
Participant

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A Nepali Portfolio

Photos and text
by Mike Donahue

Mike Donahue, a Pomona College graduate in botany, is currently serving as Pitzer's in-country coordinator for the College's Semester in Nepal. In 1975 Mike was a student member of that earlier Pitzer group. While there he kept a journal and took hundreds of photos, both in color and black and white. He, like other members of the group, lived with a Nepali family in Kathmandu, while pursuing his studies and research. But Mike elected to remain in Nepal at the conclusion of the program, determined to investigate the high country and to experience village life among the Sherpas. He spent ten months in Nepal. The pictures in these pages represent a typical sampling of what he saw and experienced there, in a country basically unchanged over the centuries. His comments have been excerpted from materials he left behind before taking over his Pitzer assignment abroad.



Most visitors to Nepal fly in from Calcutta over the dry Northern India plains. Our first sight of the country that afternoon in 1975 was, not unexpectedly, Everest, a black pyramid trailing a plume of snow several miles long. I was able to identify the South Col, that notch between Everest and Lhotse, until we banked and came over the flat Terai and Siwalik hills far below. Eventually we crossed the Mahabharat Lekh with its boulder-strewn gorges, reminiscent of the San Gabriels back home, except that here were hundreds of tiny cultivated terraces clinging to the slopes. We began to let down over the Kathmandu Valley, describing wide circles between surrounding hills, preparatory to landing at the capital city's airport on the outskirts of town.

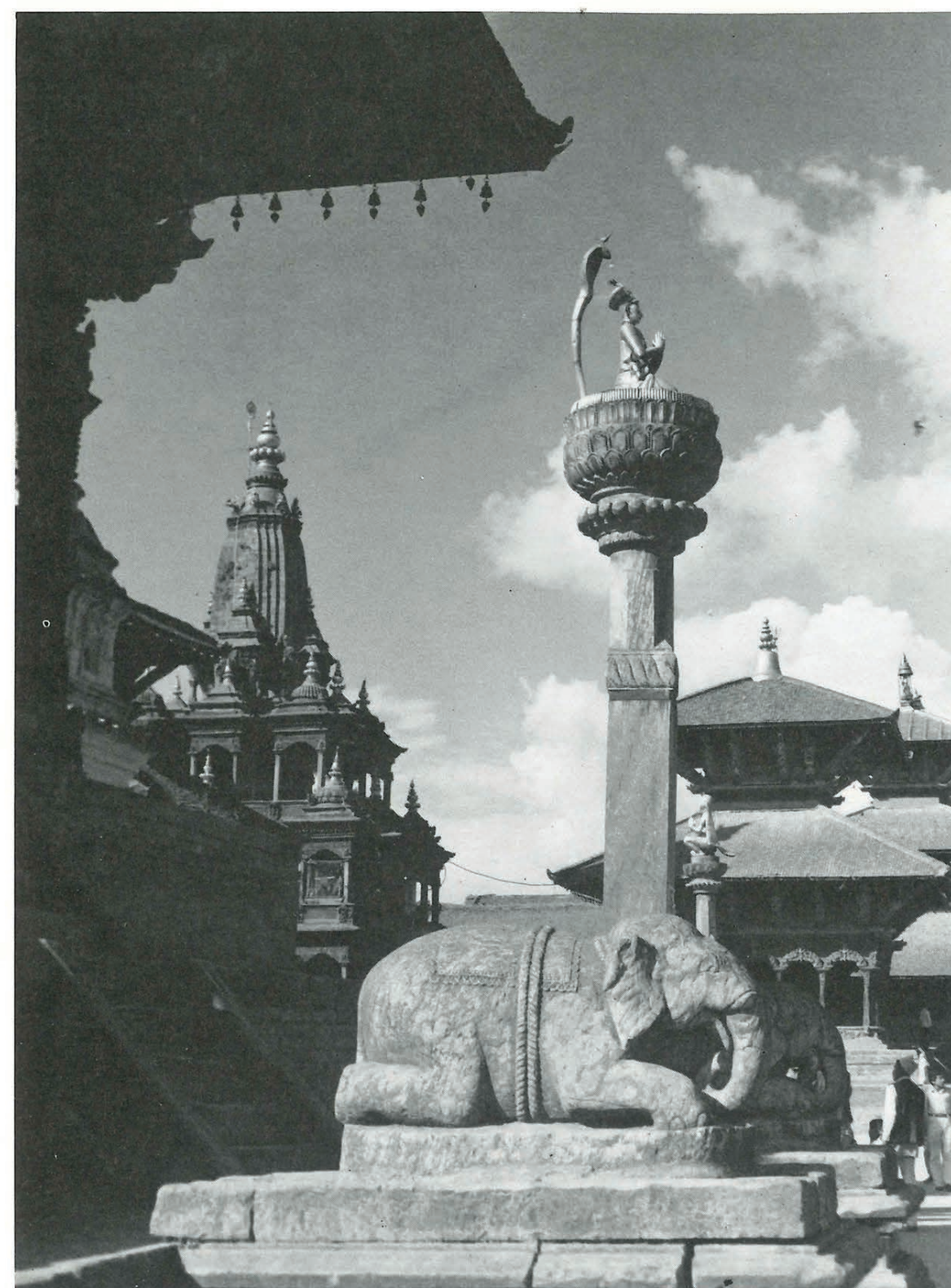
From that initial sighting of this ancient land, until I left some ten months later, my admiration for the Nepalis and their way of life, grew. This, in very small part, is a pictorial odyssey of that experience.

