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With Reverence for Culture and Nature

Development and modernisation in the Himalaya

In the space of a hundred ages of the gods,
I could not describe to you the glories of the Himalaya.
As the dew is dried up by the morning sun,
so are the sins of humankind
by the sight of the snows of the Himalaya
–Skanda Purana

'The Abode of Gods, King of Mountains, Himalaya! You bound the ocean from east to west. A northern yardstick to measure the Earth.' – Thus is the Himalaya described by Sunderlal Bahuguna, famed guru and environmentalist from India, quoting the great Sanskrit poet Kalidas. The glories of the world's highest mountain range are still sung by many. For sages and saints the Himalaya has always been a place of peace and meditation. Also today it is a place of self-realisation and worship – not only for millions of pilgrims, but for tourists from the West as well.

Over the centuries these mountains have served as a source of spiritual inspiration for humankind, as indeed they still do. But with the advance of material civilisation, especially over the past 50-odd years, the 'abode of the snows', this realm of peace and home of the gods, has gained new – albeit dubious – importance. Influencing the ecology and economy of eight Asian countries, the fabled Himalaya has also become one of the most disturbed regions of the world. *'Sages no longer meditate in the caves here'*, laments Sunderlal Bahuguna, *'but soldiers with guns sit in bunkers guarding national frontiers against their neighbours.'* (Bahuguna 1998, pp. 15–16) The still-unresolved conflict in Kashmir, simmering ever since Indian partition, brought the world near the brink of nuclear war not long ago. Where the Tibetan poet and mystic Milarepa once weaved his poems and tamed the wild beasts, the Red Army today bares its teeth. And Nepal, renowned throughout history as a haven of peacefully co-existing religions and ethnic groups, has experienced seven years of increasingly violent internal conflict between the government forces and a self-styled Maoist insurrection.

Nor should we forget the new class of Himalaya enthusiasts, who see the potential for fabulous profits to be made by cutting down its forests, extracting the minerals from its depths, damming its rivers and setting up five-star hotels. These unbridled activities are putting heavy pressure on people and nature, all in the name of ‘development’. In fact this is nothing but blatantly commercial exploitation of natural resources, with the benefits going not to the poor who desperately search for sources of income, but to a small number of entrepreneurs and bureaucrats. The poor stay poor, the rich get richer – this never-ending story is also true on the roof of the world.

Sundarlal-ji complains that ecological destruction is always followed by cultural and social destruction. When economics becomes the new global religion, everything becomes a marketable commodity, to be bought and sold. We of the Western world have come to perceive the Himalaya as a commodity – as a tourism destination, the place of eternal happiness only an airfare away. We are enchanted by the scenic beauty of its mountains and lush valleys, by the broad Tibetan smiles and the shy charm of Nepali ladies. In our Western image of the Himalaya, the skies are forever blue, the forests are dense and the peaks a pristine pearly white. No cloud darkens the shining ranges of our vision of Shangri-la.

But every coin has two sides. The distinguished Nepalese scholar, Harka Gurung (1998), reminds us of the need to differentiate between notion and reality, between the pictures in our heads and the world outside. There are many misconceptions about the mountain environment – and one of them is the ‘balance’ between nature and man. This, he says, is a long-standing myth: in the Himalaya people are constantly trying to find technological solutions to adapt or to control their surroundings, so the relationship is a dynamic, not a static one. Another widely shared but false view, as Gurung points out, is that deforestation is responsible for erosion. Of course, man is not totally innocent here – roads and other infrastructure contribute – but it is mainly natural erosion above the tree-line that puts stress on the environment. Steep slopes and extreme climatic and weather conditions have always made the Himalayan valleys prone to soil erosion, whether or not human beings happen to be around. Finally, it is not the peasant in his remote villages who exploits and misuses his environment. Centuries of experience have taught him otherwise. True, the more advanced the economy is, the greater the pressure on resources. But then poverty is a basic cause of poor land management, and the consequence of poor management is ever-deepening poverty.

Nepal – An Underdeveloping Kingdom

Stretching some 3,500 km from east to west, and between 300 and 500 km from north to south, the Himalaya-Hindu Kush ranges are not only the greatest but also the most densely populated mountain system on earth. Some 140 million people make their homes here, living under extreme conditions in the remote valleys, and establishing settlements at elevations of up to 4,500 m. above sea level. The subsistence-level peasants of these mountains are among the very poorest of the world's poor. Firmly anchored in their religion-based cultural systems, they have survived by managing to work out techniques and lifestyles suitable to the terrain. In the process they have also developed a rich store of knowledge for living and even thriving in these extremely demanding surroundings.

Here in the Himalaya-Hindu Kush we find three of the world's great religions – Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam – but also three nuclear powers – China, India and Pakistan – facing one another. And yet, perhaps the greatest threat involves nature itself. The rich biodiversity of the region is endangered in many ways. Timber-felling may be an inevitable concomitant of population pressures, but it is disastrous where there is no corresponding programme of reforestation. The same applies to over-grazing; mono-culture in agriculture; the loss of fertile soil through landslides and natural erosion; the environmental stresses caused by road building and clearances – to mention only a few of the major danger-points. (See ICIMOD 1998.)

