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*Lynn Bennett Campbell*

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TWO WATER CASE STUDIES

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*by*  
Lynn Bennett Campbell

Department of Local Development/UNICEF  
Research - cum - Action Project  
Paper No. 5

Kathmandu, Nepal  
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Preliminary Note

In a sense the two papers which follow on the practical and ritual aspects of water use in rural Nepal are complementary to each other. Yet the scope of their applicability to the design and implementation of water supply projects varies greatly. The first paper deals in a descriptive and historical way with the actual water system and patterns of practical water use in a special village. Since the village is situated on the edge of the Kathmandu Valley with a good natural water supply and ample rice-growing land (and hence more local cash available for its own water projects), obviously it can hardly be taken as typical for all Nepal. Its main interest will perhaps be as a case study in motivations for village-instigated water projects.

The second paper concerns itself with the central categories of purity and pollution as they affect the ritual use and classification of various water sources. As such, its scope is not limited to any particular village situation and it should be relevant to the designing of water systems for use by Hindu groups anywhere in Nepal.

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Lynn Bennett Campbell  
Kathmandu, September, 1977

These papers, which have been slightly edited by Dr. Ferdinand E. Okada, UNICEF Country Programme Consultant, do not necessarily reflect the views or future plans of either the Local Development Department or UNICEF.

## SECTION I

## NARAKOT VILLAGE: A CASE STUDY OF MOTIVATIONS FOR SELF-INSTICATED WATER PROJECTS AND WATER USAGE AND WATER SOURCES

The Village

The village of Narakot<sup>1</sup> lies along the top of a ridge about two hundred feet above the Bagmati River which flows roughly parallel to its north-east boundary. The village is separated from the Bagmati by a ten minute walk through a band of ever-thinning woods on the steep side of the ridge, across the main road, which eventually leads to the city, and finally over a wide belt of the village's chief rice-growing land. This holy river has considerable ritual importance and is felt to be an auspicious presence in the village the way a temple of some famous god might be. On the south-east boundary of the village the ridge descends more gradually and its run-off finds its way eventually into the Dhobi Khola. Of the 93 households in Narakot, almost two-thirds are Nepali-speaking high castes: there are two Jaisi Brahman, ten Brahman and forty-one Chetri<sup>2</sup> families. The remaining third of the village is composed of twenty-six "bhote",<sup>3</sup> ten Newar and four untouchable occupational caste households. One house (# 27) is unoccupied and is now being used as a mill.

- 
1. Narakot is a pseudonym for the village which is shown on the accompanying map. This area represents the old village unit which under the panchayat system has been divided into wards and combined with other villages to form a village panchayat area.
  2. Of the forty-one Chetri families, four are actually of thakuri caste which ranks higher than Chetri and sixteen are thina Chetris having some Bhote blood on the female side and therefore ranking slightly below Jharra (pure) Chetris in some ritual matters.
  3. "Bhote" is a term used by high caste Hindus to describe members of Tibeto-Burman speaking Tribal groups.

### Domestic Water Supply

An average household of ten members with its own convenient well uses about 30 pathis<sup>4</sup> of water a day. Households further away from water may be more sparing, but still uses on the average of 18 to 20 pathis per day. Houses with livestock need considerably more. A buffalo consumes 7 or 8 pathis a day, a cow 3 or 4 and a goat about 4 manas or half-a-pathi. All this water is carried in gagros<sup>5</sup> by women (and sometimes by a male servant) up to the kitchen which is usually on the top floor.<sup>6</sup> To keep the heavy vessels from hurting them as they walk the women wrap long waistcloths around their hips. About sixty percent of the gagros in the village are brass which are cleaned every day by rubbing ashes on them. The rest are fired clay and are cleaned less frequently by rubbing sand on the inside and rinsing.<sup>7</sup> A household with a young daughter will often have a special smaller size gagro for her to use until she is full grown.

Hauling water does not seem to be one of those extremely unpopular jobs (like cutting grass, weeding fields or hauling manure) usually reserved for the daughters-in-law and disliked by all. I have often seen one of the village's most respected woman (a 60-year old mother of eight children with two daughters-in-law in the house) happily carrying water from a distant spring.

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5 A gagro is a copper, brass or clay vessel with a narrow neck to prevent spilling of water. They hold anywhere from 3 to 8 pathis of water.

6 Poorer families whose houses are of unbaked brick sometimes have the kitchen on the ground floor.

7 Clay gagros are also permanently polluted and unusable if touched by a menstruating woman.

4 One pathi equals 1 gallon (4.5 litres)

Perhaps the job is not dreaded because of the high likelihood of meeting other women at the water source and finding a moment of gossip while filling the vessels. I have overheard, however, a daughter-in-law being severely berated for having used too lavishly (for washing her own feet and hands) water carried upstairs by her mother-in-law. The implication seemed to be that if you must waste water, waste water you have carried yourself.

#### Practical Water Uses and Health Considerations

Water once carried to the house, is used for cleaning vegetables, cooking, washing hands and feet before cooking and before eating, and washing hands and rinsing mouths after eating.<sup>8</sup> Some dishes are also washed inside, though heavier pots and pans are usually taken outside to a water source for washing. A full glass of water is usually taken with each meal and children are given water on request (usually in the cupped hands of their mother until they can hold a glass). No child, however, is allowed to drink water until its pasni ceremony (in the fifth month for girls and sixth for boys) at which it takes its first rice and other foods. Considering the often unsanitary water available to the village infant, this initial restriction to mother's milk is probably very important in allowing the child to build up some strength and resistance before being exposed to the local water.

Although many families know that boiled water is cleaner and should be given to sick children and adults (and to visiting anthropologists!), they do not transfer this knowledge to prevention of sickness by regular boiling of drinking water.

