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THE WOODEN HOUSE

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UNIVERSITY OF GLASGOW
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Abstract

My project consists of two complementary parts.

First is a series of short prose narratives that build into a more comprehensive memoir exploring the formative world out of which my poetry grows. I have set myself the challenge of writing as it were from memory rather than after memory. I don't politicise the memories or judge them. I try to be faithful to what I actually remember and to honour its otherness, not to enhance or exaggerate it.

The second part of the project consists of poems drawing on some of the same material, enhancing and reorganising it and finding in it experiences which, though rooted in the particulars of that distant world, are more universal in nature.

Memoir

My fragments of memoir centre around childhood, growing up and receiving my early formal education and acquiring formal language. They include descriptions of a typical farmers' village in Nepal where I was born. Temporally, these events of my life are distant in time. The geographical location is far from here. But as I recall the place and the events, they unfold one after another and they seem to come very close.

I begin with the wooden house, the tiny world of a child that starts expanding. The child steps out onto the courtyard, from the yard to the kitchen garden, the field, the school, the bazar and so on.

The child's communion with ants, frogs, reptiles and cattle is another step. He makes friends. He enters the world of knowledge and formal language. The alphabet opens the door to books, education and creativity.

The village has no means of communication, no power supply, no transportation. A radio in the neighbourhood is the only link to modern technological invention. But there is transformation. As the child grows up to be an adult, the village acquires electric power, television, and telephone.

Poems

Wherever I am today, I remain in memory and imagination rooted to that rural landscape where I grew up. That geography and its society are always central to me.

In the poems I have composed, and to which I am adding new work, I recreate that geography, home and culture. I reflect on the myth of home and its shifting meaning.

Through this creative process, I also observe the texture of hybridized living. I also register my anxiety over a troubled homeland.

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It is also fitting here to thank my younger son Saral for his understanding, as he has agreed to stay with his grandparents back home, in order to allow my wife to work full time and myself enough free time to work on my project.

Table of Contents

PART I

My Family	6
Father, His Injury and Death	7
The House	9
Animals	10
Emasculation of Male Cattle	12
Friends	14
Neighbours	16
Soil, Planting of Crops and Harvesting	19
The Rice Mills	22
Learning Alphabet	24
From Alphabet to Words and Sentences	25
The Primary School	27
After-school Chores	29
Grandpa's Death and Garuna Purana	31
Parsu Ram Migrates	33
My Eldest Sister Sita's Family	35
Bhajan or The Devotional Song	36
Khagendra Goes To College	39
School Anniversary And A Short Story	41
Festivals: Dashain And Tihar	43
Swasthani Fasting And The Mythological Story	45
The High School And My Early Poems	48

PART II

The Wooden House I	52
The Wooden House II	54
The Wooden House III	56
Grandmother I	57
Grandmother II	58
Grandmother III	60
Yamuna Sister	63
The Window	66
Face I	68
Face II	69
Home I	70
Home II	71
Mathematics	72
Father's Fingers	73
Lunar Eclipse	74
BIBLIOGRAPHY	75

THE WOODEN HOUSE

PART I

1

My Family

My birthplace is Chuthai, a village in eastern Nepal. I was born in 1969 into a family with three brothers and two sisters. Two sisters and one brother were born after me. We were nine siblings.

My eldest brother, Parsu Ram, was Sanskrit literate. He read Sanskrit books and sang mantras in a melodious voice. He was shorter than his younger brothers. Parsu Ram married and had three children: a son and two daughters. His wife's head shook involuntarily and the pupils in her eyes danced. It was not a disease but a harmless physical condition she inherited from her parents. It was handed down to her daughters but not to her sons.

My second brother, Chandra, had to leave school when father died. He always regretted leaving off his studies. Third was Khagendra, soft spoken and studious. He had a book in his hand most of the time. He topped the class in high school and all the teachers knew him. He became a medical doctor.

I was fourth among five brothers. I tried to follow in Khagendra's foot- steps and did well in primary and lower secondary school. I had to change schools in the eighth grade. I continued to be studious but could not excel. I found the environment of the new school daunting: large classes with many bright students. Teachers did not take notice of me, except a few who knew I was Khagendra's brother.

My youngest brother, Govinda, nearly drowned in childhood. He often argued with me over petty things. He called me by a dozen names. I flew at him and he flew back at me. Our quarrels grew worse until our elder brother Chandra arrived. If he did not turn up, mother sent for him. This made Govinda and me suddenly go quiet.

My eldest sister, Sita, married and lived with her husband. She visited us often and we visited her. She was graceful, spoke calmly and cared about mother and grandmother. My second sister, Yam Kumari, liked to dance and sing. She quit her studies quite early because she was married off. Of my two younger sisters, Bala took after Sita. She spoke and dressed simply.

The youngest, Jamuna, spent more time than the rest of us tidying things at home, planting flowers and sweeping the floors. She never finished high school.

Mother was almost as tall as Parsu Ram. She had dark circles under her eyes. The skin on both her heels was dry, cracked and rough. She worked more in the field than at home. Sometimes, I fell ill with fever and slept all day. She came back from the field and ran her palm along my forehead. She gave me boiled water to drink. At night my mouth and throat felt parched, I shivered under the quilt. She came and gave me more water.

Mother had a migraine every month. The headache lasted for two days. She put a pillow over her head and clenched her teeth with pain. An aspirin relieved her for a few hours, and she got up out of her bed and ate.

My younger brother, sisters and I spent most of our time with grandmother. Grandmother was in her eighties but never stopped working. She hung clothes on the wash line, collected firewood, washed dishes, fed cattle, moved cattle from the shed to the field, gathered them in, and cooked food. She had a staunch belief in local shamans known to us as *dhami*. If anybody fell ill, she suggested calling on a shaman. For her, illness was the play of a bad spirit, and only a shaman could chase the spirit away. Whenever she fell ill, she was dramatically cured by a shaman.

2

Father, His Injury and Death

I was five years old when my father died. I catch his figure as a flash of insight in my mind. He was tall and thin. Villagers called him *pundit* meaning he could read and interpret Sanskrit books, including books of *puranas*. They invited him to conduct household *pujas*, birth, marriage and death rituals.

It was a winter day when he got injured. After the crop was harvested, villagers left their cattle in the field for grazing. In the winter field to the south of our kitchen garden, there were a number of cattle. Nearby, one of our cows was tethered. She must have been in season: bullocks gathered round her, contesting, locking horns.

My father did not want the cow pestered by them. He threw himself in their midst in order to drive several of them away and to leave the cow with one. He carried a stick in his hand for the purpose. Before he could accomplish what he wanted, he was badly hurt by a bullock. He managed to get away, one of his shins bleeding.

Mother cried, sister-in-law rushed away and returned with water to rinse the wound. Mother found leaves of the herb called *bhumiraj* in the field. She began rolling the leaves between her palms, squeezed their juice into the wound, tore her shawl and bandaged the shin with it.

Father was not taken immediately to a doctor. There were no doctors in the nearby bazaar, only a couple of privately run pharmacies with undependable chemists. My family and the neighbours did not know enough about modern medicine and modern methods of treatment. When an injury or illness occurred, they first tried local herbs, then they consulted shamans. The pharmacy and the doctor were a last resort.

It must have been a long after the actual incident in which papa was injured; Parsu and Chandra placed him on the bullock cart and drove him to the bazar for treatment. By then he was infected with tetanus. The chemist washed the wound, applied medication and changed the bandage.

Papa's health grew worse. He had a stiff neck. It was difficult for him to swallow food. In his final days, he was confined in a dark room created for him, with makeshift walls on the normally un-walled ground floor of our house. The only doctor living in our end of the district was consulted. He had advised mother and my brothers to keep him isolated. Light, the doctor said, would worsen his suffering. That image floats in my memory: the dark space, mother, grandmother and sister-in-law going in and coming out.

Papa stopped eating. A week later he went into a coma and died. A bamboo bier was made and his body was wrapped with white cloth and placed on the bier. Parsu, Chandra and Khagendra shaved their heads and carried the bier to the *ghat*¹ for cremation. Villagers accompanied them in a funeral procession.

¹ *Ghat* is the riverside where the cremation is carried out. Hindus consider the rivers mentioned in the religious stories as the most sacred and use their banks for cremation. In Nepal Bagmati River is one such river. Nearest my house is River Kankai which has that reputation. In India 'Harischandra and Manikarnika are the two most important *ghats* that specialize in cremation' (Pierce 2000). River Ganges also has a great religious significance.

The House

The house was made of all sizes of wood planks and beams. The tin roof leaked in places. The supporting poles were whole tree trunks. The ground floor did not have walls. The flooring consisted of hard-packed earth. Firewood was stacked in one corner.

Upstairs, a veranda ran along the front of the house. At the end of the veranda was a room-like compartment with a cot and a table. I shared it with Khagendra. Inside, a small division on the left of the corridor was used for puja. There were kept the sacred books and gods' images. Mother and grandmother performed puja every morning. The space also contained a narrow bed for Govinda. The room beside this was used by Chandra. On the right was a big bedroom with three wooden cots. Sisters, mother and grandmother were accommodated in it.

At the back of the house was a narrow balcony called *kausi*. It overlooked the fruit and nut garden. There were betel nut and litchi trees in the garden. The nut trees were tall and the litchi trees were the height of the *kausi*. The ground between the trees was damp. Our wooden house blocked the sunshine in the morning and tall bamboo trees on Mr Gautam's land blocked the sunshine in the evening. There were nursery beds of turmeric and ginger plants. I sometimes spotted chameleons crawling among the plants and up the litchi trees.

The kitchen was in a separate thatch-roofed cottage. As with the main house, there was an upstairs floor in the kitchen house. My elder brother and his family stayed there. I remember the incident of burglary in the kitchen house. The burglar had taken away Parsu's chest and stolen the valuables: his wedding clothes and some gold ornaments. In the morning my elder brothers and mother went through the dishes in the kitchen and found that the burglar had also stolen some brass plates, leaving behind silver and steel ones. It was a shock and a surprise to my family. The burglar had left the chest in the field, about two hundred metres away from the yard, with some articles he had decided not to take along.

Sister-in-law plastered the ground floor of the kitchen with cow dung and white clay. Drinking water was stored in clay pots in a stand by the wall. Sisters and sister-in-law carried water from the well in these pots and kept them there.

Cooking was done on open fires in a hole in the kitchen floor. There were two cooking areas in the kitchen, one away from the entrance door and the other near it. In the further one meals

were cooked for the family. The other was used for boiling water and cooking broth for the milk cow.

The front yard of the house had a sandy surface. Walking in barefoot, we carried sand up to the stairs on our soles and dirtied the floor. The yard, stairs and wooden floor of the house needed to be swept every now and then.

