it was, it would not take long for Yermu to find out. The power structure in Suri was blatant, but not exceptional in rural Nepal at that time, when the elites held control over all aspects of life.

Aerogramme home - Nakpa, 11 July 1988

It's a grey afternoon, nearly five o'clock, and the cloud is closing in for the day, I think. I'm sitting in the front porch area of the house of Karnak Bahadur – the older house – with grandfather, mother, a son-in-law visiting from Jiri, another guest, and several of the servant's children. My idea to find a room with a simple family seems to have been rather fanciful. Karnak Bahadur insists that I should stay here, and in truth this is the only house in Nakpa in which I can have a room of my own. Sweet milky tea has just been served – milk products are readily available to this family, which owns a large herd of cows and at least several milking buffaloes. Grandfather is peering over my shoulder, watching me – he's amazed at my writing, but even if I was writing in Nepali, he wouldn't be able to make out the words as his eyesight is very poor. Actually I'm not sure how literate he is. Mother (Chandi) has got up to shoo some of the chickens and their chicks under a bamboo basket; here you have to watch out for birds of prey, which can suddenly swoop and carry off a chick without a moment's warning. Father (Karnak Bahadur) is weaving another, larger bamboo basket, an occupation of which he is obviously fond and does with skill. Although he's a very rich man in local terms, he certainly doesn't sit around idling away his time. He always seems to be busy with one thing or another – as is Chandi, who has a very quick eye to spot anything not being done as she thinks it should be.

The two year-old son of one of the servants is now toddling back across the courtyard to the kitchen with our empty tea cups (steel "glasses"). The visitor is talking but no-one seems particularly interested; I've lost track of the conversation myself. Daughter-in-law (buhari) has just emerged from the kitchen (where she seems to spend most of the day) to inspect the couple of eggs that the chickens have produced. At the age of 40, with a full grown son (she has two sons and a daughter; three other children died), she should be in a position of authority, organising her own household. However, her husband is never here. Everyone refers to him as sachib (secretary) because he has this position in another panchayat. He has a second household with a second wife in Singati; she's a Gurung, which must have caused a bit of a stir². ... Be that as it may, daughter-in-law here is certainly at the beck and call of her parents in law.

This extract from an early letter introduces the main characters living at Yermu at the time. In addition there were a varying number of grandchildren, of whom the most permanent were Kumar and Bobin. The eldest son of *sachib* and *buhari*, Kumar was a quiet, soft-spoken young man then in his late teens, who was usually to be found looking after Yermu's large livestock herd. A slow performer at school, one of the reasons for his limited scholastic achievements may have been partial deafness - a condition for which he had been operated as a child with only limited success.

The daughters of Yermu and the other son had all left home – the daughters to marry, the son to make a career in the army – and only returned every now and then, particularly for religious ceremonies. Two servant couples (bonded labourers) also lived seasonally in the house with their small children; for part of the year they were absent in the forest with the livestock. Whatever the season, they kept in the background – held as inferiors, although not openly harshly treated. Being of the Bhujel caste (strictly speaking, freed slaves), they had not managed to free themselves of the debt of their forefathers, and had thus grown up in servitude.

Although he was probably the wealthiest man in the panchayat (as it was then), Karnak Bahadur Karki was not the village head (*Pradhan Panch*), but the deputy. The position of *Pradhan Panch* was held by a Gurung from the nucleated hamlet of Kapti, just visible from Nakpa. As a self-made man, a contractor who spent most of his time

in the small riverside bazaar of Singati just outside the *panchayat*, Muktan Gurung was always said to have been elected *Pradhan Panch* because of his good connections with the authorities. He was considered a “Mr fix-it” when it came to matters outside the *panchayat*, whilst Karnak Bahadur was the person for internal matters. The arrangement seemed to work to their mutual satisfaction. It also perhaps reflects quite well how power and influence worked at the time – the “old” powerful landed families finding ways to co-exist with the more newly rich. The latter were essentially those who had managed to establish enterprises providing contractual services to development projects, or otherwise to gain a foothold in commercial activities. They tended to build themselves large houses in Charikot and other significant settlements in the district (or even Kathmandu valley, if very successful). From there they could readily conduct their business, leaving the “old” established families to hold sway in the villages.

This is not to imply that development initiatives failed to reach rural areas – but it was true that significant income was captured by the powerful, and became concentrated in more urban areas. The anthropologist Janice Sacherer, for example, notes in 1990 how popular opinion was often voiced in terms of “The rich help themselves whilst the poor get poorer”³. She was referring specifically to her findings in the districts of Sindhu Palchok, Kabre Palanchok and Dolakha, where Swiss development assistance had been channelled. Whilst in economic terms, she found no proof that wealth disparities had actually increased, she commented that the local perception was significant in militating against the building of self-reliance and self-confidence.

Returning to the politics of Suri some 20 years ago, another reason for Muktan Gurung being the elected *Pradhan Panch* was probably that he represented a neutral figure between the two powerful Chhetri lineage groups of the village – the Bungdur and the Yambali Khadkas. Karnak Bahadur represented the head of the Bungdur Khadkas, although by birth and name he was not a Khadka, but a Karki. As a rich young man from a neighbouring *panchayat*, he had married Chandi Khadka, the only surviving child of one of the most powerful Bungdur Khadkas. He had thus taken on the management of Yermu. Although taking up residence in one’s wife’s home is generally regarded as an undesirable – even demeaning – situation, this was most definitely not the case for Karnak Bahadur. He managed affairs; the village followed.

The wealth of Yermu was most evident when the harvest came in – whether it was maize stacked high on a frame erected outside the house, potatoes stored in a separate house built primarily for that purpose, or rice threshed close to where it was harvested, and then carried up in sacks to the main house. What struck me as feudal was that the labour required for these and other tasks was neither paid nor reciprocal, but expected as an obligation. The workers who came when called were essentially people



living in Nakpa or its vicinity who were in debt to the family in some way. Mainly Sherpas and Tamangs, many of them were share-croppers of Yermu lands. They were expected to provide three days of free labour per year – for felling, splitting and portering the Monsoon fuelwood supplies, and for bringing in the paddy harvest.



However, it was not just the poor and indebted who came to help Yermu with their monsoon fuelwood provisions; amongst their number were some quite influential, reasonably well-to-do individuals such as the then ward chairman of Nakpa (a Newar). When asked why people gave their labour for free, Karnak Bahadur replied that they did it “for love”. I wrote at the time that this might be more realistically interpreted as “out of respect and a desire to maintain cordial relations”.

Compared to other parts of rural Nepal at the time, Yermu was not particularly exceptional in benefiting from the supply of free labour in this manner - although the practice was becoming less common. Indeed, whether paid or obliged, labour-intensive practices were declining. Already 20 years ago, any strong young man (to a far lesser extent, woman) preferred to seek better paid work outside the *panchayat* on seasonal or longer migration, rather than stay in the village. Perhaps it was seeing a different way of life outside the village that sparked thoughts amongst some of social change within the village. Certainly earning money outside represented the main – for some

probably the only – mechanism to better one's lot and gain an improved social status. The same broadly remains true today – and of course not only amongst Nepalese. Wherever one travels to poor rural areas - of Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine, Mexico or the Philippines to name just a few examples - the striking thing is the relative dearth of able-bodied young adults. Many have left to find better-paid work outside.

I was absent from Suri during the years of civil conflict, so it is difficult to know how revolution fomented – to what extent Maoist ideas grew within the village, or were brought in from outside. The bare facts for the country as a whole may be summarised as follows. The transition from the single party panchayat system to multi-party democracy, announced by King Birendra in 1990, raised many expectations. Worldwide, of course, it was a time of sweeping political change - but whilst the end of communism was being announced in the West and the Berlin wall broken, in Nepal the most notable form of celebration for the advent of multi-party democracy was the flourishing of red flags bearing the hammer and sickle. That much I remember from my last visits to Suri in 1990 and 1991 – and whilst the symbol of communism was startling, and the ardent admiration for Stalin expressed in some quarters highly shocking, the desire for change was not. So many people had been consigned to poverty, with a lack of any real political voice, for so long.

A variety of political parties had been active underground for some time, with communist parties of different ideologies - Marxist, Leninist, Maoist and more - being particularly prominent. At first it seemed that they would all have a chance of representation in the new government, but entrenched power structures are not so easily toppled. Eventually after years of frustration, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) launched what it called the "People's War" in 1996, thus starting a civil conflict which lasted more than ten years and cost many thousands of lives. Many more lives were forever scarred through internal displacement and trauma.⁴

During the civil conflict, most of Dolakha district came under Maoist control. Suri was no exception – and this sealed the fate of Yermu.

Diary extract – Nakpa April 2008

A pile of rubble on which banmara⁵ is growing profusely is all that is left of the big house. The whole site of Yermu is deserted; the old house that stood opposite the big house is still standing – but it is in very poor repair and has a forlorn and dilapidated air. No-one is living there, that is clear; inside the remains of a fire in the middle fireplace and some scattered pages of text books indicate the use to which it is now occasionally put – that of a private school. It is difficult to reconcile these images with the hustle and bustle of life at Yermu as it once was, and remains in my memories. In its prime, it was the largest habitation in the hamlet, indeed all of Suri. It exuded prosperity. Both houses always had a fresh

coat of limewash before the autumn festivals of Desain and Tihar; the courtyard between the two was swept daily clean, the tulsi⁶ plant in the corner in its tall brick shrine was always trim and thriving. The shrine to the family gods in the porch of the older house never lacked a small offering of fresh flowers and vermilion powder. These gods were faithfully reminded each morning and evening by the ringing of a bell of their job to protect the house and all its inhabitants. Yet now all is desolation.



Whilst the fall of Yermu was a direct result of the civil conflict, it was not the Maoists who destroyed the place, but the army. The one former member of Yermu who still lives in Nakpa today is Kumar, the quiet grandson. Kumar has married, has four small children, and has built himself a new house of modest size and appearance a few metres away from the ruins of the former family home. This was clearly a more practical option than to try to renovate the old house – although I assume that Kumar would in any case have wished to avoid disturbing the ancestral ghosts of the old place.

Diary extract, Nakpa April 2008

On the terrace above Kumar's house, three milking buffalos chew the cud lazily, whilst a small flock of goats are tied, awaiting their afternoon fodder. The family bulls have gone to the forest on their own, and will return on their own – an honour that was always afforded to them alone, and is obviously still practiced (though the animals themselves are different). Somehow someone always sees the bulls returning in the evening down the steep path from the forest and makes sure that they do not wander into the tempting area of private fodder trees or (according to season) the standing crops in the fields. At the same time the bulls appear to know the limits of their freedom, and do not generally overstep them. Kumar's wife is busy out gathering fodder for the buffalo and goats, but Kumar himself has time to talk to visitors and recount what happened to Yermu.

The Maoists simply arrived one day, and took over. Karnak Bahahur and Chandi were away in Kathmandu at the time,

so Kumar was the main family representative present. He offered no resistance; to have done so against the armed rebels confronting him would in any case have been suicidal. The rebels took over the main house, turning it into a local Maoist centre of command. They also took over the land, continuing the sharecropping system. [People I asked gave varied accounts of the details of how the Maoists managed the sharecropping of Yermu lands – and indeed, they may have differed according to family circumstances. In any case, a share that was more beneficial to the cultivators seems to have been usual – such as three quarters retained against one quarter taken by the Maoists.]

Kumar remembers the day of the army attack very clearly. It was early in the morning, just getting light. Nine days previously, he had moved his family out of the main house into the old house because the children were disturbing the Maoists with their crying in the night. The Maoists had used the occasion to clear the house, and had given away many things that they found – rice and other provisions that actually belonged to Kumar. Seven Maoists were resident; one, a young woman, was sitting drinking tea when Kumar emerged and crossed the courtyard to go to the toilet (not a convenience that existed 20 years ago). Through the cracks of the toilet door, he saw a line of soldiers advancing towards the house, and heard the commander call “Gauri”, which must have been the word to open fire. Bullets started flying; the glass from which the young woman had taken her tea shattered with a “ping” into fragments. Kumar didn’t know what to do, but he heard his children screaming in fright, and realised that they were alone, as his wife had already left the house to cut the morning fodder.

Kumar decided to make a dash back to the house – he held his breath, ran, and flung himself at the door. Minutes later his wife stumbled inside, and together they barred the door and huddled fearfully inside, trying to calm the distraught children. There were cries and shots all around, but they couldn’t make out what was happening – all was terror and confusion. Apparently the commander called out for them to open the door, but this Kumar failed to hear. Then the army started shooting directly at the house, and the couple realised that they and the children would be killed if they stayed inside. So Kumar took one child on his front, and one behind whilst his wife took the remaining child in her arms, and very cautiously they opened the door. The soldiers ceased their fire and let them come out. As they stood nervously outside, the commander came up to them and castigated Kumar, yelling and slapping him on the face. Possibly the commander had been a little nervous himself, as he was under strict instructions not to harm Kumar or his family; the whole operation had in fact been planned by Kumar’s uncle, who was (and still is) a colonel in the army. Although anxious to rid the area of Maoists, he clearly wished this to be achieved without any of his extended family getting hurt in the process.

Kumar and his wife surveyed the scene around them. Motionless bodies were lying in the field beyond the house,

and Kumar realised that one was of the Bhujel who helped him with the animals. Panicking when the Maoists fleeing the gunfire had taken shelter in his animal shelter, he had run with them when they broke cover, oblivious to the calls of the soldiers to stop – like Kumar, he was hard of hearing. Deafness cost him his life; three of the Maoists also lay dead. Four others had managed to escape. A final casualty was a young Newar who had ventured out of his house to help the dying Bhujel. The army started shooting at him too, so he ran away and took refuge in his house. This the army surrounded, ordering him to come out, but in terror he refused – so they dragged him out, lined him against the wall, and shot him.

Looking out from Kumar’s house on the sunlit pastures and tranquil, brightly green forest beyond, it is difficult to imagine this violence. The overgrown remains of Yermu stand testimony, however, if any was needed.

Kumar and the others in this account were certainly not the only people to experience violence in Suri. Fear seems to have been all pervasive during that time; more than one person remarked afterwards that whenever you saw someone you didn’t immediately recognise, you quickly went to collect fodder or fuelwood in the forest. The danger was being asked to give food or shelter; if the person you helped turned out to be a Maoist, you risked violence at the hands of the army – or if they were a member of the military or the police, by the Maoists. Informants were all around. Behind such fears was an even more troubling truth: that often it was not outsiders who brought violence, but known individuals. Thus for example one person I know (a Khadka) was pushed off a rocky promontory and left for dead by a young relative who had joined the Maoists. Badly hurt, he was rescued by a friend, and eventually recovered. He continues to live in the village – as does his would-be assassin. Their situation is far from unique – as in many post conflict situations, sworn enemies now have to find a way to live alongside each other.

The civil conflict was not a simple pitting of the poor against the elites – in any case, the leaders of the Maoists by and large belong to the elites. Tragically, as in the example above, it often divided family members against one another. Sometimes this was backed by strong ideological beliefs; sometimes it was driven by circumstances that those concerned had not necessarily chosen or at least intended. Inevitably the psychological toll has been huge. At the national level, there is much discussion of peace and reconciliation processes. In rural areas, a number of (generally externally funded) agencies offer counselling to the traumatised and bereaved. Swiss funding has also been used to this effect, both in Dolakha district and in other focal areas. No doubt it has helped some individuals – but there many more who, without necessarily bearing the label of “conflict victim”, suffer painful memories.

Kumar has been encouraged by some of his relatives to claim compensation from the current government for

damages. He is, however, unenthusiastic about becoming enmeshed with bureaucracy. One can understand why, although his attitude contrasts starkly with that always adopted by his grandfather and his father. They would have taken up the task with conviction and a heartfelt sense of justice and justification, but neither of them is alive to do so.

Kumar's father, *sachib*, died some years ago – murdered in Kathmandu. Members of the family and others in Suri insist that the murder had nothing to do with the civil conflict, but it is unclear whether it was a personal vendetta, a case of mistaken identity, or simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time. The idea that this jocular, self-assured, intelligent man was knifed in a dark backstreet seems incongruous and difficult to believe. The shock to his parents was profound. His mother (Chandi) died in Kathmandu a few years afterwards. According to one of her daughters, she died "of a broken heart". Karnak Bahadur survived her, but his health was already weakened. On a trip from Kathmandu to Jiri to visit one of his sisters, he was taken ill. The family hired an ambulance and rushed him back to hospital in Kathmandu, but he died on the way.

Kumar and his young family are the only members of the once powerful Khadka-Karki family to remain in Suri. Whilst they retain a significant amount of land and are far from being completely impoverished, their standing can hardly be compared with Yermu's former status. Everyone else who survives – Kumar's mother and aunts, and his uncle – is well established in Kathmandu, swelling the numbers of those "eating a salary" (as the Nepali phrase goes) or depending on someone else who does, rather than tilling the land. Their homes are now in apartment blocks, and their children are growing up as urbanites with urban aspirations, reluctant to even visit their rural roots. Indeed, they have become far removed from them. This is a lifestyle change in which they are not at all alone.

During the conflict, the influx of people from rural areas to Kathmandu was widespread and massive. Virtually anyone who had a relative in Kathmandu, or some means to stay there, left their village. This was apparently true even in quite distant districts; Dolakha is relatively close. There were frequent reports of the influx placing a huge strain on extended family resources and relations, as is not difficult to imagine. According to official census data, the population of Kathmandu city rose from just over 421,200 in 1991 to some 671,800 in 2001⁷. This is almost certainly a major underestimate, given that many people do not have papers for Kathmandu residence. The true figure by now is probably some 2.5 million – excluding the large and burgeoning population of the rest of Kathmandu valley, which may total some 7 million.

Back in Suri, despite the outflow of people who could leave, the village population has nevertheless still risen through natural increase⁸. Like the rest of Dolakha district,

the majority of Suri residents voted for the Maoists in the general elections. What will happen in local level elections remains to be seen. Visiting the village today, one would no longer choose the term feudal to describe the social structure, although it is perhaps the case that changes in the power structure have not gone so very deep. The Chhetris, on the whole, still seem to be the most well-to-do. That said, and with the obvious exception of those whom the violence touched personally, the people who once laboured for Yermu and other wealthy households have a greater say over their lives, and greater broad life choices, than they did in the past.

In rural communities, access to and ownership of land is of course a key issue determining livelihood opportunities as well as social status⁹. One of the platforms on which the Maoists fought their successful election campaign was on land reform, promising a process of redistribution. Progress on this sensitive issue has proved to be extremely difficult, with the Land Reform Commission that was established to oversee the matter being faced with many challenges. Previous attempts at land reform have failed – yet reform is certainly needed, not only for reasons of social equity, but also because improved agricultural productivity depends on it.

Endotes

- 1 A senior World Bank official, Dr Kenichi Ohashi, then Country Director for Nepal, caused a furore in the media in 2006 when he commented that, "Feudalism is the main source of Nepal's problems." Probably he was so widely quoted at the time because he was a banker talking about economic development goals, rather than a politician or sociologist. He was making a very pertinent point, even though by 2006 feudalism was already less entrenched in society than it had been.
- 2 Traditionally, marriage across caste and ethnic group was considered socially undesirable. This remains the case, although it is becoming more common, especially in urban areas. Social discrimination is discussed further in chapter 7.
- 3 Sacherer, J. (1990). *Opinions and Perceptions Survey Rapid Rural Appraisal of IHDP/LJRP Impacts in Southern Panchayats of IHDP area and quantitative time series of Kavre SDC/INFRAS Impact Monitoring LJP/IHDP.*
- 4 During the civil conflict, in June 2001, King Birendra and much of his family were killed in a royal massacre. This set of murders remains shrouded in mystery, but is not attributed to the Maoist movement. King Birendra's surviving brother ascended to the throne to become the unpopular King Gyanendra, who was eventually forced to accept the end of the monarchy in 2008. The civil conflict itself ended earlier, with the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Accord in 2006. The period is well described by Manjushree Thapa (2007) in *Forget Kathmandu An Elegy for Democracy.*
- 5 *Eupatorium adenophyllum*, a small shrubby weed. The Nepali name means forest-killer – so-called as it invades natural clearings and out-competes any natural re-growth of tree seedlings, thus preventing forest regeneration.
- 6 *Ocimum sanctum* or Holy Basil, is widely grown in the courtyards of Hindu households. It is an important symbol in Hindu worship, notably for ceremonies invoking Lord Vishnu.
- 7 http://kathmandu.gov.np/index.php?cid=2&pr_id=2
- 8 The population of (what was then the *panchayat* of) Suri in 1986 was 1,736 according to IHDP (Integrated Hill Development Project). The figures for 2008 (VDC profile) give the total population as 3,880, made up of 757 households.
- 9 A recent review on this topic is *Where is it coming from and where is it going? The findings of a scoping study on land reform for DFID Nepal* by Wily, L.A, Chapagain, D. and Sharma, S. (2009).
http://www.landcoalition.org/pdf/08_AldenWily_DFID_LandReforminNepal_summary.pdf



Chapter 4

Enough to eat: Food security¹

It is one thing to talk about good or bad harvests when you buy your food in a shop. It is another when you have dug and planted the fields yourself, tended and weeded the crop, and then watched it ripen – especially if you have no ready alternative source of food. This very obvious fact nevertheless struck me forcibly in Suri. I watched the sky as anxiously as other villagers when the rain failed to fall, or fell too much, or hail storms threatened. The most nerve-wrecking time was April-May, when hail could ruin the maize, potato and wheat crop in one fell swoop. Furthermore, there was, and still is, an intrinsic bias in weather fortunes, with those farming marginal lands being particularly vulnerable to unseasonal weather. This letter extract reflects just that.

Aerogramme home, 2 June 1989

The low cloud enveloping the higher slopes of the valley promises rain later, and indeed there hasn't been a single dry day in this Nepali month of Jeth (which begins mid May). As I think I've mentioned, this month is exceptionally wet – it's so tough for those living in the higher parts of the panchayat (entirely Sherpas and Tamangs), whose wheat crop has been ruined. They have to sow the earliest and reap the latest; this year just as the fields were turning golden, the heavens opened – harvesting was impossible for a fortnight, and now the crop stands black with mould, or flattened and sprouting young green shoots from the heads.... Poor Bude's crop has been thus affected – he doesn't exactly need any more worries to add to his present ones.²

The best insurance against such disasters was diversification – which was indeed practised by the wealthier families. They had their paddy fields on the lower slopes, millet, maize and winter wheat fields close to their homes, and potato plots up in the forest. In addition, they kept a variety of livestock. Being in this fortunate position, they could also experiment more readily with new varieties or techniques, although there was sometimes some reticence – for example in the use of chemical fertilizers, which were considered bad for the soil (as they could be if applied incorrectly). Leaf litter and animal manure were the preferred fertilizers.

Those with little land, especially if it was land at higher altitude – as was the case for most of the Sherpas and Tamangs – had fewer options. That said, the ruination of a crop was not generally life-threatening, given the availability of grains at the market less than a day's return

walk away. The price of grain was just about affordable to those who were able-bodied and could sell their labour, in or outside the *panchayat*, although local daily wages were not enough to allow much saving after food purchases.

A striking comment about food supply twenty years ago in Dolakha district was made by the anthropologist Janice Sacherer. Having worked in Southern Dolakha and Eastern Sindhupalchok in 1979, she returned in 1990 to look at the changes over that ten year period. According to her, the difference was “revolutionary”. What had occurred was “the change from hunger and malnutrition to a generalized adequacy.”³ Janice Sacherer had spent long periods in rural areas, and was a perceptive observer. In earlier times she had observed people so weakened by lack of food in the period between harvests that they had simply slept during the daytime in order to conserve their energy. She attributed the improvements that she saw to the uptake of improved varieties of rice and the new and widespread cultivation of potatoes, as well as the availability of cheap imported rice in markets close to the road. All these changes, in her view, were strongly linked to Swiss development assistance.