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8 See second paper for Ritual Uses.

And with the scarcity of fuel and the already heavy work loads of women this is understandable. Use of "potas" (iodine crystals) might be feasible if they were cheap and easy to get, but so far it is used only by a very few families. And even then it is put in inadequate amounts into the wells rather than directly into the drinking water.

#### Categories of Water and Water Sources

The villagers have many ways of classifying water (pani). Some of these like jhuto (polluted) and chokho (pure) are relevant only in a religious context and will be dealt with in the section on ritual water use. When a man wants to know if he can drink a given water source, he may simply ask whether the water is ramro or naramro (good or bad) or he may ask if it is sanha (clear) or phohor (dirty). Specifically applicable to water is the distinction panilo (clear) and dhamilo (muddy, cloudy or full of sediment). Dhamilo pani is not drunk, though if the condition is not too extreme it may be used for washing clothes, utensils or the body. Jhyau pani ("moss") is stagnant water covered with a film of green plant growth and prevalent in the monsoon season. Such water would not be used even for washing in most cases and is considered fit only for buffalo and ducks. Mul pani (mul = source or root) is spring water and is usually synonymous with pure, sweet-tasting, drinking water.

The broadest classification of water sources is according to whether they are still (jameko) or running (baseko). Within each of the two categories there are many types and all are precisely ranked on a scale of purity and pollution. But leaving aside for the moment such ritual classifications, here are the main types of water sources that Nepali Villagers deal with:

- 1) Fokhari--a tank or pond usually of still water collected from excess water during the rainy season or from the run off of another water source, and used for buffalo wallows and sometimes for irrigation (lokhar is also used to describe a larger body of water like a lake but a lake can also be called a tal).
- 2) Inar--a man-made well usually lined with brick which may or may not be covered. "Tube well" is also understood and distinguished from the ordinary inar.
- 3) Fuwa (also called panera)--a spring sometimes covered, sometimes not where mul pani emerges and collects in a small pool.
- 4) Dhara--water which flows freely from a spout of some sort. There are two kinds of dharas distinguished:
  - a) Dhunge (stone) dhara--the traditional dhara where mul pani flows from a hillside spring out through a carved stone spout.
  - b) Kal (machine) dhara--where water from a central tank is piped in by force (water pressure or an electric pump) through a metal spigot.
- 5) Nadi or Khola--a major river which flows all year round.
- 6) Khare--stream bed active only in the wet season.
- 7) Kulo or kula--temporary irrigation ditch used during the rice planting season.
- 8) Kunda--a spring water source with religious significance usually the center for a mela or religious pilgrimage once a year.

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9 It has perhaps occurred to others that the prevalent use of the single Nepali word, dhara to cover both the continually flowing natural source and the more recent phenomena of faucets connected to a central supply may contribute to the apparent carelessness of Nepali people in turning off faucets when they are finished using them. Since the central concept of a dhara as opposed to other sources, is that water is continuously free flowing anyway, the idea of waste may not be immediately apparent to them at the sight of a running spigot.



### Social Motivations for Locally Sponsored Water Projects

The villagers of Narakot feel that they have no "pani ke dukha" or problem with water. Most of the water sources with the exception of wells, are described as having always been there as long as anyone can remember. A few are said to have just appeared spontaneously in a previously dry spot. Even in the digging of wells the villagers have been lucky, never having to go more than ten meters deep to find water. Yet the villagers have steadily maintained and often substantially improved the existing water resources. In doing this they have had assistance from HMG in one project and managed to recruit charity funds from a private institution on one other occasion. The rest has been done entirely by the villagers on their own initiative and at their own expense.

Certainly, strongly motivated village leadership has been crucial to the success of Narakot's efforts. And we must readily admit that this is a factor which changes from village to village with the personality and interests of its leading men. However, there are several important other inter-related socio-cultural factors which are not unique to the Narakot situation but should be uniformly present in any Hindu village in Nepal.

### Motivation for Locally Sponsored Water Projects

To begin with all dharas, kuwas and of course all rivers are automatically classified as sarba janik or public property as opposed to inars which are considered bektigat or private property. This means that when village land holding maps are made for tax purposes, the small sections containing dharas and kuwas which may fall within the boundaries of a man's land holdings are not listed in his name.

He does not have to pay tax for this area and by the same token he must allow other villagers free access through his land to the water source. Thus, although such a kuwa or dhara water source is often improved by the man on whose land it occurs and even named after him, this does not demonstrate his ownership, but rather his piety or public spirit.

#### Social Prestige as Motivation

This leads us to the two often closely related factors of social prestige and religious merit. High social prestige is attached to contributions for community or sarba janik projects like water improvements. Since there does not seem to be any regular form of panchayat taxation as a source of funds for such projects, when a villager wants to get something done the first thing he has to do is to canvass and collect chanda or donations.<sup>10</sup> People are expected to give two, five or ten rupees "gachhe anusar" (according to their means). But as in wedding spendings there is an element of competitive display in these contributions. Everything is written down and generous amounts are remembered years afterwards. In fact it seems that one of the major criteria for being a "big man" in the village is the making of a big contribution for these village projects.

#### Religious Motives: The Gift of Water and the Gift of Labor

However, when people describe such acts of public generosity, they usually speak in religious terms.

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10 One way this is done in Naraket is to collect a group of men to go about from house to house singing on Ehai Tika day during Tihar. This singing is called Diausi Kelne and it is traditional for each household to give grain, sweets, and small amounts of cash to the singer. When they know the collected money is going for a village project the villagers give more generously.