My Nepali family's home, where I was dropped off after five intensive and exhaustive days of orientation, was a kind of shocker. It was a mud and brick affair, two stories high, with an inner court, a balcony, a couple of miles outside Kathmandu on the road to Mahaankal and Sundarijal. My first impression was one of kids peering from doorways looking over the new tenant. That and the noise, the flies, and the smells gave me pause, but not for long; I was installed in the best room in the house, on the second floor, over the latrine.

The family, I found out in short order, was a delight. They made me feel welcome, as sketchy as our communication was. These good people were Brahmans of the lower

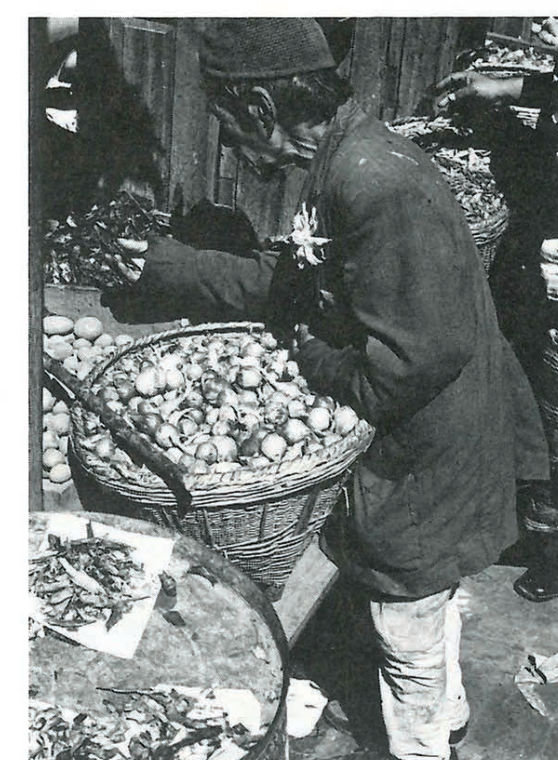
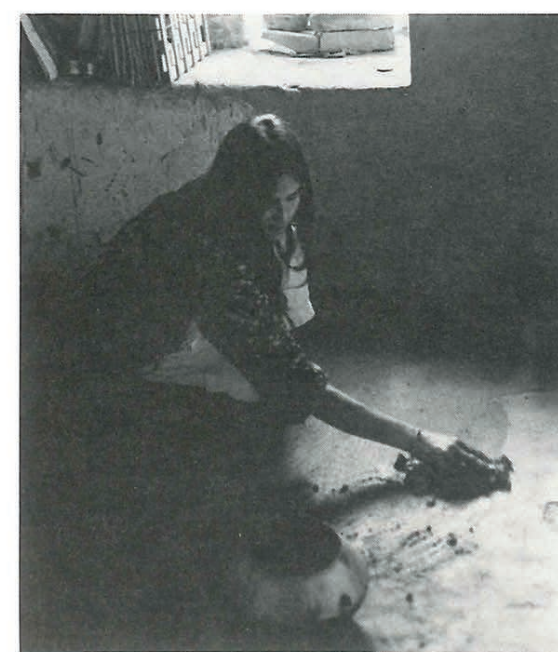
caste, and obviously poor. They had names that sit right on the tongue, and I must mention them: Krishna Subedi, the father; Aamaa, the mother; three children, Basundara, Arun, and Rabindra. Basundara [1] was the married daughter with three children of her own, Benita, Bindu, and Bipin.