The cattle shed stood a few yards away from the house. It was rectangular and ran from east to west. Next to the shed was a pit used for depositing dung. The dung pit filled up, then made a hill-shaped mound. The mound of dung decomposed and turned into manure fertilizer. The pit needed to be emptied. So, the manure was dug out and carried in a *doko*², a wicker basket, to the field. It was evenly spread there. When the field was ploughed, the manure mixed with the soil. The manure fertilizer gave the soil a darker texture

A large area behind my house consisted of bamboo trees. The trees belonged to our neighbour Mr Gautam. The borderline of the Gautams' and our land ran through the thickly packed clumps of bamboo trunks. A hole was dug in the field nearby, about a hundred metres away from the house. Two wooden planks were placed across it. It was enclosed by a jute-stalk wall. A curtain made of a tattered jute sack hung at the door. This was my family's toilet. It was very stinky and worms squirmed in it.

On a wet day, I needed to summon courage to use toilet. Those white squirming worms floated on the pool of squalid water in the pit. Some of them climbed up the wall and crawled about. They caused goose bumps all over my body out of sheer disgust. Once the job was over, I felt as if I had won a battle.

4

Animals

Villagers kept bullocks for ploughing. My family had a pair named Gore and Kathure. Gore means 'white' and Kathure means 'white with dark splotches'. A pair of bullocks was not enough for our land so we also kept male buffaloes. They were called Muge and Tauke.

² *Doko* is locally made. It is a large basket made of split bamboo. People carry it on their backs using a jute strap.

There was a cow named Tari Gai – Tari meant ‘starry’. She had a black pelt with white spots. She kept tossing her head from left to right and right to left. At first I wondered if it might be a disease. It was not: it did no harm and I concluded that it was a habit.

A milk buffalo was among our other cattle. She had no name and I never asked why. Mother appreciated her because she gave a good quantity of milk. My mother also appreciated the fact that papa had purchased her mother, and she grew up in our family.

The young cow and buffalo calves fascinated me. They were cute creatures, always kept tethered. They toddled about on the day of their birth. Later, sometimes a calf broke loose and ran like a deer, crashing through freshly planted crops, across neighbour’s kitchen garden and fields, but soon it was caught and re-tied to a pole.

*

As a child I often played with soil. My love for the soil brought me close to ants. When I peed on the soil, the place where the jet of pee fell made a small hole. It scared the ants walking near it. They ran on. I followed to see where they went and watched them entering their tiny hole. I placed my index finger in their way; they did not seem to be troubled, did not change direction, but walked along an arc round the tip of my finger and went their way.

These were small ants, smaller than a rice grain. They travelled in groups, as if aware of their fragile presence. I loved their nimble movement and their curious expedition. I wanted to know if they ever slept, if they spoke or made any sound, if they had rooms in their houses. I sometimes saw bigger ants walking on the courtyard. I could comfortably hold them between my fingers. They had sharp pincers on their heads. My grandmother saw me once trying to hold one of them. She cautioned me, ‘Never play with those ants, they can clip a piece of flesh off your hand’. I had caught it by the back: then the ant flicked its pincers. I heard grandmother’s words, dropped it and jumped away.

I damaged their dwellings out of curiosity. Often they were built near the base of a tree or a twig. I would smash it open to see how it looked, but the inside of the anthill contained only dull chambers of brown soil. No ants were to be seen. I wondered if they had abandoned their home. I tried another, but the same emptiness was revealed.

Red ants were found in some trees. They built their home with leaves, joining them with a papery white material, turning it into a round shape. Hundreds of red ants lived there. They turned aggressive when anyone disturbed them.

I loved to see snakes but was afraid of them. They lurked in the grass and preyed on frogs. Snakes usually swallowed a frog alive. The frog issued a plaintive cry that went on for a short while. I used to approach to see the snake but it remained hidden. As soon as villagers knew it was there, they came running with poles and sticks. They poked in the grass. Some began to beat it. The snake let the frog go and slithered away. The cry stopped and the frog hopped out of the grass. Sometimes the villagers succeeded, struck the right place and killed the snake. Then the frog remained sandwiched between its jaws, half dead. I loved the bodies of snakes, their sleekness. But the moving tails frightened me. I did not know why the snake's tail remained alive after the snake was dead.

The climate and the dry soil in our village were good for many kinds of snakes. Most were not poisonous, but villagers also encountered cobras. With cobras came stories of their bite and its fatal consequences, of its ferocity and poison: 'Cobra is the angriest of all snakes; it chases once it sees you; it can stand on its tail.' But any snake the villagers encountered was a danger. They killed it before it could escape. Only after the snake was dead did they try to find out what kind of snake it was. It was usually a *harhare* (slim snake) or *dhaman* (rat snake) or *dhodiya* (water snake). On rare occasions they found cobras. I asked, 'How do you know it's a cobra?' They explained: its head was flat and bore god's foot print. Someone's stick touched the head, the tip of it circling around. I recognised an indistinct pattern.

5

Emasculation of Male Cattle

Most of the male buffaloes and the bullocks kept for work were castrated. This was done in order to use their strength to utmost degree. Otherwise they were distracted by the presence of a cow or a heifer. The bullocks ran after cows whenever they got a chance. As soon as a bullock was freed, he ran towards the cow and stuck his nose to the cow's rear, shrank his nose and grinned. He climbed up on her even though the cow was not willing. An uncastrated bullock could also be offensive towards people.

Any villager who kept an uncastrated male buffalo was badly pestered by the people who kept bringing their buffaloes for mating. I remember the time when Chandra brought home a

pair of young male buffaloes named later as Muge and Tauke. As they grew up, he trained them for ploughing and pulling the cart. They were not castrated yet. People began to bring the female buffaloes to them for mating; initially one in a month but later they brought one every other day.

When a she-buffalo was there, tethered to one of the nut trees behind our house, the male buffaloes grew restless, tugging hard to break loose. The man who brought her would talk to Chandra and he freed one of them. It ran up to her and lifted its front legs and climbed up. I did not understand it initially. The male buffalo stuck out a pink pointed thing and pushed it into the part from where she-buffalo peed. But soon I understood what it was and began to have an erection.

There were two ways people got the young male calf, goat or buffalo rid of their masculinity. The first way was by inviting a local practitioner – there was old Sarki Dai – who came over with a clipping tool and a hammer. They laid the cattle flat tying up the legs together. Sarki Dai clipped the base of the testicles and hammered on the clip until he believed that the veins had snapped.

When Sarki Dai hit on the clips, the bullocks and buffaloes attempted to get up, but they were firmly fixed to the ground. They endured this process quietly. I watched their faces from a distance. The eyes looked wet. I was not sure if the animals cried because of pain. I watched Sarki Dai do it to a goat which bleated loudly. Each strike of hammer caused the goat to issue a heart-rending bleat.

The second way of castrating was to get the bull's testicles operated on. It was not done by a doctor. Some strangers from India came door to door asking if we required this service. They carried ropes and knives with them, laid the bull flat on its side, slit the testicles and squeezed out the insides. Flies hovered round the wound for days after the surgery. It took months for the testicles to heal. In some bullocks, the wound festered. Villagers tied the cattle's legs again, washed the wound and used local herbs and oil.

My family did not keep goats nor did Mr Gautam's family. But the Kafles and other villagers who were meat eaters kept goats. I wished we had goats too among other cattle. But the change came in my family when Khagendra finished high school and went to Kathmandu to

study medicine. He began eating goat's meat. Govinda and I began and after a couple of years Chandra began to eat meat too. Then a day came when we kept goats.

Female goats were kept for breeding and male goats for meat. A goat was castrated because its emasculation ensured the good taste of the meat. A buckling goat showed an eccentric behaviour. It climbed up on every female goat that came its way. It did not gain weight and stank. Its meat also bore the smell. The villagers turned a goat into a wether when it was about six months old or soon after that.

6

Friends

When I was very young I played hopscotch with my younger sisters in the yard. As Govinda grew up, I played hide-and-seek with him. I met Mr Pathak's daughter Kamali on the village road sometimes in the evening. Kamali never showed any shyness or hesitation.

I was in the first grade when I made friends with Rajkumar. His house was about a mile away from ours. I had to walk past many houses before I got to his place. His family had frailer means of subsistence than other villagers did. His house was among a cluster of tiny huts. They were Rajbansis, hardworking indigenous people. His family lived on daily wages. I never saw a shadow of despair in his face. His hair always glistened with oil. On humid mornings, there were sweat beads on his brow. Under his nose sweat appeared as droplets of moisture, tinier and subtler than those on his brow. He was simple and warm-hearted; he always wore a smile in his face.

On my way to school I often met him on the road outside his house. There were *kadam*³ trees on both sides of the road which seemed damp in the shadow of the trees. A ramshackled *chautaro*⁴ on the right hand side of the road was littered with withered flowers and fruit from the trees.

³ Kadam's scientific name is *Neolamarckia Cadamba*. People planted Kadam trees because they grew faster. They could be used for firewood and timber. Villagers could sell wood so they also had cash value.

⁴ A wooden bench-like structure on the roadside for pedlars to sit down and rest. It is usually built at the foot of a tree that also provides shelter and shade. Some people plant a peepal tree before building a *chautaro*. Hindus plant and worship peepal trees because they believe that Lord Krishna is present in each leaf of the tree. Grandmother had a religious ritual when she planted *bar* (banyan) and peepal trees near the road to Kalisthan. She had a *chautaro* built in memory of my father under the shade of these trees. I remember a wedding

Rajkumar and I walked together back home. We passed the rice mill, the jungle and the houses every day. Where the jungle began was the bridgeless river. On the other side of the river was a spring where we drank clean water. I said, 'You go first.' He replied, 'You go first.' I bent my body, head so low that my mouth touched water. I drank like a cow in the river.

On either side of the road a canal-like hollow collected rain water. It remained for months at a time. There were fish and frogs. Children came out with line and went on fishing for hours. They looped fish on a thread, whitebait of all sizes and a bigger and darker fish called *hile machha* among others. After school Rajkumar joined them, his spindly legs moved like reeds in the wind. He said, 'Wait, I will be back with my line.'

I loved watching them fishing. I watched Rajkumar fishing for a long time. He came out with a small spade and began to dig in the damp field. Soon, earthworms were exposed. He collected them in a tiny pouch. He baited the hook. I was eager to see how the fish got hooked while trying to swallow the worm. Rajkumar stood by the road with the line in hand, his eyes fixed on the water's surface. He said, 'Once the fish eats the bait, I feel the string being pulled'. I realized I needed to wait longer. I hurried on my way.

Balkrishna was another friend who loved to play with me and Govinda. He called us to the river for swimming. He neglected studies and was interested in sports and singing.

Mr Gautam's son Tara and Mr Basnet's son Keshav were also my friends. Tara was not very close to me because of our families' relative positions. Keshav had a pointed chin. He stammered when he spoke. I met him on my way to school or once I got to school.

I can hardly forget what Keshav and Kamali did in the field one evening.

After the day's work I went to the road with a football made of discarded socks and rags. That evening I was on the road, playing. I met Keshav. I rarely met him in the evening. We

ceremony of these trees was also held. 'Banyan and peepal trees are brought into conjunction, the peepal is considered the female, probably... on the basis of the relative vitality of the trees (the growth of the banyan being even more exuberant than that of the peepal' (Ferro-Luzzi 1980).

cracked jokes, laughed and kicked the ball. Kamali was in the field on the other side of the road. She came towards us.