Partly of course this is because it is more acceptable to seek religious merit than worldly power. Nevertheless the strength of purely religious motivations should not be underestimated. The ideology of Hindu charity is immensely complex and beyond the scope of this paper. We can say however that it supports village water systems in two ways. First, the gift of water ranks very high in terms of merit--second only to such sacred gifts as one's own daughters in marriage (kanyadan) and cows (godan). For as the villagers themselves explain, "Even before food man must have water to live. In giving water we are giving life." Furthermore, unlike kanyadan and godan which must be given to individuals whose ritual status is above one's own if it is to be meritorious, water can be given to anyone high or low. The giving of water for merit is much in evidence at festivals like Ghora Jatra and Shiva Ratri, etc. when one often sees individuals carrying heavy sagros through the throng giving water out to anyone who asks. And even though inars are considered bektiyat or private property, most villagers<sup>11</sup> share their wells with others<sup>12</sup> to earn religious merit. Likewise a man or group of men who improves a dhara or kuwa thereby earns merit whenever people use its water.

Allied to the gift of water is the gift of labor, shram dan (shrama--labor). Shram dan can be given either to an individual neighbor or to the community at large.

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11 House 16 seems to be an exception

12 Untouchables of course are not given access to the wells of touchable caste, nor can they gain merit by giving water away since their touch pollutes it for those above them.

The kinds of work for which it might be donated are : mending the village road or foot bridge, building or repairing water sources (either private or public), helping someone build a house, helping to transplant rice seedlings if a death occurs in a neighbour's family during planting time and the family members cannot do their own work because of funeral observances. There is a clear distinction between shram dan and other systems of labour exchange and payment. For in labor exchange (manva) one works a day in a neighbour's field and expects both khaja (mid-day snack of ten including rice beer) and a day's labor in one's own field in return. In wage labor of course one expects cash payment (iyala) and (khaja). But in shram dan one works for dharma (religious duty) and expects nothing - not even khaja - in return. One earns instead, merit (manva) whose benefits will accrue in a future rebirth. Of course villagers do express a general sense of obligation to those who have helped them in shram dan and a feeling that they would return the help in time of need. But there is no strict accounting - except according to the laws of karma.

#### Historical Description of a Village Water System

Let us now try to see some of these factors at work by looking at the recent history of Naratol's eighteen principal water sources -- who uses them, who built them and who maintains them. Some examples will be examined in detail to illustrate the dynamics involved.

House 1, 2 and 3 (all brothers) use Kuwa A which has been there on their land as long as anyone in the houses can remember. They do remember improving it at one time by putting in large stones to keep the bank from caving in and to keep the spring from getting muddy during use. Nowadays they use it only for washing clothes and pots and pans, getting drinking water from the recently improved Dhara A.

Houses 4, 5 and 6 (as well as other households in the adjoining village) use Kuwa B which was improved by the now deceased grandfather of house 4 and called by his name "Bau Ram ko pancra". His family and the other villagers say he improved the spring which was on his land not only for his own family's use but "for dharma".

Houses 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 17 and 18 go to Dhara A on a gently sloping hillside that is public grazing land. This dhara up until seven years ago was only a kuwa. At that time they decided that the water from the kuwa wasn't really clean enough and under the leadership of the ward panchayat representative (whom we shall call Durga Bahadur), they collected a fund (chanda) from houses 1 through 23. According to Durga Bahadur who lead the collection drive the households in this area who stood to benefit from the improvement all contributed ten, five, or two rupees according to their ability. This money was used to buy twenty feet of steel pipe from the pradhan panch and to pay for the skilled labor. (Two masons--dakarmi--were needed). But the major expense, Rs. 255 for bricks and cement was donated by a private institution, Balmiki Bidashram. Evidently this organization used to give away charity funds for some worthy cause every year and the director happened to be a friend of the pradhan panch who convinced him that Narakot should be the recipient that year. Durga Bahadur, the ward representative ordered the bricks and cement and once they were brought the dhara was completed in three days with twenty-five to thirty men from the village donating their labor in Shram dan each day. There was no trained engineer or technical advisor. The villagers worked out their own design which included a cement and brick storage tank built into the hill, a brick retaining wall, and just below the dhara, a large 10 by 5 meter pond to catch the run-off.

This pond serves as a buffalo wallow except in the dry months when the villagers must take their animals daily on the time-consuming trip down to the Bagmati. Two years ago a further improvement was added to the dhara by Durga Bahadur at his own expense. He decided that people were wasting too much water so he put in a 40-rupee metal faucet which closes automatically unless pressure is maintained on the nozzle. This new dhara, besides being a better source for drinking water is also heavily used for ritual purposes. Those ritual baths which must be taken after birth, menstruation and death pollution are taken at Dhara A by many villagers who may draw their daily drinking water from a closer--but less "pure"--source.<sup>13</sup>

Houses 13 and 15 (and those with the notation I A who use it during the dry months when other sources diminish) use water drawn from Inar A. This well was built six years ago by the same Durga Bahadur who is the occupant of House 15 on his own land. He said the well cost him Rs. 500, most of which went for the 4,000 bricks and one bag of cement he needed. The well which is about 10 meters deep took five days to build or 132 man days of labor. There is one particular village man who, though not an engineer or in any way professionally trained, seems to have a talent for building wells. This man has directed the building of four wells in the village; this one for Durga Bahadur, one for himself, one for a neighbor in an adjoining village and one for the newly build Shiva temple math which has not yet been consecrated. He is said by the other villagers to have a "sense" or managyan for finding water and he enjoys the work.

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13 See Section III of this paper for further details on the ritual importance of dharas.