Most of these factors converge in the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal, that trekking and adventure-tourism destination that has become a fixation in the Western world. In this 'typical Third World country' we find soaring population growth (variously measured at between 2.2 and 2.8% for the past decade), declining agricultural productivity combined with soil depletion, thereby weakening the very foundations of the subsistence economy; extreme climatic conditions; lack of an industrial base; scarcity of mineral resources; major environment destruction; brain-drain to the urban areas and abroad; massive un- and under-employment among young people; high illiteracy rates; political and economic dependence on 'Giant Neighbour' India; extreme disparities between rich and poor; pervasive corruption within the bureaucracy; incompetent politicians and overburdened governments; and a young democracy facing a long-drawn Maoist-Communist 'people's war'. (Krämer 2002; Panday 1999; Shrestha 1999; Shrestha 1997)

Working especially within the sectors of tourism and the textile and carpet industries, foreign donors as well as local investors and entrepreneurs have made considerable efforts to crank up the economy and improve living conditions in the country. And yet, all indicators still point in the opposite direction. (See UNDP-Nepal Human Development Report 2001.) Nepal is no ‘Shangri-la’, no paradise of eternal joy on earth, writes the highly reputed journalist Kanak Dixit (2001) – nor is this likely to change overnight. Indeed, the reverse seems more probable. The caste system, although officially long since abolished, still reigns in everyday life. All major decisions in economy and politics are taken exclusively by the high-caste Brahmins – the same group that have long sought to block such measures as land reform, so as not to jeopardise their privileged traditional standing. (See Acharya 2002, p. 203.)

The much-touted ethnic mosaic, with over 60 different ethnic groups and more than 100 languages, has also hampered the emergence of a distinct Nepali identity (see Vaidya & Bajracharya 1996), thereby also making the monarch the single most important figure of national integration. Following an age-old tradition, he is revered as an *avatar* – an earthly incarnation – of the Lord Vishnu, one of the three supreme deities of the Hindu pantheon. This belief, however, suffered a severe setback with the Palace Massacre of 1 June 2001, when King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah and almost his entire family were slain. (For one analysis, see Raj 2001.) King Birendra had been a well-loved monarch – but in fact, under his reign, poverty had begun to assume alarming proportions, in parallel to the increase in his own wealth and that of the royal entourage. Even today, some 80% of the country’s 23 million-plus inhabitants have no access to sanitary facilities; only half have clean drinking water, and a mere 15% of all households have electricity. More than half the population are undernourished, and less than half are functionally literate and numerate. Living conditions for women are generally inferior to those for men: women have less education, less influence and power; they live under poorer circumstances and thus have shorter life-expectancy than their male counterparts. (UNDP-Nepal Human Development Report 2001)

That, then, is one side of the coin. The other? In the many hills and valleys where there are no major trade or tourist routes, communications continue in the highly traditional sense. Through folk music and folk tales, stories are passed on from generation to generation. Many of Nepal’s multifarious languages and dialects have no written form – after all, much of the rural population has remained illiterate. As always, they rely on oral transmission. Even

today, wandering minstrels and story-tellers travel through the hills and dales, relating fables and legends, as well as the latest tidings from here, there and everywhere. Religious festivals and seasonal gatherings mark the rhythms of life while also serving as fora for the exchange of news and information. (See Downs 1996; originally issued in 1980, much of his description and analysis remains valid.) In this way, knowledge about herbs and medicinal plants or farming methods is traded orally, just as the legends of demons and gods, of Bodhisattvas and mystics are passed from village to village. (Stevens 1996) In the Sherpa country around Mt Everest, you can still encounter the ‘mail runner’ – a combination of postman and bearer of the latest news and gossip. Every day, a husky youth from the main village of Namche Bazaar sets out on the gruelling 5–6 hour run down to the airstrip at Lukla, bringing letters and postcards from local people and tourists to the airplane. The next day he sets off for Namche again, this time bringing mail for the local people, together with the latest news – and gossip – from the capital. Nothing has changed, it would seem, although there are now telephones in the villages of Sagarmatha (Mount Everest) National Park and even satellite TV in some prosperous Sherpa households. Person-to-person communication is still the rule in this culture, which has developed its unique character in the shadow of the world’s highest peaks. It is only where tourism or development project have brought ‘modernity’ in their wake that there has been some change in local forms of interpersonal interactions. (Luger 2000)

More noticeable in the Himalaya than in the other mountain realms of the world is the juxtaposition of poverty and wealth, of backwardness and modernity, of spirituality and materialism – and of harmony and destruction. The main keyword, however, is *change* – in society, in culture, in the environment. Before Nepal opened its doors to the outside world in the early 1950s, it had taken decades or more for changes to come, establish themselves and become part and parcel of everyday life. The tempo was determined by natural cycles, and only a few novel measures – like techniques for regulating streams and rivers, the use of artificial fertilisers or the introduction of vegetable cultivation – would make a breakthrough, bringing rapid alterations in lifestyles and techniques of farming. Nowadays, however, external influences are increasingly setting the pace, transforming age-old village rhythms with amazing vehemence. (See Luger 2000a.)

Perhaps the most noticeable factor of change can be read from the statistics on population growth. For years the average growth-rate for the country as a whole has lain around the 2.3% mark. According to the 2002 Census, 78% of the country’s 23.1 citizens are under the age of

40; and 41% are less than 16 years old. In earlier times, population growth was much slower. Now the land cannot feed the people; and as harvests dwindle, more and more chemical fertilisers are applied, with no thought for the long-term consequences. In many areas, traditional agriculture – field cultivation and cattle breeding – can no longer provide a living. The result? Labour migration and urbanisation. (See Gyawali 1995.) More and more farmers are trying to gain a foothold in small or cottage industries, often supported by well-intentioned international development projects. Because of the scarcity of land, subsistence agriculture is rapidly becoming an additional source of income, not the mainstay that it has been for centuries. Throughout much of the country, the former isolation and self-sufficiency is being undermined through small-small market-oriented enterprises and exchange based on a cash economy. (See Adhikari & Bohle 1999.)

