An aerial photograph of a mountain valley in Jhimpa, Nepal. The landscape is dominated by terraced rice fields that follow the contours of the hillsides. The fields are in various stages of growth, showing shades of green and yellow. A central valley contains a small cluster of buildings and more lush greenery. The background features high, rugged mountains under a clear blue sky.

# MITHO TALES

Lucien Lanson Hirigoyenberry, Jhimpa (16/17)

On Saturday March 4th, I went tree cutting for the first time and, for the first time in my life, I got to truly understand what it means to make a ‘food choice’. Swarswati, Sunil and Laxmi’s mother took Stella and me to her patch of land up in Jhimpa. We had agreed to meet her at her house at six in the morning and were greeted with nasta: kodoko roti and sweet milk tea. After eating, the forty-minute steep climb towards the top of the hill unfolded itself. As we got higher up, so did the sun and its warm light soon caught up with us on this chilly morning. We got to the patch and the mother instructed us to watch her so that we could learn. So we observed her climbing trees in a lungi (a wrapped around skirt) while carrying a heavy sickle. As the mother ascended (with ease) towards the top of tree, fallen branches accumulated around the base of the tree. We gathered the freshly cut wood into a bundle that we would later attach to our foreheads with a string. The walk down back to the house on slippery, serpentine paths with the load resting on our backs and pulling our heads backwards was not that enjoyable but we managed to do the entire thing without shedding a tear. The task was rather tiring (to say the least) but unlike many others, it was not part of our daily routine. All of this effort was only to provide feed for the animals and wood to cook with. And that is the day I realised that there are many stories behind what we have on our plates.

Reading through my diary, my love for the local food is apparent and it is one of the reasons why I decided to focus this exploration on it. However, I quickly realised that by exploring Jhimpa through its food culture, I got to delve into many other salient features of the community. Agriculture, women, religion to mention a few are all integral parts of life in the valley and somehow relate to food. Sharing meals was a lovely way to bond with people. A family I mention a lot throughout this text is the Pokharel family. The Pokharels live in Karigaun (Jhimpa’s next-door neighbour hill) and have treated me like one of their own and I am infinitely grateful for that. I would usually spend about 2-3 hours a day with them everyday and they are the ones who kept me going. The family was comprised of Ama (mother), Bua (father), Manoj (16 year-old son), Mukti (10 year-old son), Mahendra (8 year-old son) and Muna (1 year-old daughter). The parents told me they considered me as their son and I see them as my parents from another time and my sisters and brother from another place. Most of the recipes were inspired by the observations and questions I collected over the months I spent by their side.

# AGRICULTURE

*100% of people own cultivable land*

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Just like the kitchen is the main room of the Nepali house, agriculture is at the heart of the Nepali life. From dawn to dusk, people work in their field; it is not a matter of choice but rather one of survival. Indeed, agriculture is, by far, the main source of livelihood for the inhabitants of the hills. All families own at least some sort of land that they have to take care of in order to feed themselves. This means nearly everyone is a small-scale farmer who works all day, whether it is a weekday or not, to sustain themselves. There are a few exceptions to this such as teachers, police officers or other sort of government officials. Even then, they normally work at least a little in their (fewer) fields. In this case, people will buy more food from the shops or other community members. The difficulty lies in the country's geography. Indeed, according to my students' "society's book", Nepal is divided into three geographical zones: the Himalayas, the hills and the Terai (a big plain occupying the lower half of the country and inhabited by two thirds of the population). Living in the hills, the landscape was wonderful but working on it was far from easy. Carrying heavy baskets called दोको (doko) on their foreheads, constantly going up and down steep paths, being exposed to landslides on the daily - although particularly during the rainy season - are all part of life in Jhimpa. The agricultural practices are sustainable and reflect green ideals. What can be recycled is recycled and every resource is optimised. Uneaten food and detritus are given to buffaloes that digest it, the faeces are mixed to straw and earth and the mixture is then used as a fertiliser to grow crops like maize or millet. In turn, this means products are delicious (मिठो, mitho, one of the first word I learnt), organic and fresh. Funnily, 'organic' is an English word that's made its way into Nepali along with the word 'chemicals' generally used in a context that highlights the fact that the food is extremely fresh (□□□□, taja). The geography also dictates the type of crop that can be grown. For example, only some fields can be wet enough for rice and only a particular strain of rice can be grown at this altitude.

Children, who are more like tiny adults, know everything that there is to know about growing their own food unlike those back home and often take pride in what they produce. I would happily rejoice with my students over the beauty of their fields. More than once, I asked my students or their parents if I could work with them but this was generally met with reluctance for two reasons: 1. If I do something wrong, it will probably result in them having to do more work or their food production being affected 2. I was the 'special guest' (even after ten months, unfortunately it is difficult to get rid of this title) and so I should not do anything. But as I got more familiar with the community, I got to do some farming which I enjoyed a lot; it was one of my favourite activities there (maybe because I am privileged enough for it not to be my daily life): picking lentils with the Pokharels, carrying fertiliser, going wood cutting, planting rice with Sabitra (my host) or cutting wheat with students after school. I got to learn about agriculture and spend time with the community and understand its fundamentals ie cooperation, friendship and kinship. This food-centred lifestyle can be overwhelming at first, but like everything else, you get used to it and you adopt it. It takes a surprisingly long time to become habituated to being asked "Did you eat? What did you eat? Was it good? Is my food good?" every day, on average five times a day (especially at the beginning). Similarly, at first, I found it quite irritating when someone would ask me what I was eating while snacking but by the end of the year, I was the same and asking everyone why they went to the shop and what they had had for breakfast.

There is little concern about nutrition except that daal, dairy, eggs or some meat must be consumed somewhat regularly to ‘give strength’. Animals are not used the same way as they are exploited at home. There is no large scale farming done at all in the villages; animals are only used as producers of fertilisers, for their milk and occasionally for their meat. Daal (a lentil or bean soup) and vegetables are eaten almost everyday, usually either one or the other. In winter, when resources were scarce, meat was prepared more often and sometimes when there were no veg or daal or anything, we would just have rice with a liquid prepared with spices, oil and anything that can add flavour. Buffalo milk or whey is also consumed (if possible) as a source of fat and protein. The recipes I share here are adaptable and should serve as inspirations; recipes are never fixed! My time in Nepal has taught me that cooking should be instinctive with a lot of tasting and experimenting and, preferably, reflect local and seasonal ingredients.