Durga Bahadur told of the morning in Baisakh<sup>14</sup> when digging was begun under the supervision of his friend and how he first before the sun rose lid a puna to the earth and to the Nags (the snake gods who are thought to have control over water sources) begging them to help them find water. He was very nervous he said because of the big investment involved and he was terribly relieved when about four-o'clock water appeared in the narrow preliminary hole. Since then he has covered the well with a corrugated tin lid which is closed at night and he has made a small cement platform where clothes can be washed. He feels that the well should be cleaned once a year removing all the ferns and moss and collected sediment at the bottom --however, he has fallen behind on this. He does keep a sort of grappling hook on a rope for fishing out any animal that may fall in and contaminate the water. He also puts potas (iodine) in the well occasionally--though insufficient amounts and not at regular intervals.

House 14 uses Dhara B which was built by Durga Bahadur's grandfather some eighty to ninety years ago on family land. About five years ago the dhara was improved by Durga Bahadur's middle brother with a polished cement retaining wall and stone catch basin. The brother's family themselves (house 16) use this dhara only for ritual purposes, having built the village's only tube well ten years ago in their own compound for daily water needs. Recently the brother's son bought an electric pump to bring water up into the house so the women of this house are the only ones in the village exempt from the time consuming task of carrying water. No other families use this tube well.

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14 All wells are dug in the dry months of Baisakh and Jestha to insure that they will yield water all year round.

House 19 (elder brother of 16 and 14) goes either to Kuwa C, Dhara A or occasionally to Inar A at present, but the head of the household says that they are going to build a well next year. When this was mentioned to Durga Bahadur he said that he would have to give help<sup>15</sup> every day in digging the well since his elder brother had given him help six years ago when he built his well.

Houses 20 1A, 21 1A, 22 1A, 23, 27 and 28 go to Kuwa C. This covered brick spring was built eighty to ninety years ago by a prominent Brahman family at the same time they were building the elaborate brick enclosed kul devta shrine nearby. The family still cleans and maintains the spring which borders on land owned by them and land owned by House 16. They are also planning to excavate a pokhari in one of their nearby fields to be used as a buffalo wallow.

Houses 24, 25 and 26 get water from Kuwa D which was improved with bricks by House 25 about five years ago when the spring first appeared on public hillside land adjoining their house.

Houses 36, 37, 40 and 41 all used to go to Dhara D which was built by the now deceased grandfather of House 40 on his land. Now, however, except for ritual purposes, they all go to Inar C built by the previously mentioned village well specialist for himself. He was allowed to use the bricks from a nearby fallen house and got free labor; the building of the well only cost him Rs. 200 to build. This well, unlike Inar A is not covered and on the occasion I saw it khorsani (red peppers) and vegetable peelings were floating in it.

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15 D. B. being a high caste, fairly prosperous villager, would not himself do any digging, but would donate the labor of his male farm hand, his women or pay the wages of a day laborer.



Houses 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 57, 58, 59 and 71 go to Dhara C whose brick and cement retaining wall was built by the Thakuri family in House 31 three years ago on their own land. Before that time all these families went to the now defunct Dhara E, but the pipes which were channeling the water to that dhara broke and the water flowed down hill in a muddy unusable stream. Instead of simply rebuilding Dhara however the villagers decided to split the water source. Part of it was channeled to Dhara C and some of the old stones and bricks were used by the Thakuri family so the cost of building the dhara was minimal. The remaining water was channeled to Dhara G, a spot owned by a Brahman family in House 56, and convenient for two of the untouchable houses in the villages 74, 75. Using the remaining bricks and stones Dhara G was built which is now used and maintained by Houses 72, 73, 74, 75 and 76. Apparently the labor and the money for constructing these two new dharas was contributed only by the families now using them and was not a village-wide effort.

House 56 and its well, Inar D, were both built by an early Newar resident of the village who has since sold the house to a Brahman family. This well is also occasionally used by those who live close by.

Houses 77 and 80 go to Dhara H which was built by the now deceased grandfather of House 79 on his land. The present head of house 79 built Inar E six years ago which is now used for most purposes by the families in houses 78, 81, 82 and 86.

Kuwa E is also used to have been built by a grandfather. The head of House 94 in the last generation built it from stones at his own expense and on his own land. It is named Mangal Lal Kuwa after him and used by Houses 83, 84, 85, 87 and 89, as well as houses in the adjoining village.

Thakuri Dhara or Dhara G was made "for dharma" by an important Thakuri family in the adjoining village, but it is used by Houses 88, 92, 93 and even by House 94 occasionally along with many other houses from the next village.

The biggest dhara in the village is appropriately called after the village "Narakot Dhara". This is Dhara F and it is used by Houses 42 through 55, 60 through 70, 90 and 91. Many of these households are quite distant and sometimes go to other nearer sources. For example Houses 60 through 70, 90 and 91 also use Kuwa F for washing of clothes and utensils in the wet season when the kuwa is running. Also House 91, the local rukshi pasal (home-made liquor shop) goes to a kuwa a little way down the road in another village for the great quantities of water needed in making their home brew. But people prefer the clean and plentiful water of Narakot Dhara and are willing to go a long way to get it. The dhara itself which has a very old carved demon spout with a stone relief carving of Vishnu set above it is certainly one of the most beautiful in the village as well as the most bountiful. It is said to be able to fill a gagro in a minute all year round. The villagers say the dhara was built collectively by their ancestors on public grazing land but no one can say specifically when or who. A stone slab on the dhara itself however testifies that it was improved and rebuilt 13 years ago by RMG in a Gram Bikas project. This the villagers do remember--especially that it was a man from a nearby health center who organized the villagers and raised the money through the government Health Ministry. They are proud of the dhara with its underground storage tank, and its brick and stone stairs leading down into the fountain itself which is surrounded on all sides by a brick wall. Perhaps the women who have to haul water from it every day think differently, but the men like its privacy and inaccessibility.