Keshav began to flirt with her. She was more flirtatious than him because she made an obscene gesture with her hand. Keshav looked encouraged. He said to me: 'Let's do it.' He told her to follow us up to the place we used to go. There was a dry canal in the middle of the field. Some solitary trees stood in the field here and there. They hardly concealed us. But evening was drawing in and the light was failing. I went with him but I was afraid. I knew I was only keeping him company.

She lay in the middle where the canal was deep. I stood on the bank and watched him struggling to get into her because she was much younger. By the time he succeeded and was busy doing it, it had grown darker and I was restless, thinking that mother and elder brother might be looking for me. I said to Keshav, 'I'm going.' He told me to wait but I was anxious. I rushed back home.

I disclosed it to friends the next day but never talked about it to Keshav. These friends made fun of Keshav asking what he did to Kamali. He grinned in answer. Keshav and Kamali's parents never knew about it.

7

Neighbours

The houses in the village were widely scattered. We had immediate and remote neighbours. Everybody knew everybody in the village.

To start with, the Pathaks and the Gautams were our immediate neighbours. Later my grandparents' family migrated from Asam, India and settled next to our kitchen garden. Mr Kafle also moved near us. So these four families were our next door neighbours. The Basnets were also not very far. Their house was across the Singari River.

The Pathaks were quiet people. They were a family of five: Mr Pathak, his wife, his elderly father and two kids. The elderly Pathak always read a book of verse scriptures called *Srimad Bhagawad Gita*. His was a distinctive reading with noticeable errors. I still remember – he pronounced 'Krikna' for Krishna.

Mr Kafle was a unique man. Only a few hours' sleep was enough for him. When he took a shower, pouring buckets of water over his head, he loudly sang mantras. He had two wives living together with him – three wives in fact, but shortly before he purchased the land next to our grandparents' house, one of them had eloped. The reason for his multiple marriages was his infertility. Also known as an astrologer, he was in his late forties and wanted to have children. He interpreted people's horoscopes and foretold their future.

A few years later, I heard that Mr Kafle's fourth wedding was fixed with a girl near the bridgeless Sarki River. It was hard to believe, but nobody questioned him. How did the wives that lived with him agree? Why were the girl's parents ready to marry their daughter to an elderly man with two wives at home?

A bullock cart was decorated for the groom to drive to the bride's house where the wedding rituals took place. I remember Mr Kafle dressed in *daura suruawal*, coat and *topi* as a groom. He sat on the cart. Men from the neighbourhood accompanied him in a procession. I joined them. A local band playing *panche baja (pañcai bājā)*⁵ walked ahead of the bullock cart.

My grandfather had a slightly dark complexion. He was a hunchback and ill with asthma. Grandmother was my father's step-mother. When his mother had died my grandfather married for the second time. Their house was an ordinary village house with wooden poles and thatched roof. We called the grandpa's son *kaka* meaning uncle. The elder *kaka* was a jolly man and had a fine voice for singing. The younger one was a man of few words. Both were barely literate. The sisters were also grown up. The elder sister did not go to school. The younger went to the school I attended.

My grandparents' family and Mr Kafle's relations got complicated a few years' later. Mr Kafle's first wife was attracted to my elder *kaka*. The lady began to reveal it in such a way as to make it clear that she was ready to elope with my *kaka*. He was not ready for this because he had his wife at home and Mr Kafle's wife was much older than him. The rumour in the

⁵ 'During the three Hindu wedding seasons (marriage is confined to certain auspicious months of the year) the hills resound with the music of the wedding bands (*pañcai bājā*),* played by the *damāi* tailor-musician caste. In an Indo-Nepalese marriage, the groom, accompanied by his male relatives, must go in procession to the home of the bride, marry her there, and escort her back to his family home, and the *damāi* musicians are employed to lead marriage processions of all castes above (and including) their own. Their large paired kettle- drums signal their approach from far away across the paddy-terraced slopes, as do the strident fanfares of their C-shaped natural horns (also played in pairs) which are approximately two metres in length (*narsiṅga*). The other instruments of the band are cymbals, barrel drum, small kettledrum and paired shawms' (Tingey 1992).

village spread fast. My *kakas* and grandmother were in deep trouble. They asked for mother's and Chandra's suggestion.

Before the situation grew worse, one day elder *kaka* left home at dawn. He went to Asam where there were many of my family's relatives. Mr Kafle's wife began to say openly that she had slept with my *kaka* a few times. She ultimately left Mr Kafle and her brother took her to Asam and handed her to elder *kaka*. He had no choice but to accept her, but later he was able to persuade her to leave him. My *kaka* eventually reunited with his wife.

Mr Gautam had a weird accent. He did not get on well with our family. He was not liked by many people because he was oddly eccentric and he rarely mixed with neighbours. Besides, he and his family followed a religious sect that shunned meat-eating. They despised the practice of meat eating and wore rosary beads round their necks. The sect was called Krishna Pranami. They were worshippers of the god Krishna and considered Him the source of all creation. Other people were meat-eaters and did not like Pranami sectarians.

The reason for our family's discord with Mr Gautam was land. My brothers said the Gautama's had taken some of our land. Gautam's land spread very close to the nut and litchi garden behind our house. There he had grown a massive bamboo grove. Once Mr Gautam arranged a visit of a surveyor from the district land office. We lost about fifteen hundred square feet of land next to our kitchen garden. A public road went through that land up to Mr Kafle's house. Mr Gautam ploughed the road and planted crops in it. He argued that the road was not registered in the district land office and was not printed in the map.

The Basnets were the only family who had a radio at home. When their radio played, music often wafted over to us and pleased our ears. Mr Basnet was a bald-headed elderly man. He had four sons and three daughters. One of his sons lost his sanity. Their family became followers of Krishna Pranami.

Some neighbours were farther away from our house but close enough so that they remained in touch and were helpful. Those neighbours had a high regard for my family. The Puris, the Ghimires and the Siwakotis were among them.

One figure among them stands out from my childhood. That is Mr Puri. He was a short man with prickly whiskers. He grabbed me by my arm and rubbed his chin over my face. I felt a stinging pain and applied all my energy to get away from him. He rubbed his whiskers over and over on my tender skin until I cried. He laughed. I ran away and kept my distance from him.

Soil, Planting of Crops and Harvesting

My family and all the neighbours were farmers. The focus of activities in the village used to be planting, tending and harvesting of rice crops. Soil was fertile and irrigation available. Canals branched off the rivers. The villagers worked collectively to make sure that the canals had water in them and everyone's field got irrigation.

The weather was good in general. One year it rained when the crops needed rain. But another year it did not rain, and when the weather changed, hailstones fell, causing a great deal of damage to the crops. Occasionally very strong winds swept across the land. And sometimes a rainstorm destroyed the crops.

The ground lay sealed after harvest and rain. The first ploughing uprooted the grass and loosened the soil. It also turned up clods: massive, tiny, all sizes. After ploughing, the person who drove the bullocks used a harrowing tool called *pataha* for levelling the surface and breaking the clods. It was in the shape of a T: the horizontal beam was for a person to stand on and guide it. It broke most of the clods but smaller ones escaped and some tough ones didn't break at all.

I remember going to the field with a wooden mallet. Govinda and my sisters also came along with me. We hammered the clods all morning and afternoon, breaking them up. Sweat streaked our temples and soaked our backs as we finished an assigned area. Because vegetables, chilli, corn, jute, mustard and wheat were planted in dry soil, we needed to get rid of the clods.

Rice crops were planted in a wet field. We did not have to break the clods because the water soaked them. After the third ploughing, the grass and dry stalks decomposed. The soil turned into a clammy mud. The field was ready for planting.

The nursery beds for rice seedlings were prepared a month before transplanting. The rice grains were scattered on a dry bed which was ploughed and levelled. Plenty of dung manure was mixed in the soil which took on a grassy, herbal smell. Birds needed to be scared away or

they pecked at the soil for grains. In a week I could see pallid shoots emerging from the soil. As the shoots grew taller, they sprouted green leaves.

I trimmed the walls of the causeways. The grass-covered causeways needed to be renewed before planting the crops. The musky smell of the soil and of the grass mown by the tool filled the nostrils.

Earthworms were often chopped into halves by our labour. Millipedes and other insects were exposed and killed.

On rainy days I used *ghum* to shelter myself from the rain. Although *ghum* left both my hands free, the elbows rubbed against its sides and it frequently fell off my head.

The worst memories are of wet days, muddy feet, mud-smearred clothes, and the searing pain when an ant walked up my body along the bare thighs under the shorts and bit somewhere. My hands were covered with soil so I could not brush it away. I felt instantaneous, sharp pain, sometimes near the testicles, sometimes on the foreskin of the penis, in the underarms or on the back. The problem was to find that ant which kept moving and biting wherever it went. The elders said it was a kind of ant that bit you only once but it felt as if it bit at least seven times in seven different places.

The event of *ropai*, transplanting the rice seedlings, was like a celebration. The family that had *ropai* prayed for a day of good weather. There needed to be sufficient *ropahars*⁶ and pairs of bullocks to complete the proposed area of land. Extra hands were hired from the neighbourhood. *Ropahars* sang the song. A morning meal was carried to the workers in the fields that were far from home. Everyone left the work, washed mud-smearred hands and legs in the canal and sat down in a dry place by the side of the wet field. The team had a good half hour's rest to enjoy the meal.

Irrigation was crucial for freshly planted rice seedlings. For a few days after transplanting, the seedlings looked weak and pale. Soon they stood firmly in the soil and turned green. If the weather remained dry, it caused trouble. Canals almost dried up. But the occasional rain helped.

⁶ Females who did the planting. *Ropai* is collective work and the number of *ropahars* (planters) involved in it depends on the area of land they plan to cover in a day.

In a period of two months the rice plants began to flower. When the grains appeared, I picked a few grains and pressed them between my fingers. A white stickiness painted my fingers. It tasted like milk. As the grains matured, their colour changed from greenish-white to gold. The stalks and the whole field turned gold.

Scythe in hand, villagers got to the paddy field to reap the harvest. The cut-down rice plants lay in the field for about a fortnight to let the grains and the stalks dry by the sunshine. Then bundles were made of the sun-dried rice plants and brought to *khamar*, the floor where the harvest was stored ready for threshing. The bundles were beaten up. Part of the grains went to the granary and the rest to the jute sacks. The grains in the granary fed the family for the year and the grains in the sacks was sold in the bazar.

Not many people were required to plant the vegetable, corn and jute crops. Every year my family planted *rayo* for green leaves, cauliflower, cabbage, lady's finger, brinjal, onions, and garlic seedlings. Chandra went to the bazaar and brought back seedlings. Mother, sister-in-law and sisters planted them. Corn seeds needed to be scattered along the furrows. As Chandra ploughed the field, grandmother walked behind him with seeds in her hand. She mixed pumpkin and cucumber seeds with corn and leafy creepers were seen everywhere in the cornfield. When the corn plants grew taller, the creepers climbed up. I came across pumpkins of all sizes, and cucumbers everywhere in the cornfield.