## **DAAL - दाल**

PINK LENTILS

GINGER

GARLIC

CUMIN

TURMERIC

FRESH CORIANDER

OIL

WATER

- Bring water/lentil mix to a boil. Boil for 8-10 minutes
- In a large pan, heat up the oil and throw in the garlic and ginger
- After 10-15 seconds, pour in the cooked lentil mixture
- Add in cumin and turmeric
- Bring to a boil and cook for another 10 minutes or so. You might want to add more water in case the lentils thicken. The end result should be quite thin (remember, you want it to help the rice slide down your throat, not congest it)
- Two minutes before serving, add the coriander and stir
- Pour onto an opulent pile of rice

The recipe should only be an inspiration. A lot of the times, daal will be made with dried, crushed beans which requires a lot more boiling time (up to an hour and a half). If you like spicy food, chilli (a little goes a long way) can add depth and character to a daal. If you prefer green/black lentils (like Puy lentils), follow the same procedure but instead of ginger you could do with onion, shallots or even tomato chunks; the result is equally satisfying. In the valley, this kind of lentil is harvested around the end of April, after wheat and before planting corn.

## VEGETABLES - □□□□□□ (tarkari)

HALF A CABBAGE

8-10 MEDIUM POTATOES

SALT

TURMERIC

CUMIN

WATER

2 TBSP OIL OR GHEE

- Cut the potato into wedges and slice the cabbage
- Heat the oil in a wok-type of pan
- Throw in the potatoes and shallow fry for a couple of minutes
- Add the chilli, cumin and turmeric. Cook for a couple of minutes
- Throw in the cabbage
- Add water and salt
- Cover until soft.
- Using the back of a big spoon/ ladle, lightly mash the potatoes and cabbage together until the consistency is more one of a bitty, thick broth/ liquidy mash (it does not sound that appetising but wait until you try it)
- Serve with a mountain of rice

The key to preparing delicious Nepali vegetables is not to overcomplicate things and to be fearless when it comes to oil and salt (though equally delicious recipes can be made more healthily).

Garlic, onions, ginger, cauliflower (or anything that you like really) would be great additions/ substitutions but this winter recipe was a staple in February/ March and is still one of my favourites. I like to think that a curry can work with any combination of vegetables and that spices play the role of the harmonising force that balances the flavour and unites them. Nutmeg, paprika, herbs of any kind are all sensible flavourings and are worth experimenting with, regardless of whether it tastes Nepali or not as long as it tastes great, the one true Nepali dogma. Saag (any leafy green) is the only exception in that it is generally cooked on its own rather than with other vegetables. In this case, just throw the saag in hot oil with chilly and salt and that should suffice. Different types of saag were available from June to February. The period that spans from February/March to May does not offer a lot of vegetables but rather fresh lentils and wheat. Some families own cows or buffalos in which case you'll be offered milk and the combination of vegetables, rice and warm, sweet buffalo milk is mind-blowingly 'mitho'. Thinking about the Pokharels, I get emotional for two reasons: they were so generous and I miss them but also the food and particularly their milk were so so good.

Regarding the proceedings of a meal, more precisely of a ‘daal bhaat’, they are very different from the ones at home in many ways:

1. You eat with your right hand, making a mush out of the rice and the daal/veg
2. The person who cooked (usually the mother) will eat after everyone
3. You get more than one helping, even in restaurants. ‘पुग्यो/Pugyo’ (enough, must be said with a hand over the plate otherwise you will be force fed) is a useful phrase.



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Daal bhaat at Radha's in Jiri + Manoj about to milk the buffalo



# WOMEN

*A girl's education is not seen as equally valuable as a boy's*



The status of women and girls could in itself be an entire topic of discussion. Women are what keep the community together despite the shocking gap that exists between men and women. Simply put, women are seen as those who cook, those who help in the field, those who take care of the house and most importantly those who provide a family. From a young age, that is what a girl is told to hope for in the future.

It is very rare to meet a family and not hear of a father or brother that has gone abroad to earn money and send it home, leaving the women on their own. Clearly, the situation is easy for neither side but women do have it rough. One of the worst-case scenarios resembles Nirmaya's life, the woman Stella and Caoimhe lived with. Nirmaya is a 24 year-old woman who lives in Okhareni. She was married at 19 to Dev and moved to his house where reside his grandparents, mentally-ill brother, cousin, his cousin's wife and two of their children. She has two children herself, Aditia (5) and Anu (1.5). In September 2016, Dev left Nirmaya so that he could study Biochemistry in Kathmandu and build his future. Meanwhile, Nirmaya who is far from looking like a happy, fulfilled person, works in the field all day long and when she isn't, she is taking care of the many people that live in her house. To this must be added other social norms and societal pressures: the widely accepted notion that a boy is better than a girl, the expectation to have a son, the ideal of being married young, the general lack of respect of men towards women, the prohibition from women to enter the kitchen while on their period (which is seen as dirty) and the caste system. When a woman (or sadly, a girl) becomes married, she is to leave her home and dedicate her new life to her husband's needs and family. Obedience becomes a great virtue. Her desires, opinions and ideas become secondary. More than once, it felt like the villages were stuck in the Middle Ages. Despite all of this, and maybe because there is no alternative, women keep going and rarely complain. In this kind of rural and developing area, it is women who make life possible (for more, refer to section about development).