But Narakot Dhara almost underwent a drastic change three years ago. During their "Gaon Pharka" sojourn two government officials known in the village as the Colonel and the Engineer, did a feasibility study of the dhara as a source of water for the entire village. This project would have involved constructing a large metal water tank above the present fountain, installing a pump and laying pipes through the village at a cost of some half-lakh of rupees. Not only that, but each family in the village would have had to pay Rs. 7 per month for water. For that, the villagers say, they would in a few years each dig their own well! It is not clear where the "Gaon Pharka" engineer expected to get the money for this project, but it is easy to understand why the villagers were not enthusiastic about it. I am told, that the villagers who, as they say themselves, have never felt any pressing water shortage to begin with, killed this ambitious project simply by "chun lagera basne"--by staying very quiet.

## SECTION II

## RIVERS, SPRINGS AND WELLS: RITUAL USE OF WATER AMONG NEPALI HINDUS

Concepts of Purity and Pollution

As in any Hindu village where ideas of purity and pollution are pervasive, water carries many spiritual and ritual meanings for the inhabitants of Narakot. For in the Hindu world view, water along with fire, has always been one of the great elemental sources of purity capable of reversing the continual pollution arising from the unending process of human life--eating, defecating, menstruating, copulating, giving birth and dying--are all seen as polluting to the individuals and family groups in which they inevitably occur.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the complex and philosophical and social implications of this view for Hindu culture as a whole, it is clear that for the Hindu villager it means in a practical sense that a good deal of his time and energy will be devoted to the task of purification. We are particularly concerned here with how he uses water in that task and why various kinds of water sources are necessary. In understanding the logic of ritual purification we must first realize that there are many degrees of purity and pollution. And here the concept of relative states of purity described by Harper among the Havik Brahmans of Mysore is extremely helpful.<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 a) Douglas, Mary: Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo. New York: Fredrick Praeger, 1966.
- b) Dumont, Louis: "World Renunciation in Indian Religion" in Contributions to Indian Sociology, No. IV.
- 2 Harper, Edward B.: "Ritual Pollution as an Integration of Caste and Religion" in Religion in South Asia, University of Washington Press, 1964.

For like the Haviks, Nepali Hindus seem to have three states of relative purity--a negative state of definite pollution, a middle ground of normal or neutral purity and a higher state of positive purity necessary on certain ritual occasions. And even within each of these states there are definite degrees of intensity. Hence the process of transition to higher ritual states--that is purification--requires ritual actions of varying strength depending either on how deep the state of impurity the individual is in or on how high the state of positive purity he wishes to move to. In fact, to supplement Harper's concept of discrete states of relative purity, one almost needs the notion of a vertical scale on which the individual is continually moving. In the Hindu view both downward movement through pollution and upward movement through ritual acts of purification are precisely calibrated. Accompanying the idea of relative degrees of purity and pollution then, there is a whole arsenal of symbolic acts and for every degree of pollution<sup>3</sup> there is a ritual strong enough to bring purification.

Of course water is not the only ingredient in these numerous acts of purification. Fire, ashes, the five products of the cow (urine, ghee, milk, curd and dung), mantras, abstinence from sleep, sex and food and even the sheer passage of time are all efficacious. But in almost all purification, from the most mundane to the most powerful, water plays an essential part.

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3 Except for the very greatest such as cow slaughter, co-habitation with an untouchable, failure to observe funeral ritual for one's father. For such grave pollution one must be out-casted so as not to spread the contamination to former caste fellows.

### Rituals of Daily Purification

The ritual use of water begins each day with the ordinary tasks of washing after defecation and morning bathing. The night of sleeping (there may have been sexual intercourse or nocturnal emissions) and the morning trip to the fields both bring a mild state of impurity called "bitulo" to distinguish it from the more severe pollution---ihuto<sup>4</sup>. This impurity must be removed before the work of the day can properly be begun. For unless an individual is in at least a state of normal or middle range purity or "chohlo" he or she cannot cook or even eat ritually relevant foods in their rightful place at the family hearth.

These rituals of morning washing are so simple and practical as to hardly seem like "rituals" at all. Yet on closer examination their ritual nature becomes apparent. For example, sufficient water for cleaning after defecation and thoroughly washing hands must be carried out to the fields (or to the occasional rare latrine or charni) in an old tin can or lota. To touch anything, including the kuwa (spring) or inar (well) water source (or even a bucket of water standing near it), before washing pollutes that object for others. This means that the tins meant for this purpose are usually not kept too near the water source and water must be poured into them without contact between the vessels because the tins are permanently polluted. This also means that adults (usually women) are responsible for cleaning children up to the age of four or five years.

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4 Technically my informants restrict the work ihuto to left-over food, the body and bedding of a dead man and, with some hesitancy, menstrual blood. However, from my observation the word is used loosely to refer to all sorts and degrees of ritual impurity.

After the age of six months<sup>5</sup> when a child stops living exclusively on mother's milk and is fed rice, a child's faeces are jhuto. The jhuto is mild, however, and can be removed by simple washing of hands. Though encouraged to go outside as soon as they can walk young children are not expected to go far from the house like adults (or even use the charpi if it is available). Efforts are made to teach the child to communicate his needs<sup>6</sup> so he can be taken out, but I have observed only mild reproof when a child of four suffering from diarrhoea soiled even pillows and carpets inside the house. If there is a cement basin in the kitchen area for cleaning dishes, often the child is allowed to use this up to the age of five or six and there does not seem to be any feeling that this pollutes the utensils which are later cleaned there. Infant urine, muti, is barely considered polluting at all and most women who find their saris wet while holding an infant merely shake the water out--perhaps sprinkling a little fresh water on the spot--and continue wearing the sari. This casual attitude extends also to the child's own "diaper" clothes and small mattress which are not washed after every wetting but merely dried in the sun. Despite this apparent nonchalance about children's bodily functions, however, adults often mention their own mother's uncomplaining attention to this polluting task as an exalted proof of maternal love and sacrifice and a cause for the child's future sense of debt and duty to the mother in her old age.