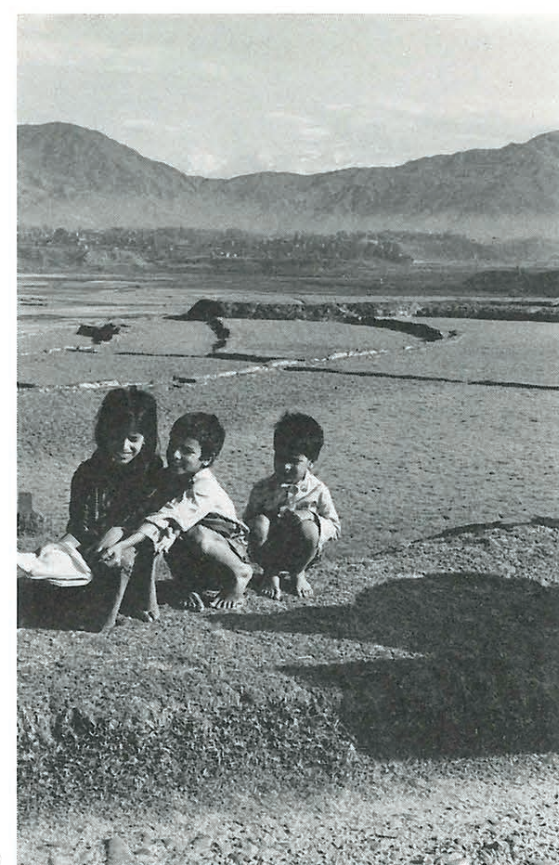
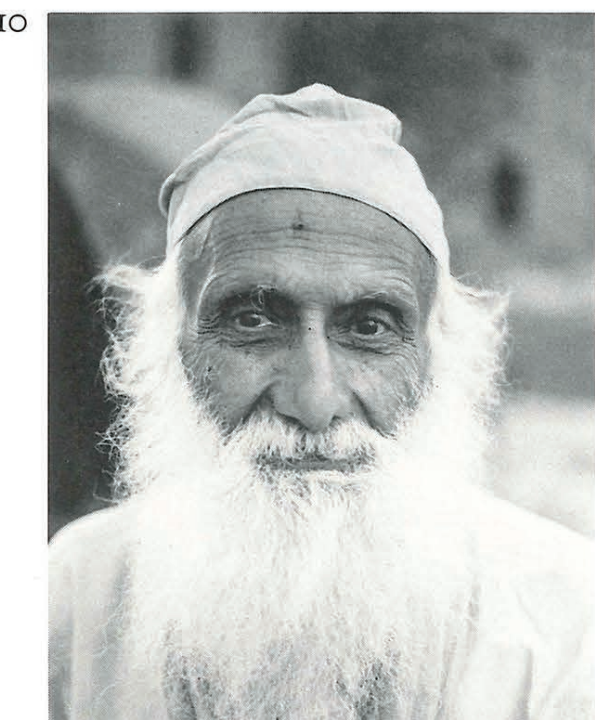
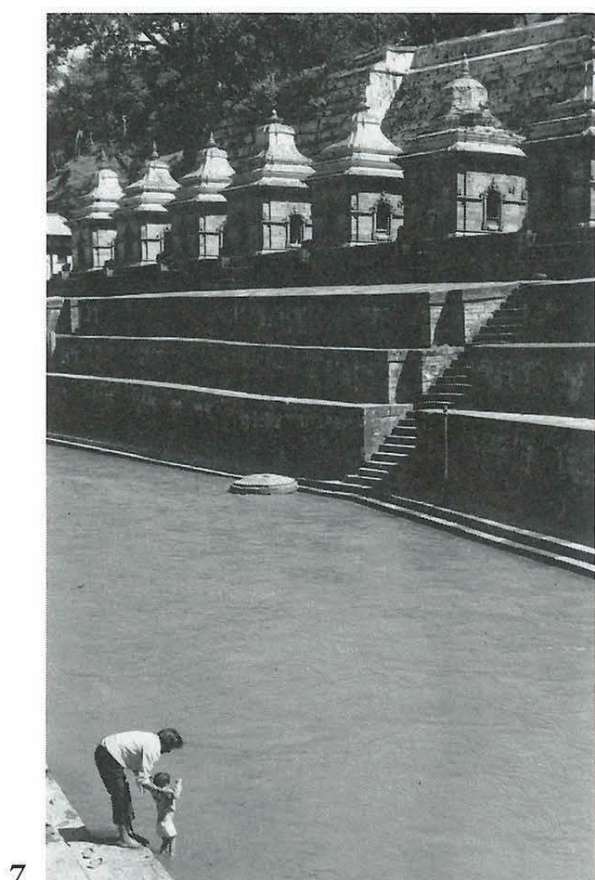
Truly, my Kathmandu family did a good job of initiating me into the ways of the Nepali. It wasn't long before I preferred sitting with them in the kitchen, watching the women prepare meals, [2] performing the Hindu rite of purification, which consists of scrubbing the floor with a mixture of mud and cow dung, [3] everything about the cow being pure and sacred. The family was generous to a fault. Aamaa gave me her best floor mat the first day I was in her