Just as in the Alps of Europe, there are in the Himalaya clear tendencies towards urbanisation. Literacy levels have risen appreciably in recent decades, but youth with higher education find themselves forced to move to the cities, or even abroad, as there is no suitable work available in the villages. Nepal's towns and cities are suffering from totally unbridled growth, and it is not only the serious environmental problems that place a heavy burden on already overtaxed local problem-solving capacities. (See UNEP 2001.)

A further dimension of change concerns the opening to the outside world – through road construction, market relations, work-migration, tourism, the media and the new information/communications technologies. It is from these factors that the powerful changes emanate – to the benefit but also the detriment of local communities. We can see these contradictions in societal change in the field of international tourism, which in most areas of Nepal has become an important force in only the past two or three decades. Too often, the thoughtless construction of tourism infrastructure has led to environmental destruction, as well as disrupting long-established socio-cultural structures – without providing any benefit for most members of the local communities. (See Tüting & Dixit 1986; East, Luger & Inmann 1998; Nepal 1999.)

Many areas in countries throughout the Himalaya-Hindu Kush have become highly attractive, frequently visited destinations for the growing industries of trekking and adventure tourism. (See Dixit 1995.) Lately, however, in many regions, armed conflict and other negative influences have since led to drastic declines in tourist arrivals, with equally drastic impact on

the economy. Examples here are Kashmir and, most recently, also Nepal: not surprisingly, tourists seeking paradise tend to avoid the hells of war.

These negative points need not be the final verdict on tourism, however. A small, land-locked, resource-poor country like Nepal desperately needs the revenues that tourism can provide. On the political front, a recently declared truce between the warring parties has not yet been broken (as of early April 2003), and negotiations are planned. And as for the environment? Responsibly managed eco-tourism offers an economic potential that can represent a welcome source of additional income for many. Additionally, such a form of tourism will not only respect the uniqueness of the fragile eco-system but can even contribute to protecting it. Important concepts like 'pro-poor' tourism and strategies for sustainability have indeed reached Nepal, and the initial successes are not to be ignored. (See SNV Nepal 2000.)

In the tourist areas of Nepal, standards of living are noticeably higher than elsewhere in the country. (See Sharma 2000.) This is especially the case with the Sherpas, that famed ethnic group of the Everest region: for nearly 50 years now they have been able to profit from tourism, and are often cited as a model example of a society in successful transition. With the Chinese occupation of neighbouring Tibet came an abrupt halt to most of their traditional trans-Himalayan trade – but the Sherpas were able to adapt, establishing a new and profitable source of livelihood in mountain tourism. Their high mobility and commercial expertise, results of centuries of experience in cross-border trade relations, also provided them with greater social and cultural openness, an indubitable advantage in dealings with foreign visitors. (Adams 1996)

In most instances, it can be shown that changes in the cultural structures of a society have been caused by external factors. This was certainly the case with Nepal. Until 1951 the country had remained closed to the outside, under the *de facto* rule of the aristocratic Rana prime ministers. Then, with the restitution of monarchical power, followed by the introduction of democracy and then the much-publicised expeditions attempting first ascents of Nepal's ten 8,000-metre peaks, came an opening to the world. Tourism developed, controlled by the royal house by means of entry, climbing and expedition permits. On the other hand, this kind of tourism had scant influence on the daily lives of peasants, whether in the Kathmandu Valley or away in the villages: the difference in culture and education between locals and foreign sahibs was simply too great.

The lifestyle of the local population was – and has largely remained – rooted in religious traditions, whether Hindu, Buddhist or animistic. Men and women feel a deep sense reverence towards Nature and all creation. Caves, mountain peaks, rock formations, natural springs and river confluences – even today, the mountain people see the landscape as holy, made up of places of power from which we humans can draw energy, but also places to be kept at a safe distance, because legends have long defined them as threatening. Communication with the protective deities has determined everyday life, including the total acceptance of secular power. Rebellion – be it against institutions, one's superiors or one's elders – becomes unthinkable in this worldview. Also today, few would dare to question the age-old principles of seniority. The agrarian cycle, together with the multiplicity of religious festival days and rituals – with their typical activities, visits to the temple, dances and processions – has always structured the rhythm of the year. As in all the collectivist cultures of Asia, family and clan bonds play a central role. They serve to protect vital institutions – such as the clear sense of hierarchy and the well-established rules of marriage – from abrupt change.

In this way, the kingdom of Nepal managed to keep much of its unique cultural identity until well into the 1970s, but social tensions and demands for reform increased massively over the years. Not until 1990 did the monarchy declare itself willing to renounce its claim to absolute power and permit a modernisation of the governmental system. (See Ogura 2001.) Since then the king is indeed the supreme representative of the nation, but the government is led by a popularly elected prime minister, and the politicians have kept making attempts at Westminster parliamentarianism. As yet, however, not a single government has managed to stay in office until the end of its elected legislative term. Political instability and lack of responsibility on the part of the political-administrative system have proven major obstacles to the positive development of the country. (See Hoftun, Raeper & Whelpton 1999; Kumar 2000.)