Jute crops had an interesting cycle. A gentle shower could help the seeds' germination but heavy rain caused damage. The seeds germinated and grew ankle high in a month. Everyone in the family went to the field to weed the crops. We carried a metal tool, *pasina*, with a wooden handle and flat iron blade. The crops eventually grew up to two or three metres tall.

People from India came in groups in the summer looking for work. Villagers hired them to cut down the jute plants. The workers bundled up the stalks, each bundle no thicker than a thigh, left the bundles stacked for a week, then shook them one by one. Weathered leaves dropped off. Caterpillars crawled in and out of the piled up leaves.

A pond-like pit was dug in the field for jute retting. The workers dumped the jute bundles in it and filled the pit with water. The water remained still for a month. The jute skin became soft and fibrous. A musty odour of jute hung in the air. A cloud of gnats swarmed over the water. Tadpoles and frog eggs glistened on the surface of the pool. Then the workers walked into the water and pulled the jute skin off the stalks. The jute was dried in the sun.

The jute bundles were stored in the loft of the cattle shed. Jute was used to make ropes with which cattle were tethered in the shed and in the field. The ropes had an artistic shape. The ropes for tethering cattle in the shed were different from the ones used for the cattle in the field. The ropes in the shed were short, thick, woven criss-cross. The ropes went round the cattle's necks. While in the field, I - as everyone else did - tied the ropes to their horns and ears. If any of the cattle was difficult to tame, it had its nose pierced and the rope went through the nose.

In addition, jute was used for tying things up to the fence made up of bamboo and wooden poles, and wherever anything needed to be tied together. The jute was also made into *namlo*, a rope with a head strap to carry loads on one's back. Dry jute stalks were used as firewood. Workers used jute stalks to make the walls of their low huts.

The price of jute would be low at the time of jute harvest. The best time for selling it was October or November. But the price never met villagers' expectation. It was also the time of the great festivals, *Dashain* and *Tihar*, when the pressing need of money made villagers sell their land produce. Chandra went to the bazaar, bargained, fixed the price with the merchant and carted the jute to the bazaar.

9

The Rice Mills

The road to Kalisthan divided in two about half a mile from my house. The right fork took us to the mill. The mill was housed in a tiny cottage. It had an old fashioned diesel engine. Everything inside the cottage was covered with brown and soft dust of the husk. I heard the continual *pook pook* of the mill's exhaust pipe in the afternoons, evenings, until late into the night.

The sound of the mill stood out among other sounds in the village in the evenings - the calls of the white egrets in the bamboo grove, the boom of the homing cattle, barking dogs, children at play; the sound of mosquitos, cicadas, parents calling out to their kids and the flowing water in the canal.

The mill ceased to exist and its *pook pook* was no longer heard. Another mill was built near Kalisthan. It was farther than the first mill and its sound was not heard in my village. It had a

diesel engine and an exhaust pipe, and it sounded similar to the old mill. Later, electric power lines were brought to Kalisthan and from there to the mill. The mill got a new life and voice with electric power.

I remember my visits to the mill with my brothers. We had to unload the sacks of rice from the cart, put them on the scale one by one to take the weight, pay the mill's charge and leave the stuff there because there was a long queue of villagers waiting for the service. We went back to the mill with the cart a few days later.

At the mill my job was to look after the bullocks. The bullocks would be tethered outside near the cart. There was nothing to do with them. Usually they stood up flicking their tails and munching something. Sometimes they sat down. I walked in and watched the miller starting the mill. He turned the wheels round and round as fast as he could. He left it when the machine kept going on its own. That is how it was done with the diesel driven machine: after the arrival of electricity, he turned it on with a switch.

The villagers in the queue watched closely, guarding their sacks and pushing them closer to the machine into which they poured the rice. The man in charge was covered with powder of the husk; his hair turned brown. Some people walked up to him and spoke into his ear. The noise of the machine drowned their voices. He occasionally allowed someone who had a single sack of rice to queue jump.

The miller constantly watched the quality of the unhusked rice. He placed his palm under the tube. Rice poured out from it. He peered at the rice and explained that the grains were over-dried or not dried enough, the reason for the poor quality. He had a tiny hammer to hand. With it he occasionally hit on something in the machine to adjust it properly.

When it was our turn I collected the rice husk powder, *gunda*, in sacks. The machine released each sack through a pipe at the back. The milled husk was carried home in separate sacks to use as fodder. The bullocks were fed on it every day.

The husk powder covered everything inside the mill. It had a dry and dull smell. If the dust particles got into your nostrils, they made you sneeze. The powder irritated the eyes, stuck to

your trousers. As I filled the sacks with *gunda* my hands and hair turned whitish brown. Its particles also settled on my eye lashes and eyebrows.

The whole process of milling was so rapid that Chandra and Khagendra both became busy. One of them poured the rice grains onto the floor, lifted and poured into the machine. The other filled the sacks with the milled rice. Chandra carried the sacks to the cart. The bullocks pulled the loaded cart back home.

10

Learning Alphabet

Learning to read and write the alphabet was a pre-school activity. My elder brothers wanted me to be able to read and write before I started school. Although I could recite the letters easily, it took me almost a year to gain the writing skills. I saw my brothers writing words with speed and ease. I fancied writing like that, though I wished to escape the evening alphabet sessions. The day's toil made me tired and feverish. I was reluctant to write letters, so I surreptitiously went to bed before the thought of teaching me alphabet came into my elder brothers' minds.

Of the thirty six *Devanagari* consonant letters, many had complex shapes. At least four of them were difficult to memorize. The most difficult for me were the ninth ज्ञ (jha), seventeenth थ (tha), thirtieth श (sha), thirty third ह (ha) and thirty fourth क्ष (kshya). These letters represented consonant and semi-vowel sounds.

My brothers taught me how they had learned. I had a slate and *khari* for writing. They said: draw a horizontal line, then a vertical, move your *khari* in a curved line. I moved the *khari*, but the curve did not look like a curve and the line crossed at the wrong places. Many times they held my hand and moved in the right direction. After that, when I began on my own, I failed. The failure dulled my mind and bored me; my inability to acquire the skill tired my brothers, but they never gave up.

Once one of our cousins, Lomanath, who lived in a distant bazaar, Chakkarghatti of the Sunsari district, visited our family. He was a school teacher. Chandra and Khagendra were busy teaching me. It was months since I started to practise writing. He joined my brothers in teaching me. I had overcome the difficulty of writing most of the letters by then, but ह (ha) and क्ष (kshya) were still a challenge. Lomanath made every attempt to help me. He never lost his temper; he encouraged my attempts. He stayed with us for about a week and then left. Shortly after he was gone, I succeeded.

I had overcome the first and most difficult impediment. Memorizing vowels was not that challenging. There were twelve in total. I had gained confidence and skill. I did not take long with vowel letters.

The next step was to learn *barakhari*. It was an important step to go from individual consonant and vowel letters to the exercise of combining them. *Barakhari* enabled me to see how a letter (*akshar*) and vowel sounds (*matras*) came together. It was all about the *matras* (*diacritical marks*) that represented vowel sound. The consonant ka (क) became ke (के) as I added an *ekar matra* (े) to it. The same *matras* were applied to all consonants, so it was an easy exercise. I had fun reading and writing after that.

11

From Alphabet to Words and Sentences

After I completed *barakhari*, I needed to use a pencil and write on paper. Chandra brought two slim notebooks and a pencil. He sharpened the pencil with a used-up 7 O'clock razor blade. I was eager to scribble on a page of paper. Permission to write on paper was like a qualification.

I felt the smooth surface of the notebook. It was such a soothing feel. I lifted it to my nose. The smell of the new paper pleased me. But as I started scribbling letters on the paper, the pencil's lead broke. It was dark and brittle. Chandra sharpened it with the same blade. I wrote the letters with care. The other end of the pencil had a tiny bit of rubber. Whenever I made a mistake, I erased it. The rubber left a dark mark on the paper. My rubbing on the dark mark tore the paper.

Barakhari led me to words. But in many words, *matras* were not needed. Simply joining consonant letters together could make words. घ (ghə) and र (rə) made a word घर (ghərə), house. क (kə) and ल (lə) made कल (kələ), tube-well; ब (bə) and स (sə) made बस (bəsə), bus. There were three-letter and four-letter words such as मकल (məkələ), an earthenware stove and कमल (kəmələ), lotus and दमकल (dəməkələ), fire-brigade. Some longer words I loved to read were the ones that imitated sound. They were: डमडम (dəmədəmə), छमछम (chhəməchhəmə), खलबल (khələbələ), कलकल (kələkələ).

I had not seen a fire-brigade, bus and *makala* but I liked them for their simple spelling. The book of Nepali in the first grade introduced sentences. The pictures next to the sentences fascinated me. The sentences we read in the book were: *ektare bajau* (एकतारे बजारु), play on *ekatare*; *mamaghara jau* (मामाघर जारु), go to maternal uncle's house; *dudha bhata khau* (दुधभात खारु), feed on milk and rice.

There was a picture of a girl sitting on the floor and eating and a picture of a boy walking on the road. In one of the pictures a man with a long beard stood with an *ekatâre* in his hand. I related this to a singer who came from across the border to our threshold. The *ekatâre* instrument's base was made of an ash-gourd dried and hollowed out, sliced on one end, a string fixed to it. The man held the base under his left arm and the string in his left hand. His right hand struck on the string to make the tune of the hymn he sang. His voice was neat and pious.

Half letters were used in the verbs such as जान्छु (janchhu) which was part of a sentence like म जान्छु (ma janchhu), I go. I could make a number of sentences like 'I go.' So the half consonant letter न (nə) did not trouble me.

In the book there were some songs like nursery rhymes. They were easy to memorize. I always remember one called: *tara baji lai lai*. Everyone in the class sang it in unison and at the tops of their voice. The teacher had to shout to silence the class.

The Primary School

The modest primary school I attended was in Kalisthan, a twenty five-minute walk from home. The school always began at ten o'clock in the morning with an assembly. The children were summoned by a bell. We stood single file in a straight line. Each class had two lines because the girls stood separately. We maintained a distance between us by stretching our arms straight ahead, parallel to the ground. Then the whole school sang the national anthem.

After the anthem, one of the teachers commanded us to stand at ease. The class teachers checked their class attendance lists to make sure that everyone followed the school dress code. The boys wore blue trousers or shorts and white shirts, the girls blue skirts and white shirts. The class teachers also checked our fingernails and teeth. The teachers punished the children with dirty nails and teeth.

The head teacher asked latecomers the reason for being tardy. He caned some of us. He also called forward students about whom he had received complaints of neglecting their studies and playing marbles, chewing tobacco and uttering swear words. He made them bend over and struck them on their buttocks and calves.

The school had a single hand pump tube well. The school office had a peon who rang the bell after each class, striking the brass with a hammer. The bell for break rang longer, with an incessant tinging. The moment that bell rang, boys and girls poured out of the classes and swarmed around the tube-well. One pumped and the others, one at a time, cupped their hands and bent their bodies. Their mouths lapped from their palms. As the water gushed from the mouth of the tube-well, it spilled from their palms to the floor, then splashed up to wet their feet and legs.

