



## 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 there<sup>1</sup>.

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 stir<sup>2</sup>. ... 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”<sup>3</sup>. 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.<sup>4</sup>

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 banmara<sup>5</sup> 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 tulsi<sup>6</sup> 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 2001<sup>7</sup>. 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 increase<sup>8</sup>. 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 status<sup>9</sup>. 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](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](http://www.landcoalition.org/pdf/08_AldenWily_DFID_LandReforminNepal_summary.pdf)