

(Gurung_guide)

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A GUIDE TO THE GURUNGS

Alan Macfarlane

and

Indrabahadur Gurung

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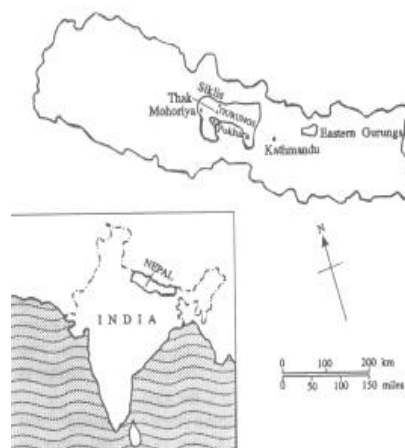
Preface

As one walks through the mountains of the Annapurna region of Nepal one can see villages perched on the high ridges, their terraced fields stretching down the steep hillsides to the valley bottom.

Who are the people who live in these villages and whose cheerful, slightly mongoloid, faces greet one on the paths? This 'Guide' aims to give a brief and simple introduction to the customs and manners of the Gurungs, as they are called in Nepali (Tamu-mae in the Gurung language). These tough mountain people have become famous as one of the major groups from whom the Gurkha soldiers have been recruited. This account aims to help those who visit and work in the Annapurna region to understand something of a way of life which is likely to be very different from their own.

The authors combine their knowledge and experience, one of being a Gurung and the other of working among them as a Social Anthropologist. Both have a particular attachment to the Gurung village of Thak which lies in the hills some twelve miles north of Pokhara.

Location of the Gurungs (map)



Introduction

The Gurungs are the predominant group living in the Annapurna region, but they are surrounded and to a certain extent interpenetrated by other groups. Some of these are also Tibeto-Burman peoples and are scarcely distinguishable from the Gurungs in language and culture - the Tamangs, Thakalis, and the inhabitants of Lower Manang and Mustang are all obviously from the same roots as the Gurungs and indeed many of them claim to be Gurungs, have the same priests and similar rituals, and speak mutually intelligible languages. The relations between them are very close and intermarriages quite frequently occur. Thus, much of the general description of the Gurungs applies equally to these groups. The Magars, another Tibeto-Burman group, living to the south and west are culturally like the Gurungs, so are the Bhotias and Tibetans to the north.

The other groups living with them are Indo-Aryans from the south Brahmins (priests), Chetris (warriors) and the service castes, metal-workers, tailors and leather-workers. These people can easily be distinguished from the mongoloid hill peoples by their Aryan features. Brahmins, for instance, tend to live in the valley bottoms and their houses are often painted an ochre colour whereas Gurung houses are white. Thus this area is a cultural watershed between the Indo-Aryan south and Sino-Tibetan north. In a situation of growing competition for the few remaining cultivatable slopes, one might have expected considerable friction between peoples historically divided by language, religion and race. Yet there is as yet little sign of this.

Gurungs and others intermingle amiably and many friendships exist across these group divisions. It is clear from their language, which is classified as a variant of Chinese and Tibetan, and from the physical characteristics, the short stature, upturned eyes, flat noses, and general mongoloid features, that the Gurungs originally came from further north. Almost certainly, many thousands of years ago, their ancestors lived in the high mountains of western China.

The course of the long migration over forested mountain ridges is only remembered in myths and legends. Some suggest that the main route was down to Burma and then westward through Assam and eastern Nepal to their present settlements, where they have been for over seven hundred years. Other legends tell how the Gurungs were wandering shepherds who came down through the high pasture of Tibet, through the kingdom of Mustang to settle the southern slopes of the Annapurna range. Yet other traditions suggest a dual origin, with the 'four jat' as they are known coming from the south, from northern India, and the 'sixteen jat' coming down from the north.

The mongoloid societies of Tibet and China from which the Gurungs came had no caste system and within themselves the Gurungs do not practice caste rules. Yet for several centuries, at least, the Gurungs and other hill peoples have been mixing with the caste cultures of Aryan India and they have been influenced by them in various ways. They have found themselves slotted into the caste system by the Brahmins and Chetris, as a clean caste, yet inferior to the Brahmins who traditionally would not allow intermarriage and would not take cooked food or water from them.

In turn the Gurungs regard the service groups who live with them as effectively lower caste. Gurungs have traditionally not worked with iron, leather or made up cloth. Thus each village has for centuries had small settlements of blacksmiths, leather-workers and tailors who worked for the Gurungs. The relationship seems to have been similar to a patron-client one in an Indian village. Each blacksmith family would work for a number of Gurung households, providing pots and pans, knives and plough tips, through the years. In return they would be given grain. They were not allowed inside Gurung houses and if they very ostentatiously and obviously touched a Gurung, the Gurung would need to cleanse himself by a simple ritual using gold dipped in water. In practice,

there are quite frequent contacts and no one takes much notice.

During the last thirty years there have been changes. Within the village, the purchase of factory-made metal goods, leather ware and clothes from the bazaar has deprived the service groups of their traditional roles. Instead, as the Gurungs leave the villages for the towns, their field labour is replaced by that of the service groups. These workers may be paid by the day or share-crop the land. Thus the position of the service groups has not necessarily deteriorated, despite the loss of their traditional functions, but it has changed.

The changes in the town are complex. On the surface, caste is not formally recognized and in public places - on buses, in restaurants and shops - caste rules are waived. But in the home a Gurung would still find it difficult to entertain a blacksmith, or to accept cooked food from him.

Thus we have a mild variant of the caste system, far more open and tolerant than in India, yet ever-present. Europeans on the whole fall outside the system, being caste-less, though a traditional Brahmin would not allow one into the cooking area. Historically, the Gurungs were animal herders, migrating pastoralists growing a little grain to supplement the meat and milk from sheep and cows. Now they are fairly evenly balanced between pastoral and arable production. The higher one gets and the further from the towns, the more important animals become, so that old villages such as Siklis, Bhujung and Ghanpokhara are still dependent on large herds of cattle and flocks of sheep and goats. Animals can only be kept in large numbers when a village has access to high pastures where the flocks and herds can be taken during the summer. The goats are bred for meat, goat meat being preferred to sheep, and the sheep are kept mainly for their wool. Neither sheep nor goats are milked much. Buffaloes are kept in large numbers in both the high and lower lying villages. They are generally stalled by the house throughout the year so they need no summer pasture. They produce about seven pints of milk a day and a large amount of dung, and buffalo meat can be eaten whereas beef eating is prohibited by Hindu law. However, a buffalo stalled in the village will need some 12kg. of vegetation brought for it each day. The huge loads of grass or leaves one sees being carried are usually for the buffalo.

In villages where large flocks are kept, the migratory cycle is roughly as follows. In April, before the monsoon begins and the crops are planted in the lower lands, the flocks and herds are driven up to the high pastures on the sides of the mountains. Here, at between 8-10,000 feet the melting snow leaves rich grazing. The shepherds and herdsmen from many villages congregate and build temporary encampments where they live for the summer months. In October and November the animals are brought down through the forests and reach the newly harvested rice fields in time to eat the stubble and manure the fields. When the millet has been harvested they are moved to those fields so that wheat can be grown as a second crop on the rice fields. They then remain near the villages until the spring, when the cycle of migration starts again. This migration is not without its hazards. For instance, it is estimated that about half of all lambs and kids born each year in the Lamjung area are killed by tigers and leopards.

Any traveller in Nepal cannot fail to be impressed by the beautifully constructed terraces hewn out of the steep hillsides. Huge efforts over the centuries have created productive grain fields out of the stony slopes. The basic crops grown in Gurung villages are rice, in the lower fields, and maize and millet above. These are supplemented with pulses - various kinds of lentil and small beans - which are sown along the raised banks between the fields, or in gardens. They also grow vegetables and taro in their gardens; potatoes are grown as a second crop after the harvest in millet and maize fields or in forest clearings. The land holdings are often small. In Thak, for instance, the average holding is about two thirds of an acre of cultivatable land per person.

If crops are to be sufficient and the village kept in good repair, a complicated rhythm of tasks must be performed. The main ones are as follows:

January - dung carrying, house building and road repairs.

February - same

March - cutting and carrying firewood for the monsoon.

April - ploughing maize fields, planting rice seeds.

May - ploughing rice fields, planting millet seeds, hoeing maize.

June - transplanting rice and millet seedlings.

July - picking maize.

August - picking maize and weeding rice.

September - weeding millet.

October - harvesting rice.

November - harvesting rice and millet, threshing rice.

December - threshing and storing grain.

The busiest three months are May to July, and the least busy, January and February.