Women are, by default, the ones who cook and it is by speaking to and observing them that I learnt how to make proper Nepali food. Every school day before class, I would go to the Pokahrels in Karigaun at 7 am and teach three brothers, Manoj, Mukti and Mahendra. I would normally arrive and go to the kitchen where the mother was preparing a snack for us (नस्ता, nasta). In the winter, kodoko roti and sweet tea were staples and they are the recipes I decided to share to illustrate the condition of women and also because they are delicious. To me, these recipes are revealing of the status of women because of all the times I had a snack at someone's house, I can only think of one instance when it was not a woman that made it (and even then it's because she had gone on a walk to feed the buffalos). Men and women work equally in the field (that is, when the man has not gone away) yet the housework (ie cooking, cleaning, washing, mudding etc.) is not shared. Men rest while women are still busy working. What's more, in the morning, the woman generally wakes up first so that she can make food for her family.

## MILLET ROTI - □□□□□□ □□□□ (kodoko roti)

MILLET FLOUR

WATER

OIL

- Pour as much flour as desired into a big bowl
- Pour a little water on top of the flour and mix using your hand
- Add water until the dough is solid but wet
- Form a ball
- Place the dough ball onto a hot pan with a tablespoon of oil at the bottom
- Using your wet hand, flatten the ball into a flatbread shape
- Cook on low heat for four minutes and flip onto the other side
- Leave until dark brown, about two-three minutes.

You could use wheat or rice flour or even a mixture of any and it is just as wonderful. Because I loved kodoko roti so much, Ama gave me some millet flour (as well as timur, a fantastic local spice) as a gift to bring back home and so it occupies a special place in my heart (and stomach!).

## TEA - □□□□ (chiya)

0.5 L OF WATER

A GENEROUS PINCH OF TEA LEAVES

2 TO 3 HANDFULS OF SUGAR

- Put everything in a saucepan over high heat



For two months, I would give an extra-lesson to my class 5 on Friday mornings and they wanted to give me money for it but instead I told them to just bring some snack that we would share together.

One day, I got given a large plateful of roti, freshly made by the students' mothers over a fire in the morning.

- Bring the mixture to a boil
- Brew for 2 minutes
- Pour and drink and forget about the risk of diabetes. The flavour should fill you with a warm, soft sensation that temporarily takes away your problems.

If you're feeling extra special, these are good add-ons:

- spices, a mix or even just one. Cloves, cardamom, black pepper are good ones.
- crushed thumb-sized piece of ginger + pinch of salt
- Alternatively, for an even more comforting version, boil the tea, sugar and spices (sugar, milk and cardamom is a winning combination in my

A *very* special mention goes to all women and girls of the valley.

opinion) in watered-down milk (ideally buffalo). Again, the secret is not to be stingy with the sugar. The final beverage feels very cozy and heart-warming. After (or before) a full-on day at school, sharing some nasta and drinking tea with a student is an instant that brought peace to my soul.

Making dinner at ChetSir's house on May 30<sup>th</sup>





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स्वा

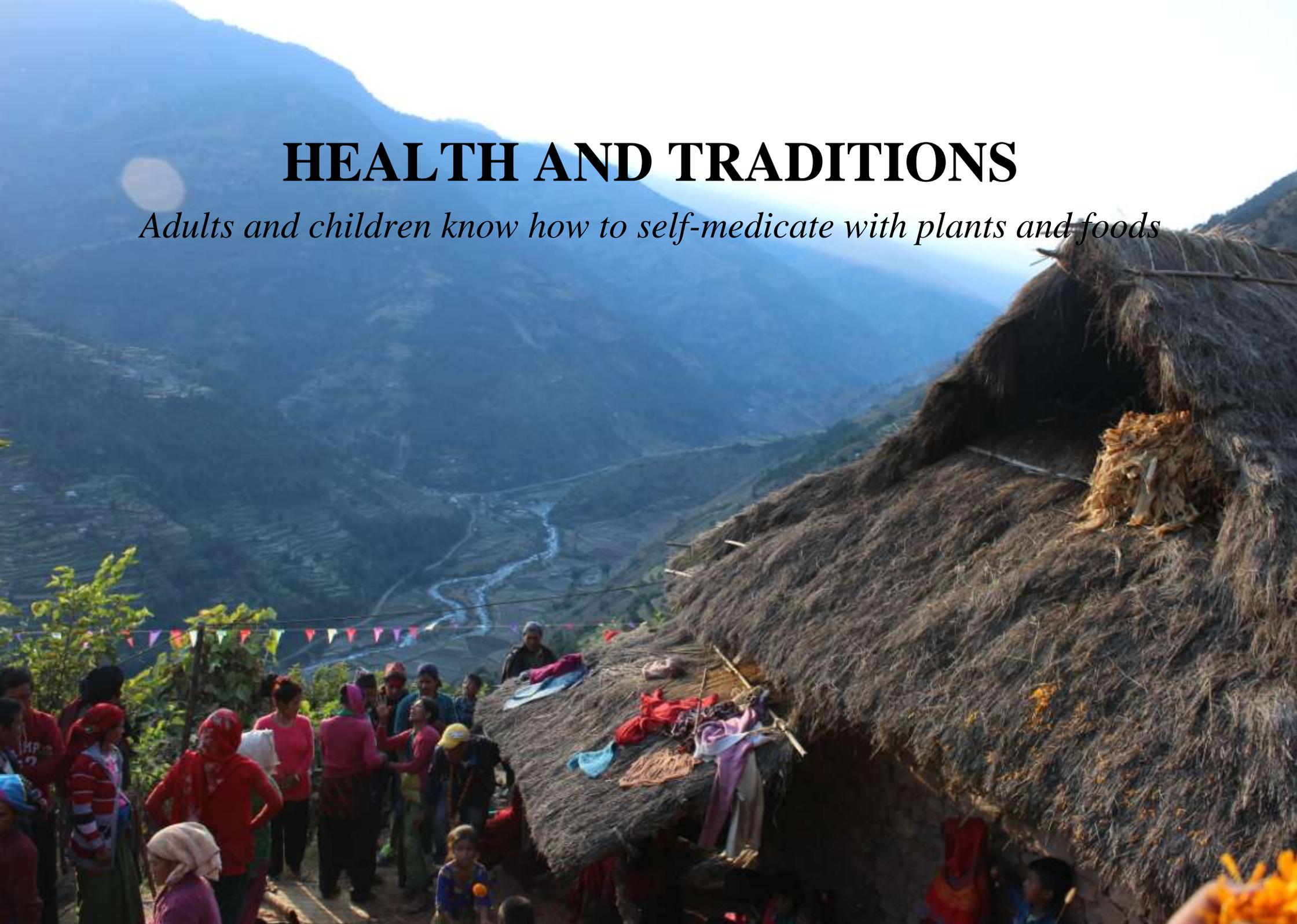
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# HEALTH AND TRADITIONS

