

CAUTIOUSLY OPTIMISTIC

The ceasefire opened a window of hope; the residents of Dolakha converged for the two-day festival in numbers far exceeding the past few years, when fear had kept many at home

BY SARA SHNEIDERMAN AND MARK TURIN IN DOLAKHA

DASHAIN HAS LONG BEEN bittersweet for the Thangmi population of Dolakha's villages. On Vijaya Dashami, instead of receiving *tika* from family and celebrating at home, two Thangmi men must make the trek from the village of Dumkot to Dolakha Bazaar, where they strip down to loincloths and drink the fresh blood of a buffalo calf sacrificed in the Devikot temple courtyard. By drinking the blood, the Thangmi are believed to clear the way for Newar fighters to win the battle against evil in the Khadga Jatra festival, which takes place on the following day. This dramatic ritual has traditionally brought Dolakha's diverse inhabitants together in a quintessentially local celebration that highlights the economic and cultural interdependence of the region's ethnic peoples.

This year, a tangible feeling of relief hung in the air thanks to the Dashain ceasefire called by both the Maoists and the government. Since establishing political and combat operations in Dolakha in 1998, the Maoists have taken control of most valleys in the district, while at the same time the government and security forces maintain a strong presence in the district headquarters of Charikot. Although the area has thankfully not seen a major battle, minor skirmishes occur regularly. Casualties on both sides have been significant, and where village conversations at this time of the year were once focused on the rice harvest and

buffalo sacrifices, now political speculation dominates. The news of a ceasefire opened a window of hope, and Dolakha residents from villages as well as the towns converged for the two-day festival in numbers far exceeding the past few years, when fear had kept many at home.

As we traveled through the villages close to Dolakha Bazaar, we noted a cautious optimism as farmers spoke of their hopes for the future. Despite the insurgency, the past several years have brought concrete improvements in the standard of living for those villagers within a two-day walk from the town. An agricultural road that runs between Dolakha Bazaar and Singati market has become fully operational in the last year, and an impressive number of village homes are now lit by hydro-electricity.

The Dolakha-Singati road was not always a winning proposition. Funded by GTZ and the Norway World Food Programme, construction began in 1998. Local laborers were contracted to build the road through a food for work scheme, but thanks to corruption and mismanagement much of the promised rice was received late or was so infested with weevils that it was only fit for livestock. Worse still, farmers whose property was taken for the new road were never compensated for the land they lost.



For subsistence agriculturalists who squeeze out grain from every square meter just to make enough to feed their families for six months, the loss of land was a major blow.

At the time, villagers organized protests in Charikot demanding payment and threatened to blockade the road when it opened. But now that the road is functional, with several Rolwaling Yatayat buses plying the route every day, attitudes have changed. Few villagers choose to pay the Rs. 10 to ride the bus when they can reach their destination in more or less the same time by foot, but many people with whom we spoke still believe the road to be a positive development. Why? Because in medical emergencies they can move sick or injured people more efficiently to the Gauri Shankar Hospital in Dolakha, now staffed with a well-trained medical team from the Model Hospital in Kathmandu.

The heavy pylons and wiring necessary for electrification were also more easily transported by road. Soon after last

year's Dashain festivities, several VDCs were electrified for the first time from a hydropower station located just west of Charikot. Having installed a meter box and the wiring set-up of their choice, village households can now have lights and power sockets to power radios and sewing machines for a minimum charge of Rs. 80 a month. Some extended families living in close proximity have opted to pool resources and wire several houses off one meter box, so that each household need pay only Rs. 20 or so per month—a manageable charge even for poor families. Villagers commented that electric light at night has led to a noticeable decrease in smoke-related health problems and has likewise increased the amount of time available for students to study and for other productive social activities.

Ironically, even though the road-project staff were some of the Maoists' earliest targets for extortion and physical assault in the area, villagers commented that the road has made Maoist travel and intelligence gathering far more efficient. Almost everyone travels along the wide road now, rather than on the narrow shaded village paths of old, making it far easier to keep tabs on the comings and goings of neighbors. Naturally, the road benefits the security forces as well, who now survey the area from a high ridge near Charikot. For the most part, the security forces patrol the road during the day, while the Maoists move at night. Villagers on their morning rounds or en route to their fields stop by the roadside teashops to check for newly posted Maoist directives.

Intriguingly, there were no such directives against celebrating Dashain. Both the traditional family *tika* and the large-scale festivals in Dolakha Bazaar were allowed to proceed as usual. Ru-

mors flew about Maoist fighters returning home under cover of night to take *tika* and returning to forested camps before daylight. A local source even reported that he had been contacted by the regional Maoist leadership to help send a Dashain bonus to cadres in the field and something special to those in jail.

We had half expected a Maoist ban on Devikot Puja and Khadga Jatra, both because they assign the Thangmi—the poorest and most disenfranchised ethnic group in the area—a demeaning role and because the festivals represent the local assertion of Hindu state hegemony. But there was no such ban in place. For the Thangmi participants who become possessed by deities, the Devikot Puja is in fact a source of divine power. The only other visible display of power during the festival was that of several groups of heavily armed policeman in civilian clothes charging through town in pick-up trucks with their guns trained on festival-goers. Citizens of the bazaar looked the other way, avoiding eye contact.

As the buffalo calf was sacrificed, blood sprayed out far beyond the mouths of the possessed men waiting to drink it. According to the Newar *pujari* of Devikot, the large quantity of blood was an auspicious sign that bodes well for the coming year. At the end of the two-day festival tired, hung-over and relieved villagers walked home up the road, returning for their own *tika* by bulb-light for the very first time. ■

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