THE VILLAGE

A Gurung village will present the visitor with a haphazard collection of buildings separated by narrow, twisting, dung-filled lanes, but there are certain landmarks to look out for. At strategic points are the water taps or springs where women gather to fill their water pots, wash clothes, and wash their children and themselves. These are centres of gossip and laughter and are usually placed on the main pathways. It is believed that witches meet here at night, fire flashing from their finger-tips. Most villages will also have a shop selling a limited range of goods - sweets, batteries for torches and radios, matches and cigarettes. In large villages the stock will generally include sandals, cloth, sugar, kerosene, rice, oil, noodles and even soft drinks for tourists. One can often get a cup of tea there, and sometimes a cooked meal and a bed for the night. Many villages also have some kind of hall outside which the village council meets, where travellers can sleep. Some halls have stone seats in the forecourt for their village meetings.

On the outskirts of the village there are often one or two little temples to the local gods, with relics of sacrifices or flowers in front of them. The entrance to the village is often indicated by a string of flowers across the path. A less pleasant indication in some villages is the public latrine. Few Gurungs build latrines and although some houses have a private grove or ditch, most people go to the edge of the village.

Gurung houses were originally built with a wood and lathe framework, covered with mud and dung and thatched with grass. More recently, stone and slate houses have replaced many of the earlier type, though the verandas in particular of these newer houses are still plastered with a mud and dung mixture. Corrugated iron is now often used instead of slate for roofing.

When one enters a house, the smoke, darkness and low ceiling, make it difficult to see anything at all for some time. Having taken off one's shoes at the door to prevent breaking up the smooth, earthen floor, one will be asked to sit either on a bed in the anteroom, or by the fire on a mat or stool. As one's eyes get accustomed to the gloom one is likely to see numerous pots and dishes on shelves and the vague pattern of the structure of the house.

Nearly always the Gurungs reverse the European habit by sleeping downstairs. The room above is used for storing grain, and baskets, mats and small tools when not in use.

The cooking area is the focal point of the house. A tripod sits in a square hole sunk into the floor and a variety of pans and dishes are used to cook over a wood fire. Above the fire is a large

wooden rack suspended from the ceiling which is used to hang meat and fish from for smoking, to dry small amounts of grain, and to store some implements and rain shields. Around the walls are shelves with brass dishes, bowls and jugs, which are used on special occasions and are an indication of the family's wealth or poverty. Larger storage pots and baskets for grain, water, oil or millet 'whisky' stand on the floor. Other tools are wedged between the ceiling beams. Often one sees a toothbrush and toothpaste in a glass; these have replaced ash as a tooth cleaner. However, ash is still used to clean plates and cooking pots.

People sit on the ground, cross-legged, the women having perfected the art of decently tucking their long skirts between their legs when sitting or crouching on their haunches. When sitting in this way it is less likely that someone will walk over one's legs. To walk over someone, or even to touch them with one's foot, is the height of bad manners. People eat with their hands, washing them before and afterwards. It is good manners to ask permission of the oldest member of the family before eating or drinking. Guests eat first, the family next, and the cook, usually the senior woman in the house, after the rest have finished.

People sleep wherever they can - sometimes on hard wooden beds, sometimes on the floor on mats, wrapped up in rugs or cotton coverlets. There is little separation of men, women and children, though sometimes a young married couple will be given a separate temporary 'bedroom' made with bamboo partitions on the veranda. The two major non-agricultural jobs are fetching wood and water. Fires are kept burning most of the time, and a middling Gurung family will burn approximately 180 cubic feet of firewood a year; about 120 heavy bundles. To collect just one bundle from the forest usually takes half a working day. Through most of the year dead wood is collected, but in the spring live trees are cut down, allowed to dry out and then split into logs to be piled up in preparation for the monsoon months. In the summer, people will be too busy in the fields to fetch wood from the forest, which is in any case wet and leech infested.

The amount of effort spent in carrying water to the house has been greatly reduced for most villages by the introduction of water pipes. Yet a housewife or her children will still spend, on average, up to one and a half hours a day collecting water. Each household needs about three large bucketfuls a day for cooking, washing plates and for the buffalo to drink. The upkeep of the house requires constant attention. The earthen floor cracks easily and has to be dampened and smoothed with a mixture of dung and mud almost daily. Other domestic chores such as sweeping, washing and cooking, take up much of a woman's time. The main tools used by the Gurungs are very simple. For digging they use small hoes of various sizes, and for ploughing, an iron-tipped scratch plough which is pulled by yoked oxen. For all cutting jobs, from harvesting grain to cutting firewood, they use a small, curved sickle. A kukri is used occasionally for killing an animal and cutting meat. For husking grain they use a foot beater. For grinding small amounts of grain they use stone querns though larger amounts are generally taken either to a water-mill or to diesel-powered grinding machines.

The Gurungs are practical people and are gifted craftsmen within the narrow limits that usefulness implies. Strong, careful and persistent, they use natural materials around them to great effect and certain villages with particular resources have traditionally supplied those without. There is little clay so in only a few villages are pots made. Those used for making millet 'whisky' are most commonly seen in Gurung houses.

Gurungs are not metal workers, and they do not use stone except for house building. In certain villages with good supplies of the right wood, beautiful turned pots are made for all the milk collecting and processing chores.

Wooden water vessels used to be made, but copper containers, made by the blacksmiths, have taken over in the last fifty years. Recently plastic containers have been replacing the clay, wooden

and copper pots.

Every village has access to bamboo and it is used in many ways.

They use it to make temporary houses, animal sheds and fences. They make many varieties of basket for carrying and storing, trays for winnowing and sieving, fish-traps, rain-shields, and plaited mats of various sizes for drying grain.

The simple house furnishings include bamboo stools and mats for sitting on. Men are the traditional basket makers, the workers in bamboo. Women make the house mats using thick grass. Many women still weave in the winter months. They use a backstrap loom which uses the weight of the body to give tension to the warp. The spinning wheel is simple too, with a large, round stone in the centre to give it momentum. Women may also use a simple spindle so that they can spin while walking.

Textiles are woven from both wool and nettle fibre, and more recently from imported cotton. A certain type of nettle is washed, beaten and finely spun, then woven to make a coarse cloth used to make the sack-bags worn by men. A thicker thread is used to weave sacking. It used to be made into the skirt worn by the men, but these are now made of bazaar cotton. In the villages with herds of sheep, the thick cape worn by men, and coarse rugs are made, the wool being unsuitable for anything finer. Recently, imported wool has been brought into the hills and is being made into Tibetan-style rugs for an international market. Although textiles for clothing used to be woven in the villages, all of it now comes from the town bazaars.

One sees all types of clothing in Gurung villages from the latest jackets and jeans of the teenage sons of rich men to the tatters of rough sacking worn by the poorest. Even the traditional Gurung costume has been changing very fast over the last twenty years. Children now wear Western dress, but women wear either the lungi or sari. A Gurung woman's traditional dress consists of a petticoat under a tubular skirt. This is much wider than the imported 'lungi', and is pleated to hang in folds in front. It is held up by a square of black velvet, lined with coloured cotton, and worn folded as a triangle at the back of the skirt. This is itself held in place by a twelve foot cummerbund wound around the waist. They wear a velvet, high-necked, blouse fastened with ties across the chest. Over this a velvet cloak is worn over the left shoulder, and a head cloth completes the costume. The necklaces of gold, turquoise and other semi-precious stones still worn by older women, come from Tibet. Other gold pieces, earrings, nose-rings and bracelets are bought in the towns. Married women wear red glass or plastic bangles. When any of these break they are immediately thrown away as it is believed that a husband's life would be at risk if his wife continued to wear them. They are all broken at his death.

Men traditionally wore a shirt of the same pattern as the women's and a 'kilt' held by a belt, a sack-bag worn on the back, criss-crossing the chest, and a Nepali cap. All but the shirt are still commonly worn in the village, though mainly by the older men. Young men favour Western dress.

THE FAMILY

It is important to understand something of the Gurung family since it provides the basis for the whole of their social and economic system. What police, pension-officers, civil servants, employers, magistrates, psychiatrists, nurses and teachers provide in the West, is largely provided within the family. The Gurungs' calm, un-aggressive and humorous character, and their ability to work collectively without quarrelling, grows out of the affectionate and tolerant bringing up of infants and young children. The elderly are treated with respect and, in the villages, there are few problems with adolescents. Sadly the latter is no longer the case with Gurungs who have

moved into the towns.