The tube-well often went dry. The rubber valve did not work and we ran across the road to a neighbour's house. Some children went to a house beyond the playground. The tiffin break used to be of forty five minutes when the teachers went to the tea stall in the chowk for afternoon snacks. The children who came from the neighbourhood went home. For me and many of my mates the time was either for playing or for hanging around. Usually I did not

have a penny with me. I ate a meal before I came to school and did not eat anything else all day.

I wore flimsy shorts and went to school barefoot in my early years. As I grew up I wore long trousers and a shirt. My family could afford only one pair of school trousers and a school shirt for a year. The trousers thinned at my buttocks and had a hole long before another year started. I got it patched on the inside. The patch work unstitched because of constant use and many times I stitched it back up myself with a needle and thread.

I took part in the physical training drills for the anniversary celebration in which I stood in line and marched. One year, during the drill, one side of the patch cloth came unstitched and the cloth flapped outside. My hands kept pushing the cloth in to avoid a moment of embarrassment among boys, girls and teachers.

I always carried text books and *copies*⁷ in my hands. No one in my class carried a school bag. Sweat and exposure to the occasional rain ruined the book covers. All my books and *copies* had dog-eared pages.

In the first grade we sat on the mud floor. A skinny wooden chair stood in front of the class on which teachers sat. The black board had a coarse ply-wood surface. The teachers came with pieces of chalk to write on it but only the maths teacher actually used the board. In other classes there were benches where the children could sit and write. The benches were arranged in two columns with a passage in between.

We had exams and we were required to pass them. The teachers announced the names of the students who performed best in class. In the first grade I was declared first in the class. Mr. Indra Sen, who was the class teacher, gave me a one-rupee coin as a prize. I imagine it was from his own pocket, but it was such a great thing for me.

After school, I walked home through the Kalisthan chowk. A man was drinking tea at a stall. He gestured towards me as if he wanted to speak to me. I walked up to him. He asked me about the result. I said, 'I stood first.' 'Good, very good', he said. I felt elated. Then he said,

⁷It was and still is in practice to use the term 'copy' for a 'notebook' or 'jotter'.

‘Let me see your copies’. He took one in his hand and went leafing through it. Each page of it had a number of ticks in red for right answers. He went on being surprised. I felt proud of myself.

13

After-school Chores

Back home from school, granny served cold rice with *mohi*⁸ and salt. On a rare day I got milk with rice. Warm milk with rice was quite a luxury. After eating, my job was to take the buffaloes for grazing. Granny said, ‘Well, now, go and take the buffalo⁹ by the road, graze her along the canal, by the river and wherever there’s grass. Don’t come back until it is evening. She should be full; her tummy should rise above her back. Otherwise she will refuse milking.’ Chandra milked her twice daily. There were occasions when the buffalo showed her unhappiness by walking about at the time of milking, not letting down her milk at all. Chandra came back with an empty milk bucket in his hand.

I often placed a jute sack on her back. I propped one foot on her head and climbed up to sit on her back and control her with the rope tied through her nose. Rice crops spread on either side of the road, the canal and the river. As she grazed on grass, she stole morsels of rice crops. I gave a sudden pull and led her down the canal with running water. The tip of her tail dipped into the water. When buffalo flies stung her, she flicked her tail. Her tail kept hitting me with wet whisks. Near the tall bushes and bamboo groves a swarm of gnats circled about.

The flies aimed at my bare arms and thighs. I made attempts to slap them. The buffalo’s tail and the flies pestered me so much that I had to get off and walk along the canal, the rope in my hand and eyes keeping track of the movement of her muzzle.

The day I did not use the jute cushion, I would be aware of a nauseating smell all over my legs, and my body felt like the body of the buffalo. My head became itchy. My hands were busy scratching. Eventually a fat louse was found to have sneaked into my hair. I caught it

⁸ Buttermilk. It is the most refreshing drink in Nepalese countryside households. It is made from cultured buttermilk, curd. It has a sour taste. The boiled milk is cultured traditionally in a wooden container locally called *theko* or *theki*. It gets thickened overnight, is mixed with clean drinking water and churned around. The churner used for the purpose is called *madâni*. Butter collected on the surface is separated and the thin liquid, *mohi*, is served to the guests and taken with the meal.

⁹ Domesticated water buffalo. Villagers kept them for milk, *dahi* (yoghurt), ghee and *mohi*.

with fingers near the top of my head and chucked away into the grass. I looked for soap for taking a shower. We used the same soap for washing clothes and our bodies. I rushed to the well and poured buckets of water. After I dried my hair, I combed it down. Nothing dropped onto the paper and I felt relieved.

In the evening mother asked me to light the brass lamps and lantern. The glass of the lantern needed to be wiped with a piece of soft cotton cloth. The sooty smoke followed from the previous night's lighting. I adjusted the wick. I shook the base to discover whether it contained enough oil for the evening. If not, I filled it with oil. My hands were black with soot and wet with kerosene oil. The kerosene smell would spoil the food at meal time as we used our fingers to eat with.

I headed off to the well and washed my hands with soap. I repeated the washing several times. The smell of the kerosene wouldn't go. The only thing that could erase the smell was the leaves of the marigold plant. I squeezed the leaves and rubbed the sap all over my hands. The leaves' smell was nicer.

Marigold plants could not be found all year round. The flowers bloomed in November before Tihar festival and lasted for a few months. In the absence of marigold there was a *tulsi* plant in the yard. It stood there all through the year and had aromatic leaves. It was considered sacred and was planted with special care. Mother and grandmother watered it every day and offered a puja.

During the time of threshing rice grains, I needed to help my elder brothers. The threshing was done in two phases. First, my elder brothers picked the rice bundles from the stacked-up *kunyu* and hit them on the granary floor with a succession of thuds. They chucked the bundles to one side. My job was to stack them neatly.

The beaten bundles still contained grains. After the whole *kunyu* was beaten, the second phase of threshing began. Bullocks were used. My job was to walk after the bullocks, driving them with a stick. Bullocks walked round a bamboo pole which stood in the centre. Their trampling did the threshing. Chandra moved the top layer of the hay aside every now and then. The process was called *dain*.

I walked for hours, barefoot on the hay. The hay stalks badly scratched the skin on my legs. What was most annoying was when a bullock moved his bowels and I had to clear the dung off the hay. If the dung was watery, I had to invest a huge effort clearing it. Usually I noticed that a bullock was about to do it. I quickly picked a handful of hay and placed it underneath. The dung collected on the hay I held cupped in my palms. I chucked it into the field.

14

Grandpa's Death and Garuda Purana

Uncles did not take grandpa anywhere for treatment. He was too old. On a sunny day in winter uncles carried him to the yard. They made a bed on the floor. His breathing seemed regular. He kept on basking in the sunshine for hours. In the evening he had an attack. His face went pale, chest heaved up and down, veins in the neck tightened. Everyone from my family rushed to grandpa's house and hovered round him. He recovered by midnight. These attacks were frequent and uncles said, 'We don't know when it will take him from us'.

One afternoon, Jamuna came running from grandpa's house. She was out of breath as she spoke, 'Grandpa is seriously ill'. Every one of us got there. Grandpa was unconscious. Within half an hour, he died. It was near evening. Grandma and my aunties cried for a while. That was followed by a solemn calmness. Then messengers were sent to all directions. The villagers got the news and came there.

A common practice in the village was to blow a conch. The conch was blown during the Hindu prayers and pujas and it was also used to signal the death of a community member. The conch for a signal of death was blown without a rhythmic pause. It was a continuous sound, its pitch rising highest towards the end.

The dead body of grandpa was carried and laid in the courtyard near the *tulsi matha*.¹⁰ The place where the plant stands was believed to be a holy place; people considered the plant a form of god.

Villagers kept arriving as the debate about whether to proceed to the cremation that night or the following day was in progress. Uncles and elder brothers stood in a corner, grim faced,

¹⁰ Tulsi is planted and grown upon a plinth like base. The plant and base are collectively known as *tulsi matha*. The base is usually built with. Those who can afford also construct a concrete base.

and spoke in a hushed voice. They decided to stand guard over the dead body all night in the yard and take to the *ghat* for cremation next morning. This would give them more time for preparation. More villagers would participate in the funeral. The conch was blown all evening and the following morning.

I kept walking to and from grandpa's house until late. About ten or eleven at night everyone heard a sound coming from the bamboo grove. It was like hacking the bamboo trunks with an axe. There was the dead body in the yard and there was that sound. Villagers looked at one another in suspicion and fear. The sound stopped later. I came home and went to bed about eleven.

In the morning the villagers began to prepare for the funeral. A white cloth was brought from the bazar. The bamboo bier was made. Grandpa's body was placed on the bier and wrapped with the cloth, flowers scattered over him. Uncles lifted and carried the body to the *ghat*.

Everyone collected logs of wood at the *ghat*. The cremation pyre was built. The eldest uncle lighted the fire. The fire began with weak flames and a dense column of smoke but soon the pyre began to crackle with tall flames. The cremation was done.

Uncles shaved their heads, moustache and beard, and clad themselves in white dhoti. They ate one meal a day. They had to make the food by themselves in the kitchen garden in the presence of the priest. The priest read mantras while they cooked their food.

From the sixth day Garuda Purana started. To listen to the Purana was part of the ritual. The priest began to recite the *slokas* (couplets) and interpret them. I had no patience to sit down and listen to the whole narrative. Yet, whenever there was a chance, I sat there to listen to the priest. The Purana was a conversation between the lord Vishnu and Garuda, the king of birds. As the narrative progressed, it described kinds of sins and what kind of sin in this life would be liable to what kind of punishment.

The description of hell, the way the sinners are punished by Yama, the king, was frightening. Yama's messengers executed the punishment declared by Yama. The priest interpreted how the sinners underwent the punishment.

There is a huge tree in the middle, blazing like a fire. It covers five yojanas and is one yojana¹¹ in height. The sinner is tied to it and hit by metal rods, hammers, with iron clubs, with spears, with maces and with big pestles. He screams and pleads for forgiveness to which the messengers pay no heed.

Some of the sinful are cut with saws, like firewood, and some others are chopped into pieces with axes.

Some are plunged into heated oil, and like a cake thrown into the frying-pan and are turned about.¹²

The images of these *slokas* gave me a nightmare. The lord Vishnu mentioned number of hells, eighty four hundred thousand, out of which twenty one were most dreadful.¹³ As I dropped in to attend the next session I found the priest continuing with the kind of sins that could lead one to these hells and the horrendous torments.

I began to call on the name of lord Hari before I slept and whenever I remembered it was my duty to do so to avoid punishment in the afterlife.

15

Parsu Ram Migrates

About a year after grandfather's death, one day I heard my eldest brother Parsu Ram talking to mother in a low voice. All I heard was: a few years, to try out, Jayapur. After a few weeks he began to pack up. Then I understood he was parting with our family. He was going to live with his own family by himself. He was going to try his luck. The location he talked about was Jayapur where his in-law's house was.