My overall impression living in Suri in the late 1980s was that there was close to a “generalised adequacy” of food in terms of simply filling the stomach. However, food was not always plentiful, neither was it always very nutritious. Certainly not everyone had adequate nutrition throughout the year. What villagers ate, and how much, was greatly determined by wealth and status.

An easy gauge of food security could be made in the autumn after the maize harvest, when those households with substantial stocks would erect wooden frames in their courtyard on which to stack the cobs. Those with a more limited harvest would simply tie the cobs beneath the eaves of their roof – and those with very little just kept it in a basket indoors. Yermu's display of maize cobs was by far the largest in the village. Whilst their paddy harvest was less visible, being stored inside, the main family members could certainly have eaten rice every day had they wanted to, though in practice they varied their diet. The servants were given millet *dhero* (a sort of thick porridge), but they were nevertheless well fed by comparison with some people in the village.

Food in the village varied according to the season.

Vegetables were only grown in the summer, when the monsoon rains could be more or less relied upon to water them. Cucumbers, beans, squash, pumpkins and spinach would be planted in small vegetable gardens around the house, though this was more the case amongst the better off - those who had enough land and manure from their livestock, and a nearby water source in case of need. Summer was also the time of more plentiful milk products; those with milking animals would then eat *dhoi* or *moi* - yoghurt or buttermilk - with their meal. These were luxuries in winter due to the shortage of fodder - a cow or buffalo inevitably producing milk according to how she is fed⁴. Yet despite the seasonal differences, and especially in comparison to the huge choice enjoyed by people in the West, food was monotonous. For many, the essence was eating for survival - not for pleasure. Except, that is, during the occasional times of feasting.

The most insecure time of the year was in late winter/early spring, in late January to early March, when in addition to stocks of grain being low, and there were no vegetables or fruits available. Those who had dried supplies of radishes or spinach made recourse to these, but otherwise anything that could be gleaned from the forest was welcome. Mushrooms were one prized foodstuff (more common in the autumn, but also found in spring), whilst in early spring, nettle shoots would be made into a bright green soup. I was never sure why the first taste was pleasant, but the more one ate, the less pleasant it became. Only young shoots were used; older leaves were said to cause diarrhoea. Later into spring, young fern shoots could be found in the forest and would be widely picked as a vegetable, as were the leaves of peas inter-planted in fields of winter wheat at lower elevations, by those who could afford this crop.

The typical food of the poor in times of scarcity before the harvest was simply a carbohydrate staple (maize or millet *dhero*, or else purchased rice), eaten with water, salt and chillies. The following extract gives an idea of the struggle some people had to put together a meal in the lean season - the "time of sickness", as it was called.

Aerogramme home, 5 April 1989

It's a hazy sunny morning; I'm sitting outside Birmaya Sunwar's house on her little porch whilst the morning meal cooks. Cheap rice brought from Singati bubbles on the fire - it's parboiled stuff which smells dreadful whilst cooking and tastes not much better. She's grinding a hand full of beans which we'll eat as a dal with it. Her husband's not sent any money or even a letter for that matter from India, and her food stocks are very low. This rice was bought with money from selling her cockerel, and I suspect the beans were given to her by someone who saw that I'm here. Otherwise it would have been soldar - water boiled with salt and a few chillies.

In early days of living in the village, I used to ask for maize or millet, thinking that rice was the preferred food, and that *dhero* was the cheaper and easier option for people

to provide. Certainly it was the more nutritious one. This was before I realised that although locally grown rice was by far the most preferred food of everyone, parboiled rice bought from the market was actually the cheapest staple for those who had no stocks of their own⁵. For all my meals in the village, I paid a standard amount, and insisted (not always very successfully) that I would like to eat whatever the family was eating - nothing special. I did not cook for myself, as sharing food was an important part of daily interactions - and in any case there was no kitchen that I could use.

Sometimes the *soldar* that people ate with their staple would be enlivened by a few potatoes sliced into the water, or perhaps a couple of sprigs of *gundruk* (fermented and dried spinach), but foods rich in protein were conspicuous by their absence. As children and women traditionally ate after the men had taken their fill, it was they who were particularly vulnerable to malnutrition. I worried about the children, given that early malnutrition can influence one's entire development and life expectations.⁶

Aerogramme home, 11 December 1988

Pramilla upsets me. When I first started visiting the family, she was a friendly, bouncy youngster - just toddling, and into everything with a healthy desire to discover, and a face usually wreathed in smiles. She's just not the same child anymore. I doubt that she's lost weight, but she doesn't seem to have grown and is thus smaller than other children of her age; she cries and wails most of the day, has lost most of her interest in things around her, and certainly most of her friendliness. Most kids here have constantly runny noses (I read somewhere this is due to vitamin A deficiency), but Pramilla has a perpetual cold and heavy, blocked up breathing. She is obviously unhealthy, and the reasons are equally obvious - poor diet and skimpy clothes in the cold of winter; the fact that both her parents smoke (local tobacco rolled in leaves) can't help. The family resources are clearly running low - Ashok is leaving for Sikkim soon in search of work, and there's little labouring work for Birmaya to do at present. Once Ashok's gone, I'll give Birmaya a tin of milk powder I bought for Pramilla. Hand-outs are a difficult business; in this case it's the only thing to do, but others are quickly jealous and I simply can't give things to every needy person in the panchayat.

Pramilla survived - but there were those who did not.

Aerogramme home, 25 April 1989

The little Sunwar boy, the son of Mitra Man, is dead; I heard the news on reaching here the day before yesterday. The family is very subdued, and the little girl, I noticed, very clingy to her mother. The baby is fine; growing quickly and quite chubby, but it seems to me that in many ways babies are less vulnerable than children who've been weaned - it's then that their protein intake drops. Their mother asked me why I thought her son had died; I said as gently as possible that it was difficult to say, but that perhaps it was TB, and the fact that he didn't have a lot of nourishing foods would not have

helped. There is a word in Nepali for nourishing foods, and people know perfectly well what they are; the mother sighed, and said that her children never see white things to eat – by which she meant milk, yoghurt and moi (buttermilk)...

Paradoxically, I was commonly told that milk products had been more readily available in the past, when large herds of livestock were kept – spending part of the year in the forest, and coming down to graze the stubble of the fields after harvest. The forest was thick and fodder had been plentiful then, it was said, and there was no shortage of young men willing to herd the animals (migration was not yet common). The milk was made into *ghee*, and taken to sell in Kathmandu – even though this was five days walk away. However, this was obviously the case for the richer households only; the poor had never been able to afford many animals, though perhaps as herders for the rich they managed to enjoy milk products illicitly when up in the forest.

Eggs were rarely eaten, mainly because eating an egg meant forgoing the chance of raising a chicken which could then be sold – and which was often a handy way for women, in particular, to make some pocket money. Bahuns and some Chhetris would eschew eggs on religious grounds, although even twenty years ago, this was already not very strictly practised. A fried egg might be served as a special delicacy, particularly to a guest. Indeed, I was given so many eggs when taking my leave of different households at the end of my time in the village that even now my stomach cringes at the thought of eating any – boiled or fried. From time to time the wealthy might kill a chicken to eat, but overall, meat was rarely a part of anyone's diet except the Tamangs (as explained later). The one exception was for the festival of Desain, when it was, and still is, customary for any household who could afford it to sacrifice and eat a goat (preferably a castrated male). Instances of meat-eating over the rest of the year were more generally associated with accidental livestock deaths. This letter describes an incident that took place when I was staying at my second Suri residence, the Bahun-household of Madusudan and Radika Acharya in Surigaon.

Aerogramme home, 29 August 1989

I emerged from my room this morning shortly after first light, just as Madusudan's mother was making a very unpleasant discovery. "There are no goats, there are no goats" she wailed. The goats are housed, if you remember, in a little shed below my room. Exhibiting due concern, I asked whether there was any sign of their escape. She gave me a withering look, and told me to come and see for myself. Lying in the shed were six very dead goats, their throats gouged out but their corpses otherwise intact. By there being "no goats", Madusudan's mother meant no live ones. I had not heard a single bleat in the night, but apparently this is typical of an attack by a "tiger" (that is how the word "bagh" translates). As soon as the goats smell the bagh, they become so petrified that they're unable to cry out. Today's nasty incident was preceded by

one a few days ago when 11 goats housed in a stall right by a house between here and Nakpa were all slaughtered in just the same way. The bagh just drinks their blood and departs. It was a clever animal to get into the shed inhabited by the goats; the door was a strong one, and padlocked against thieves – yet it managed to gnaw at the frame, prize it open, and squeeze through the space of only 4" or so.

Anyway, "it's an ill wind that blows no good..." Half of Surigaon has feasted itself on meat today, which people would not otherwise have had the chance to do – though they did have to pay for the privilege. It sounds as if the Bahuns struck a hard deal for the carcasses, and whilst undoubtedly they've made some losses from the killings, it probably wasn't more than a couple of hundred rupees. It could have been a lot worse. A Newar family living close to Birmaya bought one carcass; Birmaya and I went up to the house whilst it was being butchered and carefully portioned out. Not a morsel wasted. It made me sick at heart watching all the local kids clustering round the grisly sight with such glee. Filthy from head to toe, distended bellies and peaky faces, noses running – they were a particularly sorry sight, this morning's crowd. Pramilla outdid them all in her eagerness for protein, though. She sat amongst the throng happily chewing, with great concentration, on a raw ear that she'd been given.



The one group who did eat meat more regularly was the Tamang community. Since there were no Sarkis in Suri (the Hindu caste that deals with cow carcasses and leather work), the Tamangs took the role of carcass disposal. Their feasting on beef was viewed with distaste by the Hindus, but nevertheless it was a convenient way to dispose of dead cows.

Aerogramme home, August 1988

A large pot bubbling on the fire gave off a pungent odour – Langamaya informed me it was beef. The slaughter of cows is a serious offence in Nepal, punishable by many years in prison – but in any case, no self-respecting Hindu would dream of eating beef. The Tamangs, being Buddhist, have no such qualms. Actually what worried me was what the cow had died of. "Oh, it died naturally – it got a disease and died"

said Langamaya, thus seeking to reassure me. I was glad that I'd announced my vegetarianism on an earlier visit, and could thus gracefully decline the meat treat.

Judging by how often a pot of beef was bubbling on the fire when I visited Tamang families, they probably had the most protein-rich diet of any group in the village.

Under-nourishment amongst the poor of Suri – particularly women and children – was not, on the whole, out of ignorance about the nutritional value of different foods. In general mothers knew what their children should eat – an awareness probably bolstered by the Swiss health project that was already operating at the time. Neither was there a problem of supply in the market. A lack of assets – land, livestock, and cash – was the main reason for undernourishment.

Twenty years on, my concern for Pramilla's protein intake now appears over-exaggerated. She has become a healthy, jean-clad young woman living in Kathmandu valley – although that is no doubt one of the reasons that she looks so well. Her parents left Suri not long after I did, and Pramilla grew up in Bhaktapur – going to school and living free of the rigours of agricultural labour. She says that she has no real memories of village life. Langamaya, meanwhile, died when she was barely 30 years old “of a fever” – though to link her death in any way to the eating of cow meat of dubious origin would be highly spurious.

According to everyone in the village whom I have questioned on the subject, standards of nutrition in Suri today are far better than they were twenty years ago. The main comment was that it is so much easier to buy grain if one runs out, as well as items that were formerly seen only in the houses of the well to do – such as tea, sugar, lentils and beans, and a variety of spices and cooking oil. Vegetables are also far more widely grown. Here a big change is that cultivation is also practised during the winter, when vegetable plots near houses are carefully irrigated. Some families even have poly-tunnels – a very recent innovation⁷. Land use is generally more intensive, and livestock ownership focused on a few animals kept in stalls near the house. Not every family has a milking animal, but it does seem more common.

Definitely the most striking agricultural change is the increase in potato growing in fields around settlements. Twenty years ago, most potato cultivation took place in clearings in the forest on a rather *ad hoc* basis (see chapter eight). Now fields of carefully tended potatoes are a common winter crop, in a rotation before the summer staple (in this case, usually millet). They are planted for cash as well as consumption; a regular mule train to and from Suri means that they can now be transported out to market with ease. Earlier the only form of transport was on one's own back, or the back of porters. Before long, I imagine, truckloads of potatoes will leave Suri by road.

The widespread adoption of potatoes is an interesting development, given that when they were first promoted, in the 1970s, they were reportedly viewed with considerable suspicion. As used twenty years ago, potatoes were primarily a preferred vegetable in curries or sauces, mixed if possible with a green vegetable – although in higher altitude settlements, boiled potatoes were also eaten (by all castes) as a filling snack between meals. This was a pattern generally true in the area⁸. Today, fields of potatoes are very widely seen in Dolakha district; indeed, they are reported to be Nepal's second staple food crop⁹. It is interesting to compare this with potato uptake in Europe a few centuries earlier. Writing about the introduction of the potato in mountain villages in Switzerland in the late 17th century (where it was also originally viewed with suspicion), Robert McNetting made a strong argument for potatoes having changed the pattern of life irrevocably. Since their cultivation permitted higher productivity per unit of land than from cereals, especially in cooler, wetter climates, years of poor harvest and famine were averted – spurring population increase. This then led to out-migration, and greater connectedness with the outside world¹⁰.

However impressive the spread of potato cultivation in Nepal may be, considerable concern remains about national food security. Many of the agricultural improvements made from the 1960s onwards were set back during the conflict period, when people left the land, or could not obtain timely inputs of seed and other supplies¹¹. Government's figures – even if of limited accuracy through problems in data collection at the time – indicate that fertilizer use in Nepal plummeted in the 1990s. Another growing concern is the possible effect of climate change on cropping patterns, with unexpected weather events such as hail and drought forecast to increase. Perhaps the most worrying trend of all is the reliance of many rural households on purchased grains during at least part of the year, creating vulnerability to fluctuating, and recently soaring, world food prices.

These are pessimistic points on which to end, although the villagers of Suri are certainly in a more fortunate position than many of their rural compatriots. They have relatively good access (in Singati, less than half a day's walk away) to farm inputs such as seed and fertiliser, to agricultural advice, and to a market for both sales and purchases. Another important advantage is the local availability of credit at what is considered a reasonable interest rate (as discussed in the final chapter). Although some people certainly eat more vegetables and dairy products than others, villagers consider it rare for anyone to truly lack a reasonable diet, even in the lean season. This is in stark contrast with the rural mid West of Nepal, where hunger is reported to be an annual reality.

Endnotes

- 1 According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation, "food security exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Household food security is the application of this concept to the family level, with individuals within households as the focus of concern."
<http://www.fao.org/docrep/005/y4671e/y4671e06.htm>
- 2 Bude Sherpa's wife was clearly dying at the time this letter was written.
- 3 Sacherer, J. (1990). *Opinions and Perceptions Survey Rapid Rural Appraisal of IHDP/LJRP Impacts in Southern Panchayats of IHDP area and quantitative time series of Kavre* SDC/INFRAS Impact Monitoring LJRP/IHDP.
- 4 It was (and still is) regular practice to time the serving of cows by a bull so that calving occurred in late Spring. This maximises milk production in the months of rich fodder supplies – thus giving enough both for the calf to suckle, and for milking.
- 5 It was explained to me at the time that the cheapest quality par-boiled rice cost Rs 20 per *pathi* (local measure equivalent to 3.2 kg) in the market, and could simply be cooked and eaten. Although millet might seem cheaper, costing Rs 16 per *pathi*, it had to be first pounded and ground, with the result being only about 5 *manas* of flour (not much more than half; there are 8 *manas* to one *pathi*). Thus millet not only required far more work to prepare, but also ended up being more expensive in a strictly volume to volume comparison.
- 6 Particular problems were vitamin A and iodine deficiencies, as well as a generally low protein intake. The low vitamin A intake is associated with sight problems, whilst inadequate iodine intake of course leads to the typical malaise of mountain people living far from the sea – goitre (grotesque swelling of the thyroid). In severe cases of iodine deficiency in the womb, the child may be born with mental retardation – cretinism. Goitre was a common sight recorded by visitors to the Swiss Alps in the eighteenth century; it still exists in Nepal, although I only saw it amongst a few older women in Suri.
- 7 The poly-tunnels are supported through the SDC-funded Sustainable Soils Management Project (SSMP), which is managed by Helvetas Swiss Intercooperation. In this case, a local NGO called ECARDS is responsible for implementation.
- 8 Janice Sacherer notes that "For a long time potatoes were a low-status food because they were the staple of middle ranking tribal castes. That they have become so widely accepted now results from many factors: the previous scarcity of food in the project area (the desperation factor), the generalized breaking down of caste prejudices and caste barriers regarding food, and the association of potatoes with Westerners and therefore a modernized status. Over and over I heard, "The improved rice came from the Nepalese government, the potatoes came from the Swiss." (Sacherer, *ibid*: 13)
- 9 Potato cultivation was widely promoted from the 1970s onwards, and production "increased from 300 000 tonnes in 1975 to a record 1.97 million tonnes in 2006. The potato is now Nepal's second staple food crop, after rice, and per capita consumption has almost doubled since 1990 to 51 kg a year."
<http://www.potato2008.org/en/world/asia.html>
- 10 Robert McNetting, writing about the uptake of potato cultivation in the late 18th century in the Swiss mountain village of Törbel states that, "They could not know that the means that they took to avoid a population crisis would also power sustained population growth... The results of this growth, such as increased out-migration, economic interdependence and the breakdown of local isolation and self-determination, were part of a...modernization process" McNetting, R. C. (1981) *Balancing on an Alp: ecological change and continuity in a Swiss mountain community*. Cambridge University Press.
- 11 Seddon, D. and Adhiakari, J (2003) *Conflict and Food Security. Report to Rural Reconstruction Nepal*.
[http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/%28httpDocuments%29/13C80D92223B06B5802570B700599A54/\\$file/eu-conflict.pdf](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004CE90B/%28httpDocuments%29/13C80D92223B06B5802570B700599A54/$file/eu-conflict.pdf)



Chapter 5

Falling sick

A Kathmandu-based friend once advised me, "You cannot work in countries like this and let yourself get depressed by people in villages dying – however sad. The simple statistics mean that out of the people you get involved with, over 18 months some are bound to die". Although these words seem harsh, they were nevertheless true. A number of people whom I knew in Suri did die – and they did so from medical problems that would not have killed them had they lived in the West or (probably) in Kathmandu. The particular death that had upset me badly, and which had prompted my friend's remark, was that of Dadika Sherpa. I had spent a good many days with Dadika, and like the rest of her family, had watched her grow steadily frailer. I knew the reality of her illness, yet I had hung on to the hope that she would recover.

Aerogramme home, 6 August 1989

I attended Dadika's funeral yesterday. I was present at her death the day before, too... When I arrived in the early morning Dadika was lying by the fireside, breathing horrible bubbly breaths and moaning quietly – occasionally trying to call out and waving her arms about. By that stage she couldn't articulate anything and seemed delirious, her eyes rolling and her head covered in sweat – though Bude said her hands were stone cold. It was not a pleasant death... Poor Bude sat beside Dadika throughout her dying hours, tears streaming down his face and trying desperately to obtain some response from her, spooning sugared water into her mouth lest she feel parched, and even trying to get her to take a little millet gruel. He sent me off to the Health Post in the morning to fetch the "doctor" – the man refused to come – but though his presence would have given some support to Bude, some belief that something was being done, there actually was nothing that he could do, as he rightly said. I also felt that Bude was gaining more moral support from his family and friends, who had gathered in the house as custom requires. Many had stayed up the whole night with Bude and Dadika, and throughout the day as some people left, others came. Bude and his daughters were never alone in their grief.

Dadika died at 20 past one; her tiny, shrunken corpse was covered with white cloth, and by her head was placed a bowl of water, a bowl of grain; and a lighted ghee lamp. These latter were provided in case her soul needed them in its journey onwards. People split up to go and buy provisions for the funeral, grind flour to feed the guests, etc. Though Sherpa funerals are less financially demanding than Chhetri ones, they are still crippling expensive. Bude will inevitably go into

great debt over the matter, but the rites are mandatory. Apart from his wish to express his love for his wife and his heartache over her loss, he cannot stint on her funeral for fear that her spirit (even one as kindly in life as Dadika's) will be aggrieved and return to haunt the family. Belief in ghosts is strong.

So the lama was fetched from the neighbouring panchayat of Jhankhu, and yesterday I joined the procession of mourners making their way up to the Sherpa cremation site on a wooded promontory high above Kasika. We were led by the clashing of cymbals and the mournful blowing of a conch, followed by three cloth banners – red, white, and what should have been black but was actually a floral print on dark blue background – the local village shop could provide nothing better. A lama's assistant carried a tanka (prayer picture) and other ritual paraphernalia. Many of us were weeping as we walked, and I found myself – perhaps not strangely – very comforted by the event. Dadika's body was burned high above her village, the pyre burning quickly despite the squalls of rain that periodically soaked us and raised great billows of smoke. Khaja (a snack meal) was provided – jaad (local beer), boiled potatoes, rice, wheat and buckwheat roti (flat breads) – and we participated in this whilst we waited for the fire to burn low. Then we slithered our muddy way back down to the mundane matters of existence down below.

The Upaha Pradhan Panch (Karnak Bahadur Karki) said to me, as I sat, very subdued, by the fire on the evening of the day Dadika died, "You must not grieve for Dadika. She is dead, she has gone. When you leave us, we will think of you, we will never forget you. But when you die, then we must forget you." Practical advice, but I wonder to what extent he could adhere to it himself if he was in Bude's shoes (except that Bude doesn't have any)....

Dadika died of tuberculosis (TB), a disease these days often associated with AIDS, although this was far less so twenty years ago, and certainly did not apply in Dadika's case. TB was and remains a very common disease in Nepal, the bacteria spreading easily in the poorly ventilated houses and in situations in which many people crowd tightly together (as is often the case during festivities, on bus rides, etc). Many Nepalis view it in some way as a curse of the gods, something shameful that is better to hide and accept one's fate. Though a lively and resourceful woman, Dadika seemed to do just this as she slowly grew weaker before our eyes. At my strong encouragement, she did seek treatment at the nearest hospital, in Jiri – but by

then it was simply too late. I wondered afterwards if I had done the right thing, as it meant she was away from her husband and daughters for two whole months not long before she died. When I now think back to the walk that she made back to Suri from Jiri, I am simply amazed by her strength of will and inner resources. It's a demanding walk for a person in full health, let alone someone so frail – but she must have been absolutely determined to get home.

When she first became ill, Dadika had received treatment from a *jhankri*, or traditional faith healer, the usual first recourse of villagers in those days, and still that favoured by many. The *jhankris* are men (I never met a female one, and indeed they are uncommon) who “communicate” with evil spirits, and force them out of the body of the person supposedly possessed, as described below.¹ Often they also have special knowledge of the medicinal plants that should be used for different illnesses.

Aerogramme home, 4 December 1988

The Bahun's baby fell sick the other day – vomiting, diarrhoea – but not really serious. Still, after he had been unwell for a number of days, the jhankri was called. The jhankri is the village medicine man; he may be any caste although like castes tend to serve like castes. As there isn't a Bahun jhankri in Suri, the Bahuns called a Chhetri. The important thing is that he is open to being possessed by a spirit... “Treatment” generally involves the muttering of various incantations and blowing on the person taken sick – but the baby's treatment was the full works. After supper, we all sat downstairs; the jhankri took up his place before an offering of uncooked rice, a lamp, money (a 10 rupee note²), and an egg, amongst other items. The rice and money he later pocketed as his fee. As we watched, he slowly went into a trance and then became frantic as the spirit “possessed” him. Mother called out to him to say who was responsible for putting a curse on the baby, and the reply came from the jhankri in veiled hints that the family later pieced together (I guess this absolves the jhankri from any difficulties as it can always be claimed that they came to the wrong conclusion from the hints given).