The basic structure is provided by a number of clans. There are two main groups of clans. One is called the 'four-jat' and consists of four groups which vary a little in their names over different Gurung areas. The other clan is called the 'sixteen-jat' or 'nine-jat'. Within this there are more than thirty named groups. The basic principle is that each of the groups of clans must marry within itself, but a person must not marry someone of his own clan. Clan membership is passed through the male line. Thus sons and daughters belong to their father's clan and group. Another feature of the system is the pattern of kinship terms which emphasizes birth order and sex. Although this varies a little, a common variant is:

daughter	son
eldest - nani	thargu
second - moeli	maila
third - saili	saila
fourth - kaili	kaila
youngest - kaji	kancha

When addressing an old person who is not a relative, one calls them grandmother, "bujae" or grandfather, "bajae". Any person of one's father or mother's generation can be called father, "aba" or mother, "ama". If they are a little older than oneself, older brother, "agi/dhai" or older sister "didi". If a little younger, then younger brother, "bhai" or younger sister "bhaini". If one does not know the birth order, it is polite to call girls "nani" and boys "thargu/ali". It is considered slightly odd to call people by their proper names and often these are not even known by other villagers. It is definitely rude to refer directly to one's husband or wife by name, or even to use the word for husband, "pa" or wife, "mri". When addressing or talking about them one refers to them as 'the father or mother of so and so'. Nicknames are also frequently used.

The closeness of the family system is emphasised by the way in which children are brought up. Children are very greatly valued and from birth are cherished by their parents. If a baby cries a mother will almost immediately try to pacify it at the breast, and small children are constantly watched in case they fall over or hurt themselves. Every growing gesture is commented on with pleasure and one hardly ever sees an adult strike a child in anger, though they occasionally shout at them. The devotion of older brothers and sisters is very evident and they will spend hours carrying the younger children on their backs or playing with them. There is little anxiety about the child urinating or defecating since few wear nappies and the floors can easily be cleaned.

This affectionate upbringing leads to a very closely bonded family. Sons are very close to their mothers and respect their fathers throughout their lives. They accept parental rulings on matters such as marriage and the choice of a career which would not be tolerated in the West. They assume it is their duty to protect and provide for their parents in old age, just as they have been supported and protected in childhood.

Marriage among the Gurungs has traditionally been too important a matter to leave to the whim of individuals. A marriage affects the social relations not only of the couple themselves, but of all their relatives. The choice of a spouse is thus a family affair. The mother and father, with the assistance of senior relatives, will choose an appropriate bride or groom and then inform the individual. Sometimes the couple have never met before the wedding ceremony. If they cannot get on, they will refuse to cohabit and the marriage will fade away because marriage among the Gurungs is a process rather than a single, irreversible event.

The choice by parents is constrained in various ways. The partner must not be from the same clan, but should ideally be a close relative in the same clan group. For instance, the preferred marriage is with certain first cousin - either a mother's brother's daughter or father's sister's

daughter. The partner should be from a family of roughly equal wealth and be of similar age. Gurungs marry in their twenties, unlike the Brahmins who live alongside them who generally marry in their teens. There is a preference for sisters to marry in birth order, the oldest first. It is also necessary to consult the local priest, not only to find out the appropriate year for marriage, but also the day on which it should be performed. He will consult astrological charts to see that the couple are compatible and can live happily together.

In the past Gurungs could marry more than one wife at a time, but now this is forbidden for all by Nepali law. A few cases still occur, however, and if it is with the agreement of the first wife no one tends to object. Marriages are easily dissolved in the early years. For some time after the marriage the girl may remain in her natal village and only sees her husband occasionally, particularly when her husband is away working or in a foreign army. If no child is conceived within a few years of the ceremony, or the couple do not like each other, the marriage fades away and the partners can remarry.

None of this implies that, once established, Gurung marriages are anything other than deep and affectionate relationships. It is clear from watching couples working and talking together, or nursing each other in sickness, as well as the intense grief at the death of a spouse, that most husbands and wives are very close. However, this relationship is seldom based on personal choice or romantic love before marriage.

There are two stages in the making of a marriage. In the first, several rituals occur involving visiting between bride and groom's kin. One of these consists of the bride being carried from her village by her friends, usually arriving in the evening at the groom's house. The door is barred by the groom's mother, and only after knocking several times are they allowed in. Bride and groom are seated side by side, the girl's head and face covered with her shawl. The groom's oldest male relative says a few words of blessing and introduces himself to the bride by the kinship term that she is to use when addressing him. He presses a little rice mixed with milk onto the foreheads of both bride and groom, and withdraws so that other relatives may introduce themselves in the same way. No priest is present. The couple are now married by Gurung custom and the guests share a meal with their hosts. Some years later a second ceremony is performed which officially transfers the bride from her lineage to that of her husband. This is done in front of all the villagers. Money, millet 'whisky' and rice are given to the bride's parents and her father will formally give her to her husband's lineage. It makes the marriage official. Very recently the Nepali Government have introduced the registration of marriage which must be done after the first ceremony. This confirms the marriage at the first stage and is making the second ceremony redundant. As an 'official' marriage is harder to break, young people, particularly in towns where they are more influenced by Western culture, are less ready to have their parents choose a partner for them. 'Love' marriage is becoming more common there, but in the villages the old method of bride selection is still the norm.

After birth, a baby is protected against evil by having magical threads tied round its neck, wrists and ankles. It is fed on demand, washed and oiled daily, and spends much of its time sleeping in a basket cradle hanging on the veranda. At other times it is carried on the back of its mother, father or siblings. The first hair-cutting for boys is delayed until the village priest gives an auspicious day for it so one sometimes sees little boys of five or six wearing their hair in plaits. Up to the age of five children have no tasks and just play with each other. After that they are expected to take care of the baby or younger children while their parent's work, and to do small chores like fetching water. As they grow older and stronger, more work is expected of them, so that by the age of fourteen or fifteen they will be doing all the tasks an adult does, except ploughing. There are no particular rituals of ageing except the boy's hair-cutting ceremony and the older custom, that between the age of seven and nine girls were clothed in adult dress. In general, children up to the age of five are cosseted but older children are treated like young adults. They

obviously respect their elders, but are in no way deferential. It is not at all uncommon to hear a mother shouting for her daughter to come and do something, and the child taking no notice until her mother comes to find her.

There has been a significant change in this pattern of childhood during the last thirty years with the introduction of schooling. Every village now has access to a school and education is compulsory to fifth grade. Most children go to school. Although there is as yet little equipment - paper, pens, maps and books - children are introduced to other languages (Nepali and English), mathematics and science, as well as more practical things like health education and diet. Furthermore, education gives them a vision of a world outside the village and the possibility of escape from a life of grinding toil. Their parents, too, often place an extremely high value on education. Schools are free, except for the books, until after fifth grade. From then on it has to be paid for. Many parents make great sacrifices to educate their children. As village schools don't go to tenth grade, children either have to walk very long distances to regional High Schools, or board there. Some parents have even taken the drastic step of selling their land and moving to the towns to enable their children to attend school and university. All this in order to secure a job in the town, in an office or factory, if they are lucky, away from the fields and forests and closeness of the village.

For the majority who can't aspire to town life, a child's role in the family still requires much physical labour. A typical day might start with a climb to the forest to fetch wood or fodder followed by a meal. Then school from ten to four o'clock and possibly a long walk to reach it. On returning from school, there will be further work in the fields or around the house. At holidays and weekends they will work alongside their elders. The low pay received by school-teachers mean that they, too, are often also farmers and understand the necessary balance between education and agriculture.

All this changes when children leave for schools in towns. Even if their parents stay in the village, their roots wither fast. The bazaars, tea-shops, video cinemas, cars and buses enlarge their world and although they may return frequently to the village, they rarely take any part in the work of the farm. The town schoolboy is often easy to distinguish from the village boy by his smart clothes and shoes. He is being trained to join an urban bureaucratic way of life that as yet can only provide a modest number of jobs for the flood of qualified young people. There are few imported toys so young children play various games using stones, nuts and berries to play variations of draughts, hop-scotch and marbles. They make hoops, balls from animal bladders or old cloth, and swings. Older boys compete with each other in running, and throwing the stone. Nowadays they often play football and basketball in the school-yard, listen to songs on the radio and read novels. However, the most characteristic form of Gurung entertainment is singing and dancing.

Anyone who spends a night in a Gurung village is quite likely to hear the sound of a double-ended drum and a group of girls and boys singing. Traditionally the songs were in the Gurung language. Curiously, the usual theme in this arranged-marriage society is love. For instance there were flirtation songs where boys and girls would sing in turn, each trying to outdo each other in teasing innuendo, and called "doves playing" songs. Today, they tend to sing Nepali 'pop' songs. They are often extremely catchy, and boys and girls dance together or singly, performing for the rest of the group.

In the remote hill regions, shepherds still dance, singing traditional songs and accompanying themselves on a small, two stringed viol. The dances are slow step dances with elaborate hand movements, and the songs are ballads with innumerable verses, punctuated with stamping chants.

The most elaborate dance is the "garda sheba". This is thought of as a traditional Gurung dance

though it originally came from the south. It tells the story of a Thakuri king's wife who committed 'sati' after her husband's death. It is danced after the harvest is over, between January and March. A dance master instructs two young girls who are usually aged between nine and sixteen. On the first evening the girls go into a trance and are possessed by a goddess. They stand, swaying slowly from side to side, flicking their fingers, sinking onto their haunches and up again, turning first one way then the other. The dance is accompanied by a drum and a slow, low chanting by the men. The girls wear beautiful costumes with necklaces and bracelets of gold, garlands of flowers, and gold filigree head-dresses. The dance may go on uninterrupted for up to twelve hours and the whole event lasts for three days. The "garda sheba" may be danced a dozen or more times a year. It is performed for a particular house or individual who in return gives money; between 100-1000 Rs. The money gathered is used at the end to feast the dancers and singers.