Until the late 1700s, Nepal had consisted of a collection of scattered small fiefdoms, each with its own ruler. Then came unification under Prithvi Narayan Shah, the 'Father of Nepal', whose scepticism of foreign powers and outside influences initiated the 'Closed Door' policy of isolationism keenly pursued by the oligarchic Rana regime (1846–1950). This near-total isolation, under conditions of absolute rule, laid much of the foundation for underdevelopment. Also the nation's culturally-based orientation, which led to economic

dependency on neighbouring India, may help to explain why the process of independent development made so little headway in Nepal. However, in addition to difficult topographical conditions and the lack of mineral resources, it is factors from recent history – like the high birth rate, land scarcity and bad governance – that have massively obstructed the country’s economic development.¹ Centuries of total isolation, leaving the country frozen in its own little time-capsule, together with socio-cultural factors like the caste system and the strict hierarchical system, prevented necessary social and societal change. Fatalism, says Dor Bahadur Bista in his still-controversial work from 1991, is very much to blame. To Bista, this involves the widespread conviction that the individual has no control over his or her life, that everything is in the hands of the gods, determined by fate... and this worldview stands in stark contradiction to the realisation of productivity, efficiency and other goals that could pave the way for noticeably better living conditions.

It was not until the introduction of democracy in Nepal in the 1990s that some changes were achieved – but with undesirable side-effects that took everyone by surprise. The southeast Asian ‘tigers’ had managed to achieve enormous economic growth in the course of the past few decades, adapting their traditions to modern realities through ‘Confucian dynamics’. In Nepal, however, practically any kind of social or economic development remained blocked by the deeply ingrained and absolute respect for tradition and status obligations – together with the meagre savings rate, the lack of investment capital and the general unwillingness to take chances and venture into the realm of uncertainty. (See Hofstede 1997, p. 243.) And yet, never before in the history of the nation had the opportunities for individual participation been so great. Never before had there been so much activity on the part of minority groups, women’s groups, students’ groups, organisations of the untouchable and the underprivileged. (See Dixit 2001.) The country was experimenting with democracy in fast-forward, even timidly beginning to question the hitherto unquestionable figures of authority. And thus it is hardly surprising that the picture became one of problems and crises, of a desperate search for a new orientation. Nepal’s struggle for economic independence and cultural self-awareness is in fact a logical consequence of its headlong rush into reform.

Modernisation through Development

¹ ‘Nepalese politicians and technocrats developed five-year plans one after another. Each espoused different objectives, priorities and outlay, which were never matched. Infrastructure would be developed. Regional imbalance would be ameliorated. Poverty would be alleviated. Employment would be generated and what not. Plan became document to sell aspirations and an instrument to disseminate the political rhetoric.’ (Acharya 2002, p.195)

Development cooperation is customarily associated with change and modernisation. In the process, cultural conventions are often viewed not as valuable traditions to be preserved, but as questionable affairs that can become the source of potential problems. Western ‘experts’ may not openly support Mao’s dictum ‘Religion is poison’ – but there is often the sneaking suspicion that local traditions, local cultures and religious beliefs are more trouble than they are worth. For that reason, development cooperation – even on such apparently mundane matters as water and electricity supply, or poverty reduction – has to be understood as an ongoing experiment in intercultural understanding. It must build on day-by-day efforts to find a mutually acceptable basis for working together to develop activities – and that also means being ready to change plans and abandon ventures if no consensus can be reached on the goals and how to reach them.

Austria has been providing development assistance to Nepal for nearly 40 years now. In the beginning, activities focused on map-making and master-plans for the conservation of world cultural heritage sites in the Kathmandu area, as well as some construction projects, including new plans for the largest university in the country. There followed support to projects focused on technical and agricultural development, including the construction of a small hydropower plant for villages in Sagarmatha National Park. A pattern was established: Austrian experts provided know-how which was deliberately transferred to the local level, for long-term sustainability. (See Höivik & Luger 2002.)

A focus on cultural preservation and conservation entered the picture with a project initiated in the 1980s: the restoration of a ruined palace in the Durbar (Royal) Square of Patan. This was a unique architectural venture that resulted in the establishment of the now widely-acclaimed Patan Museum. With this museum project, an exemplary contribution was made towards the preservation of the many Kathmandu Valley sites on UNESCO’s World Cultural Heritage list which had been neglected and were rapidly decaying (Hagmüller 2002).

Classical Nepali architecture was meant ‘to serve man and gods alike’ (Mary Slusser). Influenced also by the art of geomancy – the science of man and landscape – it has exerted a magical attraction for Westerners as well, and a wide range of international organisations have become involved in efforts to save these pearls of Eastern culture from decline and destruction. However, these are more than mere assemblies of stone, brick and wood; or of hills and valleys and mountains pleasing to the eye. Ruedi Högger has pointed out an essential

but little-realised truth: that mountain and city, farmhouse and temple are not only external-material but also internal-spiritual components of a broader totality. Wherever there are humans, the gods are also present; whatever is built for secular purposes, bears witness to the sacred as well. 'The temple courtyard is a living space, and the landscape is a temple. Both indicate the existence of another, obvious, reality above and beyond themselves. This is the essential mark of a cultural awareness that has become alien to the West.' (Högger, 1993, p. 28)

Can, then, East and West never meet? With the restoration of the neo-classical Keshar Mahal 'Garden of the Six Seasons', also known as the 'Garden of Dreams', in the bustling centre of Kathmandu, *Eco Himal – Society for Ecological Co-operation Alps–Himalaya* – has been involved for the past two years in a project to conserve and promote the cultural and architectural heritage of Nepal. The Garden of Dreams is in itself a remarkable bridge between two cultures, constructed in the early 1900s by a Rana aristocrat who sought to incorporate elements of European culture – the gardens of Versailles, neo-Grecian architecture, Victorian poetry – into a distinctly Asian environment. A key feature of this project is the utilisation of a dormant resource to serve as a vehicle for capacity building in fields critical to the development of quality tourism and architectural preservation: garden conservation, eco-tourism, and cultural resource management. The revitalisation includes not only restoring the physical structure but also introducing new functions: cafés, restaurants, exhibition facilities. The Garden of Dreams is meant to serve as a quiet oasis in the heart of modern Kathmandu. (See www.ecohimal.or.at; see also Höivik & Luger 2002, pp. 80–85.)