Coming out of the trance, the jhankri called out to Madusudan and then rushed out of the house, throwing small pieces of white rock hither and thither as he went. We women had to hide our faces under our shawls; Madusudan followed the jhankri and together they distributed, at high speed, pieces of wood into which iron nails had been banged, as well as bits of white rock, around the premises of the building and into every room (I'm still finding bits of rock in mine). Then it was over, and all that remained to be done was to hide the offered egg in a safe place away from the house – this having become the residing place of the evil spirit that had possessed the baby. An anthropologist could no doubt deduce much from the symbolism; I was more interested by the reaction of Gayatri, who is after all an educated young woman, and Mother, for whose common sense and sharpness of mind I have great respect. Both giggled when they had to hide their faces, but were also anxious to work out the clues to determining the perpetrator of the curse on the baby. They

seemed to take it very seriously. Whether or not they did or said anything to the suspect, I do not know.

I was later told that the significance of the nails lay in the fact that they are made of iron, which is a deterrent to evil spirits. The wood chips should have been of a particular tree species that is irritating to the skin³ – and thus, it may be assumed, irritating to spirits as well.

Reflecting on my reactions to *jhankri* treatments, I am surprised by my own degree of uncritical acceptance. I recorded, for example, the application of a poultice of chicken meat to a burn blister without apparently having made any suggestion to the user that this might not be a good idea. I myself was also treated by *jhankris* on one occasion.

Aerogramme home, 25 May 1989

I have had the most peculiar allergic reaction – or that is what I suppose it to be....It started when I was walking out here from Charikot, with some red, raised blotches and intense itching around my knees. This gradually spread upwards during the day, reaching my waist by the evening – the more I scratched, the more it itched. I stayed the night at Mulabari, at Sita's house – or rather, in the loft of their animal shelter/hay store, which they've just had enlarged (I couldn't sleep in the main house, for fear of bringing into it the evil spirit that has attacked me). The loft was a lovely cool, smokeless place in which to sleep – except that I kept waking up, itching horribly!

Sita couldn't have been nicer. She made me local beer to help me sleep; cooked me the nicest food she could and brought it to me to eat where I was; and called the jhankri. Her husband is a jhankri himself, and a highly respected one at that, but he was away, so she called another one. He waved red beads around my body, recited various charms, and blew on me to get the spirit to go away. It wasn't very receptive, I'm afraid – the next day I was worse. The rash was still spreading, and I was feeling very drowsy, but I decided to walk on up to Nakpa anyway. By the time I reached there, the rash was up to my upper arms and neck. Here, too, I received nothing but kindness and sympathy, and another jhankri was called to my assistance. In fact in total I've received “treatment” from a jhankri four times, and whilst I jokingly tell people that jhankris are unlikely to be able to help a disbeliever such as me, it would be churlish to refuse given the faith that everyone places on them – at least for conditions such as mine. The general consensus of opinion is that I must have met a hunter on the path, and that an evil spirit (possessing him due to his animal killing activities) passed from him to me....

My rash eventually passed, confirming the view of everyone in the village that the *jhankris* had been efficacious. I myself was left with a sneaking respect for them; a *jhankri* in a trance is certainly an impressive sight. I saw *jhankris* in action on a number of other occasions during the time I lived in Suri – including at a specific festival known by

its location, Shepding. This occurs at *dhanne purnima*, the full moon in October/November, and entails worshipping the powers believed to reside in the Shepding tree shrine. The shrine lies in a damp overgrown hollow, not so very far from the health post. My letter describing the event has gone missing, but I have photos and memories of six or seven *jhankris* gradually making their way up the winding path to the rhythmic banging of drums, stopping regularly to consume local beer and spirits proffered by people along the way. It was evening, and people thronged all around; the moon was bright in the clear, cold night sky, and near the shrine, stalls had been set up selling tea and other light refreshments. The occasion was one to enjoy, but without frivolity; there was a clear sense of awe at the capacity of the *jhankris*, and the power of the spirits being invoked.⁴



Whilst *jhankris* offered treatment to both men and women, as men, they were rarely asked to treat women who had reproductive health problems. Births were often only attended by the mother-in-law or other female household members, who had no more knowledge than their own experience. I also knew of cases where the woman had given birth completely alone. Traditionally in Hindu culture, birth should take place outside the family home – strictly, the woman should “sit in a cave” (this is the direct translation) for the birth and for eleven days afterwards. In practice, the “cave” is often the cowshed – not the most hygienic of birthing locations. The widespread belief in the purifying powers of cow dung also meant that, in the past at least, it was often applied to the cut umbilical cord, resulting in high levels of tetanus infection – and the death of both mother and child.

Complications concerning menstruation and childbirth were a taboo subject of conversation except when I was alone with the woman concerned. This extract from a letter mentions one such situation.

Aerogramme home, 8 June 1989

She asked me for what can best be translated as some “body tightening medicine” (!) She says that her body has never been the same after the birth of her first child (the baby died);

her husband was absent on seasonal migration at the time, and her mother-in-law made her work in the fields almost immediately afterwards. She says that sometimes her insides protrude and she has to push them back inside again... I've told her that she ought to see a doctor, but she has no faith in the health post “doctors” (medical assistants), and I must admit neither have I! There's certainly no possibility of her family agreeing to a trip to Charikot to see a proper doctor, at least whilst she remains in apparent reasonable health.

I was in fact unaware at the time of the huge problem of uterine prolapses amongst women in Nepal, a problem hidden by the silence of shame and embarrassment. These days, the issue is nationally recognised and coordinated attempts are being made to address it.⁵

So have things changed in Suri? Yes, general medical provision and awareness of health issues have definitely changed for the better. For a start, the health post gives a far more favourable impression than it did in the past. Constructed with Swiss assistance back in the 1980s, its location remains bleak and often damp, in a hollow swathed in low cloud. However, it was strategically placed, being within reasonable access from most settlements. It is especially convenient for people living in the higher reaches – who tend to be amongst the poorest in the area, and most likely to need health care. I remember in the past being unimpressed by the paucity of medicines available, and the regular absences of the “doctor” (health worker), who seemed to spend more time away than at his work station. Both the posting of staff and medical supplies were government responsibilities, and the system functioned poorly. I was particularly horrified on one occasion to see needles being re-used after a quick wash in warm water.

It is thus a striking contrast today to see the health post cupboards well stocked with a variety of medicines, to note basic equipment in use (including a sterilisation unit for syringes), and to talk with health workers who clearly know their subject matter – even if some are more conscientious than others with regard to their presence⁶. Many villagers comment with appreciation that the health post got a “promotion” (they use the English word). In practice, this means that it has become a Primary Health Centre (PHC), staffed by three health workers – for villagers, its title remains the “health post”. One case in which its services almost certainly saved a life is that of Sita Tamang. Sita is a quiet, pretty woman in her early thirties. She married Padam Bahadur after his first wife Langamaya died, and has served the role of step-mother to his children whilst being unable to have her own.

Diary extract, September 2008

Sita clearly prefers to remain silent as Padam Bahadur talks. She sits listening close by, engrossing herself in her step-granddaughter, on whom she lavishes cuddles and kisses. Padam Bahadur, by contrast, seems eager to talk about all the things that have happened in my absence.

During her first pregnancy, Sita became sick and Padam



vBahadur took her to the health post, where they were told that the baby had died in the womb. She lost it, and did not become pregnant again. Eventually they decided to seek medical help in Kathmandu. There they stayed for a month, spending Rs 36,000⁷ on medical fees, without any obvious result. Nine years later, however, she did become pregnant again. Her pregnancy was difficult from the start, so they decided to go to Dolakha. Here they spent Rs 2,500 to be told by the doctor that there was nothing that he could do and that they should go to Kathmandu. By this time they were both quite anxious, and Padam Bahadur begged the hospital to provide an ambulance. None was available. Indeed, no vehicle of any kind seemed to be available until a truck came along and offered to take them to the city for Rs 5,000. Padam Bahadur remonstrated that this was a huge amount for him, as a poor farmer, to pay. A man he knew, who also knew the driver, intervened to support him, and the driver finally agreed to the sum of Rs 3,000. To put this in perspective, the regular bus fare from Charikot to Kathmandu is currently some Rs 90-120 (depending on the speed and comfort of the bus).

Thus they travelled in the back of a bumpy truck to Kathmandu, Padam Bahadur comforting Sita as best he could over what must have been at least six hours, and possibly more. They finally arrived at the hospital at which they had sought treatment nine years previously. The medical team was able to locate the records from before; indeed, the couple recognised amongst the staff many of those who had treated Sita earlier. An operation was conducted (one assumes a Caesarian), but as the first time round, the baby was already dead.

Once Sita was discharged from the hospital, the couple returned by bus to Charikot but were unable to get seats on the onward bus to Singati. Padam Bahadur thus carried Sita all the way home – an arduous day's walk at minimum, including a descent of over 1,000m and another climb of similar height at the end. At Sunkhani (about half way), some of her stitches broke and a gaping wound appeared. Being shy to ask for help, however, Padam Bahadur simply continued, and brought his wife to the health post, which lies not far from their house. The staff there gave her oral medicine as well as ointment to apply to the wound, and gradually, over a period of two months, it healed. Even now,

however, some 18 months after the operation, she still feels quite weak and unable to do really hard physical labour.

The availability of correctly prescribed antibiotics at the PHC has no doubt saved other lives. TB is also said to be far less common in the village – mirroring the overall reduction in Nepal in the last 20 years⁸ due to the wide availability of very effective treatment. Diagnosis and treatment is offered at PHC level, Suri being no exception⁹. Maternal and neonatal deaths and other complications following childbirth have also decreased. One reason is public health campaigns through the radio and through local health workers; another is that most Suri women now give birth at the PHC – the financial incentive (Rs 1,500) offered by the government to those who do so, being very effective. Professionally monitored births mean that uterine prolapses are less common and can be quickly treated if they occur. As a further improvement, a separate delivery building is currently being constructed.¹⁰

As for *jhankris* – they are still active in Suri. The positive role that *jhankris* can play in community health care is now quite widely accepted in Nepal, to the point that in some areas – including Dolakha district – they are being offered training to bridge the gap between their world view, and that of Western medical practitioners¹¹. Of course some *jhankris* prefer to avoid any such association with Western medicine, but those of Suri it seems to have been viewed in a positive light¹². At least, villagers whom I asked thought it a good idea, and said that they preferred to go to *jhankris* who had received such training.

General standards of health have improved not only because of the better functioning of health services, but also due to improved drinking water and sanitation facilities. There were a few drinking water pipes in Suri 20 years ago, but they were often broken and/or ill repaired, and most people drank stream water. Amoeba and giardia were the inevitable distressing and debilitating results – at least as far as I was concerned. I clutched my water bottle dosed with iodine wherever I went, but this in itself was not enough – from time to time the bugs got through. Villagers no doubt had greater innate resistance, but they too complained of intestinal problems.

Today, almost all households have access to a drinking water spout, and most also boast a simple toilet. Twenty years ago, toilets were virtually non-existent. Much giggling accompanied my first enquiries on this matter, when I was told to “go to the forest”. The only toilets that were to be seen – outside the primary school of Surigaon – were an overflowing, stinking disaster. The children squatted by the main path in preference; this then became (I strongly suspect) a ready source of hookworm infection, particularly during the monsoon. Anyone who has ever felt a close furry presence behind when trying to relieve themselves will know one of the important functions of dogs in a Nepali village. The following extract is a shocking example in this regard.

Aerogramme home - No date 1988

I think I explained that dogs are not really viewed as pets here. As guard dogs they can be quite vicious, and there's always the danger of rabies from a bite, so I've tried to cultivate good relations with all the dogs along the paths that I frequent. Actually if you make a point of greeting them rather than the usual response they get of a stone being thrown at them, they generally become quite touchingly friendly. The real reason that people don't really like dogs, though, is that apart from guarding, they serve as the local waste disposal agents..... Rukmini told me the other day of a terrible case in the village of a dog cleaning up the diarrhoea of a baby boy lying out on a blanket in a field whilst his mother worked nearby – and going too far. It ate the baby's testicles! The family tragedy was unspeakable – the baby boy was the much cherished son after five daughters, and there he was, rendered impotent before he could even walk...

This story has a happy ending – at least as far as the baby is concerned; the dog met a short, sharp end at the hands of the boy's father. The baby was taken - at great expense at the time - to Kathmandu for surgery. He then grew up in Suri, where speculation on the part of other villagers can be imagined. As a young man, he moved out of the village, married - and is now a father himself, thus putting speculation well and truly to rest.

Still, it's no wonder villagers have a rather different attitude to dogs than Westerners, and I suspect that the noticeably reduced number of dogs in Suri today is related to the fact that almost every household now has a toilet.

The picture of improved health today is not entirely glowing, however. People may suffer less from readily preventable health problems, but if they do have a serious illness or an accident, specialised treatment is far away and not always affordable. As Sita Tamang's example illustrates, those who have few outside contacts and very limited negotiating power are easily exploited when in need of rapid care. Sita's reproductive problems cost the family a considerable amount of money, in addition to all the anguish that they endured – and she is still childless. It is a simple fact that better health care for a wider range of problems is available in the district centre of Charikot, and better again in Kathmandu. Yet getting there and paying for treatment is beyond the resources of many households. For women it may be particularly difficult - especially if the men in their family, who would normally organise their health care, are absent on migration.



Endnotes

- 1 Father Miller, who studied the *jhankris* of Dolakha district, commented that all of them “have a world view that they share with their patients. Briefly, it consists in a belief in powerful invisible forces whose uncontrolled intrusion into our visible world brings disorder of all kinds: sickness, misfortune, disharmony in relationships...the *jhankri*, by virtue of his calling and training, has the ability to come into controlled contact with them and negotiate their withdrawal.” Miller, C. (1979) *Faith Healers in the Himalayas Centre for Nepal and Asian Studies*, Tribhuvan University, Nepal; Reprinted 1987, Sahayogi Press Pvt Ltd, Kathmandu Nepal.
- 2 This was then equivalent to the cost of a cooked meal of rice and vegetables bought locally.
- 3 The tree is *Bhalayo, Rhus succedanea*
- 4 Father Miller writes in similar vein about the much larger and more famous Kalingchok festival (which takes place on the full moon of Saun – July/August), although there time of greatest significance is dawn, and the worship includes animal sacrifice.
- 5 In 2008 a major awareness campaign, the Uterus Prolapse Alliance, was launched to try to reduce the stigma attached to the problem and encourage women to come forward for treatment. According to one website (nowpublic, 3 December 2008), there are, “an estimated 600,000 women in Nepal suffering from uterine prolapse, a debilitating condition in which the muscles supporting the uterus weaken, causing it to descend into the vaginal canal. Some of the women live for years with the uterus completely outside of the body. A third need immediate hysterectomies. The combination of pain and shame drives those afflicted to desperation: “Sometimes they apply mud or pieces of flip-flops... they cut a piece of slipper and put it in the vagina just to hold their falling womb, because they have been suffering from so much pain,” said Samita Pradhan, Secretary of the Uterine Prolapse Alliance (UPA), a network of women’s organizations and partner of The Advocacy Project (AP). “There have been cases of women applying cement inside their vaginas just to hold their uterus.”
<http://www.nowpublic.com/health/new-campaign-nepali-women-targets-uterine-prolapse>
- 6 Apsara Khadka, a young Auxillary Nurse Midwife who by September 2010 had been posted to Suri for some 2 years, was particularly helpful in providing information.
- 7 With current exchange rates fluctuating at around NRs 70-75 to the US \$, this is equivalent to roughly US \$ 500.
- 8 Today the government’s National Tuberculosis Centre (NTC) estimates that some 90,000 people in the country have one form of TB or another.
- 9 Treatment is provided on the basis of a sputum test, which is carried out at the PHC. The Directly Observed Treatment Short-Course (DOTS) programme, under which patients have to take medicines every day in front of trained health workers, has an almost 90% success rate. According to NTC, annual TB-related deaths have decreased from 10,000 to less than 7,000 in the last decade, as a result of increased detection and treatment success rates. See IRIN (Integrated Regional Information Networks), UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs Nepal: TB still killing 5,000-7,000 people every year Kathmandu, 25 April 2008 <http://www.irinnews.org/Report.aspx?ReportId=77433>; also The Journal of Young Investigators, Volume 19 Issue 6 December 2008 Childhood Tuberculosis in Nepal <http://www.jyi.org/features/ft.php?id=102>
- 10 The construction is being supported by the project LILI – Local Infrastructure and Livelihood Improvement Project – which is financially supported by SDC and implemented by Helvetas. A budgetary contribution was also apparently made by the RHDP.
- 11 Father Miller was convinced that *jhankris* had an important role in the treatment of the sick. He even wrote, “at least according to the world view of his villager patients... the doctor is treating symptoms while the *jhankri* is getting at causes. There is room, and need, for both.” Miller, *ibid*
- 12 This training was provided by the Swiss-supported Rural Health Development Project (RHDP), which has placed particular emphasis on the issue (Kate Molesworth, *personal communication*). See also: Molesworth, K., Karki, Y. and Koirala, I. (2005) *Rural Health Development Project, Nepal Report of the 2005 External Review*. Swiss Tropical Institute, Basel. Conducted on behalf of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation



Chapter 6

In search of a living

What can you do if there is no more food in the house, and no paid work locally available - which tends to be the case in the cold winter months after the main agricultural harvest? Seeking employment outside the village is an obvious strategy, although one full of risks. Migration – both permanent and temporary - was already a well established phenomenon in Suri twenty years ago, many families having far too little land to meet their food requirements through the year. This was part of a wider, national trend.

Aerogramme home, 7 March 1990

There's been much excitement in the village recently with the return of a number of men who've been working in Sikkim¹. They've brought gifts and money for their families, of course – as well as presents and news from other Suri men working there who have not yet returned. This is particularly amongst the Sunwar community, so there's been much rejoicing and consuming of jaad (local beer). One of those to return was Mitra Man (whose young son died); I visited the family yesterday and would hardly have recognised him, dressed in jeans and a smart new jacket. Mitra Man also brought with him money and presents from Ashok, I was pleased to learn.

I was round at Birmaya's place the day before yesterday, and she was at the end of her tether. She had completely run out of food, had no money, and was just fed up with having to beg food from the Newar family below – for whom she has to work to pay off the debt. "Look at me" she said, "My clothes are in tatters, so are the little one's, there's not a mana² of food in the house; I have to beg all the time. He's not sent a single rupee to me. If I just had a little money and a friend, I'd run away to Kathmandu!" I think she would too, if the chance arose – she's done so once before, but before Pramilla was born, so then it was easier. She wouldn't leave Pramilla behind, which cramps her style now. The last time she ran away, people here sent word to Ashok who left Sikkim, found her in Kathmandu, and brought her back – she'd been cheated out of her belongings by that time and was probably glad to see him. Maybe she also earned some respect from Ashok for her pluck in the process.

Anyway, this morning when I went down to see Birmaya for a quick chat she was almost dancing with happiness, quickly preparing a morning meal of (borrowed) rice and soldar (water boiled with salt and chillies) in order to set off early to Singati to buy as much poor quality rice as she can carry back..... Birmaya also has some new clothes, and Pramilla

a multi-coloured, beribboned little synthetic dress that will fall to bits in no time but with which both mother and child were highly delighted. So all this is great - yet seeing the life that Birmaya leads, and knowing that she is well aware of life outside, I just wish better for her. She was brought up in Sikkim, had some schooling, and sometimes went to the cinema – from which she gained romantic ideas and an extensive repertoire of Hindi movie songs...

Permanent migration from rural Nepal already began over a century ago – and as mentioned previously, many people who now live in Suri (as in other villages), acknowledge that their ancestors came from elsewhere. There have been waves of human movement from ancient times, but originally, this was simply in search of land to settle, rather than to find paid employment. Individuals today are often more mobile than one might initially assume. Thus Birmaya, (who is actually Tamang by ethnicity, but married to a Sunwar), was born in a Dolakha village not far from Suri; moved with her parents to Sikkim as a small child; and returned to village Nepal on her marriage. She now lives in Bhaktapur in Kathmandu valley, as an economic migrant drawn to better opportunities.

The main original destination for Nepali migrants seeking work was India – with a strong tradition of men joining the Indian or British army (as Gurkhas) to fight in return for payment. This means of earning a livelihood was, of course, also common in Switzerland in past centuries, with the Swiss Papal Guard being an enduring legacy. However, the main traditional recruiting grounds for Gurkhas are the East and Central West of Nepal. Although there is a tradition amongst some Khadka families to join the Nepal army, most men of Suri – those who would have formed the rank and file – did not seem attracted to army life. Instead, they headed to India in search of seasonal employment in factories or on construction sites, usually leaving their women behind. Seasonal migration as (somewhat paradoxically) a means to stay in the village probably became widespread in the middle part of the 20th century.

The season for the men to leave was in late October, after the major festivals of Desain and Tihar. They would then return in April or so, in time to participate in bringing in the monsoon firewood, and in the general agricultural activities. Male labour is needed, for example, in ploughing the fields, and in repairing and maintaining

the terraces and water channels, even if it is women who do the planting of rice and millet. Of course the pattern varied, and single young men often stayed away for the whole year, or even years at a time - only returning, if they could, for the festivals. For the poor, labouring outside the village for at least several years was the only option to earn enough to buy some land, build a house, and thus gain some status and start a family. The most common destinations were Sikkim, Darjeeling and Calcutta. Most quickly learned enough Hindi or Bengali to communicate (both being related to Nepali), but as few had more than very basic schooling, options were limited. The very lucky might get a job as a guard, Nepalis being widely known for their bravery, but more usually they just did hard manual labour.

It was rare to go alone; usually a group of friends and relatives would go together, and if they found a good employer, they might write or pass a message back with a returning individual for more friends to join them. Patron-client relationships developed where employers in India knew and trusted certain Suri individuals to work well, and to supply other hard workers if necessary. Thus there was a tendency for Tamangs from one hamlet to go regularly to one place; Sunwars to another, etc. This had obvious advantages of camaraderie and mutual support - as Padam Bahadur Tamang reflected when recalling how he learned of the death of his wife Langamaya (chapter 9). A letter sent by his family when he was working in Sikkim was read out to him by his friends. Out of kindness to lessen the immediate shock, they avoided telling him the news of her death, but simply said that he should go home straight away because his wife was seriously ill.

Undoubtedly there was also complicity amongst those migrating regarding what they told people in the village and what they didn't. A group of Sunwars from Surigaon, for example, found well paid work in a shoe-making factory in Calcutta - but since this is defiling, demeaning work for a Hindu, they took care at the time to tell no-one in the village about the precise nature of their employment. It would probably not raise much of an eyebrow these days. Meanwhile, for the women left behind in the village, life was often tough, as Birmaya's situation illustrates.

Seasonal migration of unskilled labour to relatively nearby destinations continues; thus Padam Bahadur's son, Shyam, now in his early 20s, has followed very much in his father's footsteps. The only difference is that he does not need to go to India, but instead finds work in Nepal, as a porter for trekking agencies. However, for the more ambitious, other employment destinations have opened up. They no longer head for Calcutta or Gangtok, but to Dubai, Riyadh, Kuwait City, or Kuala Lumpur.