All this is changing fast. The "garda sheba" is dying out in many villages. Also disappearing is the "rodi" where the young people gather to sing and dance. In essence the "rodi" is an example of a young persons' dormitory which can be found in many tribal groups throughout the world. The purpose of all these is to segregate groups of young boys or girls of roughly the same age, usually between fourteen and seventeen, who form an age set of close friends. This "rodi" group works together in the fields during the day and in the evening friends of the opposite sex would be invited to the "rodi" house to sing and dance with them. The Gurung "rodi" traditionally met in the house of one of the parents of one of its members, or in the house of another adult who was prepared to become the 'mother' or 'father' of the "rodi". The adult would oversee the conduct of the young people, would be present during the evening when guests were invited, and would sleep with them at night. A "rodi" might be male or female. There would be expeditions at night to "rodi" in other villages. A group of young people would set off in the late evening, perhaps climb a small mountain or cross a river to a neighbouring village, sing and dance through the night returning at dawn to carry out the day's chores. There is no evidence that there was sexual promiscuity associated with the "rodi" and anyone who has visited a "rodi" can see that the sleeping arrangements are too public to allow this to occur. Basically they act rather like boarding schools, taking children away during adolescence and allowing them to grow up under the influence and discipline of slightly older and more experienced young people.

This useful and innocent institution is dying out quite rapidly in the villages most penetrated by Hindu values and town pressures. For a while they were subjected to criticism as being somehow immoral and the Gurungs became defensive about them. This phase seems to be over, but a larger threat lies in the fact that communal work and communal values are declining as many young people leave for the towns or for work in India, and village work is increasingly done by wage-labourers.

In fact, the very division between 'labour' and 'leisure', 'work' and 'play', is really rather novel and Western. Traditionally the boundaries were fluid; singing and flirting enlivened field work, and in the evenings the young might combine singing and dancing with podding beans or teasing and carding wool. This helps to explain why very hard work is undertaken with such cheerfulness.

In many traditional peasant societies women have a low status and their world is carefully demarcated from that of men. What will strike the visitor to this and other highland Tibeto-Burman areas is the confidence and openness of the women. Although they may eat after men, though they do not act as priests, or engage very actively in public life, or plough, they otherwise do most of the things that men can do and are considered to be their equals.

Women can own property in their own right, and as widows or only daughters are sometimes the richest people in a village. They run shops and businesses; in their husband's absence they often

run the farm, hire labour, sell crops and arrange everything to do with planting and harvesting.

Even a short acquaintance with a Gurung village will reveal that, if anything, the women work even harder than the men. While men relax by talking or gambling, women seldom rest. It is assumed that they will marry, give birth to their babies without anaesthetics or even a midwife, and breast-feed their children until a new baby is born, without stopping any of their other work. They are immensely tough, resilient and cheerful. They mix with young and old men without any noticeable signs of deference. They join with gusto in the sometimes bawdy joking and singing, and they often lead the family rituals. Their blessing is necessary for their brothers at the festival of Dessain, and they play a crucial role in the memorial ceremonies to the dead. Thus while their life is usually physically hard, it would appear to Westerners to be preferable to the cowed existence of women in other parts of the world, or even that of their Brahmin neighbours. There is little if any emphasis on the purity of women and they are not strictly segregated at either childbirth or menstruation. During the latter, a woman will probably abstain from sex and wash her clothes and her hair afterwards. There is no great concern with puberty, no specific rituals or segregation of women takes place, no humiliating operations on the sexual organs and no painful tattooing. In general, women's bodies are not considered as dangerous or polluting, nor is there any obsession with sexual purity. It is not considered, as it is in many Hindu and Islamic societies, that the father or brother's gravest duty is to protect his daughter or sister's honour against the threat of other men. Loss of chastity before marriage is disapproved of, but a daughter bearing an illegitimate child is unlikely to be rejected by her family. Abortion is disliked and occurs very infrequently.

Talking with both Gurung men and women, they regard the sexes as equal, and if anything, argue that women, who hold the purse-strings and guide the family and village society, are the more powerful.

Although infant and child mortality rates are high, an individual who survives to the age of ten is quite likely to live into his seventies or eighties. Thus a visitor to a Gurung village will see many old men and women. Two features of their life are worth mentioning. Firstly, they never lose their economic, social or ritual functions. Until death the old can be useful. They spin and weave, make baskets and mats, beat millet, pod beans, watch the babies and generally enable the young to get on with the heavier tasks. They are not seen as a drain on the wealth of a family. Furthermore, as they grow older, their spiritual position improves. They intercede with the spirits, go on pilgrimages, lead family rituals and act as the family priest. In western societies, parents lavish a good deal of care, affection and money on their children, who then leave home and do the same for their own children. Little is expected in return except minimal respect, occasional visits and perhaps a little help in old age. In Gurung society children give as much as they receive; the parents can expect as of right that their children will respect them, honour them when they are old, and support them in every possible way. This is the most sacred duty. The idea of 'old peoples' homes' could not be further away from Gurung philosophy.

HEALTH AND DIET

People in western countries are generally protected against the anxieties, risks and dangers that daily face the Gurungs. The weather is the most obvious. Hail falling in summer can devastate the

maize and rice crops. Rain during the harvest turns rice mouldy, rotting as it lies in the fields. Too little or too much rain at the wrong time can wipe out weeks of work. There is no insurance fund, and a minimal amount of food is stored for emergencies, so that the poorest who cannot afford to buy in grain face semi-starvation when this occurs.

Accidents and natural hazards are always close. The thatched houses are prone to catching fire and though the neighbours will help to rebuild a house and give some food, a family can overnight be reduced to poverty by this means. Landslips not only sweep away precious fields but also houses. Small landslips occur in most years. After such an avalanche of rocks, stones and mud, nearby families lie sleepless, fearing that their houses will be swept away too. People fall from the steep cliffs while cutting fodder and wood; some are bitten by snakes. Bears, tigers and leopards very occasionally attack people and kill many of their animals.

The only safeguard against these and other insecurities is communal, mutual help. The old have to rely on their children as there are no pension schemes except for retired soldiers. The sick and poor have very little between them and total destitution; only the charity of neighbours and family feelings of relatives can support them.

Most of the serious epidemic diseases have now been reduced through vaccination campaigns; the elimination of polio, diphtheria, smallpox, tuberculosis and, most recently, measles have been the objects of these campaigns. Quite high rates of tuberculosis contracted when abroad have also been reduced. The area is too high for malaria and though meningitis is relatively common, serious illnesses of this kind are under control. However, infant mortality rates are still high with up to one in fifteen babies dying in the first year of life. As a comparison, about one in every hundred babies die in Western countries. The principal cause of death is dehydration caused by dysentery, - both amoebic and bacillary. The wet months from June to September are particularly dangerous since the water courses, used as latrines during the dry weather, become filled, and the water is used for drinking. Two recent developments are rapidly changing the situation. In the last few years, piped water from clean sources has been brought to most villages and this cuts down infection. Secondly, techniques of oral rehydration are becoming widely known and adopted.

There has been a marked improvement in recent years in combating iodine-deficiency. Goitres were widespread and an unusually large number of children were born both deaf and dumb. Until the early sixties, salt was traded with Tibet for rice. This salt was deficient in iodine. It has now been replaced by Indian salt which does not suffer from this deficiency, so these complaints are rapidly decreasing.

Primary health care is also being extended into the villages. Twenty years ago there was hardly any health provision outside the towns. Now there are health posts in every district, or 'Panchayat', although these are still desperately short of medicine. While the average medical provision per person in Europe or America runs into hundreds of pounds, in Nepal the provision is only a few rupees a year with much of the medicine coming through international organizations such as UNICEF. In this situation, most people have minor illnesses of some kind most of the time. Children have colds through much of the year, most people have intestinal parasites, ringworm, roundworm and so on, most suffer frequently from dysentery and many complain of headaches and sickness. Many people have eye infections and the elderly often have cataracts. Scabies, boils and other skin diseases are common.

However, any visitor will notice that despite this constant ill-health, the people are almost always cheerful and still manage to lead a very active and physically demanding life. Perhaps surprisingly, there are no obvious signs that the enormous weight-lifting they have to undertake leads to an undue number of sprains or strains, or muscle or bone complications. Rheumatism and arthritis are not noticeably prevalent, though some old people are bent over and complain of general body aches. Given the general level of chronic illness one might wonder about their physical

strength.