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5 Five months for a girl child.

6 There is a word "acchi game" in special baby language which is used.

Morning bathing--though considered virtuous and orthodox--is not a daily custom among most Hindu Nepalis. Normal choko is sufficient for daily puja (worship) and cooking can be attained by washing hands and face, rinsing mouth and changing from the clothes one slept in. For Nepalis--perhaps because of the colder climate--it is "luga pherne" or changing of clothes rather than bathing of the body which is the crucial act of purification after sleep or sex and high caste Nepalis talk in low tones of other peoples who sleep, cook and eat in the same clothes. However, this is not to say that bathing does not have a strong symbolic meaning in Nepali Hinduism. Indeed it is precisely on those occasions where strong purification is needed ( in transition from state of severe jhuto to neutral purity or neutral purity to hi chokho) that the ritual of bathing is required.

In all cases where severe jhuto must be removed the individual must not only bathe once or several times--but he must do so in a running water source. Still water can purify him, but it cannot absorb the pollution he brings and will pass this pollution on to all who use the source subsequently. Thus water sources themselves are ranked on a scale of purity--the purer they are the more intense jhuto they can absorb. Nowhere is this more evident than in the way high castes and untouchables relate in terms of these two categories of water. For the very name used to designate untouchables in Nepal is "pani nachalne"--those from whom water cannot be accepted. Yet this low caste person does not pollute all water he comes in contact with. His touch pollutes only still water. Otherwise the same rivers and dharas could not be shared by both groups the way they are.

Purest of all waters is the River Ganga, as one old villager said "because it fell from Mahadev's head".



The fortunate pilgrim who can bath in the Ganga at Banaras is felt to attain not only high ritual purity at the time of his bathing, but a fund of moral purity or merit (punya) as well. Since the Himalayas are known to be the source of the Ganga, the Bagmati and in fact all principal rivers in the Kathmandu Valley and beyond are considered to be actually the Ganga merely called by some local name for convenience. This identification is made explicit near Banepa on the edge of the Valley, for example, where every 12 years the Funyamati river becomes as holy as the Ganga at Banaras and people flock to the Fanauti mela to bathe. It is because all large rivers are vaguely personified as the goddess Ganga Devi, and also known to be the home of Nags (snake gods), that most Nepalis automatically touch their foreheads in reverence when crossing a river.

Major rivers<sup>7</sup>, then, are the most pure of all water sources. Only they are capable of absorbing the most severe pollution--that of death. The body of the dead must be dipped three times in the river before it can be burned and a bit of the flesh--the astu--must be saved from the fire, wrapped in white cloth and thrown into the river. For it is believed that the astu is carried along by the river till it gets to Banares and then it goes to heaven. The chief mourner, who must light the funeral pyre by placing flames in the dead man's mouth, can only be cleansed of this momentous act by an immediate bathe in the river. In fact, the villagers I talked to could not conceive of a funeral without a river.

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7 That is, kholas, those which flow all year. The khures which flow only in the wet season are not considered chokho. If the river is far away only a small container is carried back and mixed with a gagro of ordinary water thus making the entire contents chokho.

In the context of death rivers function not only as part of the transition from the pollution of the corpse to the purity of the immaterial soul but in a vague way they are felt to "carry the soul to heaven". Hence when the saudan<sup>8</sup> gifts are given to a Brahman 13 days after death they are given if at all possible on the banks of the river so that they might through the medium of the pure Brahman and the pure river be carried to heaven or to the deceased's next incarnation to make him comfortable. This symbolism--along with still another important ritual use of water--was impressed on me several months ago when I watched a saudan at Cauri Ghat near Guyeswari. When the gift of water was made, 360 tiny clay pots each containing water and a stick of wood were clustered around one large pot on a sand bar in the center of the rushing river. It was explained to me that during the first year after death the deceased still needs water to drink every day and so these pots were placed in the river to be carried to heaven.

Further, the pinda or rice ball which is ritually fed to the pitris (ancestors) during sraddha<sup>9</sup> ceremonies and is then considered to be the jutho of the dead, can only be disposed of by throwing it into a river. The water given to the pitris for sraddha, as well as the sand on which the pinda is placed, must come from a river. For only river water is pure enough for them to drink and only the river sand is pure enough for them to alight for a moment so they can eat the pinda.

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8 Gifts of the necessities of living which must include food, clothes (appropriate to the sex of the deceased), utensils and according to the wealth of the family may extend to house, lands, furniture, jewels, silver utensils and cows which are given to the family Brahman. The concept is a bit blurred as to whether these items are used by the deceased in heaven--or come to him in his next birth.

9 Commemorative rituals performed on the lunar anniversary of deceased family members where they are honored and fed.

River Bathing and States of High Chokho

Besides cremations and rituals for the dead there are several other occasions when bathing if at all possible should be done in a river. They are all occasions when an extremely high state of chokho is required. One is exclusively for men--Janai Purni when all karma choleko,<sup>10</sup> twice-born men must go to the river before dawn and bath 360<sup>11</sup> times. This is done in imitation of the ancient holy men or rasis who maintained rigorous purity by fasting<sup>12</sup> and bathing every day. Since, practically, the villagers cannot do this, on this day they make up for their past lapses by bathing once for each day in the year. Only then are they pure enough to receive new janai (sacred thread) from their family priest.