house; Basundara took the only chair from her own room and gave it to me. All the children, regardless of age, became my friends; I taught them games; they taught me something I have no name for other than patience. It was a good, busy life, a useful transitional period.

Once shed of Western hangups, I could enjoy every encounter in Nepal, both in the cities or on the road as a lone traveler, or among the Sherpas. I found willing subjects to photograph. Sometimes I knew the subject or the significance of the rite I was trying to capture on film; frequently I had only the vaguest idea; no matter. The old man shopping [4] at a food stall was, to me, just as significant as a water buffalo sacrifice, [5] where blood is offered to one of the sacred gods or goddesses. Or a typical shot in Darbar Square in Patan, [6] one of the three principal cities in the Kathmandu Valley.





Most rivers that flow through the Valley are sacred, and the most sacred of all is Bagmati [7] the one that flows through the city of Kathmandu itself. Travelers from all over the country make annual pilgrimages to bathe in the river, to immerse their animals. The dead are cremated along the river banks, their ashes scattered upon the sacred waters. Temples lining this or any river are places of meditation, prayer, and purification. One way to bless a child is to dip its ankles in the water.

Here at home, we tend to put away and keep out of sight our most deformed or cruelly crippled, or did

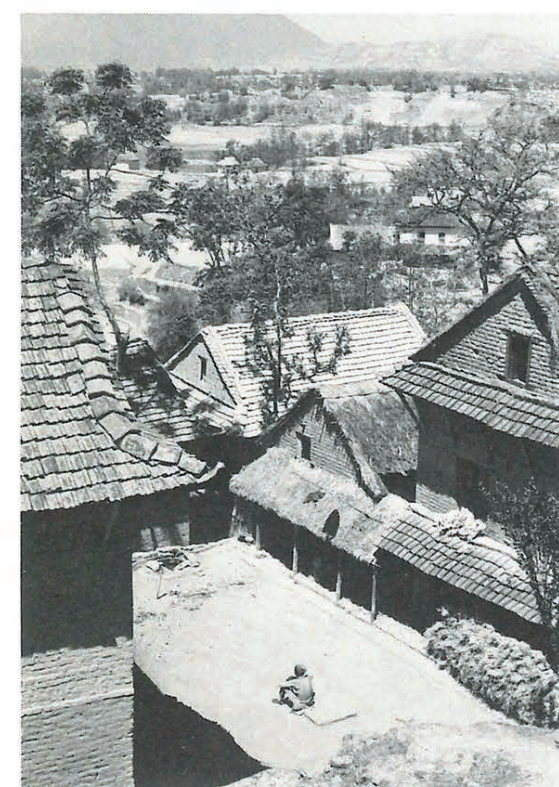
until very recently. In Nepal, the cripples, the malformed, even the lepers circulate freely in society. Some are given tasks to perform within their competence; others beg. No odium is attached to the practice. [8] The people generally, however, whether young or old, are handsome; perhaps not handsome in the superficial sense of the term; the young show a guilelessness [9] and openness; the old, character.

On one of my expeditions I encountered an old, old man, a very distinguished-looking man with full white beard and hair. He was sitting under a tree with its inevitable rock wall built around it (these walls are at just the proper height so that the weary can rest their backpacks on

them), and he was watching me. Giving him the respect that was due him, I asked in my best Nepali if I might take his picture. In perfect Victorian English he replied that I could. I did. There was something vaguely familiar about him.

