



Chapter 9

Beliefs and rituals

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

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

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

Aerogramme home, 4 December 1988

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

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

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

Diary extract, April 2008

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Aerogramme home, 6 October 1988

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

Aerogramme home, 26 September 1988

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

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

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

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

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

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

Diary extract, April 2009

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

Endnotes

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