Diary extract, Mulabari, September 2007

It is 7pm or so in the evening; we have gone inside and are chatting whilst supper is being prepared. The telephone rings. I'm startled by its sound - I'm not yet used to the idea

of telephones in Suri. Jagat answers and talks briefly; it is the son of the Kami living near them, calling from Qatar where he is working as a labourer. He'd like to speak with his father. Jagat arranges a time for the son to call again, when he will have got his father to the phone, and they ring off. I ponder how 20 years ago, Padam Bahadur learned of his wife's death weeks after it occurred; now one can talk instantly from a far more distant location.

The government of Nepal officially recognised the opportunities of foreign earnings through labour migration a good while ago (in the Labour Act 1985), but that does not mean to say that Nepalis travelling overseas for paid employment are particularly supported or protected. Indeed, arrangements for foreign employment have become a major private business in Kathmandu. I cannot remember hearing the English word "manpower" slip off the tongues of villagers in the past, but now it is a part of regular village vocabulary - if you want to work overseas (in the Gulf States, Malaysia, etc), you must go to a "manpower" (agency)³.

Of course the work offered overseas is largely of a menial nature - long hours of drudgery, but for a financial reward unimaginable in Nepal for the unskilled (or indeed for the highly skilled). There is also another type of migration amongst the youth of Suri who pass their SLC and move on to higher education - something that is increasingly common due to the greater opportunity locally to study to this level. Those who have done well in their studies tend to search for office jobs within the country - so that they can "eat a salary". The dream of most of the educated from Suri, at least, is to find permanent work in Kathmandu.

The average villager is certainly more informed about the outside world than was the case in the late 1980s. Information by radio is accessible to virtually all, and perhaps more significantly, television has also recently arrived in the village. Nevertheless, first-hand experience through migration (and to some extent second-hand, from those who have migrated) is a particular eye-opener. It is striking how those who have migrated know exactly the exchange rate of the Nepali Rupee to the US \$ and the Indian Rupee, and have no compulsion against asking a foreigner exactly how much she earns and how much a return flight to Europe costs, and then rapidly calculating the equivalent in Nepali Rupees. They seem very "street wise".

Going overseas is a high risk, high potential gain option; the interest rates for loans are high and the risks of being cheated or forced into paying bribes to manpower agencies are not inconsiderable. Overseas migration is not only risky; it is also a far more lonely option than the group migration to India - even if communication opportunities today are relatively good. The financial stakes are such that often only one person from the family can go, and they are as such more vulnerable - emotionally and financially. Yet it is increasingly common.⁴

Two people recounted to me at some length their own stories of migrant labour. The first is Hem Bahadur Ghatane, a Kami who worked in Malaysia - a relatively new destination for Nepali migrant workers⁵. Hem was a young adolescent when I lived in Suri, but must have left soon after I arrived. He studied to 7th grade, at the time the highest grade offered in the village, and then headed for Kathmandu at the age of 16. There he worked as a silversmith, saving money so that he could study at a private school and eventually gain his SLC.

Diary extract, September 2008

Hem Bahadur Ghatane lives in the Kami tol – the collection of Kami houses – on Suridada, the topmost part of the ridge above Surigaon. It is no accident that the land here is steep and poor, and the Kami's houses are clustered together as if in a huddle against the odds of existence. Traditionally, they made their living from blacksmith work and owned little, if any, land. It's a morning of low cloud and dampness - emphasising the separation of the settlement from the houses of the main part of Surigaon. Hem Bahadur is semi-expecting us (the village grapevine works quite well). Straw mats are rapidly brought out for us to sit upon, and inside the house, tea (it turns out to be hot milk) is prepared.

Hem Bahadur is a lanky, dark-skinned man with a chipped front tooth, and he seems so at ease in his surroundings that it's difficult to imagine him in the diverse situations in which he's been. Yet the proof – not that it was really needed – lies in the documents and photos that he later produces. Furthermore, as he talks, his non-verbal talent for communication becomes evident.

Hem remembers his early years in Kathmandu with bitterness – his boss treated him with contempt, not even giving him decent food but expecting him to eat the leftovers from the children – “jutho ko khanna” or ritually polluted food. He worked hard to set himself up independently, continuing as a silversmith for eight years. His caste-based but reasonably remunerative work in Kathmandu corresponded with success in the eyes of his family (and indeed society). He further did “the right thing” by marrying the girl chosen for him by his father. She became the daughter-in-law helping his parents at home and in due course producing a son, whilst he remained based in Kathmandu, making only infrequent return visits to Suri. Up to this point, his was an average “success story”.

Hem Bahadur had greater ambitions, however. These first focused on a dance career, which he pursued for six years with obvious success. My colleagues are impressed as the names of the famous Nepali actors with whom he danced trip off his tongue. Sunil Chhetri, Resina Upreti, Rajesh Hamal... we pore over the photos, in which Hem Bahadur appears pale of face – yes, he says, we wore a lot of make-up. His dance troupe toured the country, putting on performances that were linked to political campaigning. We surmise that he was a prominent UML⁶ supporter in those days, although his sympathies now lie more with the Maoists. He smiles, and said that it all came to an end due to soured personal dynamics, as well as

financial concerns. The birth of his second son reinforced his concerns about providing for his family. He therefore decided to seek work overseas for a few years.

Hem's first attempt to gain overseas work, in Saudi Arabia, entailed signing up to a manpower agency and taking two courses. One was in basic English, the other in waiter skills. He paid for these by taking a loan of Rs 50,000. However, after he had applied unsuccessfully for many jobs, it became clear that he would never be offered a position without paying a bribe. Angered by this realisation, he gave up with the company, and went to another. This was recruiting men to work in an auto-parts factory in Malaysia. The total cost of going was Rs 95,000⁷ - covering his ticket, all the paperwork, and the commission of the agency - but he eventually raised the money through a variety of loans.

On 16 August 2005 Hem boarded a flight to Malaysia with 25 other Nepalis – men of varied castes and backgrounds (the list of names on the official paperwork included Bahuns, Chhetris, Gurungs and Dalits), but united by language, and the wish to earn money. On arrival in Malaysia, they were also united by sheer shock and amazement – the airport was like nothing they had ever seen before. Hem remembers them all just staring at the vastness of the building, its shiny brightness, at the moving elevators, and the conspicuous wealth. “We all fell silent, wondering if we would ever see our homes and families again.” Their discomfort increased when they found that they could not go out, as they only had copies of their official documents. The originals were with the company agent. They also couldn't collect their baggage, in which they had packed food from home – food for which their stomachs longed. Indeed, they were marooned inside the airport for 15 hours, drinking water from the hand basins in the toilet, and growing hungrier by the hour.

Hem had a little money with him, which he changed into Malaysian Ringgits and used to buy a small bun from a friendly cleaning lady, and a phone card to contact the agent. This he managed successfully, and when the agent finally materialised, he immediately took Hem to be the leader (Hem modestly put this down to the fact that he was wearing a jacket, but his resourcefulness seems a more likely reason). Apparently no-one in the mixed caste group of Nepalis objected to having a Dalit as their leader. Of course, they were out of home territory and already shaken by the new reality. The next hurdle was a medical test, which they were all required to undergo, including a blood test – despite this having already been conducted in Nepal. At the sight of a needle, some of his companions (weakened through lack of food) simply fainted. Hem took the nurse to one side, and in his simple English persuaded her to waive the blood test on all but him and three or his sturdier colleagues. He said she understood and agreed; soon afterwards, they were out of the airport and on their way to their new job in a company coach.

The accommodation provided by the company was comfortable and clean. Hem also thought that the working

arrangements were fair. Their work time on the factory floor lasted 12 hours – 8 hours was the standard working day; 2 hours extra was overtime; and a further 2 hours meant that they could have a free day on Saturday as well as Sunday. Not everyone adapted well, though. He and a Gurung from their group had responsibility to lead the men and explain things to newcomers. He saw that some men became depressed; some took to drink, and another became ill. Some were also unable to resist spending the money they were earning in bars and hotels.

The company obviously liked Hem's work and his attitude. He has photos of company "Elegant Dinner" evenings at which prized employees were entertained on company expenses. They were even taken on special trips to Thailand, Singapore and Indonesia – he showed photos of himself lounging by luxury hotel pool-sides – but after a while, he longed more and more for his family. He started dreaming of his mother and father, his wife and sons, and wondering if he would ever see them again. At the same time his stomach started to give him problems. So at the end of three years, he returned home, in keeping with his original contract.

What had he made? Hem was a little coy on the exact amount he had made – one would hardly expect him to be otherwise. Still, he could certainly pay off all his loans, buy the family a milking buffalo, contribute to the village electrification programme, and build a new house. He says proudly that on returning home, his stomach problems stopped immediately. However, just recently they started again, and he has the feeling that he will need to go away to work again, to ensure there is enough money for his sons' education. Maybe after a while the rhythm of village life is a little humdrum, after all he has experienced.....

In the past, the role of married women was generally to stay behind and look after the livestock, the land, and the children. This may still be their fate, especially when the daughter-in-law is left living in the family home, with the expectation that she will cook and care for her parents-in-law as was the case for Hem's wife, who in my presence was shy and retiring. Single young women also rarely used to look for work outside the village, mainly out of fear (at least on the part of their parents) that they might be "contaminated" by outside influences and reduce their marriage prospects. Indeed, the ideal was for them to marry in their late teens and start producing children – this being considered the norm even among groups such as the Sherpas and Tamangs who are generally more relaxed about women travelling outside their native place. These days, however, attitudes are beginning to change.⁸

Diary extract, September 2007

Niruta Gurung – everyone knows her by her pet name of Jira (Cumin) - twirls the umbrella over her head to protect her skin from the hot sun. Two large gold rings glint on her fingers, of the like I have never seen worn by a villager before – one is gold filigree, the other inset with a large sapphire and a diamond. It's easy to imagine that they are the envy



of all the girls around. Jira is also dressed in a very modern and fetching, bright orange chiffon salwaar kameez. It is so striking that we spotted her figure picking her way carefully along the path, and guessed it was her, long before she came fully into view. Jira is a pretty 20 year old who laughs a lot, particularly over what she recalls as her past naivety. She was only 15 when she went to Kuwait to work. It was, she insists, entirely her own wish – supported by her maternal uncle (who has since died). It was he who had connections with a manpower agency, who helped her to falsify her age, get a passport and then fill in the paperwork. When her parents saw her determination, they reluctantly agreed. After all, what other opportunities were there for her - a girl educated only to grade 5 who had no training and spoke nothing but Nepali? She wanted to see something of the world beyond her own village. Of course it cost a lot, Rs 1 lakh (100,000)⁹, which the family had to raise through taking a loan - but this they somehow managed.

When the time came to go, Jira was naturally worried. She admits that she had heard that girls are sometimes sexually mistreated, but she thought that this couldn't happen to everyone – and that she would somehow manage to avoid that fate. She stresses a number of times in the course of our conversation that she never experienced any sexual harassment; one can surmise that this has been a subject of much speculation on the part of other villagers. Jira says that her fears grew during the long journey; the manpower agency first took her to Delhi, where she stayed for five days in a house owned by them. Delhi was huge and frightening, nothing like her home – but by that time there was no going back.

When she boarded the plane to Kuwait, she had only the name and telephone number of the family for whom she was going to work. They, in turn, had her photograph. There was no problem, however – they came to fetch her at the airport, and she was happy to find that there was an older Nepali woman also working in the house (she used the term didi, elder sister, as one does in Nepali even if the person is not a relative). The didi had already been there for 10 years, and so was very experienced and could tell her everything she needed to know. One of the first things to learn was how to dress – ordinary clothes could not be worn in front of the man of the house; in his presence one always had to appear in a burka. You knew whether it was necessary to put it on as there were two bells to the house, one for when the master returned home, and the other one for the mistress.

For the first month, Jira had things easy – she had a medical check, and didn't have to work until the results came through as being clear. Then the lady of the house started to train her in her tasks. It was a long working day, from 4am to 12pm. She heard that others who had come had only stayed a few months and then left, but she was determined to do well. Her duties were to wash the clothes, look after the three children, and clean the house. As the climate was so hot, the children went to school at 5am, and came back at 9am; lunch was served around 2pm, and then the master and mistress took rest. However, the servants were not allowed to sleep – they had to be up the whole time, and sometimes they would be phoned to check that this was the case. She and didi were also not allowed to speak to each other in Nepali – or at least, not in the presence of the master and mistress.

Jira recalled enjoying the occasions that the children had friends around to play. They came with their maids, so whilst the children played, the maids could gossip. The other times she really enjoyed were the weekly visits to church. The manpower agency had told her to state her religion as Christian, as this would mean she would have this opportunity to get out of the house, and she had followed what they told her. Of course she was brought up Hindu, and (she giggled) when people started asking her questions about her faith, she had a lot of difficulty answering. Still, going to church was the highlight of the week. She left the house in a burka, but changed out of it in the taxi. At the church she met many others working for families, and had the chance to talk and relax. The Sunday freedom ended at 4pm, by which time she had to be home, having changed back into her burka in the returning taxi.

Jira was paid every 15 days, her mistress telling her to put her money in a box and keep it safe. Most of it she sent straight home to her mother and father. In fact, the time passed quite quickly, and when her two year contract came to an end, she was both impatient to see her family and also sad to leave her Kuwaiti family. Jira remembers the master saying he wanted to see her face before she left; when he did, he remarked how astonishingly young she looked to have worked so hard. The whole family came to say goodbye to her at the airport. Although the master explained to her what to do, she became

very emotional and confused, and kept running backwards and forth until the master called someone on his mobile to come and help her. By that time she was very late, and her name was being called over the loudspeaker. She was the last to board the plane, and the other Nepalis on it told her what a silly she was. Still, they helped her when it came to changing planes at Bharain, so she arrived back safely.

What will Jira do now? Having seen all that she has of the outside world, it is difficult to imagine her settling back into the small Gurung hamlet of Kapti - cutting fodder, collecting fuelwood and planting out millet for the rest of her life. Certainly she does not dress as if this is her intention. Asked the question, she was non-committal, but she did volunteer the information that she had been in touch with her Kuwaiti family since returning. They had suggested to her that she marry a man with a driving licence, and return to work for them as a couple – he as the driver, she as the home help. Jira was obviously pondering over her options.

It may be noted that both Hem and Jira were required to have medical checks before they could work overseas. The big concern of potential employers is of course AIDS, although tuberculosis and a number of other contagious diseases are usually also checked. The real potential health problem, however, lies not in out-going Nepali migrant workers. It is what happens to them whilst they are overseas that poses a threat to their own health and potentially that of others when they return. Jira's story is ostensibly a happy one, but she was right to be worried when she found herself in Delhi. The huge illicit trade in sex workers, particularly between Nepal and India, has resulted in a major problem of HIV transmission and other sexually transmitted diseases.¹⁰ Similarly, in terms of HIV risk, Hem implied that not all his fellow Nepali workers were as careful as he in how they spent their leisure time in Malaysia.

Hem and Jira were both drawn back to their families in Suri, but both clearly retain half an eye on the outside world, and all the excitement that they experienced there - despite the drudgery that they also endured. In this, both give the same impression. They have grown in knowledge and self confidence, something that is an asset in itself, apart from the financial rewards of migration. Of course some migrants have less positive tales to tell, and some have disastrous experiences which end in major debt or worse. From a national perspective, Hem and Jira are more typical, in that they brought money home.¹¹

How will the situation evolve in the future? The global economic downturn has resulted in fewer migration opportunities, and many migrants are returning home – some losing money in the process. More than this, however, is the fact that people like Hem and Jira are caught between two worlds. They are likely to be less and less willing to live in a village in the conditions in which they grew up. They could be a source of innovation and investment in the village; this, for example, is the

reputation of Gorkha soldiers returning to their villages after overseas postings. Hem has indeed quickly lent his support to the locally-organised electrification scheme for Surigaon. They could also become social mobilisers, pushing for political change - again, Hem has apparently already engaged himself in this respect. Or they could simply decide eventually that village life is not for them, and choose to establish themselves and their families elsewhere – thus joining the throngs of the permanent rural to urban migrants. Perhaps, though, none of these will apply. It is possible that the fate of people like Hem and Jira will be to live out life in two parts, in two interchanging roles – between hard-working foreigner in a distant land, and returning villager who is admired and envied, but no longer feels quite at home.



Endnotes

- 1 Although a part of India, the Nepali language is very commonly spoken in Sikkim – which presumably made it an easier place for Nepalis to find work.
- 2 A small volumetric measure – one mana is equivalent to 0.454 kg rice.
- 3 In 2006, there were reportedly 559 such recruitment agencies registered in Nepal, although as an indication of the corruption problems, the licenses of 117 agencies had been terminated for failing to comply with government rules and regulations (*NCCR North-South, UNIFEM and NIDS Nepal Migration Year Book 2006*).
- 4 A quick discussion with members of the community forest user group (CFUG) of Bajradada, for example (see chapter) revealed that of the 87 households, over one third had a relative working overseas. Nationally, figures exist only for those who have migrated officially (with government approval), and are thus less than the true total (*NCCR North-South, UNIFEM and NIDS Nepal Migration Year Book 2006*). However, trends are clear. The number of recorded individuals leaving Nepal to work in countries other than India rose from 3,600 in the fiscal year 1993-94 to 183,000 in 2004-05; according to the *SDC Annual Report 2010*, the number reached some 294,000 in 2009-10 (an increase on 2008-09, despite the global economic downturn).
- 5 The Malaysian government officially “opened its doors” to Nepali workers in February 2001. Within a year, Malaysia was hosting some 85,000 Nepali migrant workers (Seddon, D. 2005 *Nepal’s Dependence on Exporting Labour Country Profile Migration Information Source* <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Profiles/display.cfm?id=277>) Hem followed a few years after this first wave.
- 6 United Marxist Leninist party
- 7 With current exchange rates fluctuating at around NRs 70-75 to the US \$, this is equivalent to roughly US \$ 1,300.
- 8 A government ban introduced in 1998 to prohibit female migrant workers travelling to the Gulf States (to protect them from abuse) resulted in clandestine travel arrangements, usually via India. It effectively rendered the women more vulnerable, given there was no official record of them. In recognition of this problem, the government of Nepal recently lifted the ban, in December 2010 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/go/rss/int/news/-/news/world-south-asia-11955863>. Sadly, physical and mental abuse of maids working in the Gulf States is common, as documented by the charity Human Rights Watch, <http://www.hrw.org/node/93334>.
- 9 Roughly equivalent to US 1,370.
- 10 A fictional but accurate account is provided by McCormick, P. (2006) *Sold* Hyperlion Paperbacks, New York.
- 11 In 2006 (<http://www.migrationinformation.org/Profiles/display.cfm?id=277>), the total volume and value of remittances from Nepali workers abroad was estimated at over US\$ 1.5 billion per annum. According to the *SDC Annual Report 2010*, the current value of remittances received from migrants may be as much as 20% of GDP (Gross Domestic Product).



Chapter 7

Challenging discrimination

What is it like to realise, from the moment that you are able to start to make sense of the world around you, that you are considered inferior to everyone else? That by touching someone you pollute them, that you must always show respect to other castes – turn your eyes away when speaking, never raise your voice to express an opinion (yours is worthless), wash out your glass if given something to drink (to remove your pollution), always squat outside a house when visiting rather than sit with others, be excluded from sacred places (as otherwise they too will become polluted)....

So much has been written on this subject, yet for anyone who has not experienced discrimination at first hand, it is not so easy to understand how it really feels. Nepal ratified the international convention against caste discrimination in 1971, and already had legislation prohibiting discrimination on the grounds of “religion, race, sex, caste, tribe, ideological conviction or any of these” over 40 years ago (the Civil Rights Act 1955). Nevertheless, caste discrimination was still common practice in rural areas long after such legislation was passed – and has not disappeared today. Women, also, remain significantly disadvantaged, although some are more so than others; gender discrimination is a complex matter.

Finally, ethnic discrimination, whilst not specifically discussed in this chapter, is well illustrated with regard to the fate of the Sunwars, described in the brief history of Suri in chapter 2. Today there is a strong movement for a *Janajati* political voice and self-determinism that barely existed twenty years ago – indeed, the term itself (instead of the previously commonly used label of *matwali*, those drinking alcohol) marks a clear shift in positioning and identity.

In the Suri of the late 1980s, it was the Kamis (blacksmiths) who formed the largest group of Dalits, otherwise known in the past as “untouchables”, and who broadly remained the most isolated community. Living separately from other castes in their own hamlets, they practised relatively little seasonal migration, as they had enough guaranteed work through patron-client arrangements to keep going through the year. Wealthier families – particularly Chhetris and Newars – had “their” Kami who always took care of making any new tools they required or mending broken ones. In return they received an agreed amount of grain annually (the so-called “*mana pathi*” system, referring to

the volume of grain provided). This system locked those concerned into life as it was; they feared losing their regular source of income if they left to search for work elsewhere, yet what it provided was only enough to get by – rarely enough to save or invest in different ways to earn money. When I started to live in Suri, I naively thought that I would be exempted from any social discrimination patterns (given that I myself was a social anomaly), but I was soon corrected in this matter.

Aerogramme home: 4, 8 August 1988

The Kamis distress me. I thought that as a foreigner I wouldn't be bound by the same rules of refusing to eat their food and drink their water. However, everyone at Yermu earnestly assures me that if I commit the “offence” of eating Kami food, they will have to treat me like a Kami. That means I won't be allowed back inside their homes. This would be a complete disaster of course – and one that I find difficult to believe given the warmth of welcome that I have received so far. Everyone is very insistent on the matter, though....

On the day of my Kami visit, Yermu provided me with a bag of boiled potatoes and popcorn (cooked the previous evening) to take with me. It was an uncharacteristically small amount, perhaps to ensure that I did not share it, and I opened the bag miserably at the Kamis when they started eating their food. I was really not sure what to say, as the offering and sharing of food is so much a part of Nepali culture. A plate of steaming hot potatoes was then placed in front of me, forcing me to explain the situation. The Kamis laughed. “Take off the skins of the potatoes before you eat them”, they said (well, everyone does that anyway, as they generally don't wash off the mud fully before boiling them) “and then no harm will come”. So I did, sharing my food in the process, and feeling a lot happier. I guess that is the little charade that we will continue. Perhaps, too, the only thing that Yermu and others are worried about is the face value of things...

There was certainly a degree of double standards in “untouchability”, in that most people who travelled beyond the village admitted privately that they never refused to take food from someone of lower caste when outside home territory. Some even claimed they never tried to find out the caste of new people they met – though this I found rather implausible as it is usually part of introductory conversations, at least indirectly. (Surname is generally a good caste indicator; if that does not clarify matters, enquires about other relatives generally will.

Facial traits and skin pigmentation can also lead to ready assumptions). However equitable their behaviour outside the village, though, once back in their familiar surrounds, people returned to caste norms.

The other Dalit group in the village were the tailor-musicians, the Damai, who stitched clothes with varying degrees of skill - ranging from astounding speed and precision to the simply badly cut and badly sewn. The Damis were also called upon to bring out their instruments – drums, trumpets and a long horn not dissimilar from an alp horn (although more portable) – to celebrate weddings. As with the Kamis, the wealthier households had “their” Damai, and since the relationship was hereditary rather than selected on the basis of skill, it was not uncommon to hear complaints that “our” Damai had badly stitched an item of clothing. (To ask “Why should you be good at tailoring just because you are born into that caste?” was not considered a relevant question). Yermu had reason to complain in this regard, but they did not change their old Damai, as that would have been considered shameful. In economic terms, the Damai were often better off, as some of the sons had set up businesses in Kathmandu, making good money and sending it home. However, even if the Damai lived in better houses and had more livestock than many others, the label of Damai was indelible – they remained “untouchable” as far as everyone else was concerned.