The Gurungs farm on the slopes of the greatest mountains in the world, where the gradients are often more than ninety degrees, where a climb of between one and three thousand feet is normal when fetching grain or wood. Difficulties in the nature of the terrain and of finding enough fodder, makes it uneconomic to use pack animals, so everything has to be carried on the back. There is only a minimal use of animal power. Oxen are used for ploughing and for some of the rice threshing. Some use is made of the smaller streams for water mills, but most grinding and beating is done by arm and foot.

These small people - on average the men weigh about seven stone and are just over five foot tall - pit their bodies against the mountains and wrest a living from them. On a simple diet of rice or millet, they will carry two or three loads of rice a day, each weighing as much as themselves, up a thousand feet of cliff-side during the harvest. Girls from about fourteen will carry loads which Europeans could not carry a few yards. Old women will grind grain, and beat millet with a stick, for hours on end. It is a salutary experience for a visitor to take a turn at any of these tasks if an occasion arises where it is possible.

The diet of the Gurungs in the villages is changing quite rapidly, and probably for the worse. When they were mainly shepherds and herders they had a high protein and calcium diet of milk and meat, with additional meat from hunting. The ample carbohydrates were provided by buckwheat, maize and rye, which they grew in cleared forest land.

As they have moved down from the 6-10,000 feet to the 3-6,000 feet level on the hills, they have concentrated on rice, millet and maize growing and reduced their animal husbandry. Thus carbohydrates have tended to dominate while their protein intake has declined rapidly. In Thak, an average Gurung family in 1970 ate meat two or three times a week. Now, except at major festivals, they eat meat only two or three times a month. The decline in meat eating has been partially compensated for by the use of vegetables. The most important are probably lentils which are eaten with every meal as 'dal' and are a valuable source of protein. An increasing range of green vegetables is grown and the potato is important, particularly in the higher regions. 'Ghee', oil made from milk, and honey from the beehives under the eaves, are now supplemented by buying Soya bean oil and sugar.

When they get up in the morning, between four and five o'clock in summer, and six o'clock in winter, they drink tea, always sweetened, and in winter given added zest with ginger. The morning meal is between nine and ten o'clock and consists of rice, or a dough made from millet or maize, called "pengo", with dal and perhaps a little vegetable. This is a large meal to give them the energy needed for the day's work. They will not eat properly again until the evening when they eat another meal of rice or "pengo" and dal. If they are doing heavy work far from the house, they may take a snack with them, perhaps a thermos of tea, and some 'pop-corn'. During the harvest, after carrying up the heavy sacks of rice from the fields far below the village, a meal is generally eaten to give them energy to go down again and carry up another sack. This diet may sound monotonous, but is it surprisingly easy to adapt to. One begins to realize that rice is not just uniform, but that each variety has a subtle taste and texture of its own.

After the evening meal, the working day is over and the social part of the day begins. There is much visiting, both by young and old, to chat or even to sing, but by eight or nine o'clock, most people have gone to bed, except possibly the young men and women who may sing and dance long into the night.

The whole Gurung day is shifted forward by about three hours when compared with the West. This makes sense where the best use has to be made of daylight. One of the effects of moving to towns, with the possibility of electric light, is that people adopt the western day with office hours,

and a consequent change in eating habits. The town-dwelling Newars have long had a 'breakfast, lunch and supper' pattern. This is beginning to occur with schoolchildren and office workers among the Gurungs, though they still try to stick to the village pattern of eating. Furthermore, town life has not completely changed their diet.

They still, for preference, eat rice and dal.

The Gurungs are very hospitable. Visitors will quickly be made to feel at home, and if possible offered a snack and a drink. It is intriguing that in a culture which appears to have moved into rice cultivation comparatively recently, the most prestigious foods to be given to visitors, and to give as offerings to the gods, are based on rice; rice beer, fried rice 'cakes', or boiled rice itself.

Gurungs are uninhibited drinkers, and indeed alcoholic addiction can be a social problem among them, with both men and women suffering. The main drink is millet 'whisky' which they distil and is both cheap and potent. Most households consume several bottles a month. A fermented 'beer' is also made from rice or millet and is drunk in large quantities. Furthermore they drink a lot of tea.

RELIGION

The Gurungs combine a down to earth and practical everyday life with a rich cosmology inhabited by a myriad of good and evil spirits which have to be placated. Gurungs present a fine example of the mixing of religious traditions, Buddhist, Hindu and Animist. The Hindu pantheon is worshipped at the Nepali festivals such as Holi and Dossain, as well as in private pujas such as the 'snake puja' and the 'eighty-fourth birthday puja'. Lamas do Buddhist rituals as appropriate, including, for some, the Buddhist funeral rite. The further north one goes through Gurung territory, the more likely are the people to use lamas. However, praying to the major gods of the great literate traditions only calls on some of the spiritual energy of these people.

Every Gurung village is surrounded by a multitude of smaller 'godlings'. Most of them are named after, and reside in, some notable local feature, such as a large rock, a cave, a spring or a tree. Sometimes a small temple is made to these godlings, sometimes there is only a stone placed for their shrine. Once or twice a year the villagers will go up to the shrine and make offerings - rice, flowers and leaves, or a chicken or goat, depending on the godling's preference. An individual may make offerings at these shrines on his own initiative, to encourage fertility, to cure disease or bring a blessing on his family. If neglected or affronted, it is believed that these little godlings can make people ill or destroy their animals or crops. They are not, however, intrinsically malevolent.

The evil spirits are of three kinds. Firstly there are equivalents of the godlings, called "bhuts" and "prets" which also live in the rocks and forests and prey on the unsuspecting. Secondly there are spirits of certain dead people who have died accidental deaths and were never given a funeral, who still wander round malevolently, not having been safely conducted to the land of the dead. Finally there are witches.

In any Gurung village at any time there may be a dozen or more suspected witches, usually older women with powerful characters. It is not safe to be rude to such people or to refuse them small favours, so too much contact with them is avoided. They are unlikely ever to be openly accused or molested. In the past some were driven out of the village, but it is now illegal to call a person a witch. A visitor will find it difficult to get any information about witches for it is considered dangerous even to mention one's suspicions about them, not because of fear of the law, but because of fear of the witch. At night they are thought to prowl around the village, wearing a sort of metal armour under their ordinary clothes, their eyes red, and fire coming out of their finger-tips. They are believed to cause much of the misery in the village.

The main task of the local priests is to fight these evil spirits through their rituals. There is no point in placating witches; they must be trapped by food offerings and then expelled. But

suffering never ceases and the forces of evil and never fully controlled. Belief in these causes of illness, sudden death, landslides and so on, does not prevent people from taking other, more practical action against various afflictions. Just as the Gurungs can combine different religious traditions, so it has been easy for them to accommodate western and eastern theories of causation, to go to the hospital and to use western drugs, at the same time consulting their priests and doing rituals against evil spirits.

Although they increasingly make use of Brahmin priests and do Hindu pujas, Gurungs are also Buddhists and Animists. Buddhist rituals are conducted by lamas trained in Manang and elsewhere, who sometimes live in the village or are invited in to read the scriptures, burn oil lamps and strike bells and drums. They are mainly employed by the “four jat” and their rituals are of recent origin among the Gurungs.

What is most interesting is that the Gurungs have preserved alongside this, more strongly than any other hill peoples, elements of a pre-Buddhist form of the ‘Bon’ religion which flourished over two thousand years ago across much of Tibet and Western China. They have also preserved elements of an even older shamanistic belief which provided an alternative to the ‘Bon’ religion.

The two Gurung priests are the “poju” and the “klebri”. There is evidence to suggest that the “poju” is the descendant of a semi-shamanistic priest who practised a very ancient form of animistic religion that flourished in Western China. Within the last two thousand years the Gurungs incorporated the “Klebri”, a descendant of the ancient folk religion of pre-Buddhist Tibet. The “pojus” do many kinds of rite - forty three different rites were recorded in Thak in 1968. To take an example of these rituals, one to combat illness lasts for over ten hours, during which time the “poju” recites a succession of ancient myths, makes little rice and millet figures to represent gods and evil spirits. The “poju” wears a special belt and feather headdress, and sits on a rain-shield. While he drums and chants, spoonfuls of very hot ash and water are thrown at the patient who is cowering under a rice basket. Ash is sprinkled at the door and later examined for signs of the arrival of evil spirits. A goat is sacrificed outside the house, and the “poju” rushes in with the head in his teeth while a flaming arrow is fired off into the darkness. Evil is thus expelled.

A visitor in Gurung country in the cold weather is very likely to meet numbers of people in their best dresses going to other villages for a memorial ritual called the “pae lava”. This rite incorporates and symbolizes much of ancient Gurung culture and is the central Gurung institution.