*Adults and children know how to self-medicate with plants and foods*



On December 13<sup>th</sup>, as I was walking from Kanabazar to Jhimpa with Prakash from class 4, I missed a step and tried to reach for the stony wall next to me but ended up putting my hand on a nettle. Now, Nepali nettles are not your everyday nettles and I would not be so surprised if Nature.com published a review saying they are actually aliens that are trying to put an end to the realm of humanity. Their leaves are spiky and covered in thin, long spiky hairs and rash-like protrusions and being stung feels like being electrified and the particular spot remains sore for hours. Anyway, the point is: I was in pain (it was my first sting) and Prakash immediately grabbed another small plant and rubbed its leaves over the rash and suddenly the world was a better place. Although a lot of people in Western countries do know some things about the medicinal properties of plants, I reckon that, to some degree, increased urbanization has pushed us away from such knowledge. In Jhimpa, things are so rural that this traditional kind of expertise is still widely in use and even preferred. Medication is available but can be expensive, especially compared to nature that is completely free. Parents would advise me on what to eat to alleviate some of my ailments: ghee, mui, dahi, sinki for a sore tummy, boiled and lightly salted water for anything, a little rice for diarrhea, turmeric for infections of any kind, ginger for a cough; food and good nutrition are the first remedies to resort to, hence the importance of good nutrition (though such a term can be debated).

Generally speaking, the perception of health is quite different from the one at home. Firstly, mental health is unheard of. The closest there is to talking about mental health is when discussing mentally disabled people (ie someone born with a defect, someone who suffers from brain injuries after an accident). As for physiological health, its definition is limited to basic, common issues such as diarrhoea, stomachaches, headaches, colds etc. Significant problems will be referred to as (धेरै) बिरामी (*dherai birami*)/ very sick. Cancer or cardiovascular diseases are unheard of except in higher circles (ie some teachers, people who travelled). For instance, Bipana, one of my grade 1 student did not come to school for 6 months because she was unable to stand on her legs. She eventually came back (for once it was quite heart-warming to see a student run and jump instead of listening) but nobody could tell me what was the matter even though she had gone to a hospital in a town nearby.

During the last week of February and the first week of March, I kept getting sick having to take a few days off school. The Pokharels became quite worried for me and prepared a potion for me to feel better. The health-restoring brew was given to me a morning before school and the afternoon of my birthday; I had gone to their house to celebrate but was sick so I got the ingredients and the full instructions instead. Whether it is because of the natural powers of the plants or because I rested for a couple of days, I did get better and acknowledge that, at least to a certain extent, the qualities of certain plants can help in curing illness.

## COLD REMEDY - रुगाको औषाधी (rugako ausadhi)

Thumb size ginger bit, crushed  
Half a teaspoon of turmeric  
Half a teaspoon of salt  
200 mL of water

- Add all ingredients in a saucepan over high heat
- Bring to a boil
- Simmer for 2 minutes
- Drink as hot as possible, once before bed and some other time during the day. It might not be the tastiest beverage but I'm sure one can appreciate the herbal virtues and the redeeming soup of molecules.

Happy is healthy!

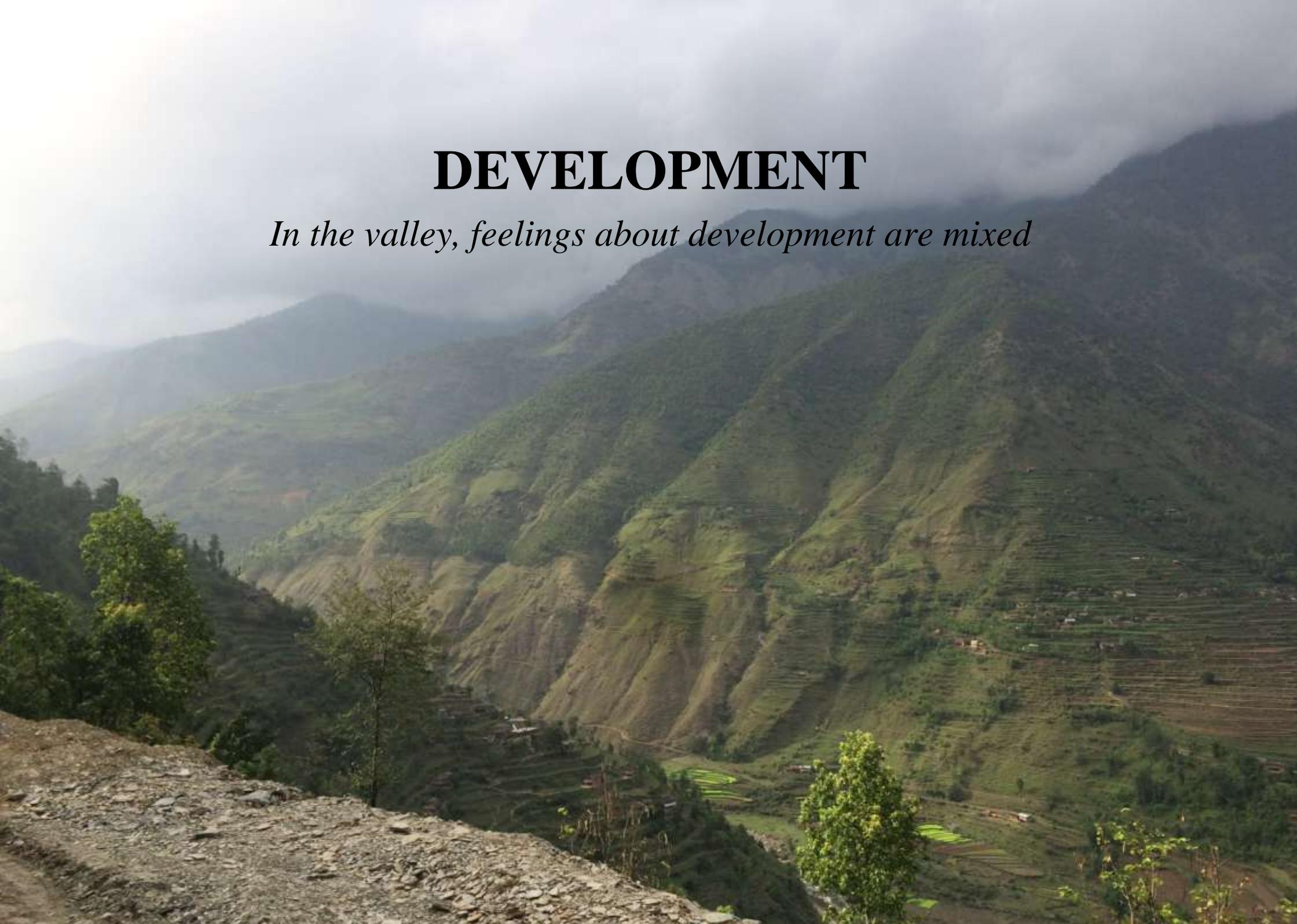
(Mahendra and Mukti + Goma and Pooja)