The Damai and the Kamis did not mix or seek common strength together. In the hierarchy of the caste system, the Kamis considered themselves to be superior, and were careful to maintain this distinction. This is something that I discussed recently with a young Kami woman from Suri, Indu BK, who received a (Swiss-funded) scholarship to become a local development worker or “social mobiliser”. She now lives and works in Charikot.

Diary extract, September 2010

Indu has a broad smile and easy, confident manner. We have finished discussing her training and current work, and I ask what has been in my mind since meeting her: has she personally experienced discrimination - in her childhood or in her current work? Indu laughs, and says that the biggest problem she encountered was with her mother, who refused to allow a very close friend (mit¹) of her father into their home on the grounds of him being a Damai. Her mother was sticking to caste principles in treating him as beneath them. Indu says that it took a lot of talking to persuade her mother to relax her principles, but she managed. She adds that, “I gained my scholarship to become a social mobiliser because of my caste, and I am proud to be a Dalit. In my work I have not generally faced any discrimination, although back in the village I used to have problems with Bahuns and Chhetris”. Her answer is both impressive and heartening – she is so positive.

So for Indu, the “last bastion” of caste discrimination was her own mother. Whilst this might seem strange,

her mother’s perspective should be seen in the light of discrimination that she had experienced herself. If you have been treated as inferior all your life, you could find comfort in demonstrating superiority over someone else.

Looking back, I wonder what would have happened if I had deliberately and openly eaten food prepared by Kamis and Damais. I was far too uncertain of my position to do so – I wished to be accepted, to learn rather than to challenge. It is easy to take a different stance now. In today’s Nepal, and especially since the civil conflict came to an end and hopes of fundamental societal change have grown, discrimination on the basis of caste is no longer broadly accepted. Indeed, there is prestige in fighting it: Indu’s comments on being proud to be a Dalit echo a growing Dalit pride. There is no denying that Dalits remain disadvantaged,² but at the same time, with varying degrees of success or failure, many are now challenging the status quo.³ Fighting for Dalit rights has become a political issue that has united many amongst them in a common cause - often, under the Maoist banner.⁴

In a village such as Suri, where outside influences are quite strong, there is clear awareness nowadays that caste discrimination is better not openly demonstrated. For some this is a welcome change; others simply adopt more subtle means of indicating their perceived superior status – including the avoidance of personal interactions wherever possible. A whole mindset based on generations of prejudice is not changed overnight. As for how the Damais and Kamis have reacted to the more open social climate, it is striking how those who have gone outside the village (such as Indu, and Hem Bahadur Ghatane - chapter 6) have been more successful in changing their lives than those who have stayed.

Diary extract, September 2008

Hasta Lal is squatting at his forge, with his left hand turning the wheel that works the bellows, whilst in his right he holds some pincers with which he turns a thin piece of steel in the blazing heat. He is making a hasiya (sickle), a tool in which he has a particular specialisation. A man who just left bearing several new sickles had come from a village half a days’ walk away to buy them from him, as Hasta Lal has a reputation for producing quality articles. He seems to have hardly changed in twenty years. He is blackened with soot and charcoal from his work, his ragged clothes are spotted with holes from where a stray spark caught the material, and his squatted position by the bellows is just as I remember. What is different is the absence of his kindly elderly father, now deceased, and the presence of a good number of children, some of whom are his own.

Hasta Lal has four children now; the eldest, Moti, is the only one who was already born back in the days when I sat at the forge. Moti – whose name somewhat incongruously means “pearl” - was then a toddler. His mother Tirtamaya would leave him with his father to play in the forge, and he often waddled so close to hot metal that it made my heart miss

a beat – though nothing untoward ever happened. He just learned his trade from a young age.



So where is Moti now? Hasta Lal explains proudly that he has gone to Kathmandu, where he works as a blacksmith. He has married there – a good match. They have a photo of his bride; Tirtamaya disappears into the house to fetch it. She reappears bearing a large colour photo taken in a studio, showing a serious and pale-skinned girl (the colour of her skin is commented upon with much approval). The photo, alas, has seen better days; rats have gnawed a large part of one corner, and it is smudged with dirt. Tirtamaya bewails the rats in a voice that indicates resignation to a life of co-residence with them. She is blind in one eye and has always given off an attitude of fatalism – “what will be, will be” could be her motto.

Hasta Lal says that he stayed in the village because he has work here, and going outside involves considerable risk. He is nevertheless pleased that his son has bettered himself - in the eyes of everyone in the Kami hamlet, at least. Hasta Lal has made small improvements in his life; he has renovated his house so it is a little bigger, bought some land, and has a buffalo whereas before he had only a few goats. He acknowledges, too, that caste differences are enforced less overtly than they used to be – we sit openly sharing food, without any sense of daring. However, he does not consider that things have radically changed as far as he is concerned; the forge and all that it implies is still his way of life.

It is different for Kaili, with whom I spent many days in the past, but whose husband I rarely saw. He was always absent, earning money on seasonal migration outside the village.

Diary extract, September 2008

Kaili is happy. She tells me her news as she bids us sit on squares of Tibetan rugs by the fire inside her house, and serves hot milk from china mugs (the mugs, rugs and indeed milk are small luxuries not found in every home). They have bought land, and built a house, near Suri Dhoban, along the main path at the bottom of the valley. Soon they will move there, when her husband comes back from India. She is not exactly sure where he is – maybe it is Sikkim – but he will be home within a year, and then they will move. Their new land should be good for growing fruit trees, and they will open a shop, so she will be able to give up working hard in the fields. They will keep their ties with the village, however – they won't sell the land and house that they have here. They want their son to have the land (they have one son and three daughters – of whom one is physically handicapped), and plan to build a new house for him on one of the terraces.

We talk about doing well, and who in the village has not done well, and Kaili is clear. Those who are genuinely poor are people who are physically weak – who are sick, and unable to look after themselves, or are disturbed because they have lost people close to them. If you are fit in mind and body, and able to work, you are not really disadvantaged – you have the choice to work hard or not. I reflect that Kaili always was a positive thinker – although she was and is thwarted on certain issues. Her handicapped daughter is a worry to her and her husband, but they have just accepted that the girl's deformity (caused by a bad home delivery) is a fact of life, and have never sought medical treatment for her. It is almost certainly too late to do much now, as the girl is in her early teens. Yet it is the type of problem that could probably have been ameliorated when the girl was small.

As a Dalit village woman, Kaili's life opportunities have not been great, but she and her husband have worked hard together to improve their lot, and the future of their children. As a woman, it is difficult and uncommon to be able to determine one's path in life – so much is decided by one's father, brothers and husband. To remain single is to defy social norms. Hindu culture dictates that men have authority over the family, and they are expected to make all important decisions (ideally, taking the well-being of everyone into account – of course, in practice this varies). Women can only play a subservient role – although things are changing slowly. Jira Gurung (chapter 6) is an example of a growing attempt amongst village girls to gain independence although the fact that she belongs to a *Janajati* group means that it is easier for her to break out of the mould than for others.

Twenty years ago, I was very conscious of my privileged position. As a foreign woman of independent means, men and women alike accepted in me behaviour that they would have strongly criticised in a village woman (and particularly an unmarried one, as I was then). I could roam wherever I wanted, get into conversation with anyone and feel welcome in so doing, but a village woman could not. This was especially true amongst those placing greatest

emphasis on Hindu ritual purity, the Chhetris and Bahuns. Whilst men are broadly dominant over women, Hindu culture nevertheless has a complex and ambiguous attitude to women – as has been the subject of much study.

The anthropologist Lynn Bennett describes in detail how a Hindu woman is considered ritually pure and is cherished in her natal home (her *maitha*), whereas the sexual qualities that she assumes in her married home (her *ghar*) render her ritually dangerous, potentially luring her husband away from family solidarity.⁵ How this plays out in practice is that the young daughter-in-law is viewed with some suspicion when she arrives in her married home. She has to prove herself. In so doing, she is commonly expected to do the hardest physical work and most unpleasant chores, eat the remaining food when all others have been served and taken their fill, and generally comply with the wishes of others in the household without complaint. The mother-in-law can become the main tyrant in this regard, in a perpetuating cycle of uneasy female relationships. The badly treated daughter-in-law dreams of the day that she can be a mother-in-law herself, ruling the family home whilst a dutiful young daughter-in-law eases her work burden. The birth of a son gives her this prospect, whilst that of a daughter does not. Indeed, a spin-off in conventional marriage stakes is that the youngest son of a family tends to make a poor prospect, as his wife is likely to face the nagging of her mother-in-law for many years (it is the youngest son who inherits both the family home and the care of his parents in it). Similarly, a young woman will tend to hope for a husband whose family lives not too far away, so that in times of difficulty, she can readily seek comfort in her natal home.

The way in which Hindu culture shapes female relationships partially explains why it is not always men who insist most strongly on gender roles. Older women can be the greatest adherents to custom and tradition. Nevertheless, back in the late 1980s, attitudes were already less strict than they had once been. For example, a report commissioned by SDC in 1990 on changes that had occurred in the Dolakha area following development interventions noted a number of positive changes.⁶ One was that some high caste men reported that they no longer expected their wives to wait for them to eat before eating themselves. This was a clear rejection of the traditional view that cooked rice taken from a pot from which the wife has already served herself is ritually polluting for the husband. Similarly, the traditional, ritually demeaning practice of the wife having to greet her husband each morning by bowing to his feet – which sometimes includes ritual bathing of the feet and drinking of the water – was reported to be declining. This latter custom I observed in a number of Chhetri households when I lived in Suri, and I suspect that it continues today in some of them.

One of the obvious ways in which the ritual impurity – and inferiority – of women is expressed in Hindu culture

is with regard to menstruation. The publicly degrading way in which this was treated in higher caste households was in sharp contrast to my Western perception of it being a private matter – and one that if disclosed, would only evoke sympathy for the discomfort entailed.

Aerogramme home, 11 July 1988

Daughter-in-law is huddled in the corner – a rare break from work. She's just started her period and so cannot go into the kitchen. A menstruating woman is considered ritually unclean – she should not cook food (at least not for any man); she has to eat by herself, sleep in a separate room (daughter-in-law in any case sleeps on the floor – it's common for only the husband to have a bed), be careful not to touch any male relatives or even cows lest she defile them in so doing.... You might suppose that having your period could be a nice opportunity for a rest, but it's not at all like that. She's just treated with scorn and given unpleasant tasks. It's all so demeaning! A family like this can afford all these rituals, of course – in poorer families, especially those without another woman to take over, the woman basically has to commit ritual sin. I'm referring to Bahun and Chhetri households – it's not the same in the households of Tamangs and Sherpas, who are much more down to earth in such matters.

Interestingly, my mother responded saying that her own mother had been brought up in the belief that a menstruating woman should not bake bread, as it would not rise, and that she had heard other “wives tales” regarding activities to be avoided when menstruating. Unease with “defiling” menstrual blood is of course true of many cultures beyond Hinduism (most obviously Muslim and Jewish, but also in many other African and Caribbean cultures), although it seemed far less of an issue amongst the Buddhists I knew. More generally, as already shown in chapter 4, women often experience discrimination in access to health services – especially in matters related to child-bearing.

Of all life-determining decisions, that of marriage is the most crucial one for a village woman's future. It used to be a decision over which she had no – or very little – influence, particularly in the case of Bahuns and Chhetris. The Bahun family with whom I stayed provided a particular demonstration of this. The father lived outside the village with a second wife, but he nevertheless decided all important family matters, including the marriage partner of both his son, Madusudan, and his daughters, Gayatri and Urmilla. Whilst well aware of the norm of arranged marriages, I was still shocked by the dictatorial, non-consultative manner in which this was done – and the relatively young age of all the parties.

Aerogramme home – no date, late 1988

There was a general sense of gloom around the kitchen this evening; Gayatri's absence is so palpable. It all happened so quickly – I don't think Gayatri was consulted at all. It seems that the first time she met her husband was at the wedding ceremony. Mother says it is a good match, but I know she

is trying to put on a brave face; she would have preferred a later marriage. Gayatri is only 17, after all, and had been doing well at her studies. Mother was clearly hopeful that she would finish school and only marry afterwards. Poor Urmilla is looking pensive in the corner, and I don't blame her – it's so obvious that her brother is unhappy with the choice of wife that their father made for him. For that matter, Radika is not happy either – how could she be, when treated with such scorn? Now that Gayatri is gone, it will be Urmilla's turn next. Since she will clearly have no choice either, all I can hope is that the decision that is made proves to be a fortuitous one...

In fact, Urmilla's marriage turned out to be the happiest of the three. Radika now lives separately from Madusudan (who married a second wife), whilst of Gayatri, news is mixed.

Diary extract, April 2008

As we walk through past the shops of Borole, there's a familiar figure sitting at the chautara. Radika, looking confident and at ease, is chatting with a shop-keeper. She's come to buy some fertilizer, and is waiting for a friend to join her for the walk back – but is soon persuaded to join us. The fertilizer weighs 15kg – not an excessive weight, and she readily keeps pace with us. We chat about times past and present. She laughs about how she was 20 years ago, saying that then she knew nothing, she was always afraid to speak for fear of saying something stupid, and she just had to do whatever her mother-in-law told her. That, indeed, was how it was. I cannot remember ever having a real conversation with Radika – partly because she was kept busy, and partly, I must admit, because I also assumed that she had nothing much to say. She tended to wear a rather vacant expression, and never ventured an opinion of her own. Hunched, dumpy, and usually rather scruffy, her hair was often awry, and her clothes worn with little care. It's only now that I realise that this was probably part of her coping mechanism at the time – stubborn resistance.

The Radika of today – a woman in her mid thirties - holds herself with pride and determination, and needs no prompting to talk. My colleagues know her, because she is the secretary of the Okhrini community forest; she is also a Women's Health Volunteer, and is clearly generally active in the village. Everyone seems to know Radika these days. Apart from her community work, one reason may be the simple fact that she lives alone. This is most unusual, and flies in the face of all traditional norms, especially as it represents a deliberate choice on Radika's part. She has borne two sons; the first is now a young man of 19, already making a living as an "engineer", whilst the second, now 17, is studying in Charikot. They no longer need her presence in their daily lives. Her husband, Madusudan, lives in Dolakha with a second wife; his mother also lives with him. Apparently they have told her to join them, but Radika refuses, saying that she prefers village life. It is not difficult to see why; here she is a person in her own right, and with them she will only ever be the chore-fulfilling daughter-in-law.



On the night before we leave, we stay at Radika's house – where I used to stay when spending time in Surigaon. My former room, in the building opposite the main house, is used now as a store and to accommodate occasional guests. My colleagues make use of it for the night. Most things are more or less as I remember them – if a little more dilapidated. The house doesn't seem to have had a coat of white-wash for a little while, and there is moss growing in the odd crack here and there. A positive change is a solar-powered light with which Radika lights the kitchen; and a radio (powered from the same source) that she has playing constantly in the background. The use of a radio was very carefully controlled in the past, to save batteries.

After we have eaten, Radika shows my colleagues to their room, and then insists that I use her room at the front of the house. It is just a small room with a narrow bed, newspaper pasted to the rough wooden walls. Her clothes hang on a few nails – she doesn't have many, although a couple of saris for special occasions are folded away separately. She pulls out a small battered metal trunk from beside the bed, and from it removes a photo album – actually one that I had given her earlier, and into which she has now placed all her family photos. There are perhaps 20 in total; we study first pictures of chubby little boys, then serious, slightly skinny children dressed in school uniform, and then tall, gangly adolescents – bearing a strong resemblance to their father 20 years ago. There is a picture of Gayatri, Radika's elder sister-in-law, now in her mid thirties with a husband and four children. Then there is an older Urmilla – also with a husband and children, staring fixedly at the camera. They are happy, says Radika. I am at least glad for Urmilla.

Radika puts away her photo album carefully, and leaves me to sleep. I think of her putting off the light, turning off the radio, and sleeping here alone each night. It is so contrary to Nepali custom. No-one ever seemed to understand my wish to sleep alone when I lived in the village; I was always being provided with offers of "bahinis" – younger sisters – willing to sleep in my room and keep me company. Yet here is Radika living all alone in a whole house. It certainly takes some courage.

The next morning, we are awoken early by someone calling Radika to attend a health worker training session. Someone else is asking for vitamin A capsules, which she duly hands out. Yet another person calls on the matter of some goats; Radika is rushing around attending to everything - not least ensuring that her guests have tea and snacks before departing. One thing disturbs me, and I question her: playing the role of a Bahun. On this she is clear; she has many friends amongst the Sunwars and Chhetris, but if a Kami or Damai comes to her door, he or she still has to sit outside, and if given a cup of tea, rinse his or her cup afterwards. Radika obviously sets importance on her superior caste status. Given her vulnerable position, this is understandable, although it still seems a pity that in fighting her own battle for self-determination, she cannot take up the cause of others.

This, then, is Radika's choice: during the day, active village member, respected by others, sought out for help and advice, busy tilling the land and raising her few goats for occasional sale. During the night, a woman alone with her photos, who cooks and eats a meal as quickly as possible with the radio for company, and then retires to her solitary room. This choice, furthermore, is not entirely hers to make – it depends on the good will of her husband, Madusudan. As a wife, Radika owns neither the house in which she lives nor the land she tills; all belongs to him, and will be inherited on his death by their sons. If ever he or they decide to sell, Radika will have no choice but to leave.⁷

Radika's case is an exceptional one, but nevertheless indicative of changing attitudes. To live on her own as she does would have been unthinkable 20 years ago; likewise, her participation in so many village activities is in keeping with a growing trend of women's involvement in village development. Although as a Bahun, she is defying a particularly strong traditional role of female passivity and family-centred behaviour, she also has the innate sense of superiority from her caste to give her the confidence to do so. Lower caste women tend to be less confident, and more hesitant to participate in community actions, with the result that higher castes often dominate – and are disproportionately favoured. Much depends on the thrust of the intervention. A review of the Rural Health Development Project, for example, found that through the project emphasis on good governance, Mother's Groups often provided a means for women of all caste and ethnic backgrounds to come together, share experiences and together gain in knowledge.⁸

Another aspect of Radika's story is quite common in

Suri: that of men taking second wives. Strictly speaking, polygamy is illegal in Nepal, punishable by brief imprisonment and a fine, but the law is rarely enforced in such situations. In any case, it does not invalidate second marriages that have taken place. Typically, the first marriage is an arranged one at a fairly early age, fulfilling family expectations. The legal age for women to marry (with parental consent) is 16; for men it is 18, and marriages at this age are still quite common. In fact Radika was married at the age of 14. Once children have been produced from the union – again, in accordance with expectations of ensuring the family lineage – and assuming the man has some financial means, he feels that he has done his duty and can please himself by finding a wife of his own choice. He may even marry across caste lines.

Of course the second wife is likely to wish for children of her own, so two families often result – the second commonly shunned by the man's family, who do not wish to see family property further divided. The first wife, left on her own in her married home, is in a difficult position, pitied or scorned for having failed to keep her husband by her side, and often expected to do more than her fair share of chores. Wives in this position would complain to me that without a husband to argue their cause, they were powerless. The second wife, meanwhile, often has her own worries – facing a degree of societal disapproval, and being uncertain of her own and her children's livelihood and inheritance prospects should the husband leave or die.

The overall result is almost inevitably a lot of resentment and unhappiness. In the case of one Chhetri family with whom I spent a lot of time, the man has married two sisters and split the family house horizontally, creating two homes with two hearths. The elder sister occupies the upper part of the house with her two children; the younger, the lower – she also has two children. It is not an easy situation for any of those concerned, as even passing remarks made jokingly betray,

"So there we were together in Jiri, he and me, and this person we met asked us how many children we have. He said four, I said two – exactly at the same time! The man looked at us so strangely!"

As for the idea of a woman taking a second husband, this goes against Hindu tradition, even if the woman is widowed at a young age. She is considered an unlucky prospect for marrying again, and often has to return to her natal home. However, attitudes in this respect are changing, and in urban areas remarriage does happen – there are even websites for those who have also lost a first spouse to seek a new partner with a similar history.

Amongst Buddhists there is, overall, more openness and consultation when it comes to choice of marriage partners. I know, for example, of no Tamang or Sherpa men who have taken a second wife whilst the first is living

– one Tamang man commented to me drily that this would only make for tears. In Tibetan society, polyandry is of course widely reported as traditional practice, often one woman being married to several brothers. When asked, Suri villagers considered this idea to be a very strange one.

Are things changing for women in Nepal? There is a reasonably vocal, urban-based women’s movement, though it tends to be dominated by higher caste women. At policy level, there is recognition in Nepal that gender discrimination exists and should be tackled, but there is still a long way to go before Nepali women are equal with men by law⁹ - and even further for this to be the case in practice. Change in the attitudes of both men and of women is needed for it to happen.

Endnotes

- 1 The custom of *mit* entails a special friendship, initiated in a ceremony between the two parties. In it they exchange gifts and declare lifelong friendship. They subsequently treat their *mit* as a relative, supporting them emotionally and sometimes financially, and always making them welcome in their home. In the event of death, a *mit* is mourned as one would a relative. For Indu’s mother to try to deny her husband’s *mit* access to her home was an act of major defiance towards her husband. At the same time, in forming a *mit* friendship with a Damai, her husband was making a social statement against caste norms.
- 2 Exactly who falls into the category of Dalit is somewhat contested; Dalit political groups claim their numbers to be nearly 20% of the population, whilst the 2001 census recorded a figure of 13%. Whatever the exact figure, Dalits are very poorly represented in the bureaucracy, legislature and mainstream political parties – a fact that has sparked the creation of specifically Dalit political parties. One Dalit-run website states that approximately 80% of all Dalits live below the poverty line, although other reports place the figure at 50%. Similarly, Dalit average life expectancy is given as 50.8 years against the national average of 58 years, and the literacy rate as 23% against the national average of 54%. See: <http://www.jagaranmedia.org.np/index.php> Given the difficulty in collecting data, all figures need to be treated with caution (and in any case, Nepal only began generating systematic data on caste and ethnicity in 1991).
- 3 A quote from a detailed study funded by the World Bank and DFID is illustrative in this regard: “After centuries of thinking about themselves as subjects of feudal rulers, more and more Nepalis are beginning to see themselves as citizens of a democratic state... This change in self perception has also altered expectations: people do not want favours from the powerful. Instead of patronage, they want rights – the same rights accorded to every citizen by law. They want uniform ‘rules of the game.’” World Bank and DFID (2006) *Unequal Citizens Gender, Caste and Ethnic Exclusion in Nepal*
- 4 At a conference held in Nepal in June 2010 that brought together many activists, politicians, scholars and others interested in Dalit rights, this was discussed at some length. It was noted that although “the Maoists used Dalits as cannon fodder in their war, they nonetheless brought the issue of Dalits to the fore.” Conference Report *Envisioning New Nepal: Dynamics of Caste, Identity and Inclusion of Dalits* Godavari Village Resort; organised by Samanta Foundation Nepal. Quote from page 13.
- 5 Bennett, L. (1983) *Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters* Columbia University Press New York.
- 6 Adhikary, P. K., Pfaff-Czarnecka, J. and Shrestha, M.R. (1990) *Opinions and Perceptions Survey Rapid Rural Appraisal of IHDP/ LJP Impacts in Central and Eastern Panchayats of IHDP area* SDC/INFRAS Impact Monitoring Project.
- 7 According to CEDAW (2003), women make up more than 65 percent of the labour force employed in agriculture in Nepal, but the majority of them are family workers who receive no financial remuneration for their labour. They account for only 6 percent of total landowners with a combined share of 4% of all arable land. Whilst in the past, unmarried daughters had to wait until they reached the age of 35 to have the right to inherit family property along with sons, the law has been changed and they are now eligible from any age (although their brothers are still highly motivated to have them marry, as in so doing women lose all hereditary rights to natal property). See: CEDAW (2003), Consideration of reports submitted by States parties under article 18 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, combined second and third periodic report of States parties, Nepal, CEDAW/C/NPL/2-3 and <http://www.wikigender.org/index.php/Nepal>
- 8 Molesworth, K., Karki, Y. and Koirala, I. (2005) *Rural Health Development Project, Nepal Report of the 2005 External Review*. Swiss Tropical Institute, Basel. Conducted on behalf of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
- 9 Nepal has ratified the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reports.htm>. However, for the convention to be implemented fully requires substantial change in the country’s legislation.