Another such occasion is Risi Panchani during the Tij festival which is exclusively for women. On this day all women past puberty must bathe, wash their hair and brush their teeth 360 times in the river. Only the river can purify them from the year's accumulation of menstrual pollution and remove any sin which they may have unknowingly committed by touching a man during their period.

River bathing is also required during the nave Patri or nine nights of the great ten-day Dasai festival.

10 Those who have undergone the bartaman ceremony and put on the janai and thus become full caste members.

11 This is done simply standing in the river and splashing oneself with a piece of dub grass the required number of times.

12 All twice-born villagers also fast on the day previous to Janai Purni as part of a set of austerities called Havasya Basne which will be discussed later.

The head of the household should bathe each morning while it is still dark and do puja to the goddess Durga.<sup>13</sup>

#### The Necessity of the Dhara

Of course if the river is particularly convenient or an individual particularly religious<sup>14</sup> ritual baths may be taken much more frequently in a river. However for most other rituals the flowing water of a dhara is sufficiently pure. For the ten days of Dhikure puja, when the heirs of the deceased are practicing austerities (kiriya basne) in his name, a dhara is used for their daily bathing, shaving, washing of dhoties and for cleaning the utensils of their single daily meal.<sup>15</sup> A dhara is also necessary for a woman's purificatory bath and washing of clothes and bedding after the 10 days of sutkeri or birth pollution to prepare her for the 11th day nuharan ceremony when the child is named and first shown the sun.

But the most persistent need for a dhara is for the fourth day bath after a woman's menstruation (parasarne or nachune). Until she has had that bath, washed her hair and all the clothes she wore during the first three days, she cannot touch any man wearing his sacred thread without severely polluting him and bring much sin (rap) down on herself. Some of the more conservative women even refrain from touching other women or children (except those whom they are nursing).

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- 13 Also river sand is necessary for growing the jau or barley sprouts which must be given to all family members on the tenth day of the festival.
- 14 For example, a woman who chooses to observe the magh fast must bathe twice a day in a river (on the model of Parvati) for a month.
- 15 Actually a wooden stick is used for stirring the rice and leaf plates are used. These are disposable so only the single cooking pot (since no tarkari is eaten) must be washed.

Until after the fourth day bath women may not go near a still water source like an inar, must wait every day (until no men<sup>16</sup> are using the dhara) and must send children to bring them drinking water or water to wash their feet with after working in the fields. Only after a second bath (this can be in an inar) on the fifth day are they permitted in the kitchen again to cook rice for the family. A third bath on the sixth day is required before they may worship the gods and if a sradha ceremony is celebrated they may not participate until a fourth bath on the seventh day. Since during the first three days a woman is not permitted to eat in the kitchen area along with the family, her food must be brought downstairs where she is staying.<sup>17</sup> If the woman is married someone must follow the food sprinkling water after it to remove the jhuto. A menstruating woman of course washes her own plate after eating but no one may touch it until the water on it has dried<sup>18</sup> when it is taken and washed again by a chokho member of the family before it may be brought upstairs to the kitchen.<sup>19</sup>

As might be expected a dhara or river bath is required (along with other ritual acts like changing of sacred thread and drinking sun ko pani<sup>20</sup>) when a twice-born man is touched by a menstruating woman.

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- 16 Untouchables who want to use a dhara must also wait until no one else is there and high caste people will not approach a dhara until an untouchable has finished his work there.
- 17 She must not sleep in the same room with her husband so she moves her bedding to a lower story of the house.
- 18 A further example of still water as a transmitter, rather than absorber, of pollution.
- 19 Specific rules about menstrual pollution vary, of course, from region to region even among Hindus. For example high caste Hindus in the Jumla region cannot even enter the house for 4 days and cannot work or carry water for seven days and must drink cow urine besides bathing on the 4th day. Universally, however, the need for a running water source in which to bath is crucial.
- 20 Water in a vessel containing a piece of gold.

Interestingly, contact with an untouchable is far less grave and requires only a change of clothes and sprinkling with "sun ko pani" to reg. in a normal state of chokho. However if either an untouchable or a menstruating woman touches a still water source the same ceremony--a hom<sup>21</sup> performed by the family Brahman--must be performed.

#### Ritual Use of the Inar

For the most part then, the running water of dhara and rivers are used to bring those who are definitely polluted up to a state of normal chokho; without them this transition could not be made. Of course sometimes running water is used to bring those in the middle range of chokho to a higher state of purity.<sup>22</sup> However in most cases this second type of transition can be effected just as well by the still water of an inar for the obvious reason that there is no positive jhuto that the water has to absorb.

For example, in the set of purifying austerities known as havasva basne<sup>23</sup> required before Dewali,<sup>24</sup> before the ceremony of gor bhuvai in marriage rituals, before sraddha and before Janai Purni, an inar bath is sufficient.

- 21 An orthodox Brahman ritual of various lengths involving sacrifice of ghee and grains to the sacred fire.
- 22 Nava Ratri and perhaps even Janai Purni can be seen this way.
- 23 On the day preceding the ceremony the individual takes only one meal of chokho foods (usually masine rice, milk, sugar fruits and nuts--no meat or oil). He bathes, shaves beard and head if male (the head shaving is observed by fewer these days) washes hair if woman, cuts nails, changes clothes, abstains from sex, bathes again in the morning after sleep and does not eat until the ceremony is complete.
- 24 The ceremony of sacrifice to the kul devta or clanged. Usually only the clan elders (thakalis) and paharis (priests) and women who are cooking ritually relevant foods must observe havasva basne.

The requirement of river bathing which we have mentioned earlier for the latter two ceremonies is intrinsic to the ceremonies themselves and not to the preparatory havasya basna.