# DEVELOPMENT

*In the valley, feelings about development are mixed*



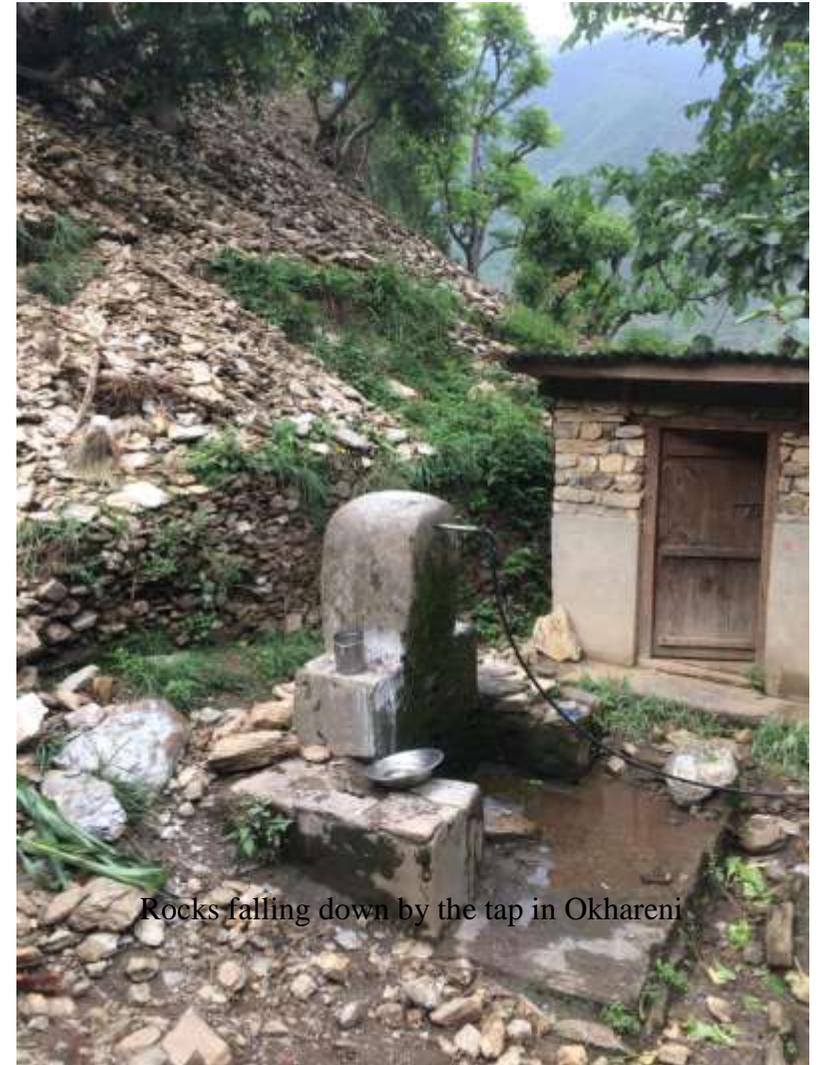
The idea behind this exploration was that by examining what people in Jhimpa eat, I could understand their culture. Looking at their (quite homogenous) diet, I am almost sure a pattern would emerge: a lot of grains, some vegetables, legumes and dairy, a little meat, some sugar and some junk food. The last item, junk food, is quite interesting to me because it exemplifies the development-oriented actions that happen in our valley, in the entire country even. Development brings about significant changes in people's lives and they sometimes clash with the traditions and long-standing savoir-faire and habits that originate in rural locations like our valley. These changes are observable in their diet, in the landscapes and in family structures and carry both a financial and humane cost.

In terms of available food, changes are seen at the shop in Kanabazaar where products from towns outside the valley are sold. Junk food (chowchow and biscuits) from small national industries, candy from India, clothes from Kathmandu and sometimes even coffee powder from god knows where. This reflects the opening on the outside world and the increased accessibility due to construction schemes across the country. Their junk food is delicious, cheap and convenient (that's the definition of junk food I guess) but a few people oppose it. Older, wealthier people claim that they make people sick and should be avoided, which is not completely wrong. Their age-old cultivated lean crops starkly contrast with the bright packets of salty noodles. The metamorphosis away from (an extremely) rural life is well underway.