Chapter 8

Green forest, Nepal's wealth

The rhyming couplet “*Hariyo ban, Nepalko dhan*” – literally, “green forest, Nepal’s wealth” has long been a popular slogan amongst people working in forestry in Nepal. Unlike some slogans, it contains much truth – healthy (green) forests are very much a part of people’s livelihoods in rural Nepal. It is the forests that are the source of much of the fuel by which people cook and warm themselves on cold winter days, of the material used for house construction, and of the fodder eaten by livestock. Forests also yield the bamboo from which a plethora of articles are woven (baskets, stools, animal shelters, and winnowing trays, amongst others); seasonal food (mushrooms and young leaves); medicinal herbs; and fibre for ropes or sometimes even cloth (made of nettle fibre). Perhaps most importantly of all, in the absence of chemical fertilizer, it is also forests that serve to boost agricultural productivity – through the dung of livestock that have been fed on forest fodder, and the application of leaf litter that is carried to the fields.

I have good reason, of course, to warm to this subject. My original purpose in living in Suri was to study the use and management of trees. Although my research focused more on trees growing around people’s homes and fields, I nevertheless went to the forest quite often – whenever the person with whom I was spending the day did so. The following extract provides one description of high altitude forest in spring.

Aerogramme home, 29 April 1989

Today I'm sitting far above Nakpa, surrounded by broken slates and, beyond, fir trees and the odd maple, bright green in young leaf flush. This is my first visit to the quarry for roofing slates; Gunte¹, like many others, is doing contractual work up here during these warm spring months. We must be at 10,000 feet or so. Stone extraction is limited to warm and dry times of the year – usually people sleep at the quarry when working here rather than making the long trek up and down to Nakpa every day. Gunte has been based here for the last fortnight and I would never have found him but for having fortunately met his cousin, who was heading up here. The walk up took over two hours. A brief storm last night has cleared the air, and it was a glorious morning. The vegetation smelled fresh and moist, and the birds were in full chorus. Indeed, they still are – competing loudly with the sound of hammer and chisel on stone. As we neared the quarry, we passed a chauri-gai² goth (shelter), around which white rhododendrons were still in bloom; the red ones lower down have already faded....

During the monsoon months, the forest was (and remains) a less attractive place to be.

Aerogramme home, 21 July 1988

With Esu, I went high up into the forest above Nakpa to dig potatoes, which her family – like others – plant in small clearings. It was a dry if cloudy day when we set off, but rain soon began to fall – and did the forest then become alive with leeches!!! Huge brown ones (well, 2”-3” before distension) as well as the small black ones that you get lower down; I could see them lying in wait for us as we struggled upwards. We had a good laugh regularly de-leeching each other from all parts of the body – quite a lot got through, though – even latching on to my scalp through my hair! Eventually, after 2 hours or so of walking, we reached the clearing, shrouded in mist and scattered with what only became obvious as potato plants on close inspection. They were growing amongst prolific nettles.

We spotted a wisp of smoke a little way off, and made our way down to the place from which it was issuing – a small shack or goth made from a couple of poles supporting woven bamboo walls, with a roof waterproofed by plastic sheeting. Life before the advent of plastic must have been very wet indeed... Inside the goth squatted a man, his two young sons and teenage daughter. It had begun to rain with force, so we squeezed our way in, warming ourselves against their small fire. The family makes their living out of raising livestock (those belonging to others as well as their own). They said that they spend all monsoon up in the forest, where the fodder is plentiful. They are not alone in this practice; others do so too, but generally only the poorer people, and particularly the Gurungs and Sherpas. Those who do not have to go into the forest at this time of year generally avoid doing so, because of the leeches.

When the rain had eased a bit, Esu dug potatoes whilst I watched helplessly – I had no digging implement. Planted some 6 months ago, the potatoes seemed very small to me (maximum 3” across, but generally less), and certainly not very numerous per plant. Anyway, they tasted OK. We boiled some over the fire and ate them with the family before we left on the downward trail.

These extracts describe exactly how I remember the forest stretching high above Nakpa, roughly from 2,000 to 3,500m altitude, which was then broadly known as *Khadkako ban* – the forest of the Khadkas. Legally speaking, and with the debatable exception of the potato plots (for which they

paid a very nominal land tax), it certainly did not belong to the Khadkas. All forest was nationalised by the Nepal government in 1957, and was thus technically the property of the State. However, visits by Forest Department staff were rare, and the Khadkas had control over all aspects of village life – so it was (at least tacitly) accepted that this extended to the forest. A few wealthy households had tree and bamboo resources on their own land, but this was not so very common then; most people used the forest. This was universally true for specific needs such as monsoon supplies of firewood, and winter fodder.

During more than half of the year – from around mid September to early June - firewood collection was mainly women's work. They would go regularly to the forest – usually in groups, although more intrepid women went alone – to harvest dried branches and other dead wood that would readily burn. However, this was not a practical option during the daily rains of the monsoon period. Thus every March-April, men would go into the forest to fell a tree or two to meet their household fuelwood requirements over the wet season. The trees would be allowed to dry for a while, and then split into pieces. In May-June, parties of men and some women would go up into the forest to head-load down this fuelwood. In many cases this work was – and still is - conducted under a system of mutual reciprocity, or *parma*³.

Aerogramme home, Surigaon, 8 June 1989

Firewood carrying is done in teams, usually on a shared basis so that on one day one household's firewood is bought down; on the next, another's. It is both hard work and a very social occasion – requiring the provision of much local beer (jaad) by the household concerned. This prompts much joking and singing; even on the days of torrential rain this month (it's getting late – the firewood should be in), I've heard loud bursts of song ringing out from the forest as firewood carrying teams emerge with another load. The standard rate down here in Surigaon is four trips in one day, at the end of which everyone is fairly drunk and exhausted. As I was washing my clothes at the water spout yesterday afternoon, one firewood-carrier on (I presume) his last lap placed his load down by the stream, curled up beside it, and promptly fell asleep!

During the coldest and driest months of the year, when the fields were bare (the stubble grazed into the muddy ground), parties of head-loaders could again be seen emerging from the forests, this time carrying a different product: oak tree fodder. These fodder harvesters often resembled quivering, walking bushes, so weighed down by their bundles that only their legs appeared from underneath⁴. The dark green prickly leaves of *khasru* or the less prickly *banj* and *phalat* do not look like very obvious fodder, but being green when most other vegetation is not, they are quite readily eaten by livestock during the winter.⁵ As in the case of monsoon fuelwood, the harvesting of oak fodder differed from the rest of the year in being usually done by men, as it was very heavy work and required walking far from home. Otherwise, women were the usual fodder collectors.

The way in which the Khadkas exercised control over the forest was not through charging for the collection of different forest products – these were broadly viewed as a free resource for all. Nevertheless, each part of the forest was “owned” by a particular household or households of one extended family, who imposed charges for the use of forest land – for erecting animal shelters (*goths*) or for cultivating potatoes. For the privilege of establishing an animal shelter, a non-Khadka had to pay the Khadka family concerned a certain amount of *ghee* (clarified butter); the exact amount was negotiated according to individual circumstance, but was of the order of a litre of butter per adult buffalo per season. For the use of potato plots, a present of potatoes was expected by the Khadkas at the harvest. If they had supplied the seed potatoes, the arrangement was one of sharecropping – half to the cultivator, and half to the Khadkas.

There was already a growing awareness amongst villagers 20 years ago that the forest belonged to the State, and that Khadka claims were legally invalid. However, State ownership was not viewed in a very positive light. The Forest Department had a mixed reputation at the time, and villagers feared that greater government intervention would mean heavy controls and fines. At least with the Khadka system, everyone could negotiate face to face; negotiating with a government bureaucracy wearing the face of an outside official (perceived to be self-seeking and insensitive) was a less comfortable proposition.



Villagers broadly recognised that the forest was becoming degraded through heavy use; older people would often regale me of tales of the density and wide extent of the forest when they were young. The Khadkas had thus decided that something should be done, and had placed a number of rules on forest use. The area and quality of a particular type of bamboo⁶, had become scarce – so its harvesting was limited to every second year. Then the oak forests – in particular the *khasru* – had, as in many other parts of the mid hills, been reduced through lopping to stumpy trees with spiky outgrowths, reminiscent of punk haircuts. Their harvesting for fodder was also restricted – which effectively meant that one year, the Suri livestock ate *khasru* during the winter, and the next, *banj* and *phalant*. It was accepted by everyone that you did not fell oak trees for fuelwood or timber - their fodder was more valuable. Whilst these simple rules for forest conservation were broadly followed, there were always some who tried to get round the system, either because they were too poor to have a choice, or because they refused to acknowledge the Khadka supremacy. Overall, there was a perception that the forest was continuing to decline.

Over 20 years on, the forest is actually in better condition than it was. This is not just according to my own observations, but also to the observation of any villager asked on the subject – and further confirmed by a recent study⁷. A number of factors have contributed to this improvement, but a very significant one is that the forests of Suri are now Community Forests. Here I must declare a bias: as a forester with responsibilities for the management of the Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project (NSCFP), I am an enthusiastic proponent of community forest management. Under community forestry, all the households using a particular forest area formally constitute themselves as a Community Forest User Group (CFUG), and discuss and agree a forest management plan. The plan is based on an assessment of the forest condition, and balances what harvesting is allowed against the needs of the different users.⁸ Special provision for the poorest and most disadvantaged is a legal requirement.

There are also other factors involved in the improved condition of the forest today. One is a reduction in the number of livestock kept in animal shelters in the forest, due to lack of local labour; people prefer to become migrant workers. Another possible factor is the cessation of potato cultivation in forest plots, this being now practised more intensively around homesteads instead. However, in terms of area covered, the potato plots were never highly detrimental to the forest. Probably of greatest significance is the increase in tree and bamboo planting on private land.⁹ Of course it is the poorest households who have least opportunity to plant their own trees, having least land. Furthermore, what land they have is often in the highest areas where the cool temperatures are already a limit on crop ripening and overall yields – so tree shade on crops must be particularly avoided. That said, people

can be very innovative in finding a space to grow a valued fodder tree that will provide emergency winter rations for their cow (fig species are a common preference), or a clump of bamboo that can be easily harvested close to their house, when they need it. Yet the forest is still a lifeline for regular tree product needs.

Diary extract, April 2008

It is a beautiful clear spring morning, and outside the Health Post, a group of banner-waving Maoists is slowly gathering to celebrate electoral victory. We leave them behind, heading upwards to the forest, with a member of the Bajredanda Community Forest User Group committee. His name is Sukrabar Sherpa; "Man Friday" inevitably comes to mind, as he was named for the day of the week on which he was born. Where once there were low yielding terraced fields at the forest edge, there is now a plantation of pine, in amongst which oak has come up naturally, and is now well established.

Further up, the path enters an area of mature khasru – still punk-like in appearance due to fodder lopping but, says Sukrabar, in better condition than it was. As we climb higher, the voices of two girls singing floats across the other side of the valley, and Sukrabar shakes his head, saying that you hear singing in the forest less often these days, because there are fewer goths in the forest. A cuckoo is calling sporadically, and a bright red flash of a small scarlet bird in flight provides sudden colour. The path climbs steeply upwards, through fading red rhododendrons and then eventually to still blossoming white ones – just as recalled in my letter 19 years ago. Eventually, after some one and a half hours of walking, we reach our goal; a chauri-gai goth in the middle of clearing. The chauri-gai are at home in the cool mountain temperatures and would overheat at lower altitudes in the summer. They are large, mainly black animals covered in white splodges or visa versa, with impressively pointed horns and oddly fluffy tails.

The goth is being managed by a Sherpa family, who pay a fee to the community forest fund for the privilege. We are invited for tea; it is made with leaves plucked and dried from their own tea bushes (grown beside their house in the village) and flavoured with salt, ghee, and a little milk for good measure. If you do not think of tea, but more of soup, it is delicious. The family make a living from their 14 chauri gai, which they move around the forest throughout the year – highest up in the rainy season, back down to close to their house in winter – changing location roughly every two months. Every morning they milk the animals, which they say yield some 16-20 litres. The husband then sets off for the dairy at Jiri, where he sells the whole milk and returns – a round trip that takes him some 5 hours walking. They eat and sleep in their smoky goth of woven bamboo, sharing the space with a few chickens and the calves when they are first born. Their large Tibetan mastiff dog guards against wild animals outside. It is a simple life, and not without risk, especially given that the death of a chauri gai is a huge financial disaster. The monsoon months are particularly difficult, when there is constant wetness and leeches are everywhere. Yet when asked about their choice,



the Sherpini (Sherpa woman) shrugs and says that this is the life they know. It is indeed – they have been doing it for 16 years - but it is a life that fewer and fewer people are choosing to lead.

The committee in charge of what is now Bajredanda Community Forest is made up of Sherpas, Tamangs, Dalits, Newars, Chhetris and a Bhujel - women as well as men¹⁰. The contrast with the previous domination of the Khadkas is striking. I can only guess at the power games that must have played out in the process; the current committee members acknowledge these struggles with laughter. Of course some of the Khadkas resisted, they say – but they also point out (perhaps because a Khadka is present, perhaps because it is true) that some Khadkas supported change. In fact it is not difficult to believe that different Khadkas had different views, given that some families in the past claimed rights over larger areas of forest than others. The committee has also seen internal fights, highlighted when the first chairman absconded with some of the funds. Whilst the funds are still missing, he is said to be too ashamed to show his face in the village – which the current committee argues is a moral victory, at least.

During the time of the civil conflict, the CFUGs were one of the few – and certainly the most inclusive and best organised – local institutions to keep functioning. In the absence of an elected village administration¹¹, it was often the CFUGs that made decisions over village development activities, using their funds for matters such as maintaining paths or repairing the school roof. They still do so. Indeed, community forestry has developed beyond a tool to promote the sustainable management of forests. It is seen by many as a means of facilitating social change.¹² Of course, this must be set within the overall political climate

of Nepal – of the greater awareness of rights, and demand for change, that has arisen out of the civil conflict.

In talking with some of the Kami members of Bajradada Community Forest – who include Hasta Lal, Tirtamaya and Kaili (chapter 7) – two particular changes in attitude emerged. One was an expression of responsibility for the forest – Tirtamaya, for example, explained how it is important to lop the oak trees without destroying the crowns, and rotate the harvesting area each year to allow time for regrowth. Amongst the Kamis, who so often in the past took such a fatalistic view on everything (that nothing was in their hands to change), this was striking. Of course Tirtamaya could have been saying what she thought I wanted to hear – but her words were certainly a contrast with the past. A second point which all the Kamis emphasised, and which in many ways is even more significant, is that they have a voice in decision making. Others listen to them. Thus the annual membership fee for the CFUG was originally set at Rs 35 per household, but the Kamis argued that this was too expensive for them and other poor households. The members then agreed that the cost should be reduced to Rs 25. It seemed less the saving of the Rs 10 in itself, than their success in arguing their case that was of particular satisfaction to them. These are small things in themselves, but important in what they represent.

The Bajredanda CFUG generates funds from their annual membership fee and from fining persons who break the rules, in addition to charging for certain specific uses of the forest, and selling what forest products they can.¹³ In this they are similar to other CFUGs, although the bank balance of each varies according to the type of forest



and its productivity, as well as to how well the members organise themselves and their finances. The overall hope for community forestry is that the CFUGs will be able to generate jobs for their members, as well as group revenue, from the commercial harvesting and processing of products. A number of plants yielding essential oils are promising in this regard and indeed the Bajredanda CFUG has established a distillation plant for wintergreen oil. However, the greatest profits are to be made from the sale of timber.

It's a paradox that selling timber is the most obvious and most difficult way for CFUGs to make money. It's obvious because of the high prices that can be gained, and difficult because of the practical hurdles of felling, sawing and getting the timber to market, the complicated rules and regulations that have to be followed, and – most of all – the informal payments that are often demanded along the way. This is becoming increasingly apparent to the members of Bajredanda and Koshnidhi CFUGs, who are together planning to extract timber for sale. For a start, they had to halt all harvesting activities for a number of months in 2010 due to a temporary nation-wide timber ban, introduced by the Minister at the time, who was sceptical about community forestry¹⁴. Now they are trying to develop a business plan, for which task they have established a timber committee. It is disappointingly noticeable that those in the committee are almost all Khadka men – it is they who have the business experience and confidence. NSCFP staff members are encouraging a more representative involvement, but it is clear that “old habits die hard.”

Community forestry represents a huge movement in Nepal – one that is widely hailed as a major success story, but which is also not without critics. In Dolakha district alone, there are now some 342 CFUGs, managing some 40,583 ha of forest¹⁵, whilst country-wide there are some 14,500 CFUGs, their membership numbering over 1.6 million households. About one quarter of the entire forest area of the country is now managed by communities, its uptake being particularly concentrated in the middle hills¹⁶.

The CFUGs are federated at district and national level, which makes them a powerful grassroots movement. Indeed, they are vocal in lobbying for the rights of their members¹⁷. This is important, as there are different views about community forestry within the government, and some officials would like to see the rights of forest users curtailed. Such retrogressive views are particularly apparent when it comes to harvesting valuable resources such as timber – as illustrated by the recent temporary ban on timber. Another potentially valuable resource, in the light of international attempts to address climate change, is the carbon sequestered in forests (particularly those that are managed to maximise sequestration). There is much talk of carbon markets and the mechanism of REDD – yet how this can be applied to community forests in an equitable manner is not entirely obvious, and is the subject of considerable debate¹⁸.

Community forestry in Nepal still faces many challenges, especially in ensuring that the rights of the poorest and disadvantaged are fully respected. By no means all CFUGs function as democratically as those of Bajredanda and Koshnidhi, and they cannot be considered to be “perfect”. Yet the achievements made nationally in community forestry over the past 20 years – in terms of user participation in decision making, sustainable management and the generation of income – are very significant.

Endnotes

- 1 Gunte was the nickname of one Padam Bahadur Shrestha, a Newar man whose activities I followed as part of my research.
- 2 A *chauri-gai* is a female cross between a yak (*Bos grunniens*) and a hill cow (*Bos indicus*). *Chauris* are apparently more productive than female yak, and more tolerant of heat – thus they are raised in the intermediate altitude between cattle and yak, being tolerant of altitudes over 4,000m in the summer, but also adapting to altitudes down to some 2,500m in the winter. The usual cross is between a yak bull and a hill cow, although bigger and stronger animals are said to result from a hill bull and a female yak. I remember Karnak Bahadur Karki remarking to me that the keeping of *chauri gai* was a sin, because the progeny are infertile and are thus kept from their mothers and allowed to die. However, I am not sure if this practice is the norm.
- 3 The system of *parma* was used when a task demanded an intensive input of labour. Participating households shared their labour on an equal basis. One day's labour for another household meant that one day's labour by a member of that household should be given in return.
- 4 I weighed some of these loads, and commonly found them to be 50-60 kg. A forester friend who also weighed some fodder loads in a different part of Nepal found them to be of similar weight – one 50kg load being carried by a teenage girl (Jane Gronow, *pers.comm*).
- 5 The botanical names of these oaks are: *khasru* - *Quercus semecarpifolia* ; *phalant* - *Quercus lamellosa* ; and *banj* – *Quercus lanata*
- 6 The bamboo was known as *tite ningaalo* (*Arundanaria* spp) and was (still is) used to weave fine baskets (coarser baskets and animal shelters being made from another type of bamboo, *ghurde ningaalo*).
- 7 Surya Maharjan, *personal communication*. The study that he coordinated is: Niraula, R.R. and Maharjan, S.K. (2011) *Forest Cover Change Analysis in Dolakha District (1990 – 2010) A study from project cluster VDCs*. Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project, June 2011.
- 8 The legal validity of a CFUG rests on the management plan that they draw up being agreed by the (government)

- District Forest Officer. He (rarely she) then signs over to the CFUG responsibility for managing the forest, and rights to its use. The CFUG thus becomes a legal entity, with a written constitution, a committee, and a bank account. This is a process that has been facilitated in Dolakha district through the Nepal-Swiss Community Forestry Project (NSCFP) over the period 1990 – 2010 – although Swiss support for community forestry in the area goes back even further. The project works with both the Forest Department and a variety of local non-government organisations (NGOs) which provide services in CFUG establishment, training, and subsequent coaching.
- 9 Having spent many long weeks in my student days scrambling up and down terrace banks and in and out of gullies, recording all the trees and bamboo clumps on people's private land, it only takes a glance to see that there has been a near explosion of vegetation on such land over the intervening 20 years.
 - 10 Legally, the committee membership should be at least one third women; this is indeed the case for this particular CFUG.
 - 11 Local elections were impossible during the years of conflict, and are still unlikely to be held for some time. The last were held in 1998; the committees thus formed were dissolved in 2002.
 - 12 The NSCFP has placed particular emphasis on governance issues in CFUGs – notably, supporting transparency and inclusivity in decision-making, active participation by individuals belonging to disadvantaged groups such as Dalits and women, and the detailing of specific provisions for such groups in management plans. Governance coaching sessions are held to discuss and reflect on these issues, using role plays and songs to provoke thought. See <http://communityforestry-nscfp.org/>
 - 13 In the case of Bajredanda CFUG, the main provisions of the management plan concern fodder and timber harvesting, and payment for the erection of goths. The harvesting of oak fodder is rotated on a three-yearly basis, so that each year, a different area is harvested – thus allowing regeneration in the non-harvested areas. The amount charged to members is effectively the annual membership fee, of Rs 25 per year. The harvesting of timber is charged to members at Rs 5 per cubic foot, although the poorest members have provision to harvest free of charge. Kamis are allowed to manufacture charcoal free of charge. The CFUG is also gaining revenue from the distillation of wintergreen oil (derived from the shrub *Gaultheria fragrantissima*, and used in ointments and inhalations against blocked breathing) – for which the NSCFP has provided support. (This was both in the establishment of the distillation unit and the marketing of the oil; limited marketing skills, information and networks are often a constraint to CFUGs making a decent profit from forest products).
 - 14 This felling ban was widely covered in the media, generally quoting the government perspective.
- See for example <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10338218> (dated 17 June 2010).
- 15 The total forest area of Dolakha district is 101,500 ha, but of this only 61,915 ha is considered to have potential as community forest (the rest being too distant from settlements or otherwise unsuitable). Thus nearly two-thirds of the area that could become community forest is indeed under that management regime.
 - 16 Community forestry is not so prevalent in the high value forests of the plains, or in the high altitude forests.
 - 17 Most CFUGs belong to the Federation of Community Forest Users of Nepal, FECOFUN, which has a powerful voice at national level and is also active in more international fora. See <http://www.fecofun.org/> and <http://www.rightsandresources.org/>
 - 18 REDD, Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation, is an excellent idea in theory that is nevertheless difficult to put into practice. For further discussion in the case of Nepal, see: Pokharel, B. and Byrne, S. (2009) *Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Strategies in Nepal's Forest Sector: How Can Rural Communities Benefit?* NSCFP Discussion Paper 7, Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project, SDC and Intercooperation.



Chapter 9

Beliefs and rituals

What shapes your concept of the world – your belief system – if you are born and spend most of your life in a village perched on a hillside overlooked by the towering Himalayas? Of course the religion in which you grow up is one important aspect, but at a possibly more fundamental level, the power of the natural elements, and the inherent dangers in them, is certainly one thing that you cannot ignore. It is fertile ground for a belief in the supernatural.