Inar baths are also sufficient preparation for visits to major temples, and for the special fasts many women do on Sundays, chaitra dasai (day before full moon), mansa (new moon), ekadasi (11<sup>th</sup> day of waxing moon). Other important fast days like Shiv Ratri and Krishna Astami, and puja like Saun Sankranti, Magh Sankranti, Nag Panchami, etc. require only an inar bath. However participation in any of these ceremonies presupposes that the individual is in normal state of chokho to begin with. Menstruating women, people with a recent birth or death in their family must remain ritually inactive until the prescribed ceremonies (always including a bath in running water) have removed their jhuto and returned them to a state of normal chokho. By the same logic the gods who are never made jhuto by these human events can always be raised to high chokho each morning (they too have "slept" and "eaten" and become jhuto or mildly polluted) by a bath with well water.

Wells, of course, though they are as we have seen carefully protected from ritual contamination, are still felt to be vulnerable. So at least once a year in the month of Chait--when most old wells are cleaned and new wells dug-- on Achi Torthia which is the day when Mahadev married Parvati, a puja is done to all wells to purify them of any chance unknown pollution.

#### Kuwas: An Ambiguous Category

Thus far we have talked about two distinct categories of water--running water which includes river and dharas and still water from wells. There is still a fourth type of water source which seems to fall somewhere between the two categories and is presently undergoing a change of ritual definition.

That is the kuwa or spring. These are usually small covered brick structure over a natural spring where fresh water is continually collecting and spilling out. The elder people of the village say that a generation ago neither untouchables nor menstruating women would be allowed to touch a Kuwa. Now they are allowed to, and the kuwa is not considered polluted although the older people are uncomfortable with the idea.

#### Other Uses of Water in Domestic Ritual

Besides purification through bathing there are many other ritual uses of water. Mixed with gobhar (cowdung) and sometimes with half mud, water is a crucial ingredient in "lime gurno" or plastering of floors and walls with cow dung. This must be done every morning in the kitchen before cooking, after every major meal, in front of each door and in front of the family altar each day. It is also necessary for many calendrical or family ceremonies to plaster a part of the family courtyard so that it is pure enough for ritual use. Also, after every meal the wooden stools (pirka) on which the diners sat have to be rinsed with water--and there is probably no need to mention the part water plays in the purification of utensils after the jhuto of eating. Water is of course, also essential in washing clothes so there is always a supply of "chokho luga" to put on.

Before eating the head of the household always sprinkles a little water on the ground before him along with the tiny mounds of rice so that the gods and pitris have food and drink too. And the married women of the house will not eat before they have drunk the gorah pani (water in which an honored person's feet have been washed) of their husband--and often of their mother-in-law too.

The use of water within the ritual contents of puja is too complex to go into in detail here.



But the principle uses of water are 1) contained in a kalas to represent the deity being honored 2) sprinkled by the Brahman to purify and protect the participants in the pujan 3) fed to the gods or ancestors as an offering.

#### Water and Caste Ranking

Finally, water as used in the cooking of certain ritually significant foods is an important factor in inter-caste compensality restrictions and hence in caste ranking. We have already noted the more obvious case where water (its acceptance or non-acceptance) determines the line between touchable and untouchable castes. More subtle however is the distinction between chokho foods and dal-bhat (lentils-rice). Chokho foods of course are either uncooked (fruits, raw rice), fried or cooked with ghee and can be accepted even by a Brahman from any individual of touchable caste. On the same logic only chokho foods can be offered to gods. Dal-bhat however is usually cooked only with water and it may be accepted only from individuals of one's own caste or above. Food cooked only in water<sup>26</sup> is a much stronger transmitter of jhate than fried or raw foods. Acceptance or non-acceptance of dal-bhat then becomes the principal criterion for ranking among the touchable castes--and cases like the mutual non-acceptance of dal-bhat between Chetris and Jaisi Brahmins indicate a sort of "peaceful dispute" between them as to their respective place on the hierarchy. This ranking is evident even within families<sup>27</sup> where the unmarried daughter of a family cannot cook rice for her parents.

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26 If ghee is added to either it becomes chokho

27 Although among more modern families this is changing rapidly

For until the bartaman (sacred thread) ceremony for a boy or marriage ceremony for a girl the individual does not achieve full caste status. Thus, while the unmarried girl cannot cook for her parents, by the same token she (or a boy who has not donned his sacred thread) can accept dal-bhat from any one of touchable caste. This same factor accounts also for the refusal of high caste men who have taken wives from lower but touchable castes to eat rice cooked by them. To do so would be to relinquish their own high caste status.<sup>28</sup>

#### C O N C L U S I O N

This is not by any means an exhaustive survey of the ritual significance of water in Nepali Hindu villages. It is rather an attempt to locate the use of water within the structure of Hindu thought and indicate broadly the kind of classification of water which arises out of the Hindu concern with purity and pollution. It is true of course that many of these intricate regulations do not apply to the numerous tribal groups of Nepal. Their ritual as well as practical need for water might be fully met by water programs based exclusively on wells. However, Chetri and Brahman and occupational caste groups whose need for running water sources we have emphasized here, comprise over half Nepal's population and are the single most widely spread and emulated group in the country.<sup>29</sup> This would seem to indicate that in designing broadly applicable water programs in Nepal the importance of providing adequate sources of running water cannot be overstressed.

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28 Interesting in this context is Dor E. Bista's mention (People of Nepal page---) of the refusal of high caste men in the far western districts of Doti and D.eldhura to eat rice cooked even by wives of their own caste. This would seem to indicate the presence of strong hypergamy.

29 Dor Bahadur Bista, People of Nepal Ratna Lustak Bhandari.