

The light of many suns

In the beginning, when gods walked the valley of Kathmandu, there was a mound where the temple now stands, and to it daily came a cow to offer her milk. A bewildered cowherd who watched this incredible happening in great awe and fear, at last found the courage to dig at the spot. He had hardly begun when he was consumed by a light like that of many suns emanating from a *linga* with faces of Shiva carved on all four sides. So terrifying was one of the faces that an early invader of the valley looked upon it and died.

There ends the myth and history tentatively begins. Pashupatinath,

I went to the famed Pashupati mystic Shivpuri Baba, a jovial old man with a flowing beard who claimed to be 150 years old. He remembered Queen Victoria being crowned empress of India, and had seen the first train in India.

however small the original shrine, was there when the first settlers raised a perishable town of wood and mud about it on the banks of the sacred Bagmati. The earliest remains are Licchavi, from AD 300 to 800. Licchavi rulers were in close relationship with Gupta India, so Sanskrit was the court language with a

growing interest in Hinduism.

Chinese representatives of the time, visiting the Kathmandu valley, described the fabulous court, carved and ornamented with pearls and gems, as being near the holy temple of Pashupatinath, where the king daily worshipped the deity that protected him.

Long before, when the Mauryan king Ashoka visited the valley, he married his daughter Charumati to a local prince and they founded the city of Dev Patan, close to the most sacred shrine. In the fourteenth century the temple was shattered by the invading army of Ghiyas-ud-din Tughlak: three hundred years later it was eaten through by termites.

King Pratap Malla, in atonement for having seduced a minor girl, added a courtyard filled with Shiva lingas. The last Malla king of Kathmandu stripped the temple of all its gold and had it melted down to finance his war against the invading Gorkhas. Such is the power of Pashupatinath, believe the devout, that he lost the battle.

Pashupatinath, as Shiva in one of his many incarnations, is a protector of animals, so there are no sacrifices at this great shrine. Appropriately, throngs of gossiping monkeys swarm through the temples, feasting off votive offerings and sometimes exploding into violent battles that zoom to and fro across the river, up and down stairs scattering pilgrims, along the ghats,

and through rows of temples. They live on the wooded hill which is part of the temple complex which reaches the airport, until recently called Gaucher, the meadow of cows.

When I first came to Kathmandu, a famed mystic, the Shivpuri Baba, lived on Pashupati hill in a small hut that seemed part of the forest. I went to him and was enchanted by a jovial old man with a flowing beard who claimed to be 150 years old. Lest I doubted him he said he remembered Queen Victoria being crowned empress of India, and had seen the first train in India.

Today, Pashupatinath is a two-tiered pagoda temple with heavily gilded roofs, heavy silver doors that are closed to non-Hindus, and is the centre of a vast conglomeration of temples, shrines, *dharamshalas*, bathing and burning ghats held together by an aura of religious fervour and the smoke from funeral pyres. Here is beauty commissioned by art's greatest patron, religion, so that hardly a stone is unchiselled or wood uncarved. The windows of even the humblest *dharamshalas* are ornamented with wasp-waist deities and intricate floral designs. Temple spires writhe with golden serpents, and on two of the platforms on which the dead are cremated are sixth century stone carvings of rare beauty.

Two festivals blaze in Pashupatinath more brightly than the



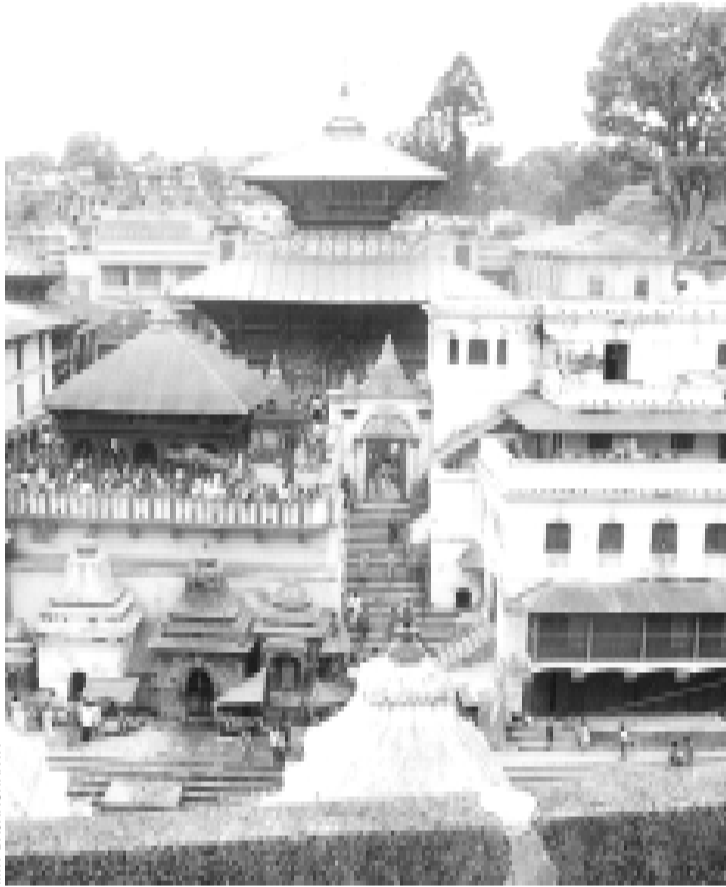
others, Shivaratri, when thousands converge on the temple from all over Nepal and India, thronging the area, day and night, and raising shelters and shops wherever space permits.