The “world view” of Suri villagers some 20 years ago contained many invisible powers or spirits – with whom faith healers, *jhankris*, had the ability to communicate – as described in chapter 5. The spirits varied in the extent of their powers, the most powerful being the local god of the area, whose presence could be felt particularly at a grove of gnarled and ancient trees in the forest named Shepding. Venerated by *jhankris* in an annual festival, the grove was marked by Hindu tridents, but was not considered a Hindu shrine. The powers of the local god went beyond religious divides. The most obvious example of this was a complete absence of pigs in Suri. Although in the rural Nepal of the late 1980s, no high caste Hindu would have thought of raising pigs or eating pork, it was usual to see pigs being kept by Dalits, Tamangs and some others. Yet in Suri it was well known that the local god would be angered by pigs – so not a single family dared to keep them.

A sense of respect for the spirits of their ancestors was common to all families, whether Hindu or Buddhist – although they worshipped them in different rituals. They also shared a fear of roaming spirits – ghosts of people or creatures that had died unnaturally, and which thus had problems in moving on to their next life. The danger of malevolent ghosts was taken very seriously, and was addressed by paying a specific, regular “ghost chaser” to keep them away.

Aerogramme home, 4 December 1988

*I was awoken the other night by a conch being blown loudly outside the house; then running footsteps, and a resounding bellow on the conch again, immediately outside my door. The process was repeated three times; I decided that it was the *jhankri* making sure that the spirit that had possessed the *Bahun's* baby was kept well and truly away. Accordingly, I rolled over and went back to sleep. The next day, I learned that the night visitor was not the *jhankri*, but a *jogi*. The term *jogi* is used for “holy man” – many of whom come from India – who has taken up an ascetic, religious existence. I was*

*thus originally confused by the name, but it was explained to me that there is also a *Jogi* caste, which is quite different. There are not many individuals belonging to this caste in the district, but apparently a group of them live in Melung, and also in Malu. Their caste occupation is to scare away ghosts. Suri panchayat's *Jogi* comes from Malu, and I'm told that every household (I guess perhaps not all) pays for his services – the fee is a set amount of grain, turmeric, pepper, and a number of other items. In return, the *Jogi* must visit each house twice a year at dead of night and scare away with his conch any ghosts tempted into habitation...*

Despite the *Jogi's* efforts, people claimed that ghosts showed their presence from time to time. One example that I was told was by Padam Bahadur Tamang, who believed that his dead first wife, Langamaya, had problems in moving on to her next life.

Diary extract, April 2008

Padam Bahadur explained that he was away from home at the time of Langamaya's death, working in Darjeeling. On receiving a letter from his family – which friends of his “re-wrote”, or read out to indicate that she was seriously ill – he returned home. This took him seven days. He recalled that when he arrived, he found his house padlocked, and the flowers and bamboo decorations of mourning adorning the paved area outside. It was then that he realised the truth.

In his absence, his mother had cared for the children. He opened up his house, and brought the children back, but he had the feeling that Langamaya's ghost lingered as a melancholy spirit. The wind rattled in the windows in an uncanny way; inanimate objects seemed to take life; he was troubled in his sleep. He was filled with worry, especially for the children. His parents had kept Langamaya's small possessions for him in a box. These included a little-used sari for special occasions that he had bought for her in India, a few blouses, and her bangles. It was the sari Langamaya is wearing in a family photograph that I had taken and given to them at some point. Thinking that maybe these things of hers kept her ghost from travelling onwards, he took them out of the house and burned them – and the odd happenings ceased.

A belief in ghosts and the supernatural is of course not limited to Nepal, or even to people of particular religions. Possibly it is a universal feature of rural communities – a seeking to explain the otherwise inexplicable – that

has only been eroded relatively recently by modern communication technologies¹. Ghosts still seem to be part of the world view of Suri people today – at least, nobody whom I asked wished to claim the contrary. A Jogi is still apparently employed to chase them away, making bi-annual visits. However, it was remarked that once the present Jogi becomes too old, it is not obvious who will replace him.²

Another – if very different - part of the belief system of Suri residents concerns the properties of food. According to Ayurvedic thought, different foods have heating or cooling properties, which should be balanced in a healthy diet.³ In fact I cannot remember this being much of a topic of conversation over meals when I lived in Suri – possibly because there was rarely much choice over what there was to eat. It was, however, very pertinent with regard to animal fodder. Of course animals also had to eat what was available through the seasons – but buffalos and cows had a far more varied diet than humans in terms of the number of different plant species that they could eat. People who wished to make sure that their milking animals produced plenty of rich milk thus took pains to ensure that they were fed a good mixture of heating (*obhano*) and cooling (*chiso*) fodders. A number of the *chiso* ones were considered particularly good for increasing milk yields, but as *chiso* fodders also caused diarrhoea, they had to be mixed with *obhano* ones, which had the opposite effect. Of course some individuals took more care over this than others, but harvesting a load of fodder – in whatever circumstances, a demanding task - took on a greater meaning once I realised the significance of what went into it.

I describe these common beliefs first because they guided very practical aspects of village life for everyone. They were not separate from, but incorporated within, people's different religious beliefs. One reason that this was possible was that Hinduism and Buddhism share the same roots and contain a number of similarities – most notably the concept of reincarnation, and of actions in one life influencing the next.⁴ Yet the two religions also have very clear differences – the most obvious being in their dictates over social interactions. The caste system, and the ritualised subservience of women to men, is part of Hinduism; neither is found in Buddhist teaching.⁵ Since the nature of such social discrimination is discussed in chapter 7, it is not taken up further here.

Religion essentially formed the social glue of people's lives - dictating rites of passage, choice of marriage partner, and all the various rituals and customs that were a part of daily existence. These were many and varied. My letters home only mention some that I happened to observe when I was living in the village.

Aerogramme home, 6 October 1988

Today I went with Langamaya – actually Padam Bahadur was there too – to a "Gyawa". This is a festival celebrating the life of a person who died recently – in this case, an old and

respected lady in the Tamang community. It was held 49 days after her death, and if I understood correctly, the idea is to nourish the spirit of the person who has passed on. Anyway, the festival involved much chanting of Tibetan texts by lamas, blowing on conch shells, dancing, and consumption of local beer and spirits. It was followed by the erection of a memorial plaque at a stone chautara, and a big feast. The plaque is brightly painted with a stylised picture of the lady herself, and sits in a long row with other similar ones, adorned with Tibetan writing. I'm not sure how many people are able to read what is written. The lamas made a striking sight, and the sound they produced through their chanting was very deep and monotonous - yet also melodious. They come from outside Suri – none are resident here. All in all, it was a good day, and as virtually the whole Tamang community of Suri seemed to be present, it was a good chance to get to know a group of people who, up to now, I've found a little reserved.

The Buddhists cremated their dead high above the settlements so that the ashes dispersed in the wind, whilst the Hindus cremated their dead in the valley bottom and let the ashes float away in the waters of the river to eventually join the holy river Ganges in India. Although I found no specific description in a letter, I remember observing in Suri many *shraddhas*, or Hindu ceremonies for the deceased - especially amongst Bahun (Brahmin) and Chhetri families. They were held not long after the death (11 days), and again after a year. For Hindus, holding a *shraddaha* is one of the duties of sons for their parents - the fact that traditionally daughters cannot perform such rites being one of the reasons that having a son is so essential for a family. Those in mourning shaved their hair and wore white for a year. The *shraddha* at the end of this year marked the point at which the deceased person became admitted into the body of family ancestors. A more general *shraddha* for them was also supposed to be held once a year. *Shraddha* rituals themselves had to be performed by a priest and were accompanied by a feast - the lavishness of which varied considerably according to the means of the family concerned. Breads fried in ghee featured prominently amongst the foods prepared. Yermu always held particularly elaborate feasts, and ensured that the ceremonies were performed by a particularly learned priest from outside the panchayat. Of the few Bahun households in the village, none had the priestly knowledge necessitated by Yermu's high standards.

For both Hindus and Buddhists, rituals honouring the dead were important events that were believed to give religious merit to those holding the ceremony, at the same time as keeping the spirits of the dead happy. They were a way of emphasising and taking comfort in family ties, although of course for poorer households, such ceremonies could be a huge financial burden. Whilst the memorial plaques that I mention in the account of the Tamang ceremony were a typically Buddhist custom, they were also adopted by some Hindus to commemorate their own dead. Keeping the plaques in good condition was an act of merit in itself, so when walking along paths in Suri, I occasionally met



lama artists as they sat refreshing faded pictures at resting places - *chautaras* - with a new coat of paint.

Within the seasonal calendar, it was Hindu ceremonies that made the greatest mark on village life – the most important being those of Dashain in late September/early October, and Tihar, which occurs three weeks later (the ceremonies following the lunar calendar). Both were celebrated, though to varying extent, by all groups in the village – including the Buddhists. Indeed, they were and remain the most important national holidays of the year. The following extract records my first Tihar in Suri.

Aerogramme home, 13 November 1988; Gai Tihar
I spent gai tihar – the festival for the cow – with the Sunwars. Their cow... was duly adorned with a flower garland, and fed with salt and puwa (a mixture of wheat flour and oil, cooked with a little water). Animals – at least cows and buffalos – are normally fed salt daily, but the Sunwars can't afford to do this; they also can't afford proper puwa, which should be made with ghee (clarified butter) rather than oil. Anyway, the cow consumed both offerings (somewhat unenthusiastically, I thought) and we then ate the remainder of the puwa which, having been offered to the cow – symbol of the goddess of wealth, Laxmi – is considered blessed.

In the evening, Laxmi was venerated by all the villagers by the lighting of oil lamps and candles at dusk. These were placed in every room of the house and at the doorway, making a path for her to enter for the coming year. After that, it was girls' night out for singing around the village.... I learned the chorus refrain quickly enough, but couldn't follow most of the other words, so I just hummed. I lasted until about 11.30, but some of the groups continued all night... The night was clear and starry, though dark (no moon), and ours was a friendly and giggly group, but I was struck with a sudden melancholy. Memories of carol singing back in Newdigate [the village in which I grew up] crowded into my mind and I just became very conscious of how far away I was from home. Luckily I had shaken off such thoughts by the next morning...

I also recorded in some detail the most important ceremonies in the Hindu calendar for women, Teej and Panchami.

Aerogramme home, 26 September 1988

When I arrived at the house at 5.30 am, it was only just light but Tomtar was returning from collecting fodder with a heavy load that she'd cut in the dark, so that she could have time for the festivities. Jagat had just woken, so she blew on the fire to get it going, made tea for him and me (they can afford tea; many families cannot), put some rice on to cook, and then went off to bathe. She returned to finish the cooking; feed us and little Soubash, and then dress up in her best clothes, even donning some lipstick and khol, which I've never seen her wear before. We called Jagat's sister from down below, and were off up the hill, pausing at other houses to wait for women who were still dressing up. There was a general sense of excitement and girlish giggling even amongst the older, normally rather staid women. Our destination was the "temple" – actually no more a small shrine surrounded by large trees – at Tinekhu. This is not a hamlet I normally visit as it lies some distance from my normal haunts. However, it's only an hour's walk from Mulabari.

We made a colourful procession as we walked along, the most prominent colour definitely being red – most people's favourite. It was one of the first really sunny mornings after the monsoon, gradually becoming hot. By the end of the day those sticking steadfastly to the rule that nothing, not even water, should pass their lips must have been really dehydrated. We didn't arrive at the shrine until about 11.30, by which time a number of women had already gathered. Tomtar and her friends made their offerings of flowers, fruit, a few coins and a handful of uncooked rice to the god of the shrine, and then sat around chatting as others arrived. Later we all moved over to the school, situated just above the shrine; drums were produced, and some of the younger women started singing and dancing. I actually found the event a bit disappointing as I had expected more women to come than the 100 or so that we numbered. The problem, I was told, was that the day before there had been several deaths in the panchayat, which meant that anyone remotely related to the deceased could not celebrate Teej. Since many people are related to each other, this would certainly have ruled out a lot of women. We watched the dancing for a good many hours, though, only returning to Mulabari in the late afternoon – by which time Tomtar was complaining of a headache and extreme thirst, although she was nevertheless in buoyant mood.

Teej was followed, after a day's space in between, by Panchami. This also involves fasting – though only until the ceremony is over, in the early afternoon. In the morning all women of menstruating age must bathe rigorously according to set rules. These include rubbing the genitals with mud and washing it off again 108 times. The idea is to wash away all one's sin from the past year – menstruation being strongly symbolic of women's sin (and generally inferior status). Indeed, if you are having your periods at the time you are considered unclean, and therefore cannot participate

Anyway, the Panchami bathing over, those who can afford it hold a puja (religious ceremony) which, like the shraddha, has to be officiated by a male Bahun. It involves the offering of food to the household deities. The Surigaon Bahuns held an elaborate puja – the full works – which went on for a good many hours. I saw a bit of it, and was later feasted on puris and various other rich foods. Being so different from normal village fare, these did not go down well with my insides. Actually I don't think I've ever had such bad diarrhoea!

Whilst Teej and Panchami were supposed to be joyous events, and were indeed accompanied by a lot of laughter, they struck me as being distinctly two-edged. The oft-used Nepali phrase "sukha dukha" – joy and pain, implying that one is closely related to the other, seemed particularly appropriate for them.⁶

There was no specific religious building in Suri for either Hindus or Buddhists during the time that I lived there – the only possible exception to this being the Hindu shrine in Tinekhu, mentioned above. Twenty years on, both the Sherpas and Tamangs have built their own Gompa (temple). These places of worship have been constructed with funds amassed by the community members themselves – probably mostly earned through seasonal and long term migration. Of the two, the Tamang one is more impressive, although both are simple buildings.

Diary extract, April 2009

The temple is located at the top of the ridge, well above Kukurabang on a piece of land that Padam Bahadur Tamang says was donated by the owner. It's a plain stone building with a slate roof and shuttered windows, the external masonry already looking a little worse for wear. A string of small, coloured prayer flags (red, yellow, green, blue and white) tied to the roof flutters in the morning breeze, echoing the louder flapping of a vertical set of prayer flags attached to a pole near the entrance. But for these, and a freshly white-painted chorten standing guard, one might not immediately realise the purpose of the building. Padam Bahadur has already sent word of our visit ahead, and the lama – who has the key to the building – arrives within minutes to greet us. He's a middle aged man with a wrinkled smile, and he assures us that he's very happy to let us see inside. In comparison with some of the beautifully ornate Buddhist temples that I have visited elsewhere, there is not much to see. However, comparisons with elsewhere are inappropriate, given that this temple has been built by the members of the local community themselves, and is a symbol to them of their Buddhist identity.

As our eyes accustom to the gloom (the lama opens only one window to let in some light), Padam Bahadur points to the three statues of Buddha arrayed on a shelf, and proudly explains that they bought them in Delhi for the price of Rs 8,000 – a good price that he says one wouldn't get now for statues of such quality. Then he draws our attention to a brightly painted wooden cupboard. The lama opens it to reveal the contents – fourteen sets of texts, each set

comprising layers of local paper printed with Tibetan script, wrapped for protection in brightly coloured cloth, and tightly bound between two boards. These are essential scriptures for the ceremonies over which the lama presides.

A group of giggling children throngs the window to see what we are doing. Padam Bahadur excuses himself and chases them off; he is gone briefly, and returns with ghee, matches and incense sticks that he has purchased from the local shop. There never used to be a shop anywhere near here. The lama fills a variety of lamps with ghee, and we each light one, leaving some small change by each lamp. A larger monetary donation that we make to the temple is carefully recorded by the lama in a register, which we duly sign. The records appear to be well maintained, and ours is far from being the only donation.

The overall impression gained in Suri is that people's world view has broadened hugely in terms of knowledge of



places and events outside the village. This is partly because of travel outside, but also because of greater information via the radio and other means. With this has come a greater sense of self identity – expressed in the case of the Tamangs and Sherpas in the construction of a community temple, complete with resident lamas.⁷ Amongst Hindus, it is said that some of the younger generation are less enthusiastic about performing religious rituals – an unwillingness to observe mourning by shaving the head and wearing white for a whole year being mentioned particularly. Yet this should not be confused with any reduced sense of being

a Hindu, as such. If anything, religious identity – closely linked to self identity - is more obvious in the village than it was 20 years ago.

Meanwhile, the local god remains respected – there are still no pigs in Suri.

Endnotes

- 1 In studying and documenting the history of a Dutch village, Geet Mak noted that belief in ghosts ceased when the countryside became modernised and controlled. Ghosts were a part of the past, in that they “symbolised the unexpected, the untamed in nature” Mak G. (1996) *Jorwerd The Death of the Village in Late Twentieth-Century Europe*, The Harvill Press, London: 266. A belief in the supernatural is not, of course, an entirely rural phenomenon – but in urban areas it is certainly not as strongly endorsed by society overall.
- 2 To be precise, there are two Jogis – they are brothers. One (the older) serves the Surigaon area, whilst the younger brother serves the upper, Nakpa area. Their visits are in the Nepali months of *Jeth* (May-June) and *Kartik* (October - November). Dinesh Paudel (*personal communication*) notes that the timing of the visits deliberately coincides with good weather for night walking, there being usually clear skies, and also heralds the planting and harvesting seasons, respectively.
- 3 Ayurveda – “the complete knowledge for long life” - is shared by Hinduism and Buddhism. Prior to living in Suri, I spent several years in Sri Lanka, where I received regular lectures from my landlady on what foods I should and should not eat together. What I thought to be a healthy breakfast of yoghurt and pineapple elicited particular disapproval, as both are considered to be heating. Although one might expect heating and cooling properties to be somehow linked to nutritional value, this is not necessarily the case. For various examples, see <http://www.holisticonline.com/ayurveda/ayv-food-dairy-classification.htm>
- 4 The present Dalai Lama is quoted as saying that Hinduism and Buddhism are like twins – a wise observation at many levels, encompassing both a shared heritage and the possibility of sibling rivalry without there being one sibling who dominates. The interview with the Dalai Lama is reported at <http://www.lifepositive.com/Spirit/world-religions/buddhism/dalai-interview.asp>
- 5 Of course a comparison of Hindu and Buddhist teaching is way beyond the scope of this short chapter, and much literature is available on the subject - as may be seen from a glance at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhism_and_Hinduism
- 6 The Nepali language is particularly rich in the coupling of rhyming words with opposite meanings. Another example is “bikas-binas”, meaning development-destruction.
- 7 Ruedi Baumgartner (*personal communication*) remarks that contributing to the construction of a temple back in the home village is a common phenomenon amongst Nepali villagers who have made money from outside migration. He adds that contributions are often also made from persons who have settled more or less permanently outside the village, out of nostalgia for, or a continued sense of connection with, their roots.



Chapter 10

From present to future

The broad consensus of opinion amongst those in Suri with whom I have talked is that life is generally better now than it was 20 years ago. This is certainly also my own impression – despite the bloodshed of the civil conflict and the many personal tragedies associated with it. Suri villagers are generally better nourished, better clothed, better informed and, largely as a result, often more self-assured than they were. I do not think that they are exceptional in this – though they may well represent the more fortunate end of the development spectrum in Nepal. Changes for the better are possibly less obvious in more remote areas.

Health care (see chapter 5) and schooling are undoubtedly far better than they used to be, even if there is still room for improvement. Twenty years ago, very few Suri village children had the opportunity to study beyond grade 7 and gain a coveted SLC pass (School Leaving Certificate, grade 10). This was because to do so they had to leave home and study some distance away, boarding at the school or, if very lucky, with conveniently located relatives. Obviously this was a cost that only wealthier families could bear, and one that was normally only expended on boys. Girls would be married off anyway, and at that time a well educated girl did not have markedly better marriage prospects than one with just basic numeracy and literacy. By comparison, Suri now has a high school which pupils can attend not only up to SLC but to intermediate level or grade 12. Furthermore, it is offering a boarding service – pupils come from four other VDCs¹, making Suri the local educational hub. As I happened to be in Suri on the “passing out” day of the first batch of pupils who will officially graduate from Sri Haleshwor High School,² I was invited to attend the ceremony.

Diary extract, April 2009

The bright young faces staring at me wear expressions varying from tearful to nervous, to slightly cocky confidence. It is the girls who are tearful, though beautifully turned out in fashionably styled, colourful salwar kameezes. Synthetic, readily torn and thus ill-suited to village conditions, their outfits would look fully in place in Kathmandu. It is Mother's Day in the Nepali calendar, when daughters should give a blessing to their mother and receive a blessing in return – marked with a lumpy red tikka on the forehead. This is made of uncooked rice and yoghurt, mixed with red vermillion. Each girl is wearing such a tikka, and as such tikkas tend to do, they are starting to break or get smeared widely across

the forehead. The boys are giving an outward show of being “cool”; dressed in T shirts and low cut baggy trousers or jeans, a number of them arrive late. The first impression of a prominence of girls is thus belied by the end of the ceremony – in fact there seems to be an approximate gender balance.

The ceremony is for the teachers to acknowledge the hard work of the pupils, to say goodbye to them, and to wish them well in their final exams – looming a few days away. Speeches are given, and prizes awarded. The names are of a mixture of castes and ethnic groups. I am called to say something myself – the blank expressions when I try a few words of English make me realise that this has not been a strong point in their teaching. Yet for a village school, the results are impressive. Last year all the students who took the SLC exam passed, whilst 28 out of 29 who took the intermediate level passed. Even though few were categorised in the first class, this is surprisingly good. The teachers must be the reason – drawn from many different districts, some are a very long way from home (even Darchula in the Far West!), but they seem strongly motivated. Certainly the facilities don't do much to encourage. The buildings are standard concrete blocks with the classic leaking corrugated tin roofs. The equipment for science consists of a few luridly coloured posters of the human anatomy and of tectonic folding, plus some dust-covered test tubes and petri dishes. The library is a bit better, but hardly extensive – and if I was in a student's shoes, I suspect the text book “Compulsory English” might not fill me with great enthusiasm. But it's all an opportunity that wasn't there before; girls and boys can now genuinely gain a full secondary education in the village.

There is even a private “English medium” school now being established in Suri. People whom I asked had mixed feelings about it – on the one hand, it represents choice – and if the English taught is good (something I could not establish one way or the other), it could represent a major opportunity for local children. On the other hand, being fee paying, it is obviously only for richer families.

Improvements in health and education are basic development indicators, but it is the change in attitudes and awareness, partially discussed earlier, that strikes me much more forcibly. This is particularly with regard to a lessening of social discrimination, but also to a clearly greater belief in the possibility of change – both at personal and wider societal levels³. There are far fewer expressions of fatalism.

Social discrimination still exists, of course. The hierarchical, caste-bound society of twenty years ago is far from flattened, and caste still defines individuals in a fundamental way. However, the big difference is that discrimination can at least be challenged. As I have admitted, twenty years ago I myself didn't dare to openly eat with the Kamis – nor did the Kamis expect me to. Their attitude was always to “keep a low profile”, often literally, whenever possible⁴. Conspiratorial acts against the *status quo* pleased them, but they feared reprisals for any form of open rebellion, however small. This is no longer the case; indeed, for some, the status of Dalit is now a matter of pride. Another sign of change is that certain occupations no longer have a strong caste association – tailoring being the most obvious. The numerous little tailoring shops in Borole and Singati run by different castes are testimony to this change. They seem to provide a particularly good way for women of all castes to make a reasonably profitable livelihood, if they have the right skills.

