



## Chapter 4

### Enough to eat: Food security<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>*

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.”<sup>3</sup> 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 fed<sup>4</sup>. 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 own<sup>5</sup>. 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 innovation<sup>7</sup>. 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 area<sup>8</sup>. Today, fields of potatoes are very widely seen in Dolakha district; indeed, they are reported to be Nepal's second staple food crop<sup>9</sup>. 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 17<sup>th</sup> 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 world<sup>10</sup>.

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 supplies<sup>11</sup>. 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)