



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