¹¹ The unit of measurement *yojana* was in use during Vedic time. It has been mentioned in *Surya Sidhanta* and *Srimad Bhagawata*. Richard L. Thomson in *Vedic Cosmography and Astronomy* explores this unit to a considerable length. 'A more precise definition of a *yojana* can be obtained by making use of the figures for the diameter of the earth given by Indian astronomers. Aryabhata gives a figure of 1,050 *yojanas* for the diameter of the earth (AA). Using the current figure of 7,928 miles for the diameter of the earth, we obtain $7,928/1,050 = 7.55$ miles per *yojana*, which is close to 8. (Thomson 2004)

¹² This *Garuḍa Purāṇa Sāroddhāra* (Extracted essence of the *Garuḍa Purāṇa*) was compiled or written by one Navanidhirāma, son of Śrī Hari Nārāyaṇa, who lived in the city of Jhunjuṇū, which was ruled by a King Śrī Sūkhalājī (Navanidhirāma 1911).

¹³ *Ibid*

Grandmother, mother and Parsu sat down in mother's room upstairs in the evening and decided what share of property he would go away with. He had a *bigha*,¹⁴ about 2500 square metre of land in his share. He decided that my grandpa's family should take care of his land on condition that they paid him half the produce. He loaded his stuff in the cart : a few steel plates and *bhaddu*, heavy bottom and narrow neck pot made of mix alloy, some cups and steel mugs, a quilt and a mattress of the kind called *dasana*¹⁵, a couple of chairs, a wooden cot and a trunk filled with clothes. He sat on the cart and began to drive. His youngest daughter sat behind him. My sister-in-law, nephew and nieces, Ramu, Laxima and Kamala walked behind the cart. It was a sunny day but sister-in-law's eyes were moist and she looked back a couple of times. Brother's face was vacant. He did not look back.

A road went north from Kalisthan between the houses. Further on it bent toward west and ran through an open space. Half a mile away it met houses again and bent towards the north. It met another road, wider, white with a sandy surface and gravel. The wider road came from Sanischare and went up to Jayapur chowk and beyond that. That road took us to my brother's parents-in-law's house. Theirs was a large family. Father-in-law's face was dotted with freckles. He worked hard and was owner of a large area of land. He was careful with spending.

Parsu had a humble home twenty minutes' walk off the broad gravel road. His fortune there was a few *bighas* of land he was offered for farming by his in-laws on condition that he paid them with the agreed amount of produce. He kept some cattle: a cow, a buffalo, some goats and a pair of oxen.

Whenever I went to Jayapur to visit his house, he was either in the field ploughing, digging, weeding crops or away to Jayapur chowk to buy salt and oil. When he came back, he chuckled at me, and said, 'When did you come, Keta?' The little ones hovered around me saying 'Kaka, kaka, k chha?' meaning 'Uncle, how are you?' Sister-in-law emerged from the kitchen and handed me a mug of *mohi*.

¹⁴ A unit of measurement of land extensively used in Nepal, some states of India and Bangladesh. But the area it refers to differs from place to place.

¹⁵ A cotton rug spread on the cot as a mattress. Villagers get it prepared at home during the winter season. I remember the makers of *dasana* coming to our house, carrying a large bundle of cotton, a rod to beat the cotton and a harp like tool to separate the cotton wads. The twang of the harp drew our attention.

He had a small house. Part of the ground floor had a walled partition, which was used as kitchen. Next to the kitchen room he tethered some cattle. Behind the house was a tiny shed where he kept a milk buffalo, oxen and a few goats.

There were beds upstairs separated by makeshift partition made of bamboo shafts. I blew out the lamp and fumbled my way to the bed. I woke up in the middle of my sleep and realized that I was not at home and not in my bed. I felt like getting up and walking out for peeing but did not have energy to find my way downstairs. I did not have sound sleep for the rest of the night.

16

My Eldest Sister Sita's Family

I do not remember the wedding of my eldest sister, Sita, or my eldest brother, Parsu. Sita used to live with her husband's family near Kalisthan, on the other side of the jungle. The soil there was drier than the soil in my village and irrigation was scarce.

Through her village ran a big sandy canal which remained dry all the year except for a few monsoon days. People in that village waited for the monsoon. When it occurred, when it rained day and night ceaselessly for days and flooded the fields, water ran in the canal, the villagers came out for rice planting. The canal came to life; the field filled with joyful activities.

The brother-in-law's father had two wives, even three. His own mother was his father's first wife. She had been dead for years. The old man lived with the third wife. He used to smoke *ganja*¹⁶. It was a small green plant they grew in the nut garden. The leaves had to be dried before smoking.

He used to be seated on the cot when some elders joined him. It took time to get the *ganja* ready for the pipe. One of them got a wooden board and a knife. The other rolled the dried leaves between his palms. He placed them on the board and crushed them with a knife into fine bits before he filled the pipe.

¹⁶ cannabis

It was fun to watch them puff at it. The smoker breathed in and out in quickly. It built up on the last draught, cheeks humped, then the smoker released a thick cloud. They shared the single pipe among them.

Mother often sent me to Sita's house to pass on a message. Sometimes I went there with an invitation for puja or the rituals performed on father's Memorial Day, *srâddha*¹⁷. During holidays, I went there to stay overnight, sometimes for a few days.

There used to be *mistris*, the carpenters, sawing a log of wood, using planes to smooth the planks. My brother-in-law had just parted from the family and his house was about to be completed. I smelled stale saw-dust and heard the repeated clang of hammering nails into the wooden beam. When I watched the *mistri* pounding on the nail, I felt he was sure to hit his thumb, but he never did.

An elderly *mistri* spoke to me kindly every day. He was tall and bony; his hair a mixture of dark, brown and grey; his teeth yellowish white. Once I went near him while he was cooking. The *mistris* had a makeshift *chulho* where they made fire and did their cooking. He made red lentil *dal*. What drew me closer to him was the smell of the fried garlic he used for garnishing the *dal*. Then he boiled potatoes and mashed them. He made chutney mixing together the mashed potatoes, chopped onions, lemon juice, chilli and salt. He offered me a small plate of rice with *dal* and chutney the taste of which lingered on my palate for years.

17

***Bhajan* or the Devotional Song**

Bhajan, a memorable event, happened regularly after the arrival of some new neighbours in the village. These neighbours included the Ojha and Adhikari families and Mr. Kafle's nephew Jeewan. The event introduced me to the tune and rhythm of the local music and musical instruments.

17 An important ritual called *Srâddha* is performed twice a year. '*Srâddhas* are not ceremonies connected with the disposal of the dead. They are not funeral rites, but after-death ceremonies in honour of the forefathers' (Krishan 1985).

'It is believed that the soul of a deceased wanders in distress as a *preta* (the spirit of a dead person -before the post-mortem obsequial rites are complete) and does not take rebirth, that is, it does not attain *gati* according to its *karmas*, till the prescribed rites are performed, *Śraddha* consists of food offerings or oblation of *pindas* (made of rice pudding) to the manes, the deceased father and forefathers, to provide nourishment to them. Consequently the non-performance of *pitr Sraddhas* leads to the operation of the law of *karma* being suspended; the non-performance is an impediment to *Karma-Vipāka*, fruition of accumulated *karmas*' (Ibid).

A group formed to sing. The Siwakotis, the Ojhas, and my grandparents' family the Kafles were in the group. The members of the group had raised a fund and purchased some musical instruments including the harmonium, the *dholak*¹⁸ and the *jhyali*¹⁹. One evening they sat down together in our house and sang. Mr Siwakoti's son Tekendra, who was Khagendra's classmate, played the harmonium. As he sang his fingers moved with ease and speed on the keys of the harmonium.

The event occurred each week and the families took turns hosting the *bhajan*. The composers of the songs they chose to sing were anonymous.²⁰ Some of the compositions were in Hindi, some had Sanskrit diction and others had folk tune and folk register. They sang of Hindu gods and deities: Rama, Vishnu, Durga, Sita, Devi, Brahma. There was a feeling of togetherness in singing in the group and also of peace descending upon my heart and mind.

Raghupati Raghav Rajaram

Patit Pavan Sitaram

Sitaram Jai Sitaram

Bhaja pyre tu Sitaram

Raghupati.....

Jai Raghunandan, Jai Siya Ram,

Janaki Vallabh Sita Ram.

Ishwar Allah Tere Nam

Sabko sanmati de Bhagwan

Raghupati

Translation

Chief of the house of Raghu, O Raghav, O Ram!

Purifier of sinners, the blessed Sita Ram,

Sita Ram, Sita Ram

O beloved we sing of you: Sita Ram

¹⁸ A two headed hand-drum.

¹⁹ Thin-walled cymbals may be made of brass or of an alloy of five metals (*pañca dhātu*): brass, copper, silver, zinc and gold.

²⁰ These compositions were part of oral tradition passed down from generation to generation.

O blessed son of Raghu, Lord Ram,

O blessed son of Janaki, Sita Ram

Ishwor and Allah, all your names

Bless us all with your wisdom

(trans: mine)

I tried to imitate the elders, sitting on the floor, on a hay cushion or on a hay mattress, sandwiched between neighbours. I attempted to catch the tune of the composition and with it the words. The whole experience was solemn and memorable. The host family made every attempt to create an atmosphere, lighting incense and *diyo*²¹, putting the gods' framed images at the centre.

One question that haunted me was why one god had to have different names? Rama was also said to be Raghav, Janardana and so on and lord Krishna had several names such as Shyama, Govinda, Gopal, Vasudev, Jagannath and so on. Chandra explained that the names referred to the roles the gods assumed in their lives. Their names also came from several of their *avatars*.

I always looked for an opportunity to try my hand at the harmonium. I was allowed to play the *dholak* but not the harmonium. I practised playing the *dholak* for months and gained some skills that could work for at least a few of the *bhajans*. But I was not confident to play during the singing. My elder uncle was good at it. He sang loudly and drummed on the *dholak*, creating a sharp and powerful sound, the instrument placed under his thighs.

The harmonium was more complicated. The elders forbade us from touching it. Whenever I went near the harmonium, my eyes ran along the keys and my fingers pressed them. Someone would say, 'Hey, no, no. You will break it!' But I got on with it whenever I found the elders in a lighter mood or engrossed in chatting after the event was over and the host served tea in steel glasses. One hand needed to pump the bellows and the other played over the keys. It was hard to keep the attention undivided. I was unable to understand how Tekendra managed to play and sing at the same time.

²¹A tiny oil lamp with cotton wick used while worshipping gods; usually rapeseed oil is used to light this. Light is considered a form of Lord, knowledge principle (*chaitanya*). Hindus light *diyo* before any ritual and religious puja.

The *bhajans* helped strengthen neighbourly intimacy and were a means of socializing. The neighbours went on chatting after the singing was over. Topics included: why weather did not bring enough rain that year or why it brought so much rain it destroyed the crops. They talked about what crops were ready, who had a milk cow or a buffalo, who needed help with the field work. They had a custom of borrowing work hands a day or two from a neighbour. They talked about the canal and the rivers, the dams and the prices of the produce, about the elderly, upcoming festivals, and young people going to get married. These events were full of fellow-feeling and warmth.