"You wouldn't happen to have a relative in America, would you?" I asked. With a twinkle in his eye, he replied with a question: "You wouldn't happen to be from Pitzer College, would you?"

Out in the middle of Nepal! Incredibly, his grandson, Jyoti Sharma, in America to earn a Ph.D. in political science, had been one of our instructors in language as we prepared for our semester abroad! The name of the distinguished gentleman [10] is Dharni Dhar Sharmg Koirola, a well-known Nepali scholar.



Children, oddly, have few games as we know them; they fly kites [11] and they swing. Sports, particularly those involving playing catch, which American youngsters do as soon as they can walk, are unheard of. There is good reason. In this most perpendicular of countries, where level spots are either nonexistent or small, any ball knocked or thrown out of bounds is apt to plunge 6,000 feet or more into an abyss.

Towns and villages [12, 13] in the Kathmandu Valley are all similar, yet are all very different. I liked to wander about in them, photographing, talking to people; life seemed so totally unhurried. My favorite time of day was late afternoon. [14] As the sun was about to disappear over the distant hills, a golden glow seemed to permeate everything, faces, buildings, trees, the fields and meadows, it was something I was never aware of back home. It was a time when the world seemed to come to a halt, a time for reflection. Workers in the field must have had the same feeling, for I used to notice the harvesters, busy cutting the wheat and bundling it [15] before thrashing it by hand; they would also pause about 4 or 5 o'clock. Everyone, including the children [16] who carried ricks twice their size, knew instinctively when the hour approached that the day's work was done.

In the lowlands or valleys (the Kathmandu Valley is generally about 4,000 feet), Nepal has fairly passable



roads. There is so little vehicular traffic it makes little difference; people walk. Roads disappear entirely as one starts going up into the hills. In their place are trails, well-familiar trails made passable by centuries of foot travel. Trails are means of communication from one level to the next, [17] even to the highest.

After the monsoons in June 1975 I set out for the high country in an effort to find a village where the people farmed and herded animals over a wide range of zones, from the

riverbottom subtropics to the alpine area. After days of hiking, and meeting with Gurungs, Brahmans, and Tamangs, either on the trail or in their villages, I found the sort of village I was looking for, and a Sherpa family willing to take me in and let me work with them. My village was called Simigaun, it was at about 6,500 feet, not more than a day's walk south of the Tibetan border.

Here I stayed for over three months. My Sherpa family and friends grew rice on the terraces at a lower level than that of the village proper; they grew potatoes, grains and vegetables; in the high pastureland (14,200 feet), they herded their yaks and chaurris, [18] the chaurri being a cross between a Tibetan yak and an upland cow. Village life centered around crops and

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animals, nothing more; it's a family activity and everyone takes part, from the youngest to the eldest. The houses are snug enough, but pretty rudimentary. Not only here but elsewhere throughout Nepal, the hill people provide accommodation for the wayfarer on their porches. [19] There is a place for the traveler to spread his sleeping mat, and an earthen hearth or a little mud stove where he can cook his rice. Anyone who has no other place is welcome. The hospitality of these mountain people is a remembrance that remained with me long after I had left them and returned to a more conventional life in another hemisphere.

Life at 14,000 feet is rugged, hard, reduced to essentials, and as magnificent as anything I ever experienced. Imagine a pastureland as high as all of Colorado's highest peaks; nearly as high as Mt. Whitney. Here the women of the village look after the herds, the women and children, during the forage season before the snows come. They live in temporary shacks, while their men go back down to the lower level to work the fields. Sometimes they commute from one level to the other.

An interesting thing about the chaurri, or half yak, half cow, is their devotion to human beings. They