Devotional music is everywhere. At Tij, women from all over the valley walk to the great shrine, married women in their vivid marriage saris and unmarried girls in their brightest best, singing and dancing as they go to bathe in the sacred river and pray at the great temple: the married women for their husbands, the girls for a good and kindly match.

They pour from the temple down the stairway to the river like a burst of scarlet sequins overflowing the ghats

and spilling into the water. In their midst, on a stark stone slab, her feet in the water, an old woman in white lies dying. No one apparently bothers but that is what Pashupatinath is all about, destroyer and protector, both. The eternal riddle of life and death. Every morning Radio Nepal opens its programme with a prayer to Pashupatinath and when the king, himself a reincarnation of Vishnu, addresses his people, he calls upon Pashupatinath to bless and protect them all. ♦

(Excerpted with permission from *In the Kingdom of the Gods*, Harper Collins, 1994.)



MIN BAURACHARYA

FIELDWORK ANECDOTE

by MARK TURIN

Learning about Himalayan body parts (through observation rather than participation)



It was four years ago, in late November or early December, that I was sitting outside on a bamboo mat facing the eastern Himalaya. Beside me sat Rana Bahadur Thangmi, a respected shaman and village elder, and the father of my host. I had been staying in his son's house for a few weeks, orientating myself and beginning to learn the Thangmi language. In the late morning sunlight of that day, I decided to try out my first full Thangmi sentence.

Thangmi is a Tibeto-Burman language with a complex verbal agreement system, making it particularly difficult for an English-speaker to learn. I had collected quite a few words in the time that I had been there, and was now ready to try some of them out. It was a Saturday so the village children were home rather than at school, and the area around our house was buzzing with activity. Rana Bahadur looked regal and dignified in a bright red woollen hat as he shared a home-rolled cigarette with his wife. I had decided on my practice sentence: it was to include a subject, an object, two adjectives and, of course, one of those difficult verbs. I looked at him and chose the correct personal pronoun, a respectful form, and then made it into a possessive form. I recalled the adjectives for red and beautiful, the noun for hat and the suitable ending of the verb 'to be'. In short, I was ready.

"Oh, respectful father, village elder and shaman of high-standing..."



Shaman Rana Bahadur Thami in Dolakha District (the man I insulted)

SARA SHINDE/ERNAN

My first sentence was complete. Total silence. Women's mouths dropped, hands went up to cover eyes, children stopped pulling the legs off beetles, and men turned to look at me.

I proclaimed unnaturally loudly in my T'm speaking to a foreigner in a language I don't speak voice, "...your red hat is beautiful". My first sentence was complete. The reaction: silence, total silence. Women's mouths dropped, hands went up to cover eyes in shame, children stopped pulling the legs off beetles, and men turned to look at me. Rana Bahadur glanced up from where he was drawing a map in the earth with a stick. "What did you say, my foreign grandson?" My accent was probably difficult to follow. After all, they had never heard me trying to speak their language before. Moreover, he was a little hard of hearing. "Your red hat is beautiful," I said again, but this time with conviction and satisfaction, pronouncing every syllable as clearly as I could. Silence again. Tortured beetles fell to the ground. Rana Bahadur began to shake his head slowly and let out a deep

sigh. He was most definitely not amused.

"Grandson," he finally said in Nepali so that I would fully understand, "your country is a long way away." He started most sentences like this, so I was not unduly concerned. "And you have made a great effort and sacrificed much to come and live with us," he said. Nothing untoward so far. "And

now..." he continued, "you have the nerve to insult me in front of my family and my village... have you no shame?" My contentedness at my linguistic achievement withered as it dawned on me that I hadn't said quite what I had intended to say. As the giggling started and as children began to whisper to each other and point at me, I desperately looked around for assistance. A young man, about my age, was peering down from the porch of the house in front of which I was sitting. He was shaking his head with a mixture of disgust and pity. Making eye contact with him, I gestured incomprehension with my hands. In answer, he shook his head as he pointed to his hair and then nodded as he pointed to his groin. My first Thangmi sentence hadn't come out as planned.

I spent the rest of the afternoon apologising and attempting to undo what I had said. Thankfully, Rana Bahadur, being a considerate man, forgave my linguistic transgression. To this day though, my Thangmi friends giggle whenever I say 'hat' in their language. After a few glasses of the local firewater, however, I can't remember for the life of me which is which. ♦

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