Overall, looking further than their diet, there are significant changes in landscapes like in Okhareni where a new road is being built. This requires digging through old, untouched rocks, destroying fields and houses. Lalita's family (grade 7) have had to deconstruct their house and build a new one in Kanabazaar. Even worse, Nirmaya (the one already mentioned) found herself in danger when the new road was built just above her house causing a landslide that ran down all the way down to her house. The house ended up being severely damaged by the rocks, compromising two families' futures. Minds too are changing with increased exposure to the media that promote a fusion of stereotypical Western notions and conservative Nepali ones. The sexualisation of females and the idealisation of paleness are only two examples out of many and they turn out to be quite influential. Young girls (age 7-8) of darker complexion would sometimes paint their face with white powder to look paler. The clashes with the traditions are quite obvious here.

This change towards a more financially demanding lifestyle creates a need for money which in turn obliges people to go abroad, find work and send money home. Often, when visiting my students' houses, fathers and/ or brothers were away. Mothers, sisters and daughters on the other hand never leave and must take care of the house, fields and community. I would say that in about two-thirds of households, a mother or a big sister is on her own to take care of an entire family's needs. Going away and sending money is a goal for many students too. Madop, the first son of Bua, for instance, has been working in India since the age of 15 (he's 18) as a bus driver, coming back only once a year. This need to work away interferes with the important and long-standing concept of a close-knit family whereby everyone lives in close proximity and shares the work. However, the separation is necessary for their common welfare. Interestingly, rather than abandoning this concept, people show flexibility by adjusting to the pressures of a changing world and instead of going against the tide, people learn to go with the flow and, to an extent, let go. The happiness of family reunions becomes amplified.

A recipe that could be said to symbolise development and the opening on the outside world would be a 'chow chow' (dried salty noodles) recipe but I don't think 'boil water with dried noodles' really makes up a recipe so instead I'll give a tip: don't cook the noodles but eat them straight out of the packet like you'd eat crisps. Students love it and the cool kids snack on it during the break at 13:35 (it is truly so good).





# CASTES

*The Nepali law made it illegal to discriminate against castes in 1962*



In the valley, there are four main castes:

1. Brahmin: highest caste, they are believed to be the creators of the world, they are the only ones allowed to lead prayers at poojas (religious events), usually are the richest and the ones who possess the most land.
2. Kshetri: Kshetri is the second highest cast. Traditionally, they are the warriors so they are reputed for being strong and fierce.
3. Magar: Magar people colonised Nepal coming from Mongolia centuries ago. They live higher up in the hills and have their own language, Kham (though not all of them speak it). It is not rare for some villages to be only Magar. Because of these last two factors, they can be isolated from the rest of the community and form a sub-community. They are physically distinguishable by their slanted eyes and dark, straight hair and fair skin.
4. Dalit: the lowest cast, they are not allowed to enter inside the houses of people of higher castes and the latter will refuse to drink water served by the former, they are seen as dirty and are expected to physically show respect to Brahmin people (often by bending over to their feet to greet them).

Despite the government's legal effort to put an end to the caste system, it remains a strong influence on social norms with each caste expected to follow a particular set of behaviours: lowest castes will do work for the higher ones. Those born in more respected castes are usually richer and will give land to lower and poorer people in exchange of manual labour. RimSir once told me that the government encourages schools to have at least one female teacher, one Magar teacher and one Dalit teacher. At school, there were two female teachers, one of which was Magar and one Dalit teacher. Interestingly, despite the segregation that exists between the castes, the system seems never to be a source of hatred or violence. Marrying outside of one's caste is generally not the best choice and is unthinkable for the highest and lowest castes: in one case they want to retain their purity and in the other no one wants to become 'dirty'. Kshetri and Magar will sometimes intermarry. Although I loved the Pokharels, who were Brahmin, their conservative attitude towards Dalit people was not one I admired: on days when Ama would not go inside the kitchen (because of her periods) she would jokily call herself a Dalit or Mahendra and Mukti would use Dalit last names to make fun of one another. Traditionalist views persist in spite of the promotion of progressive ideas.

A recipe that would have well conveyed the idea of caste difference in terms of food would have been one centred on buffalo meat since only Magar and Dalit people accept to eat it. Higher castes think of it as dirty and cheap. However, because I do not personally eat meat, I never got to eat any but I heard it is good dried into thin stripes, sizzled or in a stew with rice (of course). Instead, I chose to share the recipe for 'dhido', a food that is rarely considered to be the tastiest. It is a substitute for rice and is best described as a thick porridge of flour and water. It is an indicator of social status (and hence often an indication of caste) in that if you can afford to have rice instead of dhido then you probably own more precious land since it is easier to grow grains like wheat, millet and corn than rice. Eventually, this means that people of higher castes will only eat dhido if they have to (say they want to save on their rice reserves) while it may be eaten everyday by lowest caste people who can't afford to buy a lot of rice (since they do not own a wet field to grow rice themselves). Raj, a Dalit kid in grade 9, told me that in high-caste families, people will snack on roti and have rice for meals while those of lower-castes will have rice as a filling

snack and something else for dinner. I reckon this kind of discrimination to be particularly true of the Jhimpa area. While in Rukum visiting friends in Kamaldaha and Chipridaha, I noticed that people would happily invite us for dhido while the Pokharels laughed when I told them someone offered us dhido. This discrimination only makes sense considering our valley is a rice-growing region; in places where it is not possible, I heard dhido is a staple for everyone.

## **DHIDO - ढिडो**

Making proper dhido is about following the proper ratio. To 1 serving of flour, there should be 4 of water (or 5 for a less dense dhido).

FLOUR (WHEAT, CORN OR MILLET)

WATER

PINCH OF SALT

- Bring water to a boil
- Add salt
- On low heat, add flour gradually
- Stir continuously (it's a good arm workout) for ten minutes
- Serve (with something soupy like soupy spicy vegetables)

Once, Dilu, a student that lived in the same house as me, prepared some for everyone with millet flour. She had spiced it with ginger and cumin and it was great too. Another Dilu, in Rukum, taught us how to eat it: you must swallow it without chewing it and ideally with a slight head tilt. Dilu (the second one) was a particularly funny person and this teaching session was hilarious and makes me laugh just thinking about it.



In the end, it's all about friends (Bhuma, Swarsati and Somjana)



# REMEMBER

*Everyone in Jhimpanshan*



Religion in the valley is omnipresent yet quite inconspicuous. The Hindu calendar sets the year's rhythm by dotting the months with festivals every now and then and occasional religious events like poojas and weddings provides life with a jolly pace.