18

Khagendra Goes to College

I was in grade five when Khagendra got through the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) board examinations with first division marks. Only three students in his class were able to earn the first grade and the whole of the high school, people in Sanischare bazar and people from the villages around knew Khagendra because of what he achieved. Chandra and everyone in my family felt proud of him.

Chandra met people and discussed Khagendra's studies. He met Khagendra's teachers: the head teacher, Mr Mohan Joshi, and also Mr Panday, Mr Mandal and Mr Jha. Most of them suggested that Khagendra should be sent to Kathmandu and to study medicine.

Chandra went to talk to elderly Sangraula near the jungle. Mr Sangraula's son Yuvraj was in Kathmandu but Chandra fortunately found him at home: he was back for a few months. Yuvraj and his father helped Chandra with information and guidance.

Chandra worked on the plan: he purchased bedding and a bag, sold the spare land produce at home, borrowed an amount. Kankai bus service was new and was gaining popularity. The bus started early in the morning from Kakarbhatta and reached the capital in the evening. Chandra and Khagendra went to Kakarbhatta and brought a bus ticket.

The bus left at five in the morning and arrived at Khagendra's stop at about a quarter past five. There was nothing at home to check time; nobody had a watch. I do not know how

Chandra and Khagendra managed to wake up; mother and grandmother woke up too. Mother made Khagendra eat beaten rice with milk and watched them leave when it was still dark.

Mother and grandmother did not go back to bed but waited for Chandra to return. When he came, mother asked, 'Did he catch the bus? Did he go?' He said, 'We were early; had to wait for an hour. The bus came! It did not run, it flew. What a speed! His bedding went on the roof of the bus, the sack of rice in the luggage space. He must have crossed the Koshi River by now.' Mother looked reassured but her face was still not bright. Grandmother stood by Chandra and listened.

After two weeks somebody in the village handed a letter to Chandra. It was Khagendra's letter. Chandra opened the aerogram air-mail letter, neatly written in blue ink. He read, everyone in my family sat around him. There was a long salutation in which Khagendra included everyone in the family, grandfather's family and neighbours, the eldest sister near Kalisthan and Parsu from Jayapur. He wrote about the bus travel, who he met in Kathmandu and how he rented a room. It told a story and had a touch of affection and care for everyone. Mother carefully folded the letter and kept it in her chest.

The elder uncle came the next day. Mother told him that Khagendra had sent a letter. She drew the letter out of her chest and asked Chandra to read. He read it to the uncle. Sita dropped in a few days later. The letter was read to her. The letter brought smiles to mother's face. Grandmother often talked about Khagendra at mealtime.

Khagendra sent a letter every month, asking about everyone's health, describing life in Kathmandu. He was enrolled in the college of medicine in Maharajganj. Some of his letters also discussed the price hikes and his financial situation. Chandra understood that Khagendra was low with his budget and he needed monetary support. Chandra went away to sell spare grains, managed the amount and sent it to Khagendra.

The time before the Dashain festival was full of colours and longing for togetherness. Weather cleared, marigold flowers sprouted everywhere. The colleges and schools had a month long holiday. Satars, one of the indigenous people, had their time of singing and dance. The roll of their *dhols or drums* and clang of *jhyalis* signalled arrival of the festival.

Khagendra used to say, ‘Without the sound of Satars’ *dhols* and seeing their dance, it doesn’t feel like Dashain.’

The holiday and the festival began with the new moon. Mother peered into the dark each night. If she saw a torch light at the far end of the paddy field, she thought that might be Khagendra. And when Khagendra came home, there was happiness. He took off his shoes; Bala and Jamuna stared at the skin on his feet; his feet were white, the roughness in them had gone.

Uncles came to talk to him. Villagers came too. He explained what it was like being in the city. There was a little change in his accent. Mr Kafle had purchased a radio and I used to go to his house to listen to the radio. I wished to touch it and fiddle with the channel knob. I was not allowed. When Khagendra went there, he was allowed to take it in his hand and do whatever he liked. He had earned that respect.

19

School Anniversary and a Short Story

The school celebrated its anniversary every year with various events. I participated in the march-past which was like a military parade, the physical training display in which we needed to remember steps. On the day we needed to perform that in front of the parents and some important guest invitees. The cultural show included songs, dances and *prahasans* which were like one-act plays. The purpose of the *prahasans* was to make the audience laugh.

It was mid-session of my sixth grade year. The anniversary events were in progress. I took part in a *prahasan* in which my role was to mimic the accent of a person from the Limbu ethnic community. A science teacher, Mr Bajgai, had a talent for this accent. I had heard him speaking in it and was inspired by him. I along with a few other friends prepared the *prahasan* and I played the role a Limbu successfully. The audience burst into laughter.

A literary competition was to be held at school. I wanted to participate in it. Why did I have that desire? I did not know? But the urge was so strong that I tried to create something by myself and failed. Then I looked for something elsewhere; I scanned Khagendra’s notebooks. Among the old crinkly pages I discovered a story. The title was ‘*Paschatapko Paso*’ (‘The

Noose of Repentance’). I read from the title to the end. I was guided by the urge. Khagendra was in Kathmandu and must have forgotten he had written it.

I pulled out four sheets of paper from one of my school notebooks and began to copy the story, in letters bigger than those of Khagendra, so that I could read it with fluency on the stage. However much I tried I could not imitate the shape and beauty of his letters.

The main character in the story took his ailing mother to a local shaman who did his best but her health only worsened. Then he decided to take her to the doctor who examined her and said it was too late. He could have saved her if they had been on time. She died and her son was left repentant. There was a lively description of the room and the attendants. It aimed to criticise superstition.

There was a makeshift stage at one side of the playground. The dais was made with classroom benches, joined together, a tattered mattress spread over them. The head teacher was on the dais, the chairman of the program. The jury panel included Nepali language teachers. There were benches and a few chairs for the audience. Participants read poems, quite a few of them, but there were not many stories. I felt nervous while I was waiting for my name to be called out.

The program host called me to the stage and handed me my manuscript. My hands shook as I held the paper. But I had faced the audience while doing the play, so I was not uncomfortable. I read fluently, finished and went back to my bench. Nobody could guess that it was not my story.

The result was announced and I got first prize. It was a tiny bottle of Chelpark ink, a notebook and a ball-point pen. It was not my work, so I felt the prize weigh heavy on me. My school teachers and friends believed I had talent and I needed to prove myself. One of my classmates, Prakash Kharel, repeated the title of the story whenever he saw me for a couple of years after that – as if he liked to repeat it, as if the repetition of /p/ appealed him.

“*Paschatapko Paso*, nice one, are you still writing?” I did not know what to answer. I nodded, confused.

Festivals : Dashain and Tihar

Summers were memorable for wetness, muddy roads, ploughing and planting crops : winters for harvest, festivals, dry weather, foggy mornings, *pujas* and fasting. The biggest festivals, Dashain and Tihar, fell in October and November.

Dashain lasted for fifteen days. On the tenth day all my family members got together, wearing their best clothes, and received *tika* and blessings from the elders. Parsu came from Jayapur with his family and recited the Dashain mantra. Grandmother put red *tika* on our foreheads with her shaky hands and went on: ‘May all your wishes come true, may the goddess Durga bless you with the best fortune ever, may you have long and healthy life, may you have name and fame in the world.’ She became emotional every year during *tika* as she believed god had saved her for that year’s festival that she might not be there with her single daughter and all those grandchildren the following year.

We went to grandpa’s house and received *tika* and words of blessing. The meal was ready on the day of *tika* at grandpa’s house, the best dishes aunties made, working all morning, and served to us. People walked on the road in groups, their foreheads painted with *tika*. They went to their elderly relatives. Many of our relatives came to our house too. Govinda and I went to a distant relative, Acharya’s house, who offered us food and some gift money. The first time we went there, he gifted us with a five-rupee note, the biggest amount anybody had ever gifted us. We were happy.

A collective *puja* was held in Kalisthan, with a full-size image of the deity Durga placed on a stage. People offered fruit and flowers to the deity. The *puja* started on the first day of Dashain and continued until the ninth day. People in Kalisthan installed a horn speaker and the priest read the mantras loudly. We heard the priest reading from the sacred book and singing *bhajan* all day.

Tihar started with a worship of crow. Mostly, my grandmother performed. She managed to get the leaves of *sal* trees and wove them into a plate. Before anybody in the family ate the food, she offered it to crow: some boiled rice, milk, ghee, yogurt, curried vegetables and lentils. Each of these items was on a leaf plate with some blossoms of marigold on one side. She placed the food in a corner of the vegetable garden and checked every now and then to

see if any crow flew down there to feast. If none of them alighted, she called out with a sound: kaw, kaw, kaw .

Tihar was a festival of marigold flower. Every year marigold plants gave two types of blooms: thick petalled African style blooms –we called them *thunge* - and single petalled blooms, signet marigold locally known as *kettuke*. The only day *kettuke* marigold blooms were used was the second day of Tihar when dogs were worshipped.

We had a dog named Khaire. Sisters picked up *kettuke* flowers from the garden and strung them into a garland. Grandmother called out to the dog loudly: *choi, choi, Khaire, choi, choi*. Khaire came along, running, wagging his tail. She put a garland round his neck and gave him the food. Khaire lapped up the food and went away. After a short while dogs with marigold flowers on their necks were seen scampering about on the road.

Tihar celebrated human closeness to the animals and birds. The third day was my favourite. It was called Laxmi *puja*. Villagers worshipped cows in the morning and the goddess of wealth, Laxmi, in the evening. Mother cooked pancakes. The cows were fed on fresh grass and pancakes and flour, worshipped with flowers and garlands round their necks. Their bodies were dotted with colours.

Laxmi *puja* fell on the new moon night. The house was kept clean and decorated with coloured paper; paper chains hung by the doors. Candles were lighted and placed everywhere. They were lined along the railings at the front of the house and behind the house. Mother asked me to take one candle, light it and put it in the middle of the paddy field. I got a wooden stand and went to the field with a candle and matchbox in hand. The whole village was full of light. That night girls and women played *bhailo*, a Tihar song sung in a group, going from house to house, accepting gifts and money.

Mother opened her wooden chest and took out some currency notes and gold ornaments. In the *puja* room a copper bowl was filled to the brim with milled rice grains. She placed a *diyo* with mustard oil and lighted it, the image of goddess Laxmi in the middle, red *akshata*-coloured rice grains- in a round plate. The *puja* was offered to the goddess with *akshatas*, flowers and lighted incense sticks. Grandmother had *puja* bell in her hand. She went on tinkling the bell. Chandra blew the conch, then uttered mantras.

The presence of light all over the village and the sound of *patakas* booming every now and then was something special for me. The singers came in a group of five, six, four, and also

three. They stood to the side of the yard and sang, one group after another. I kept going to grandpa's house and coming back.

On the fourth day we worshipped oxen. Villagers no longer sang *bhailo* from the morning on the day. They sang *deusi*. On the fifth day known as *Bhai tika* sisters invited brothers. Sisters bought some gifts for brothers. I usually got a handkerchief and a plate filled with delicacies. The togetherness, sisters walking round us making a ring of mustard oil, putting a *pancharangi tika* –five coloured *tika* - on our foreheads, cracking a walnut at the door, combing our hair, gave a sense of divine attachment to them. I asked Parsu to tell us how *Bhai tika* started.