Under the enormous pressures of modernisation, the societies of the Himalaya are experiencing rapid cultural transition, caused not least by the mega-projects promoted by donor countries and development banks. Smaller development-political interventions at the village level are not capable of steering or reining in such processes: all that can be done is to provide point-by-point support. For this reason, in 1998 Eco Himal prepared a cultural concept to serve as a guideline in its practical development work in the Himalaya. Promotion of culture and cooperation on culture projects, seen as a component of development policy, can make a considerable contribution to maintaining and ensuring the survival of traditional culture – whether popular, folk culture or so-called high-brow culture like art or architecture. Vanishing cultural artefacts can be saved and preserved for coming generations. With the

promotion of cultural initiatives comes the opportunity to revitalise near-forgotten traditions and imbue them with new life.

Cultural projects serve to strengthen processes that promote self-awareness and identity. This can prove particularly important among the ethnic minorities who tend their terraces in the hills and mountains beyond the Kathmandu Valley. Frequently of Buddhist or animist persuasion, they find themselves confronted with mainstream Hindu dominance and are searching for cultural autonomy. Most of Eco Himal's work is carried out among mountain ethnic minorities, many of whom do not even speak Nepali. They may be Sherpa, Rai, Tamang, Thangmi, or underprivileged low-caste Hindus. Often called 'Bhotias' (literally: 'hill-people', but with disparaging connotations), they are discriminated, at the bottom of the social hierarchy of the country. (See Pradhan 2002.) Respect for the local culture is crucial to any development project, and especially in Asia, where politeness and etiquette in interpersonal relations are the precondition for all communication. Only through such understanding and respect can trust be established and a true partnership for co-operation become possible.

A further example of Eco Himal's cultural involvement is the support given to a pioneering series of traditional music recordings of minority groups. This involves making high-quality recordings – of the ancient songs of the Rai; the dances, songs and ritual music of the Sherpa; Tibetan work-songs – within the framework of the 'Vanishing Cultures Collection' in collaboration with the Kathmandu University Department of Music. Additionally, support is given to scholarly publications about these ethnic groups, including language guides and dictionaries. Such works facilitate access to minority cultures and open new dimensions. Eco Himal's collaboration with Nepali publishing houses and culture-producers like the Nepal Photographic Society helps to create space for local actors to realise their own projects. The Austrian Development Cooperation has also been encouraging efforts to build up a Nepali film culture. Support has been given to the annual Kathmandu Mountain Film Festival, first arranged in 2000 by Himal Association, a local NGO active in the media field. The festival provides screenings of documentaries and 'docu-tainment' productions, selected with a view to quality and their environmental or cultural focus.

Explicitly cultural activities intersect with education work in any Eco Himal project – also those focused on technical cooperation. Moreover, by means of conferences, exhibitions and

the promotion of university thesis work on the one hand, as well through literacy classes and further education courses on the other, Eco Himal also attempts to create greater awareness of, and reflection on, questions connected with culture and tradition. For example, financing is provided for a boarding school where 20 young people are trained in traditional Tibetan medicine; likewise, there is financial support for the infrastructure for the sound archives of the Kathmandu University Department of Music – the sole facility in Nepal where the music of different ethnic groups is in focus: recordings are made, and music education is offered. All these activities aim to create the necessary structural preconditions for ‘enabling environments conducive to human self-development’, as per UNESCO recommendations.

Cultural cooperation should not be limited to preservation and conservation, however. The challenges of the future and the efforts of developing societies to link up with global trends and markets also involve economic and technical challenges with consequences for the ‘software’ of society – its culture. Cultural cooperation measures must not neglect the possibilities inherent in new cultural techniques, as in the fields of communications and information technology: it is important to activate the dynamic potential of innovation, all the while avoiding the dramatic cultural splits that can be unleashed by the omnipresent mania for modernisation.

Thus, Eco Himal has been providing support to Nepal’s first independent community broadcasting station, Radio Sagarmatha. Founded in 1997, it aims not to make a profit but instead to serve a public-information function. In a country where only about half the population can read and write, radio is by far the most efficient medium for providing information, entertainment and education to the broad public. On Radio Sagarmatha there are interviews and phone-in discussions, quality children’s programmes and regular features on issues concerning everyday life. Such informed debate can help to create an environment receptive to new ideas and change, as well as serving as a forum for debate. Increased participation of communities in radio and the media in general is vital for helping pluralism to take firm root in Nepal. Only a democratic, responsible and accessible media can uphold human rights in the true sense, increase public participation in decision-making, and ensure equity and social justice. Although independent media are widely recognised as a precondition for a functioning democracy, Nepal has lagged far behind. Where political information is concerned, a kind of pre-censorship is practised, with the electronic media under *de facto* political control of the state. (See Luger 2002.) Moreover, unlike the other

commercial FM channels, Radio Sagarmatha broadcasts solely in Nepali and local languages, playing Nepali music in preference to the otherwise omnipresent Hindi-English pop from videos and Indian films. Support is important to independent radio stations, because existing laws sharply limit the amount of time that can be used for commercials. (See Pringle & Luger 1999.)