Religion also dictates a few customs: spreading tika/obir (red powder) over one's forehead to bless them, blessing a groom and a bride by placing dyed rice on their foreheads, throwing a little rice in the ashes to nourish the gods before serving family members and friends, not saying goodbye on a Saturday or not touching a crow. Festivals are varied: Teej celebrates women, Holi is the festival of colours to symbolise the victory of good over evil while Dashain and Tihar gather families and honour the power of gods. Some only last a day while some take up an entire month and schools and businesses close for the occasion. Just because people cannot afford taking a day off work does not mean they do not celebrate. Families reunite and share an extra special meal comprised of deep-fried roti and rice pudding. Sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers bless each other and dance.

Poojas are an important part of religious life all over the country and one of the most fun aspects of the community in my opinion. Poojas are prayers organised by a member of the community often for a specific reason but are diverse in their worship: some pay tribute to specific gods while some are dedicated to bring luck into someone's life. Really, the main idea is to bring joy to the community by dancing, eating and getting together. Upon arrival, the most amazing meal is served to the cheery guests: haluwa, sel roti, spicy veg, sweet tea on the good days and sometimes even rice pudding. The food makes the occasion delicious and the set-up of the decorated house confers the place a spiritual kind of appeal. Then, students eagerly invite you to show your moves on the dance floor to the slightly ominous rhythm of woods and seashells that are blown into. Hindu prayers in Sanskrit are read out by Brahmin people, goats are blessed and cut to be sacrificed to gods and offerings are thrown into the centre of a man-made bamboo hut around which believers gather. The first pooja I went to was at RamuMadam's house on January 10th. When I asked GopiSir what was her reason for organising a pooja, he told me "I am not sure, maybe to bring happy!" which I thought was a very satisfactory answer.

Similarly to my own observations of religion back home, I found religion in the valley to be the glue that instigates cohesiveness during difficult times. An example of this is Himala's funeral ceremony, by far my least favourite memory of my time in Jhimpa. On May 14<sup>h</sup>, Himala Pun Magar died killed by a rock and teachers at school were invited for what would be the equivalent of her funeral. There were a lot of people eating and we were offered food by her mum who begged us, in tears, to eat sel roti and tea to remember her daughter. We were then taken outside where a full meal was given to us. Adults and children were all eating, laughing together while the mother was slaving away to serve everyone. It was in the name of religion for her daughter who was 'in the sky'. To the family, serving food and bringing their community together was their way of honouring their daughter. I felt very sad and I found the atmosphere quite oppressive.

Haluwa, the “food of gods” according to RamSir, is my favourite Nepali food and so it is the recipe I decided to share for this section. I have actually learned to make haluwa not for a religious occasion but at my class 8’s picnic on January 6<sup>th</sup> on top of Karigaun with NaindraSir. Looking over the hills, villages and river of our sun-kissed valley, we prepared chicken and haluwa together. Personally, I find this adds a warm and convivial depth to the idea of religion: it is as much about gods in the sky as it is about enjoyment and sharing happiness on land with fellow humans.

## HALUWA - हलुवा

1 CUP OF SUJI

1/3 CUP OF GHEE OR OIL

1.25 CUP OF SUJI

½ CUP OF SUGAR

DESIRED SPICES, SEE RECIPE

- Pour the sugar into a saucepan with the water and bring to a boil
- While the water is heating up, roast the suji in oil on medium heat until golden (5-7 minutes)
- On low heat, gradually transfer the water mixture to the suji. Do a little at a time as it will spit and stir after each addition.
- Add favourite, ground spices. Cardamom, cinnamon and cloves are a tasty trio. An alternative would be to add cumin seeds (whole, not ground) when roasting the suji.
- Once you’ve added all of the water, the suji should have turned into a soft, mushy consistency.
- Cover with a lid and leave for ten minutes, stirring occasionally.
- The end result should be a glorious, fragranced mush





<  
Haluwa at the school's birthday (June 2<sup>nd</sup>)

>  
Pooja set up at RamuMadam's house  
(January 11<sup>th</sup>)





# RICE

*Rice, rice, rice*



Rice is so important to life in the valley that I decided to dedicate it its own section rather than talking about it throughout the report. Rice before anything else, is the staple food. The word for rice and the word for “meal” are the same: भात, “bhaat”: that’s how important it is. One of the first steps of learning Nepali is asking and answering the question “bhaat khanubhayo?” (did you eat rice/ your meal?). Probably the one word everyone in the country knows how to say in English is rice. The different forms of rice take up different names: दैग (deng) is the rice seed, चामल (chaamal) is uncooked rice, बहात (bhat) is cooked rice, चियुरा (chiyura) is beaten rice and भुजा (bhuja) is puffed rice. Rice was an inspiration in class too: I used it to teach essay writing to classes 8 and 9, as an action in Simon Says with class 3 and it was the first example of an uncountable noun I gave to class 5.

Having fields that can grow rice is also seen as a sign of higher status regardless of the caste; if you have a rice field then you’re automatically a bit cooler. People who grow their own rice find pride in it and sometimes are even scornful of others for buying it at the market. When I had dinner at Nabina’s house in Karigaun, her mother kept telling me to eat more of her homegrown, ‘mitho’ rice because apparently it was one of the best since it was her own (and so it was!). Eating with the Pokharels everyday, I got to witness the depletion of the rice reserves and it turns out that there is always more rice. In March, Ama started cooking a new kind of rice: pink rice that has a peachy coral colour and that is slightly denser and rounder than standard homegrown fluffy rice and just as great. By mid-May, the Pokharels had started buying rice from the market. There is always a solution when it comes to rice. On occasions when rice is not eaten, it will be roti (flat bread) or ato (boiled cornmeal, but still referred to as rice).

