



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.