An important component of Eco Himal's grassroots development strategy is the establishment of CDCs, Community Development Committees, in its project areas. Based in part on local traditions of cooperative activity, such as the *guthis* of the Newar ethnic group (see Acharya 2002, p. 208ff), these CDCs become true partners in project work. In this way Eco Himal seeks to link up with local knowledge and already established forms of organisation. Even before the state of Nepal was established in the late 1700s, local groups used to be organised in so-called *kipats*, securing rights to their traditional territory on the basis of common law (Diemberger 2002, p. 106 ff). Thus, Eco Himal's Rolwaling Eco Tourism Project west of Everest, its agricultural and village development projects in the Buffer Zone of Makalu-Barun National Park (in the Arun region of eastern Nepal) and in Solu Khumbu district (the rugged hilly region south of Everest) all feature CDCs, officially registered as cooperatives. With their basis in the local community, they function as commercial enterprises, entitled to receive credits, make investments and engage in business activities. Logically enough, these CDCs are involved in all decision-making: they are the real actors in project implementation. (See Inmann & Luger 1998.)

Mainstream Nepali culture is patriarchal, yes. But this particular barrier to development can and should be overcome, and women must be integrated into development activities. Among several ethnic groups – the Gurung, for example – there is a tradition of women's groups, the *Aama toli*. These groups can often manage to make their voices heard against the dominance of males in society, and have become central pillars in the pioneering tourism projects of the Annapurna Conservation Area Project. (Bajracharya 1998) Not everywhere in the country, however, are there activist groups like these. More often, it is difficult to motivate women to participate, for various reasons. (See www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/nep/html) Many women lack education and self-confidence; and even though they suffer under the burden of their multiple work duties, the general attitude is that their role is confined to motherhood and the home. (See Acharya 2000; Tamang 2002.)

The people of the Himalayan villages seek spiritual power and the assistance of the gods not only for their fields and crops, or in connection with special ritual occasions and festivals, but especially in case of illness. The deplorable state of health care, malnutrition and catastrophic hygienic conditions are the cause of the many widespread and life-threatening illnesses endemic throughout the country. In remote regions, the traditional shaman enjoys greater respect for his healing powers than does the village pharmacist, or the medical personnel at the nearest healthpost. The way to the latter is often long, whereas the *dhami* – the faith healer – will come right into the home to expel the evil spirits who have taken up residence in the sick person. (See Miller 1997.) One project is now trying to integrate these *dhamis* into the more modern sphere, by providing them with basic medical training. The underlying rationale is the recognition that, in order to be successful, development projects in the medical sphere need to take into consideration the wishes of the local people. By building on established local traditions, development workers together with respected faith healers can bring a better understanding of the importance of hygiene and sanitation.

Just as many practical problems in development work can be linked to ingrained practices of culture and tradition, also in the areas of economic there exists a ‘culture code’ that can make it difficult to introduce deep-going re-structuring of structures and lifestyles. (See Faschingeder 2000, p. 23.) In several tourist areas, however, such transition has been accomplished in a model way; here the experience of Eco Himal in the Everest region of Solu Khumbu and in eastern Nepal is pertinent. In the late 1970s Austria began work on a power plant in Sagarmatha National Park, as a joint venture between Austrian hydropower companies and the Nepalese Electricity Authority. Eco Himal was in charge of this project from 1992 until 1999/2000, when all management responsibility was handed over to Khumbu Bijuli Company, which is run and staffed by members of the local Sherpa community. As an integral component of its involvement, Eco Himal trained local technicians and liaised closely with the surrounding Sherpa communities, providing information and motivation to promote acceptance of this new technology. When the Thame–Namche Small Hydropower Plant came on line in autumn 1994, this marked the beginning of a new era in the lives and culture of the Sherpas of the Khumbu. (See Rachbauer 2001 for further details.)

The original aim had been environmentally-oriented: the desire to protect the forests of this important tourist area by decreasing the use of firewood. Cooking, space heating and warming up water (with more and more tourists expecting a hot shower) were consuming vast amounts

of this precious natural resource. As shown by Fischbacher's study (1999), the use of hydro-electric power has made possible a considerable reduction in timber consumption. In the year 2001, some 25,000 trekkers visited this region, famed for the highest peaks in the world and for the Sherpa people living here. And what did these foreign visitors find? – more than 100 telephone lines, 20 satellite dish antennas and three cyber cafés. The precondition for surfing the cyberspace in the shadow of Mt Everest? – a dependable supply of electricity to all the surrounding villages, thanks to the hydropower plant. With the whole new range of commercial and service enterprises and activities which electricity was made possible, the region became an even more attractive destination for mountain tourism.

Naturally enough, with advent of electricity and growing tourism, the villages of the Sherpa country have undergone change. Especially the children and grandchildren of the first pioneers of mountain tourism in Nepal are enthusiastic about their new links to the modern world. The world in which the divine dispensation ruled unquestioned, in which the rhythms of human life were determined by rituals, festivals and the cycle of the seasons, a world without tourism – this is known to the younger Sherpa generations only from the tales told by their elders. Today's young Sherpas see tourism as the source of prosperity, because it creates jobs and income possibilities.

Indeed, tourism came just at the right time, some five decades ago. When the Chinese occupied Tibet in the 1950s, this undercut the very foundations of the Sherpa economy, which had been heavily reliant on the trans-Himalayan trade in salt and other commodities. (See Fürer-Haimendorf 1989.) Instead, the resourceful and flexible Sherpas focused on tourism, combining this with their traditional yak husbandry and potato cultivation. In 1976 the Everest area was declared a National Park; it rapidly became the country's second most important trekking destination, after the Annapurna region. Since then, the life rhythms of the people have followed the seasons of tourism more than the seasons of the agricultural year and religious festivals. With tourism has come a mixed economy, increasingly characterised by a dynamically expanding service sector and by a culture that has clearly managed to retain much of the old while incorporating and adapting elements of the new. (See Adams 1996; Stephens 1996.)