At a person’s death, the body is carried either to a village cemetery where it can be buried or burnt, or down to the river where it is burnt. At this point it is believed that the spirit of the dead person is released and wanders around the village. For the spirit to leave the village, it must be conducted along the ‘soul path’ to the land of the dead, over the mountains, and therefore it is necessary within a few years of death to hold a “pae lava”. The date is set by the priest, hundreds of relatives and friends from neighbouring villages are invited, and a white flag is set up over the dead person’s house.

The rituals are conducted by “poju” and “klebre”, often several of each. Lamas now do this ritual too, but this is a very recent innovation and is generally done without animal sacrifice. The amount of money spent on the “pae” depends on the wealth of the deceased and his family. The ancient rite requires the sacrifice of buffaloes, sheep, goats and chicken. This, and the provision of rice and drink for the guests, means that a “pae” for a rich man or woman can cost anything up to 20,000 rs. - about the cost of a new house - though half this cost will be returned in gifts brought by the guests. This lavish hospitality has been an effective way for the rich to redistribute their wealth, a sort of death tax which prevented the accumulation of money by one family.

The ritual opens with the making of an effigy or effigies representing the dead person or persons. The effigy consists of a bamboo frame over which white cloth is stretched. Clothes of the

deceased, a jacket, blouse or shawl, or sometimes newly bought clothes, are wrapped round the frame, and garlands of flowers, cigarettes and money are added to make it as attractive as possible. Meanwhile the priests have begun to chant and beat drums and cymbals, and later they will do a slow dance around the effigy. The chanting and dancing continues throughout three days and two nights. The chants are myths which explain to the dead person how he should proceed past various dangers to the land of the dead. The close relatives, particularly the women, weep openly. At intervals animals are killed and everyone sits down and eats rice and meat off leaf platters. Vast cauldrons are used to cook the rice and the meat.

Two of the most dramatic incidents occur on the second day. In one, male relatives of the dead person take a stick and pierce it through a bamboo circle symbolizing the breaking through of the barriers to the land of the dead. A procession of priests, mourners and guests is then formed, following a long white sheet held up on poles representing the road to the land of the dead. They are led to a nearby field where a ritual battle takes place. A relative, if possible the dead person's younger sister's husband, holds a small branch in his hands in which he keeps a piece of bone from one of the sacrificed animals. A battle-dance takes place between him and a "klebre". They circle round each other, advancing and retreating, the "klebre" beating cymbals, dressed in a long-skirted costume with a Tibetan-style headdress, trying to take the bone from the relative. Ultimately the "klebre" must triumph and the dead spirit is symbolically released from family ties.

Towards the end of the "pae" trays of rice cakes, cigarettes, biscuits, fruit and other food and drink are laid on the ground, sheep representing the dead person are forcibly encouraged to eat. It is believed the sheep will eat the favourite food of the dead person first and that when they are subsequently sacrificed there will be no trace of any food in their stomachs. The sacrificed animals all accompany the soul to the land of the dead.

This ritual provides an effective catharsis for the mourners who are gently taken through their grief as the departure of their loved one is enacted. The support and sympathy of guests, the colour and spectacle, and the rhythmic chanting and drumming, makes it a particularly powerful way to cope with grief. It is interesting to see that many of the Gurungs who have moved to Pokhara are still holding the "pae lava" for this very reason. The Gurungs have completely absorbed all the main Hindu festivals and they celebrate these in the same way as other Nepalis, but they also have certain festivals of a non-Hindu kind which they share with other mongoloid groups such as the Tamangs.

Poose pandra (15th of the month of Poose ie. 30th December). In the evening groups of people will have a 'picnic' together, killing a buffalo or goat and eating a communal meal. These may be groups of neighbours, people who have collected money through dance performances or from working together, or members of a family.

Mark Sangrati (1st of Mark, ie. 15th January).

The villagers go to a neighbouring river and wash themselves. Members of a family from other villages may get together. In the large village of Siklis, many Gurungs from other villages congregate, drink millet 'whisky', compete in stone throwing contests and generally enjoy themselves.

Baisak Purnima (the full moon in the month of Baisak, ie. mid-April to mid-May).

This is also celebrated by non-mongoloid groups, but the special feature in Gurung villages is that a complete version of the "garda sheba" is danced over a period of three days; a splendid occasion of sustained song and dance.

Saawe Sangrati (1st of Sauwe ie. 1st July).

This is celebrated in the evening, before it gets dark. A family will lay out some fresh maize, some rice, fruit and vegetables. It is a kind of 'harvest festival'. Smouldering sticks are taken from the fireplace, out of the house, and each member of the family will wave the sticks round the heads and bodies of the others, praying that all disease and evil will go away. The burning sticks are then tossed away. Afterwards, they eat a communal meal and the Tailors will come round with their drums and curved horns to collect food that has been put out for them.

CHANGE AND ADAPTATION

The villages give an unchanging appearance, as if they had existed in their present form for centuries. In fact, there has been very rapid change in the mountains. Accounts of the Gurungs written in the nineteenth century describe an economy that depended mainly on pasturing sheep, in long-distance trade over the Himalayas in which they acted as middle men in the exchange of salt from Tibet for rice from lowland Nepal, and in growing certain high altitude crops such as buckwheat. They were also keen huntsmen, did some mining and went abroad to serve as soldiers in foreign armies. At that time they lived in small settlements in the high forest, at between 7000 and 12000 feet, burning clearings for their crops and taking their great flocks of sheep onto the high pastures in the summer when the snow had melted.

During the following hundred and fifty years the Gurung population grew steadily from about 30,000 to its present total of roughly 200,000, and new villages were built on lower slopes where rice could be grown in flooded fields. They were now further from the pastures and the flocks dwindled. From the early nineteenth century the British began to recruit them into the Gurkha regiments. During the First World War approximately 7,000 Gurungs were recruited from West Nepal into regular battalions. Even in peace time many thousands of Gurungs were serving abroad, and after 1947 they were recruited into both Indian and British regiments. Army pay and pensions now formed an income as important as that from agriculture. Retired soldiers built large stone and slate houses in the hills and their relative affluence pushed up the price of land.

At one stage in their history, the Gurungs seem to have been ruled by petty princes. For instance there was a prince who ruled part of the Lamjung region from a fortress at over ten thousand feet, the ruins of which still lie in the forest. After the unification of Nepal in the middle of the eighteenth century, these rulers lost much of their power. Instead, Gurung villages were more or less self-ruling communities, policing themselves under the guidance of hereditary chiefly families and meetings of the elders. They paid few taxes to the government, and in return the government did almost nothing for them and interfered little. This tradition of very light government was retained with the introduction of a system based on the Indian panchayats in the 1950's. Now the ruling families have been replaced by an elected council for a specific area or 'Panchayat'. Higher level regional and national councils also have elected members, through the provincial and up to the national 'Panchayat'. Conflicts are referred up these levels, depending on their seriousness, but a very large proportion of everyday business is settled at the village meeting. These meetings demonstrate another feature of government, namely that most decisions are taken after a great deal of talking. Only when a consensus has been reached will something be done. Dissenters are gently persuaded to conform and respect is shown for different points of view. Hence bad feelings and long-term resentments are avoided and harmony usually prevails.

Although the rapid inflow of foreign aid has made the State far more important for villagers than it used to be, it is still true that government is light. There are no permanent representatives of central government, the police or other officials, in most Gurung villages, and taxes are minimal. Bureaucracy is growing as new forms for registering births, deaths and marriages, land purchases

and so on are introduced, and Gurungs resent the condescending and unhelpful manner of some of the desk-bound bureaucrats in the towns. In general, Gurung villages are a model of how a people left to themselves can order their own affairs peacefully without much government interference.

A feature of Gurung society is the low incidence of crime. It might be expected that in remote mountain terrain, far from the reach of central authorities, and with no indigenous police force, the law of reciprocal threat would have existed. But in fact there is no evidence of this. The Gurungs do not normally carry weapons of any kind. Their famous kukri is only seen on infrequent occasions when they have to kill an animal. A few have a hunting gun, but otherwise this famous martial race lives unarmed.

Crimes of violence are practically unknown. For instance, during a twenty year period in one area not far from Pokhara with a population of about five thousand persons, there had only been one domestic murder and one serious theft. Serious assaults are practically unknown, and villages can go for many years without a single criminal case being prosecuted or any individual being fined or imprisoned. Children, of course, occasionally steal small things, but in general the people are honest. One can be fairly sure that if one leaves something lying about it will be carefully returned.

This is not the result of fear and repression. The Nepalese police force is tiny and mainly situated in towns. Whole villages never see a policeman from one year to the next. Though it is widely believed that a suspect in custody may be physically beaten by the police and consequently people prefer to settle conflicts without involving them, in general it is not fear of the State that keeps the Gurungs so orderly. It seems rather to arise out of the fact that people respect each other and wish to do as they would be done by. Crimes would bring loss of merit in the after-life and make one a social outcaste. In such a communal society, an individual who was shunned by his or her companions would find it very difficult to live in the village.