Rice also carries a religious meaning: at wedding guests spread a mixture of tika and raw rice onto the bride and groom’s foreheads and is put on the forehead of loved ones on a daily basis to bless them and is given to gods at poojas. In the morning, when I would eat with the Pokharels, I would sit on the floor with Mahendra, Mukti and Manoj and we would all wait together for Ama to give us our meal. However, none of us were ever served first. The first served was, and still is, always God. A small amount of rice is taken out of the pot and thrown into the fire’s ashes to be respectful of the gods. Rice is also pretty in that it nuances the valley with lush and verdant paddy fields. Rice is a lot more than a food.

Planting rice is an amusing memory I took back home with me. The rice planting season started at the end of May. I first planted rice on June 1<sup>st</sup>, in Sabitra’s fields (my host) with Stella and Caoimhe and women of the community. Finding Sabitra’s field was easy, getting to it, a little challenging. Rice fields are muddy, slimy, slidy and so I fell on the way as well as in the field, making a fool of myself but benefitting of all the minerals and nutrients of the soft silt (and the ox poo ☺). Sunitha, a relative ChetSir, was in charged of teaching us how to properly plant the seeds and it was hilarious. The technique, according to Sunitha, is to



plant in “one two three four one two three four” which to this day is a message I am still trying to decrypt. After about an hour or so in the field, we were told to come back to the house for ‘nasta’ aka rice, vegetables and Sabitra’s chutney aka the best chutney in the world: timur + salt + turmeric + chilli + bango (cannabis seeds). After that, we went back to the freshly ploughed field and went on until six, with sore backs and muddy feet. The cooperation between women illustrates the tight links that make up the foundation of the community. People help another without even questioning it. It is worth adding that even though there are undeniable injustices in terms of parity between men and women in many aspects, they share the physical labour fairly evenly. In this case, men were in charge of ploughing the field by pulling and pushing oxen through the mud while women plant the seeds. The second and last time was on my last full day in the valley on June 8<sup>th</sup>. Caoimhe and Stella had come down again and we planted in YamakantaSir’s field with some of students and other members of the community. The technique was the same but this time we ended up playing ‘hilo’, a game consisting of throwing cold mud at each other. It was fun until the sun had hidden behind the hills when it got really cold (which did not make the washing part particularly enjoyable). I then ran up to the Pokharels with a bag of present for an emotion-filled final night with them. Ama had kindly cooked the day before’s sacrificed goat for everyone which we all ate in front of the TV. In the end, it could be said that rice beautifully represents the complexity of food in that there is a lot more behind what we eat. How and why we eat it and who is behind it, all contribute to the identity of what is on our dinner plate, in this case a multifaceted and complex community.

#### Snacking on rice after planting rice

The last recipe was given by Madame in Okhareni after we (Caoimhe, Stella and I) did some painting at the school. She offered us ginger tea and we discussed life and the fact that we were rarely completely satisfied with the texture of our rice and Madame, like an angel from the sky, filled us in on how to optimise our cooking.

### **PERFECT RICE - भात (bhaat) [in a pressure cooker]**

Rice  
Water

- Rinse rice once
- Add water. When touching the rice with your fingertip, water should reach halfway through your forefinger’s second phalanx
- Put the pressure cooker’s lid on, ensure it is tightly shut
- Put on low heat

After an intense rice planting session

- Turn off the heat after the third whistle
- Leave cooker aside until all of the pressure has gone; do not pull the lid's top.

Cooking absolutely perfect rice requires experimenting and you will probably not get it right at first but it is worth the effort. It may take a lot of time and you may need to turn up the heat depending on the amount you're cooking. I would say the entire process, from putting the heat on to the actual eating, can take up to an hour but as soon as you dig into the hot, dense, starchy cloud, all worries are forgotten.





GOOBYE



Needless to say that upon my return back home, conflicting feelings grew within me, partly about food, mostly about how easy we have it. I was sad to be gone but happy to be back, excited to go to university but also apprehensive to be a student again and, most importantly, filled with a motivation to save the world from its injustices and inequities but hit by the realisation that there is only so much one can do. There are things I cannot tolerate anymore: food waste, pollution. There are also things I now feel uncomfortable about: importing foods all the way from across the globe, ridiculously expensive foods or our tendency to forget about all the work that goes behind what we eat and what we own. This is not breaking news but the fact that some people die of hunger while we throw away about a third of the food available in shiny supermarkets puts me in a rage. Food should not be a privilege.

On July 25<sup>th</sup> 2017 (a month after my return), I went to a café in Biarritz to work on this community study. I looked at the menu that was decorated with the following quote by French poet Baudelaire: “Là tout n’est qu’ordre et beauté, Luxe, calme et volupté” (There, everything is nothing but order and beauty, luxury, peace and delight). The notion of comfort as a gateway to wellness is the opposite of life in the valley where everything, to an extent, must be worked for and comfort is an unspoken luxury. Wellness revolves around ideas of family, health and prosperity. It suddenly felt awkward being sat in this café with my laptop. Such comfort appears so decadent in contrast to life in Jhimpa. It was shamefully easy to slip back into a prior life, to go back to old habits. The search for comfort and materialism are understandable I think. But to make them prominent values does not make sense to me anymore. The hypocrisy I felt at that time towards myself motivated me to engage with the things I believe in, to have and share ideas and opinions, to be proactive. The experience in a way has brought a sense of loneliness into my life but I shall learn to value it and make it a driving force.

There are many more interesting aspects that make up the community in Jhimpa: kinship, the language, the education system, the perception of time or the fact that children are more small-size adults with responsibilities than kids with hundreds of opportunities to relax, play and learn but I limited myself to the most salient food-related features. Food is the centre of life in Nepal so it made sense for it to be the centre of my report. I love cooking Nepali food, it takes me back to the time I spent with the Pokharels whose generosity I admire. I miss my students (my friends) and it is with the resonating sound of hyperactive children stored in my ears, the outline of the Himalayas engraved in the back of my eyes and the remnants of the delicious foods registered in my brain that I left the valley for the seaside. I don’t think ‘home’ will be the same again but that is for the better and I am so thankful for and proud of the community I lived in for sparking a fire within me (even though it makes me sound either extra cheesy or like some sort of hippy).