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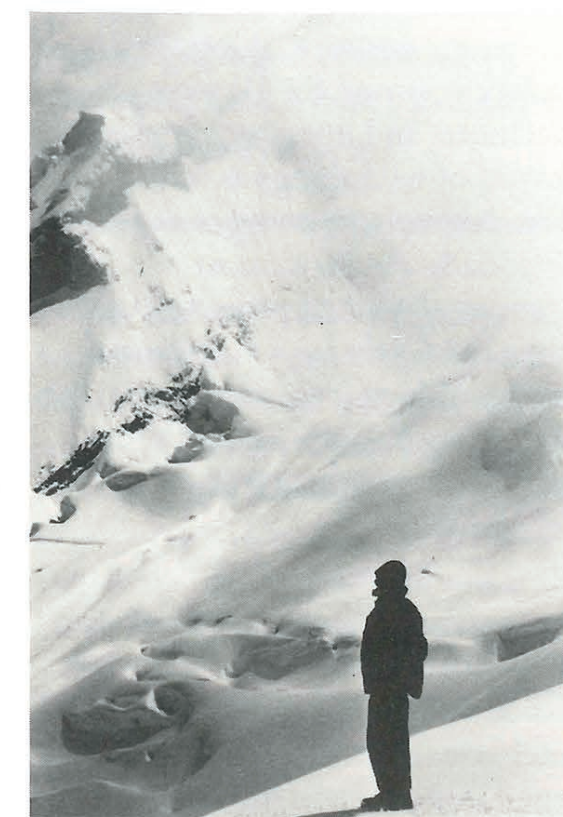
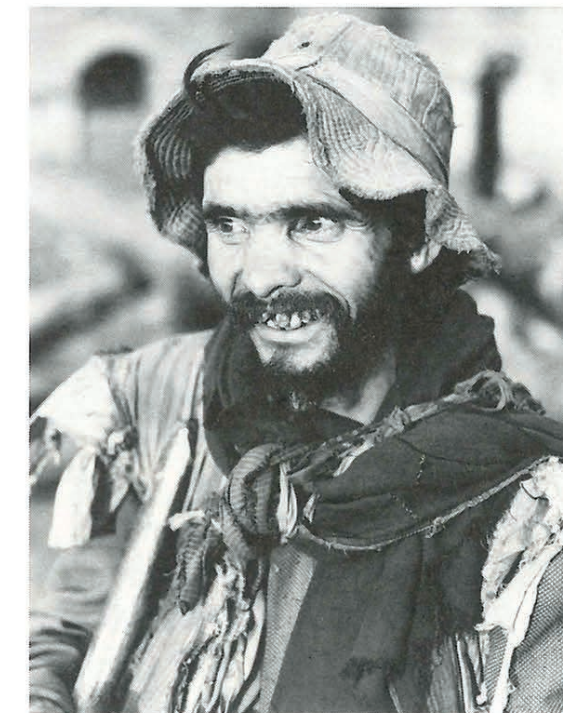


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recognize one milker only. The first woman to milk a chaurri after it has calved [20] is the only milker the chaurri will permit to come near it in future. If for some reason she can't perform the chore and the man of the house is there, the woman must touch the chaurri, usually by holding its head, before it will give its milk to a stranger.

The Sherpas drink less milk than might be expected; instead, they make butter, which has cash value in the valleys, and the by-product of butter is something called moi, a kind of buttermilk. This is boiled down in a big vat and produces a product known as churken, which is about the same as our cottage cheese. [21] It can be eaten fresh, just as it is, and it is delicious. Or it can be smoked in a process that makes it rock-hard; this is something the Sherpas carry with them on their trading trips, or into the high Himalaya. Dissolved in hot water it makes a quick pick-me-up packed with protein. A third use is to seal the stuff in a vat where no air can reach it; after an appropriate length of time the Sherpas open the vat and have themselves a delicacy that is the most vile smelling stuff I ever came across. They love it. They mix it with vegetables and make soup; it would kill anyone less hardy than a Sherpa. [22] The sights and sounds, cloud

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formations — clouds below you, clouds above and all around you — up in the high country are experiences you find nowhere else on earth. Even at that altitude, and we frequently went up to 18,000 feet or more, tiny alpine flowers bloom briefly. It is as though nature is determined to put on a display before the snows come, and people and animals have to retreat to the more habitable levels below.

I mentioned sounds. I remember a river at the bottom of a deep canyon, about 4,000 feet down from the pastureland. It was far away but the sound of water rushing over the boulders far below was distinct; I went up another 2,000 feet to perch on a high promontory, and still I heard the river. [23] Sometimes the sounds are more ominous, like thunder, but instead of thunder, quite often it is the muffled boom of distant avalanches. When one occurs, everything is perfectly still, man and beast, alike even the sighing in the trees stops, then begins again once the rumble has died away.

Back in Kathmandu, during the early days of my ten-months stay in Nepal, I used often to think of finding a Shangri La in the high country of the Himalaya. Eventually, up there on the south side of the Rolwaling Khola, I guess maybe I found it. [24]

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