If feuds and fights are rare, if everyday behaviour is so passive and non-aggressive, even gentle and tolerant, how is it that the Gurungs have, with other Gurkha troops, gained an international reputation as among the finest infantry soldiers in modern history? If they are so meek and mild at home how did they win so many awards for bravery in two World Wars?

There is firstly the purely physical aspect. An infantry man has to be strong. Whereas a Westerner will find it hard to carry the many kilograms of weapons and provisions needed on a march, a Gurung who is used to carrying 50kg of rice, for instance, up and down mountain sides for hours at a stretch, finds such loads easy. They can march through any terrain. They have excellent eyesight and are superb marksmen. Yet even more important than the physical are their moral and mental assets. Firstly, they have no internal caste system and take little interest in caste. Hence they were much easier to use with other troops, not being worried by food or other pollutions. Secondly, their temperament is ideal for soldiering. They work well in group activities, complementing each other with minimal conflict or overlap. They are very willing and hard workers. They have a considerable sense of humour and ability to laugh at others and themselves. They are basically very optimistic and trusting and seldom despair or become dejected except when very sick.

They are practical and will do anything well, from making a basket to cutting hair. They are inquisitive and keen to learn. They are not unduly deferential, yet very quick to grasp when someone in authority has made a sensible suggestion. Above all, they are a combination of a proud, self-confident, yet modest people who, once their respect has been won, will follow a leader to the ends of the earth. They obey orders without question. They may not be great leaders, but they are superb followers and will readily risk their lives as has been evidenced in many conflicts. They thus provide an odd paradox. They join foreign armies for money but cannot be bought. They are, in the main, uncorrupted and incorruptible, loyal and affectionate, and many who have

come to know them have become deeply fond of them.

At the peak period of army recruitment, in many Gurung villages the majority of men undertook military service. This exposed them to outside influences and gave them access to cash which would otherwise not have been available. For instance, it was estimated that in the village of Thak in 1970, about one third of the total village income came from foreign army service. These remittances, from serving soldiers and the pensions of those who had retired from the army, raised them above the level of subsistence farmers and helped to make them one of the most prosperous groups in Nepal.

The effects of military service on the social and cultural life have been surprisingly mild. Soldiers introduced certain goods - radios, sewing machines, pressure lamps, tartans and velvets. But they did not return and try to transform the culture and society, or if a few did try they found their ideas ignored. Although they conformed with little difficulty to life in Hong Kong or England, mastering trains and buses, telephones and shops, yet within a few days of returning to the village they seemed to put aside most of the notions from other parts and were re-absorbed into a world of hard physical work, magical ritual and communal rather than individual goals. They did not fret at the long delays and apparent inefficiencies of village life, but took their place alongside those who had not left the village as respected elders who upheld the Gurung traditions.

There has recently been a change in the nature and volume of this inflow of cash to the villages. Whereas previously the foreign army pay and pensions were used to buy land and build houses in the village, both of which acted as a way of redistributing wealth and pushing up the value of agricultural land, this is now decreasing. Retired soldiers, especially those with the larger pay and pensions from the British Army, are finding it more profitable to invest in land and houses in the towns where they can also educate their children and enjoy the relative luxuries and ease afforded by 'civilization'. If we add to this the continued scaling down of British recruitment to the Gurkhas, 1948 - 37,000, 1965 - 15,000 and 1980 - 7,000 men, it is clear that the Gurungs in the villages can no longer rely on the steady inflow of money as in the past. To a large extent this is being replaced by work in the Indian Army, which now employs at least 40,000 Gurkhas, and even more importantly by civilian work in India and Arabia.

As a visitor wanders through the Annapurna mountains and observes what are clearly dwindling forests, frequent land slips, people with sores and cuts, and the back-breaking work of mountain agriculture, he or she may wonder why the villages seem to have benefited so little from certain technological inventions which have made life easier in other parts of the world.

A little investigation will show that it is not principally for want of money. Relatively large sums have flowed into Nepal over the last twenty years in the form of foreign aid. It is true that the major part of this has been spent in the towns, in prestige building, to pay for a rapidly expanding bureaucracy, and to pay for national assets such as roads and dams. It is also true that it is this inflow of money that is largely responsible for the relative affluence and rocketing prices in the towns. Also the eradication of malaria in the Terai and the consequent production of cheap rice has undermined rice production in the hills. Yet when we consider the sums that have reached the villages and add to them the very large quantities of money earned by the Gurungs in foreign armies and other paid employment abroad, we can see that the main obstacles to technical change lie elsewhere.

The difficulty does not rest in a natural conservatism or obstinacy or a desire to resist all technical changes. Certain new technologies have swept through the hills with no effort; plastic receptacles, corrugated iron, transistor radios, diesel grinders and water pipes are a common new feature of many villages. Nor, as we have seen, have the Gurungs been at all slow to modify their whole life and go to work in foreign lands at complex technological tasks. Yet there are still large areas where what would appear to an outsider to be obvious improvements have not taken

hold. Why is this? This is a very large topic, so we can only illustrate the problems of a deeper kind by a few examples.

Some years ago, several retired Gurkha officers with some agricultural training decided to use their energies and some of their savings in trying to improve life in a Gurung village. A few of their schemes have worked. A new primary school was built at the expense of the villagers, though it is still almost entirely without equipment. An old water pipe was replaced with plastic piping. Yet a series of other schemes failed.

Improved maize seeds were introduced and produced better crops; but they ripened later and upset the traditional cycle of grazing animals on the newly cleared fields. Wheat was introduced, but it needed too much fertilizer and it was given up because of poor yields. A cross-breed goat was brought from the agricultural station, but it could not adapt to village conditions and died of an infection. An improved breed of chickens was introduced into a deep litter shed, but they needed to be fed more intensively on grain, without which they gave no more eggs than the local variety that scratched round and ate scraps. Efforts to encourage people to buy fertilizer for their rice fields petered out. A large amount of money was spent setting up a co-operative shop, but a plan to buy some mules to bring up goods was abandoned, and mismanagement, over-staffing and the problem of recovering debts led to its failure within a couple of years.

All these and many examples could be taken to show that a simple introduction of new techniques and technology is not enough. For something to work, it must make not only technical sense, but be attractive in wider ways. The basic feature of village life is that most things are interconnected and one cannot treat even technical improvements in isolation. Another example will show what we mean.

It is obvious to everyone that some alternative must rapidly be found for firewood, or else massive and protected replanting be undertaken, if the ravaged forests are to be restored. Nepal is currently losing three per cent of its forest each year. At present rates, the country will be totally denuded of forest within the next thirty years. This not only means a loss of wood, but means that the monsoon rains wash away the top-soil very much faster. It is estimated that one hectare of cleared forest can lose from twenty to seventy-five tons of soil annually. If urgent action is not taken, water supplies will dwindle, land-slips will increase, and the supply of fodder and wood will vanish.

An obvious part of a solution might be the use of efficient kerosene or methane gas stoves for cooking, rather than open fires. Yet this tends to overlook the fact that trees are chopped and hacked as much for fodder as for firewood, and eaten down by goats and other animals. Moreover, the replacement of a wood fire by an kerosene or gas oven, even if it were possible, is more than a matter of replacing one cooking system with another. The fireplace is the central focus of a Gurung house. In it a godling lives, who is given a sprinkling of food and drink before an individual eats. The fire is kept burning most of the time. Apart from cooking, it gives warmth in the cold months in the high villages. A methane or kerosene stove is seen as a poor substitute. This is one of the reasons why it has been found in detailed studies that even in villages where electrification has occurred, electricity has not been used to cook with. The electricity is only used to provide a new asset, electric light, and the consumption of firewood has not decreased at all.

This means that when thinking about whether a scheme will be successful one has to understand the present way of doing things and its advantages before being able to suggest a change that is likely to work. For instance, chickens that produce small eggs and little meat may be more 'efficient' for a villager when we remember that the hens can live off scraps, rather than requiring precious grain. It would not be worth importing new and improved seed, if the fertilizer and water

needs are too great.

Furthermore, the social pressures against innovation are always present. The Gurungs are particularly communal in their activities and traditionally worked together in the fields. Any deviation can put strains on this and bring criticism. Changes involve risk and living in such difficult circumstances the Gurungs cannot afford to make expensive mistakes. They will bear the brunt of costly blunders such as the introduction of foot-rot when untreated Merino sheep from New Zealand were brought into the Gurung hills. Such errors, as well as reported cases of inappropriate fertilizers and crops, can ruin individuals, as well as costing hundreds of thousands of pounds to put right. The Gurungs are rightly cautious. But when something self-evidently helpful, such as vaccination against smallpox or measles is introduced, they co-operate fully.