Diary extract, September 2007

It is growing dark as we arrive in Singati, and I feel embarrassed that I do not have enough blouses for the days ahead in Suri. A piece of cloth is easily bought, and my colleagues assure me that they know a tailor who can stitch quickly and well. I am amazed to be greeted by the broad smile of Kalpana Khadka, who I knew as a teenager in Nakpa. She takes my measurements with an expert eye as we exchange news – the death of her father, the health of her aging mother, the challenges faced by her brother and sisters who all now live in Kathmandu. I particularly ask after her sister Esu – with whom I went digging potatoes in the leech infested forest. I gain the impression that Esu – who created something of a scandal by running away to Kathmandu and marrying for love – doesn't have such an easy life. Kalpana herself has not



married; she says she is glad to have her independence. For a while she worked for the federation of community forest users, FECOFUN, and travelled the country, but she prefers to be in Singati. Her mother lives with her, as do a niece and nephew (her brother's children), whom she has effectively adopted. They attend the local school. Kalpana not only runs her tailors shop, she also teaches her skills to other young women and girls. From this she earns enough, she says, to be comfortable. She is certainly skilled. At 6.30 the following morning, she delivers in person to our small hotel a beautifully stitched, perfectly fitting garment.

I have written about the changing position of women, but perhaps did not sufficiently stress the greater degree of opportunity open to young women today than was the case for their mothers. Rukmini Karki – an intelligent woman now in her early 40s, who taught herself to read and write from copying her brother's text books - remarked to me wistfully, “A high school education was something I couldn't even dream of”. Yet that is what both her daughters have had. Of course, the big question for those who make it through High School is what happens next; marriage is still the main expectation, and with it prospects of a different life from that of mother or of mother-in-law often diminish. The attitudes and expectations of young husbands are crucial in this respect, and as far as I can see, vary considerably. For a woman to refuse to marry – or at least postpone it beyond her early twenties – still risks major family and societal disapproval⁵. Remaining single is only conceivable for a woman if, like Kalpana, she has real options of self-support.

Discrimination against the *Janajatis* (people belonging to the ethnic groups) of Suri was not so immediately obvious in daily village interactions in the past, but most were nevertheless distinctly marginalised in the village. What is striking today is a growing sense of pride and self identity amongst all the various *Janajati* groups – Tamangs, Sherpas, Sunwars (Surels) and Gurungs. The pride of expression in religious identity has already been mentioned, but the sense of self identity also goes beyond religion, and reflects a national trend. This is particularly evident amongst the Sunwars/Surels. Twenty years ago, their ethnicity seemed, at least outwardly, to define little more than family relationships and shared camaraderie. In stark comparison to Tamang, which I often heard, I rarely heard the Sunwars speaking in their own language, and remember being quite surprised by the lack of any obviously distinct Sunwar/Surel customs, given their position as the original Suri inhabitants. By contrast, as a group they are now taking care to distinguish themselves as Surels – related to but separate from Sunwars - and are going so far as to change their identity cards accordingly. They have good reason to do this, as Surels are now recognised by the government as a minority group, eligible for a specific social security payment.⁶ Yet it is not only this that seems to motivate them. Possibly the interest of a German linguist in their language has also helped to spur their sense of identity.⁷

A noteworthy sign of solidarity and mutual support amongst both the Tamangs and the Surels is that they have each established their own community welfare organisation. These organisations are effectively credit and savings groups, although they also provide opportunities for members to meet and discuss all sorts of matters.⁸ They have arisen out of very obvious need, and are part of a general trend of growing numbers of self-help groups in Nepal. In the past, taking a loan for any period of time was a desperate measure: interest rates were prohibitively high. Yet family misfortunes such as illness or death – as well as happier events such as marriage – required cash, and often there was no other option but to take a loan. If possible, loans were arranged through family members, but otherwise from a wealthy individual. Probably the amount charged did not differ much either way, although family members would be expected to be more lenient with regard to the timing of re-payment. In Suri, borrowing money usually meant going to a Chhetri; often it was Yermu. Interest rates were a sensitive matter, so what Yermu charged I do not know – but at the time village rates were commonly of the order of 60% per annum or more. It was an obvious mechanism by which the rich got richer and the poor got poorer.

The self-help organisations that are now established offer credit at far less ruinous interest rates. Some, such as the Tamang and Surel welfare organisations, are self-initiated, whilst others have been established through external (project) support – such as community forest user groups, or women's groups related to health. Suri is not unusual in having a good number of such groups; indeed, there is now a growing view – expressed particularly by SDC (the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation) in Nepal – that there can be too many per village, and that villagers are asked to spend their time attending too many different meetings. Whilst there is much truth in this argument, it can also be seen that the existence of many groups gives more people the opportunity to participate actively in their executive functions – gaining knowledge, experience and confidence in the process.

What is generally accepted as an “affordable” interest rate, and that which is usually offered by the self-help groups, is 24% per annum. That said, the trend in rates is downwards, so 18% or even only 12% per annum may now be agreed, depending on circumstances. Villagers are eager to take loans at the local rates, and generally manage to pay them back. “Affordable” credit is part of believing in, and achieving, a different future. As demonstrated by Hem Bahadur and Jira (chapter 6), carefully calculated debt for a fixed time period represents a clear way – sometimes the only way – for villagers to break out of poverty. Debt nevertheless carries significant risk⁹. With the increased local availability of credit, there is a growing need for independent local advice on what amounts to “wise debt”, especially for those with few assets. This is not so different from current trends in the West.

Believing in a different future is also linked to the much greater – and still growing – political awareness amongst

Suri villagers, and throughout Nepal. The turmoil of the civil conflict often forced families into taking position, however much they might not have wished to. Not all people like to talk about their political affiliations, but most have a fairly clear idea on their position. This will no doubt become even clearer once the long-postponed local elections finally take place, although true power changes may take time to materialise. It is not by chance that the current representatives of all three major political parties in Suri are Chhetri men.

There is another development that will influence awareness and attitudes that is “on the doorstep” as far as Suri is concerned – the arrival of mass media, notably television. Whether seen as a vehicle to promote global understanding or a promulgator of violence, explicit sex scenes and dubious Western morality, television undoubtedly makes an impact on its audience. It can change village life irrevocably¹⁰. Television must of course be preceded by electricity, which has come to Suri in piece-meal fashion – not via the national grid, but by small hydro-electric schemes. The first of these reached the Gurung settlement of Kapti some years ago, and gradually other schemes have followed – financed to varying degrees by external agencies, funds allocated through local government, and villager's own contributions. By 2010, most of Suri had some sort of electricity supply, albeit much of it of irregular, low voltage – enough to power only a few flickering light bulbs.

Diary extract, April 2009

Radika is cooking supper; I sit in my formerly habitual place a little way from the hearth, chatting about the day's events. One subject dominates all: the arrival of electricity in Surigaon. Walking around the settlement today, I watched the poles being hoisted and wires strung up. Radika tells me that the power will be turned on this evening. A student and distant relative who is staying with her arrives in the loft, breathless with excitement: the switch is about to be turned on. He cranes his head to the small window above the hearth and announces that indeed there is light. Radika takes her turn to look – and tells me to do the same. This requires me treading on the hearth and thus, as a non-Bahun, ritually polluting it – something I have never done, and would never



have dreamt of doing back in the time when Mother headed the household. Radika is dismissive of my hesitation, so I too step forward and peer out. Scattered up and down the hillside, small lights shine out in the darkness. Electricity has indeed arrived. I hear a few shouts, but they are muted by the distance of the house from others. The student's excitement is somewhat at odds with Radika's matter-of-fact acceptance – it is simply something that was waiting to happen, and she has already had her solar lighting for several years, anyway.

Perhaps a significant part of this recollection lies in the relaxation of Bahun (Brahmin) codes of ritual purity – yet the arrival of electricity is an important development. It only occurred as the result of considerable efforts – in time and money – of Surigaon residents, who see electricity as an integral part of the modern life to which they aspire. A more reliable, higher voltage electrical supply is not so far away. Once the large hydro-electric dam that is being constructed higher up the Tama Kosi (river) starts operations, Suri should be linked to a proper grid supply. Down in the valley, the shops of Singati already display an array of televisions and other electrical goods, blaring out their wares with noisy insistence. It seems unlikely to be long before televisions are a common sight in all the villages around, Suri included. This all the more so once there is a connecting road.

The year 2010 saw bulldozers working their way up from the valley bottom to Surigaon and beyond, leaving a ragged scar across the landscape. This so-called “rural access road” is being constructed by a private company that has been awarded rights by the government to develop a medium sized hydro-power plant in the area¹¹. The three affected VDCs are being offered a package of compensation that includes the opportunity of a road. Being connected by vehicle to the outside world – Singati, Charikot, Kathmandu and beyond – is the dream of most Suri residents. The only obvious dissenting voices are those of people whose land has been eaten up in the process. Yet even as far as they are concerned, the issues of contention are the precise location of the road and the lack of compensation, and not whether the road should be built at all. Until a connecting road bridge over the Tama Kosi is completed – which is scheduled for 2013 – the road will have little use, but once that bridge is there, fume-belching, horn screeching lorries and buses will inevitably follow. One can think sadly of a peaceful existence that will be shattered, but it is undeniable that a road offers huge opportunities for an easier life.

One final notable change compared to 20 years ago is the attitude of people to time itself. A defining feature of life in Suri as I remember it was the timelessness of the days¹². Time only mattered in terms of the period of daylight; I was always the one keeping track of the hour. Watches were a status symbol for wearing on special occasions, or for when going outside the village. Many people neither possessed nor knew how to read one, and few wore them regularly. It is thus noticeable that people

now refer regularly to the hour of day, and watches are a far more common item of dress. People hurry to get to a meeting, complain if someone is late, and – perhaps most significantly – choose to buy goods from a village shop that is slightly more expensive than shops down in the valley, because to do so “saves time”. Small shops selling basic supplies, indeed, are to be found in many places; I’m told there are at least 12 in Suri overall, whereas in the past there was only one – the poorly stocked shop of my Surigaon landlord, Madusudan Acharya. The shops have materialised in response to demand: time has taken on an intrinsic value.

Twenty years ago, I failed to ask Suri villagers in any systematic way about their vision of the future. This time I asked people for their predictions – if not systematically, at least where and when the opportunity arose. Those with whom I spoke included a number of the villagers who had been particularly instrumental in my learning in the past, as well as representatives of the three main political parties in Suri – the Maoists, United Marxist Leninist Party (UML – essentially moderately left in the political spectrum) and the Congress Party¹³.

Of course there are always optimists and pessimists. Whatever their outlook, however, everyone prefaced their



remarks by “If there is peace...”. No-one wanted to see a return to the conflict, but everyone feared that this might happen¹⁴. It is a sad fact that since that joyful celebration of election results in April 2007, progress in the restoration of democratic procedures has been very faltering, and expressions of cynicism over political processes have increased.¹⁵

To somewhat polarise arguments, the optimists see a future in the village. They view the extension of rural roads and the anticipated supply of reliable electricity as opportunities. Perhaps, for example, electricity will bring the possibility for people to work on computers in their homes, linked electronically to the world outside. They stress that education is crucial for the development of local capacities and entrepreneurial skills. Educated local people will then establish enterprises – perhaps offering services; perhaps manufacturing goods from local produce – vegetables, forest and dairy products. Investment will also be needed in agriculture, especially in improving yields of cereal crops through the use of better varieties, fertiliser and other inputs, but this is seen as feasible. As for health care – the optimists anticipate that the local facilities will continue to improve, and that people will increasingly appreciate the cleanliness of village air and water compared to urban pollution. There will come a point that the village becomes a healthier place to live than the town.

Improved prospects for local employment are a crucial part of this vision – if there are local jobs, people can choose to stay, and as a consequence, migration will gradually reduce. Some predict that migration could even effectively cease within ten years. The details of this rosy scenario are not agreed by everyone, but the basic ideas of more roads, easier access to and from the village, local employment opportunities, more local shops and better schools and health care are common to all the optimists. They see the life of their children and/or grandchildren as being easier than their own.

The pessimists are not sure that they themselves will still be in the village in 20 years time – indeed, they hope that they will not be. They see their future in a town, ideally Kathmandu. They point in particular to the better health care and educational opportunities available in the city, and the generally easier life, free of hard physical labour. Having a salaried job is their ideal. They note that already there are many young people in the village who are frustrated by the limited way of life, and that the sparks that could reignite violence are not far below the surface. They acknowledge that rural access and electricity supplies will improve. Nevertheless, to them, the village will still be a backwater. The slopes will remain as steep, and the drudgery of tilling the land and raising livestock will not be reduced in any significant way. Those who remain in the village, in their opinion, will be those who have no other options; they will be the losers. The brightest and the best will leave.

The most likely future for Suri - and for many villages in Nepal's middle hills - probably lies somewhere between these two scenarios. Some of the predictions, at least with regard to improved infrastructure and the importance of employment opportunities, are in any case the same. It is just the interpretation of the outcomes that is different. Jobs for young people are clearly crucial – throughout

Nepal, the numbers who have studied to SLC level, if not higher, are greater than ever before. Their aspirations for the future are certainly not to labour in the fields and forests. A key and immediate challenge is the creation of jobs – ideally, local jobs - that suit a moderately educated workforce.

Implicit in what all Suri villagers predict for the future is a degree of self-determination – not quite a “great transformation”, but the potential beginnings of one¹⁶. From an outside perspective, I find it difficult to believe that only those with no other option will remain in the village. It seems more likely that some will make a deliberate and positive choice to stay – for reasons of attachment to the land, their family and to a whole way of life, that go deeper than material ambition. Perhaps this will be more evident amongst the *Janajatis*; the Chhetris, Newars and Dalits appear to be the more attracted to city life. Historically, the latter arrived from more urban areas – so perhaps history will turn full circle with a significant proportion of the more privileged castes returning to an urban existence. There is already a trend in that direction. Yet so much depends on whether there is peace, or the frustrated hopes and expectations for “New Nepal” boil over into renewed conflict.

A question that is often asked is whether development support – particularly Swiss development support, since Switzerland has been by far the most prominent bilateral donor in Dolakha district – has made a real and positive difference? Some would argue that the years of civil conflict are proof of donor failure – as was suggested in questions posed in the Swiss parliament when Nepal's civil conflict escalated. Given that Nepal has been the recipient of so much development support from many countries and multilateral organisations, it is not surprising that aid effectiveness is put under particular scrutiny. Indeed, the argument that development support generally does more harm than good has some strong advocates¹⁷. The issue is not a simple one, as not all development support is the same. I would argue that whilst badly conceived and poorly managed aid has undoubtedly done harm, there are plenty of examples of constructive development cooperation making a real and positive difference. An important challenge is to learn from mistakes.

In the case of donor support to Nepal, one fact may be particularly significant: all development agencies, whatever their nature, generally espoused to act in a “non political” manner. This helps to explain which interventions were chosen - in the case of the Swiss, interventions focused on rural infrastructure, education, health and natural resources – and, once chosen, how activities were implemented. Dedicated development professionals who had worked in Nepal for some time were certainly well aware that poverty was not only about a lack of economic resources, but was deeply entrenched in discriminatory practices that perpetuated inequality. Yet at least until the early 1990s, it was difficult to speak out against cultural

norms, or to pro-actively help one group above another. Thus the sensitive questions of who in the population would benefit from the bridges, roads or health posts, which children would have better access to schools, who would be chosen as a “lead farmer”, or who would become a committee member of a forest user group, could only be raised with great tact, and in discussions with Nepali officials who shared such concerns.

It was only through development experience and growing political awareness in Nepali society that it became possible to insist on asking questions about who, exactly, benefitted from what. This in turn highlighted that in most cases it was members of elites who were the greatest beneficiaries of development assistance¹⁸. The poorest and most disadvantaged might not have been completely left out, but they often benefitted least – and in a few cases, “development” actually harmed their livelihoods. Yet to argue that this was a factor in catalysing the civil conflict would also be simplistic. The Maoist movement, though based on the demand for greater equality, was not led by the poor and disadvantaged. It went far wider than that – and possibly here development interventions did have a role, in promoting ideas of egalitarianism and human dignity.

To respond to the potential critics of Swiss development funding: the positive impacts on Dolakha district cannot be denied, even allowing for developments that might have taken place without external support. The road connecting the district to Kathmandu is both well built and well maintained, and has made an obvious impact in terms of accessibility – facilitating imports of cheap grain and agricultural inputs, and links to outside markets and job opportunities. Health, agricultural productivity, forest management and rural infrastructure can all be shown to be better in the district than in areas that have not received donor support. Possibly the greatest Swiss contribution to the district, however, has been in building the skills, knowledge and self-awareness of local people through numerous training schemes, scholarships, and exposure to new ideas and practices. Since the mid 1990s, such capacity building has been specifically targeted towards women and members of disadvantaged castes. Indeed, all interventions are screened, tailored and monitored for their impact on these groups – so that poverty is addressed through a gender and caste-sensitive lens. The result of these efforts is that many women and men are better equipped to make choices, and to direct their own future, than they would otherwise be.

Returning specifically to the people of Suri, their future, like that of other villagers, is obviously tied to Nepal’s political future. At the same time, it is also far more closely linked to the global future than ever before. The influence of fluctuating commodity markets, changing currency rates, growing consumerism, and global climate change cannot be ignored or escaped. Nevertheless, how the villagers respond to circumstances is at least part in their

own hands - and the fact that they themselves believe that they have a part in shaping their future is a very significant step in that direction.



Endnotes

- 1 Village Development Council – the lowest administrative unit in Nepal, which replaced in 1991 what was formerly termed the *panchayat*.
- 2 The school was upgraded to teach beyond SLC two years previously, but its registration took time - so the first pupils sat their exams under the name of another school.
- 3 I have generally avoided using development jargon, but this is the essence of empowerment, by many definitions. For example, "Empowerment happens when individuals and organised groups are able to imagine their world differently and to realise that vision by changing the relations of power that have been keeping them in poverty" Eyben, R, Kabeer, N. and Cornwall, A. (2008) *Conceptualising empowerment and the implications for pro-poor growth*" A paper for the DAC Poverty Network, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton, Sussex, UK.
- 4 Even more extreme attitudes were recorded by Janice Sacherer, who summarised the reaction of "untouchables" whom she met in Dolakha and Kabre Palanchok districts in the late 1970s, and again in more remote places in 1990, as being: "We don't want anything, we don't need anything, please go away and leave us alone so we don't get any more trouble than we already have". Sacherer, J. (1990). *Opinions and Perceptions Survey Rapid Rural Appraisal of IHDP/LJRP Impacts in Southern Panchayats of IHDP area and quantitative time series of Kavre SDC/INFRAS Impact Monitoring LJRP/ IHDP*.
- 5 As noted in chapter 7, brothers are usually anxious to ensure that their sisters marry, as on marriage, women lose the right to inherit any land from their natal home.
- 6 In post-conflict times, the government has sought to channel support for minority groups through specific social security payments. Surels, but not Sunwars, are eligible for such payments, which in September 2010 were reported to be Rs 1,000 (approx. US \$ 13.5) per month per individual – a significant sum for a village family. The changing of names from Sunwar to Surel on identity cards was independently remarked upon by the Suri VDC Secretary, Dil Bahadur Acharya, who said that it considerably increased his workload.
- 7 Sunwar and Surel are distinct languages, even though quite closely related. According to Dörte Borchers (*personal communication*), it is only older people in Suri who speak Surel fluently, and then often using simpler verb forms, which can be a sign that a language is no longer fully functioning. She adds that she does not believe that the new interest in Surel identity and ethnicity will change the fate of the language, as there is no effort in the community to speak it systematically with children. See http://www.himalayanlanguages.org/?q=team/dorte_borchers
- 8 Membership of both societies is determined primarily by family relationships, but each is open to other castes or ethnic groups - and indeed includes a few such households. They are neighbours who asked permission to join. In the Tamang welfare society, each household is expected to contribute Rs 10 per month; in the Surel organisation, probably reflecting their generally less affluent status, membership costs only Rs 2 per month.
- 9 A recent report on indebtedness in the nearby districts of Ramechhap and Khotang found that over 75% of the sampled households had outstanding loans. Furthermore, private loans at high interest rates were not uncommon. Not surprisingly, it was the poorest households that had greatest difficulty in making timely repayments – sometimes taking private loans at higher interest in order to avoid the shame of defaulting on payments to community groups. The report thus highlights the need for credit tailored to the repayment capacity of the poorest households. See: Chhetri, R. B. and Timsina, N. P. (2010) *A Study on Indebtedness: Magnitude, Causes and Its Effect on Development Interventions Environmental Resources Institute, Satdobato, Lalitpur P.O. Box 12207, Kathmandu*. In Bangladesh and India, where micro-credit schemes for the poor are highly developed and indeed big business, there is increasing concern about ready credit leading to multiple debts.
- 10 The effects of television on the lives of villagers are amply discussed in Critchfield, R. (1994) *The villagers Changed values, altered lives: the closing of the urban-rural gap* Anchor Books, USA: 435-446.
- 11 Universal Power Company is managing the Lower Khare Khola Small Hydro Power Project, which will start supplying electricity to Kathmandu in 2013. Official figures show it planned as a 4,400 KWatt unit <http://www.nea.org.np/reports/New%20Application.pdf>. According to Bal Ram Shrestha (engineer), the residents of the three affected VDCs of Suri, Chankhu and Khare are all entitled to shares in the company – but at community request, the Suri road has been constructed in lieu of shares. The company also foresees giving preference to local people in paid labour opportunities, with priority to the identified poor, and contributing to a social welfare fund administered by each VDC.
- 12 In summer the days were long and sleep was short; one rose early (the women particularly so – certainly by 4.00 they would be up), worked hard in the fields, and went to bed late, perhaps by 22.00 or later. In the winter, the morning cold kept everyone (men in particular) in bed as long as possible; the days were short, and people might be in bed by 19.00. Again, this was less likely for women, who would spend evenings and early mornings grinding flour and making other food preparations, often in darkness since oil for lamps or candles cost money.
- 13 Lal Bahadur Khadka (UML); Ramesh Khadka (Maoist) and Ram Bahadur Khadka (Congress) kindly gave of their time in discussions. Others who gave their opinions – and who are

named in person elsewhere – include Radika Acharya, Jagat Karki, Tomtar Karki, Rukmini Karki, Birmaya Surel, Padam Bahadur Surel, Sukrabar Sherpa and Padam Bahadur Tamang.

- 14 The longing for peace in Nepal, as expressed by a wide range of respondents, is highlighted in a recent report from the Overseas Development Institute, Jones, N. with Bhatta, B.; Gill, G.; Pantuliano, S.; Singh, H. B.; Timsina, D.; Uppadhaya, S.; and Walker, D. (2009) *Governance and citizenship from below: Views of poor and excluded groups and their vision for a New Nepal* ODI Working Papers 301, May 2009 <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/details.asp?id=3289&title=governance-citizenship-nepal>
- 15 The failure of the government to oversee the writing of the new constitution by the deadline of 28 May 2011 is one testimony to the difficulties of reaching consensus amongst the different parties.
- 16 See Sharma, J.R. and Donini, A., 2010 *Towards a Great Transformation? The Maoist Insurgency and Local Perceptions of Social Transformation in Nepal*. Feinstein International Center, <https://wikis.uit.tufts.edu/confluence/pages/viewpage.action?pageId=37721240>
- 17 See for example Easterly, W. 2006, *The White Man's Burden; Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest have Done So Much Ill and so Little Good*, Penguin Press, or Shah, A. <http://www.globalissues.org/article/35/foreign-aid-development-assistance>
- 18 This was specifically acknowledged by the official heading the Asia desk of SDC at the time, Paul Eckert, who was quoted in June 2002 as saying "For instance, one of the important causes [of the conflict] is that governance in Nepal has failed in the sense that the minorities have not had access to the fruits of development work and have been partly excluded from the political system." http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/Home/Archive/Development_agencies_debate_Nepal_conflict.html?cid=2776604