Change is rapid in this region, a highly dynamic one by Nepali standards. Harvesting the potatoes, tending the animals, hosting foreign tourists and sending e-mails – these are not seen

as contradictory. Today's young Sherpas are busy trying to formulate their own identity, picking and choosing those elements that they find suitable. The traditional lifestyles of the Himalayan valleys may appear as bulwarks of divine and natural order, but over the centuries they have undergone many a modification; far from being fixed and impermeable, they have moved with the times, integrating once-alien elements. What is new about current developments is the pace of change – not the fact of change itself.

Accepting contradictions – the holistic view

Despite the visible signs of secularisation and modernisation, the people of the High Himalaya still honour the mountains as the abode of their ancestors and their gods. Buddhists consider the peaks to be the residence of the 'soul' of the community, whose welfare is directly dependent on revering the mountains and maintaining their purity. The honour of an area is linked to the inviolability of the land. The interpretation of the natural order as something sacred underlies the laws of the human world, and destroying this divine dispensation can bring about natural catastrophes. The Tibetologist Hildegard Diemberger speaks of '*beseelter Landschaft*' – landscape charged with spiritual import. Human beings live in close connection with the world: we are a part of it as we pass through the never-ending cycle of birth and rebirth into the six realms of potential existence.

'However, in none of these visions is the world ever considered as an object placed at the disposal of human beings. The world is a part of the totality; thus every action has consequences that affect the whole', she writes (Diemberger 2002, p. 122). In this she is echoing the words of John Donne centuries earlier: 'No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main' – an insight largely lost to later generations in the West.

Ruedi Högger, explaining the cosmic order of the Hindu culture of Nepal, makes reference to this holistic approach. He writes of the various forms of knowledge for which everyday Nepali has specific terms. With *parera*, literally 'being inside', one is speaking of the knowledge gained through experience; *padhera* is book- or school-learning. These are like two opposite poles, mutually attracting yet repelling, in endless condition of tension. In this figure the male and female principles are expressed as *lingam* and *yoni* (literally the male and female genitalia) in the omnipresent world of symbols in Nepali culture. These opposites are also expressed in two dominant symbolic figures, the water serpent and the sun-bird. The

serpent (*naga*) stands for the powers of the earth, the chthonic realm, the basis of life, indeed the primordial life-force from which comes all growth and development. To the sun-bird (*garuda*) – the vehicle of the Lord Vishnu – belong the heavens; with his divinely-sent gaze he oversees the higher order of the unity of existence. As guarantor of this order he is the opponent of the serpent, whose wild force he seeks to tame and control. Both these beings, however, are necessary, and both find expression in the *toranas* (the richly carved or embossed shields above the doors to temples and other edifices) showing the Naga–Garuda myth. But the underlying idea can be carried over to development policy as well, where intuitive understanding and cool-headed science are not mutually exclusive, nor are the processes of the unconscious and rational thinking. (See Högger 1993, pp. 214 and 293.)

Being able to accept this coexistence of opposites, without expecting to conquer or resolve them – this could be identified as a central principle for a new kind of development cooperation, one that seeks to achieve the holistic approach characteristic of many Eastern cultures. Those who follow the purely rational logic of calculations and planning so dear to many development experts are on a collision course with this older view of existence, seeking as they do to eliminate ambivalence and conflict, suppressing the disparity between higher and lower forces, between rational and irrational impulse.

An especially important aspect of trans-cultural understanding concerns the rhythms of time itself. (See Grünberg 2000, p. 95 f.) Western planners are accustomed to having their schedules and deadlines, their budget frameworks and time horizons, and often impose them willy-nilly on cultures where time is seen in quite other ways. In Nepal, for example, with a concept of time totally different from that of industrialised Europe, ignoring ‘Nepali time’ in the planning of any project is a sure-fire recipe for failure. We can illustrate this ‘hidden dimension of culture’ with one everyday example. In Nepal the common parting greeting to one setting off on a journey is *bistaarei jaanus* – ‘go slowly’, to which the traveller says to those remaining behind *bistaarei basnus* – ‘stay at home slowly’! This repeated *bistaarei, bistaarei* (slowly, slowly) serves as a constant appeal to pause and reflect, and not to rush ahead too quickly or too ill-advisedly. On the other hand, of course, it also provides the perfect explanation when things don’t quite work out as planned, when performance fails to come up to expectations. This application of customary time presents Westerners with a real intercultural challenge, as it contradicts all the rational calculations and the forward urge of project planning. (See Levine 1999.)

Just who is to decide, and who is follow, is frequently glossed over or romanticised in the literature on development policy. In the participatory model, which is based on maximum possibilities of local-level involvement in decision-making, it is often idealised. (See Mikkelsen 1997.) However, if participation is taken seriously, as the demand for ‘ownership’ in the true sense of the term, then it may well happen that the local partners succeed in introducing quite different views and orientations. Totally different project goals can enter the picture – ones that might not necessarily fit the criteria of donor nations or development agencies. (See Miller 2000.)