THE FUTURE

In the last twenty year the pace of change has gathered momentum. There is evidence of growing poverty in the hills, both absolute and relative, and a growing dependence on the outside world. The diet has deteriorated, the paths are not as well kept, fields are being left to revert to scrub, gold ornaments have been sold off, clothes are less adequate. It is difficult to quantify this, but one indication is that total grain production in Thak has dropped by a half in the years between 1969 and 1987, while the population has remained constant. This is mainly caused by less intensive and satisfactory use of the land. Land has gone out of cultivation, some has been eroded and swept away by landslides, but most importantly far fewer animals are kept and as a result there is too little manure to keep the fields in good heart. From being more or less self-sufficient in grains, this, and many other villages, are now buying grain from the nearby markets.

The total population in the Gurung villages has increased, but not so much as one might have expected because of very considerable out-migration. In Thak, the balance has shifted so that blacksmiths and tailors constitute a very important part of the work-force, working the lands of the absent Gurungs. Share-cropping has increased hugely in the last twenty years.

This share-cropping for absentee or elderly owners reflects the very large increase in out-migration. This is one of the most dramatic changes in Gurung villages, from temporary absences soldiering in foreign armies, to permanent out-migration to the towns. Ironically, the towns, such as Pokhara, are becoming more mongoloid as the hill peoples settle in them, while the hills are becoming more indo-aryan as Brahmins, Chetris and the service castes raise their large families and take in the marginal lands. Only at the time of the memorial service for the dead does one tend to see a Gurung village looking as it used to look, with the richly dressed town dwellers coming to visit their country cousins. The 'village' has to be conceived of now as essentially dispersed. All this is less true of the remoter villages, but even there the pull of the towns is felt.

The major mechanism of this dislocation is education, which attracts the wealthier to the towns and quickly turns their children into citizens who would find it unsatisfying and physically exhausting to return to the villages. Scarcely any of those from Thak who went off to Pokhara to school in the 1970's have returned to the village, nor have they tended to become soldiers. Mostly they have gone to factories and offices in India or Arabia where they can make some use of their skills.

As to the cause of the decline in the villages which has turned a number of them from rice-surplus to rice-deficit economies, there are various theories. One is that ecological degradation. The monsoon rains leaching and scouring the over-worked, steep mountain sides has inevitably reduced the productivity of the soil. There is clearly something in this, but even more important would seem to be an economic explanation. The opening up of the flat land in the Terai, along

the southern border of Nepal, combined with improved roads up to the market towns, such as Pokhara which lie on the south of the Gurung area, has had a very strong effect. It is now more efficient, cheap and easy to grow crops in the Terai than it is in the hills. A 'rational' village boy can see that his labour is far more productive working for wages in the town, in India or Arabia, or even more so in a foreign army, than on a farm the hills. With money he can buy food and other necessities. He can earn from three to fifty times as much a day as he would in the village, and the work will be less exhausting. Indeed, if these young men did not go off, the villages would be more impoverished because the farms would have to be sub-divided between all the sons and there would be no cash income from outside the village. Without this, it would be impossible for villagers to begin to pay for the necessary goods from the towns. In Thak, in 1987, the average annual expenditure per family on food and other goods from Pokhara was five thousand rupees, much of the cash coming from sons working abroad.

Thus the villagers are reacting with economic good sense to the market forces from outside which are coming to bear on them, the Gurungs are as ever learning how to adapt and change, as they did in their previous transformations from shepherds to settled cultivators, and from farmers to soldiers. Now, using the villages as a base, they 'hunt and gather' all over the world, but their new territory is not the high pastures and thick forests of the nineteenth century, but the streets of Hong Kong, Bombay or Pokhara. Their survival, of course, is not merely an economic matter, but also, more deeply, a cultural one, maintaining a feeling of identity, a shared set of customs and language, which marks them out in an increasingly competitive and crowded world.

Just as they have adapted to the world market and to world religions, they have adapted to becoming part of a wider language group. Whereas most villagers spoke Gurung most of the time twenty years ago, now every child learns Nepali and the songs and everyday speech reflect a strong move towards the new language. Gurung children brought up in the towns can often not speak Gurung any more.

Flexibility and adaptability are important devices, but it may be wondered how far one can bend before one is no longer what one was before. What does it mean to be a 'Gurung', if one no longer practices Gurung agriculture, uses the language, or employs the Gurung priests? This is a current concern among the Gurungs themselves and there is much discussion, in particular about the core Gurung institution, the "pae lava", the memorial service for the dead. If this is totally modified, many feel that nothing will be left and the 'Gurungs' will have ceased to have an independent existence; their dances, their songs, their young people's dormitories, their language, their priests and their funeral ritual will have withered and they will merge into an amorphous mass of part hill-folk, part townsmen.

There is certainly such a danger, but the signs are of an increasing interest in the past and in what it means to be a Gurung, of how best to maintain an ethnic identity while adapting and becoming a citizen and a member of larger political, religious and linguistic groupings. Much of this description concerns life in relatively small villages of a few hundred people. These are the communities in which the majority of Gurungs still live, but there are a growing number of Gurungs, perhaps a third or so of the total, who do not live in villages in Nepal. Though they maintain many Gurung customs, they do not live by agriculture and they lead lives which are fundamentally different from their relatives in the hills.

There are firstly the ten thousand or so Gurung soldiers in the Indian, British and other armies, who are posted in many parts of the world. Subject to a strict and hierarchical discipline, they are separated for long periods from their wives and children. Though they often enjoy the comradeship and certainty of army life in a closed institution, and appreciate the possibility of eating and dressing well, of saving money and contributing to a good pension, they are also often lonely and bored in foreign camps. Whether in Dehra Dun, on the Assam frontier, in the

Falklands or in Berkshire, they perform with great efficiency and a good spirit, but in a world of timed routines and mechanical western values which is very far from the fluid rhythms of their village upbringing.

A second even larger group are the Gurungs who are working abroad as civilians, particularly in India. There have always been such people, but as population pressure mounts in the hills and opportunities for foreign army recruitment declines, the numbers have increased rapidly. The majority are in Bombay, with others in Calcutta, Delhi and Arabia. Young men in their early twenties will go and live in tiny flats with their friends. For instance, there are about forty boys from the village of Thak in Bombay, working in factories, and as drivers and watchmen. Many of them later take their wives and children, so any chance of saving or sending money back to the village will be minimal. The contrast between the dirt, noise and crowding of such a city existence and the life in the hills is very sharp.

The third group are those who have retired, mainly from foreign army service, but have not gone back to the village. This is again a recent phenomenon. If we take the village of Thak, in 1970 only two or three families had retired to towns in India or Nepal. By 1987, in Pokhara alone there were forty-six households from Thak, most having retired on pensions. These ex-army men had amassed considerable wealth by Nepalese standards, and in their middle thirties are starting a second life. But though they have experience of living abroad as well as capital, many find it difficult to know what to do other than to buy land and build a smart house. Of thirty Thak men who had retired from foreign armies, permanently living in Pokhara, one third were doing nothing in particular, other than living off pensions and invested capital. The rest were engaged in various jobs; farming, army welfare work, and as drivers. What was noticeable by its omission was any involvement in local government and bureaucracy, or in local trade and industry such as shopkeepers, entrepreneurs or small businessmen. Some Gurungs feel that the bureaucracy is an alien world controlled by Brahmins and Chetris in which they have little chance. Nor do they tend to use their savings to set up businesses, except for a few concerns such as the Ex-Servicemen's Bus Company. On the whole they lack the experience and the institutional framework to employ their energies and capital productively in the towns, yet they are reluctant to distribute or invest it in the villages.

Much of their wealth goes on education. It is the aim of every father to educate his children, and particularly sons, up to tenth grade and if possible beyond. Otherwise, the life for many, and particularly women is one of a new found leisure, where water, firewood and food are now bought with cash and instantly available, very expensive but no longer requiring much physical effort. Women's tasks, in particular, are very much lighter. Yet it would seem that for many who are used to the insistent rhythms which give meaning to life in the village and army, the semi-retired existence in Pokhara can be boring and empty. People complain of the anonymous, individualistic existence where the warmth and community feeling has gone, where the dangers of drugs, crime and sex threaten the young, and where the Gurungs feel second-class citizens, the prey to unscrupulous people after their savings. Yet prices are going up so fast, and the future hopes of their children so pressing, that they feel they cannot afford not to live there. Their children also find it more stimulating than village life.

It is interesting to find that not all of them are totally committed to town life. A number of Gurungs who have settled in Pokhara have kept land in their village. Some of them talk about going back there to live once their children have finished their education and can support themselves. If roads are constructed into the hills, some think that the villages near to Pokhara may become viable again. In that case they would be happy to return to their village farms.

The skill of the Gurungs lies in blending these lives. Through their constant movements, reunions and partings and through the strength of the family, they hold together the worlds of Hong

Kong, Bombay, Pokhara and the village. They adapt well and never entirely surrender to the pressures of any single environment, carrying their good humour, tolerance, practical skills and religious beliefs with them wherever they go.

Some suggested further reading

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