Here we have to ask: for whom is this development activity intended? Projects nowadays cite buzzwords like ‘capacity building’ and ‘empowerment’, used as strategies to benefit the weak and disadvantaged, to promote a change in the balance of power and/or provide communities and individuals with possibilities for self-development. This is quite a different story from the earlier efforts of centralistic, capital-intensive and elite-oriented development planning, which aimed to bring entire nations out of the clutches of tradition and backwardness, and into the world of modernisation and industrialisation – the idea being that this would also lead to the mobilisation of human resources and economic growth. If nothing else, today’s development approach has a much clearer conception of the specific stakeholders involved. (See Kunczik 1985, p. 85 ff.) Even the latest schemes of the EU or the World Bank, to bring the countries of the Third World into the realm of the latest information and communication technologies (ICTs), are finding concrete expression in the provision of infrastructure and in projects within the fields of health, education and the environment. Depending on the particular goal, the partners in these efforts may be governments, industry and commerce as well as NGOs and initiatives from civil society. (See e.g. www.europa.eu.int/information_society/index_en.htm; www.worldbank.org/html/infodev/)

In the countries of the Himalaya, the influence of Western culture has as yet remained a largely superficial phenomenon. Despite the layers of Western pop fashions, entertainment and trivia, old Hollywood films and TV re-runs, there is little evidence that the general public actually identifies with these products. And thus a major precondition for the ousting of local forms is missing. True, tourists in Nepal can get Coca-Cola (locally made, on license), although they still have to go to New Delhi for MacDonalD’s – but the burgers are made of goat or lamb, served in local versions in twin-arch outlets where working conditions are

probably no worse than in street-side fast-food places. Or take Indian TV spring 2003: also viewers in Nepal are treated to endless commercials showing well-upholstered middle-class Indians dropping everything in pursuit of the latest irresistible offerings from the Pizza Hut chain – *pizza marsala* and *pizza tandoori*, surely the perfect adaptation.

What does the rice farmer of the paddyfields around Kathmandu care, if his cable TV informs him that traffic in the suburbs of Sydney has come to a standstill because of heavy fog? And, should he catch the weather forecasts on BBC's World Service, he – or his school-going children – may well be confused. Reports are posted for Beijing and Bangkok, for Delhi and Karachi – but Kathmandu simply does not exist. Why then should the BBC exist for him? Such information simply glides by, irrelevant and thus unremarked. To escape from reality, the rice farmer, the seamstress, the shopkeeper, the housewife and their friends and neighbours all switch over to the private Indian entertainment channels for an uninterrupted, undemanding diet of Hindi fantasy, old and new. Whether for episodes of the Hindu epics or equally unreal Bollywood movies composed of equal parts of violence, song 'n dance and chaste romance, the audience sits enthralled. Nor is it only in the audiovisual sphere that political Hindu nationalism sounds its imperialist roar. In the economy, in trade and commerce, in culture – it holds its lesser neighbours firmly in its grip. When it rains in Delhi, the government in Kathmandu open their umbrellas, bowing to the unchallenged might of their giant neighbour (Dixit & Ramachandaran 2002).

In Nepal, discussions of globalisation have generally been limited to two aspects. The first is the work-migration of Nepalis to the Gulf states. (Indeed, their currency remissions even rival the figures of the state budget.) And the second concerns the capabilities of Nepali programmers and computer experts. Thanks to them, the country now enjoys a relatively high level of connectivity – at least, for those who can afford computers *and* who live in areas with electricity and telecommunications.

Now the World Bank has recognised the importance of modern communications for the development process in poor countries, and has defined itself as a 'Knowledge Bank'. By promoting the efforts of ICTs in developing countries, it seeks to narrow the information gap between poor and rich countries. And yet... in the Himalaya, as throughout much of Asia, a mythical concept of time predominates, with the past equally a part of the present. Against such a backdrop, it is hardly to be expected that the innovations can be absorbed rapidly and

painlessly. (See Tetzlaff 2000, p. 44.) Among experts, however, there is general agreement that, bolstered by ICTS, also Nepal will achieve definite developmental goals in the years to come, with results that will justify any risks of technological and cultural upheaval. (See Akhtar & Gregson 2001.) The ICTs case-study of the International Telecommunications Union, for example, accords new technologies an important role in the future development of the country. (See www.itu.int/ti/casestudies) A similar development plan was published by the National Planning Commission in 2001, although the demands of the current political situation have led to its being put on ice for the time being (HMG & IT 2001).

It is the big actors who, in their search for markets around the globe, infuse local societies and cultures with unrest – but also new dynamics. On the other hand, their influence is largely restricted to the major centres: often the periphery is affected only indirectly, if at all. The changes emanating from globalisation, with their positive and their negative effects, are not unlike the ancient Hindu myth of Garuda and Naga: constructive and destructive forces together form the totality of life. We cannot expect that the new communication technologies will enable a retreat from the processes that have disrupted the ancient unity of the life-connections between economy, society and nature. Accumulation and expansion have become the driving principles, and profit considerations rule supreme. That is why the culture of the industrial world represents a threat to the world of traditional cultures. With its means–end rationality, it stands diametrically opposed to the older holistic, mythic and symbolic understanding of man and nature as interlinked and inseparable. (See also Scherrer 1988.)

However, just as the answer to thirst need not always be Coca-Cola, the road to the future need not be a one-way street. Variety is still possible. The North–South gap may perhaps not be bridged by intercultural dialogue between unequal partners, but developing societies have a vast potential with their rich and deeply-rooted cultural foundations, so resistant to outside influences. Collective wisdom and indigenous knowledge should be utilised for modernisation, rather than ignored or dismissed as awkward remnants of the past. Here we are talking about the preservation and further development of the core values so vital to all cultures and societies.

We should realise that all cultures have long been trans-cultural structures perfectly capable of integrating elements of outside origin. Where two cultures meet, something new is bound to emerge, through mutual inspiration and enrichment. History has also shown that different

cultural worlds can co-exist, side by side. Despite the trumpeting of the global agenda, it is indeed possible, through reflection and careful choice, to stake out courses that need not be mere copies of the Western highway.

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