‘There are different legends that explain the festival’, he said. ‘One of them is this: Once the Kirati king Bali Hang fell mortally ill. His sister Yamuna looked after him and prayed for his life. Yamaraj sent a message with crows and dogs that he was on his way to Bali Hang's palace. When Yamaraj came for Bali Hang's soul, Yamuna asked him to wait until *Bhai tika*. Then she performed a ceremony for her brother, and for Yamaraj. She made him promise that Yamaraj should not take Bali Hang until the *tika*, which she had smeared on his forehead, faded away; until the mustard oil ring she had put around him dried and the garland of flowers around his neck wilted. Pleased by her rituals and prayer, he granted her wish. Hence the festival began.’

21

Swasthani Fasting and the Mythological Story²²

Bhai tika was the end of Tihar. Villagers focused their attention on work. As the harvesting continued, the month of Swasthani fasting approached. Women began the fasting on the full moon day of Poush (January/February) and worshipped goddess Swasthani, a four-handed goddess with *chakra*²³, *trishul*²⁴, sword and lotus in each of her hands.

²² *Swasthani Mythological Story (Swasthani Bratakatha)* has not been cited from a particular book. I wrote most of it from memory. At some points I listened to the audio book available in the website *Internet Archive*: <https://archive.org/details/bisauni.netShreeSwasthaniBrataKatharemainingPartsNowComplete>

²³ A spinning, disk-like super weapon. Ancient seers observed the rising sun as such a powerful disk-like existence, a wheel. ‘This wheel (Chakra) is also held as one of the emblems of the Preserver (Vishnu)’ (Haldar 1950).

²⁴ A trident weapon. It contains three spears combined into one. It is the most important weapon of Lord Shiva but it is also seen in the hands of other deities: Swasthani and Durga.

Mother, grandmother and sisters began the fasting of Swasthani. They fasted all day long, ate in the evening and listened to the story of Swasthani. It was the first time I listened to an epic length story with a number of plots. The narrator Kumarji started the story with the creation of the world. I could not follow most of the sub-stories, many names of *devatas* and *rakshasas or daityas*²⁵. But amidst its grandness and many subplots ran a narrative of sadness and heroism. The narrative centered on lord Mahadev, also revered as Shiva, who sometimes acted like an ordinary man and sometimes like a god. When Chandra read the book chapters, I looked down to hide my teary eyes from the elders. The music of the language came across because the tone of his reading fit the mood of the narrative.

After the story of creation of the world, the narrator Kumarji described how Mahadev managed to marry Dakshaprajapati's daughter Satidevi. Dakshaprajapati hated Mahadev because Mahadev fed on *bhang*²⁶ and *dhaturo*²⁷, dressed in tiger's skin, painted his brows with ash and carried a serpent round his neck. When Mahadev went to Daksha's house with the proposal, he not only rejected it, but also threw Mahadev out of his house.

Then Mahadev sought lord Vishnu's help. Vishnu proposed Satidevi for himself. The wedding was planned. He asked Mahadev to come to the wedding as an elderly *sanyasi*, a mendicant, and beg for alms. Mahadev appeared at the time of *swayambar*²⁸ and begged for alms. Vishnu used his divine power of *mâyâ*²⁹ and put Satidevi's hands upon Mahadev's hands. Satidevi cried when she realised that an elderly *sanyasi* was to be her husband. Daksha got enraged at Vishnu.

Satidevi accepted her fate and went with the elderly *sanyasi*. On the way Mahadev tested her, creating a ramshackle hut with nothing in it but cobweb. She cried and consoled herself and smiled at Mahadev. Later when he revealed the truth, she became happy.

²⁵ *Daityas and rākshas* are synonymous terms. They are described in the sacred books of Hinduism as those who oppose *devatās* (gods) and those who represent evil. Gods are described as creator and those who maintained harmony in the world through divine justice. The wars in *Swasthani Bratakatha*, in the *Ramayana* and in *Mahabharata* and in many other epic length stories seek to justify the god's action against *rākshas*. The wars have ended 'adjusting to the new social structure' (Thapar 2009).

²⁶ canabis

²⁷ A herbal plant *datura*, its seeds are intoxicating

²⁸ A crucial moment at the wedding when the bride's parents put their daughter's hands upon the groom's hands.

²⁹ *Mâyâ* is an illusion. Puranas attribute this power to Lord Vishnu. 'It is somewhat common to interpret *mâyâ* as the nonexistence of the world, an 'acosmism' in which the phantasmagoric play of images is perceived as unreal and illusory. This could be referred to as a strong sense of *mâyâ* as it suggests the absolute unreality of much of what we experience' (Simoni-Wastila 2002).

Dakshaprajapati had a grand *yagna* in which he invited all the gods and *rishis* but he ignored Satidevi and Mahadev. Satidevi and Mahadev came to know about it. Satidevi, in spite of Mahadev's attempt to stop her, attended the *yagna* uninvited. Dakshaprajapati ignored her and insulted her publicly, telling her that her husband was uncouth and unlucky, that's why he did not invite her. Satidevi could not bear this and jumped into the *yagna's* sacrificial fire and died.

Narada took this message to Mahadev who was furious with Dakshaprajapati. He created Virabhadra right away and instructed him to devastate Daksha's *yagna*. There was widespread violence and bloodshed in Daksha's house. Virabhadra uprooted Vrighu's beard, killed several *devatas*, severed Daksha's head and threw into the fire. When Brahma knew about Mahadev's rage and violence, he began to pray. Brahma's prayer calmed Mahadev's rage. Brahma asked Mahadev for mercy. He requested Mahadev to revive the gods who had been killed and forgive Daksha. Mahadev revived Daksha by planting a head of a goat on his body. He revived many other gods.

Mahadev who destroyed *daityas* in the most fatal war of cosmic scale also acted as an average mortal when he carried Satidevi's dead body on his shoulder and wandered around the world in utter sorrow. He kept walking like a lunatic for one hundred years, uttering Sati's name.

Grandmother released a deep sigh and said, 'Even gods have their bad days. What a trouble he is in!' I was moved by the story. Mother and sisters put flower petals onto the book, offering a prayer. They did it after the reading of a chapter was finished. Grandmother and mother always sprinkled sandal paste and strewed flower petals onto the books – Bhagawad Gita, Shree Swasthani Bratakatha, Ramayana, Mahabharata - in the *puja* room. They also touched some of them with their forehead. They did the same to the book of Swasthani Bratakatha while listening to the story.

The narrative went on. There was the progression of story. The narrator at places explained why the fasting and Swasthani *puja* was important and how it fulfilled the worshippers' wishes. Later in the story Satidevi's soul transferred to Himalaya Parwat's wife Menuka's

womb and was born as their daughter Parwati. Parwati wished Mahadev to be her husband. It came true after she observed Swasthani fasting and performed the *puja*.

The story left a permanent imprint in my mind because I not only listened to it, but also read it through over the years. Next year my paternal sisters observed the fasting and they wanted me to read. I loved to read the story for them, leafing through brown pages of the book with big letters. The book had a hard cover and smelled of old paper.

The fasting was ended with a special ritual. A priest, relatives and neighbours were invited. The priest printed the sacred symbol of *Om* on a copper plate. *Shivalinga*, a representation of Mahadev, was erected. Special dishes were cooked. One hundred eight fruit items and *sel rotis*- ring-shaped rice breads- were offered to the goddess. In the evening everyone gathered again. They remained awake all night, singing *bhajans*.

22

The High School and My Early Poems

I came third in my year at the seventh grade final examinations. I had to go to Sanischare high school after that. Chandra went to the school and got me enrolled in the eighth grade. It was a simple process. He needed my grade seven result sheet and a certificate.

Sanischare high school was bigger than my previous school. There were many teachers. Students from two other lower secondary schools went to Sanischare. The class sizes were large. The eighth grade had three sections with thirty students in each.

Initially, I felt as if I was lost in the crowd. But gradually I made friends in my section. Some teachers knew me as Khagendra's younger brother. The head teacher Mr Joshi sometimes came to cover an absent teacher's class and asked my name. 'Are you Khagendra's brother?' he asked. I said, 'Yes.' He smiled at me and said, 'Good. He was one of our best students.' I felt good about it because he knew me as Khagendra's brother. It was better than not to be known.

The head teacher also came into the English class with a stick in his hand. He always chewed betel leaf and nut, *paan*, which had turned his gums black. He assigned some chapters of the English text book to learn the spelling and came back the next day with the stick. I never got

the punishment but those who failed to spell the word correctly had to open their palms and he hit them.

By the time I got through grade eight, I was familiar with the school environment. Yet I never felt as cosy and confident as I felt in Kalisthan. I liked mathematics and did the sums well but it was hard to follow the science teacher. Mr Pandey chewed *paan* as well but I never had the courage to ask him questions. I kept quiet even if I did not understand the topic he explained. He taught in grade nine and ten, the last years of the high school.

Nepali textbook introduced some fine classic short stories and poems. One that stuck my mind was a poem titled '*Yatri*' (traveller) by Laxmi Prasad Devkota known as *mahakavi* (the great poet). The poem that had lines with similar rhythmical pauses and rhymes with a message to the people who went to temple seeking a communion with god. The poet addressed them and said that the best way to serve the god was to apply an ointment to the wound of a sufferer; god dwelt in your heart and your body was the temple.

Which temple will you go to oh traveller which temple should you go to?
With what would you worship him and what would you offer to your lord?
Riding on people's backs which god's abode would you reach?

.....

Which holy land are you searching for with your eyes when inside you is god?
How far will you flow on surface, when the lord lives in the depth?

Trans: Myohmyoh (LawtonWriters 2010)

I also remember a short story by Poshan Pandey. The title of the story was '*Bhinajuko Sweater*' (Brother-in-law's Sweater).

The story has a female character, Shanti. She feels that she is growing older, passive and unable to keep her husband Gopinath happy. Her younger sister Sabita comes to live with them for a month during her holiday. Her sister's prattle and praise for her husband makes her feel jealous. Shanti notices that her hair was going grey and that Sabita was slowly entering adulthood.

At the fun-fair Sabita buys some knitting wool and begins to knit a sweater for Gopinath. The growing closeness between Sabita and Gopinath makes Shanti

suspicious. She notices that Sabita is going to Gopinath's room every day to measure him. Shanti spends many sleepless nights. One night she gets up and observes the nearly complete sweater. She thinks that the sweater will be complete the next morning and once Gopinath wears the sweater she will lose all her right as a wife, Gopinath won't take the sweater off. She begins to unweave the sweater. Her hands move faster and faster and soon there is a pile of wool on the floor. As she does it in a hurry, her hand accidentally hits Sabita.

Sabita wakes up with a start, trembling with fear; she asks, 'What's wrong, sister? Why are you unravelling it?' Shanti says, 'This is not going to suit your *bhinaju*. I will knit another one for him.' Sabita reddens and says, 'This is not meant for *bhinaju*. The one I knitted for him is already completed. I gave that to him yesterday and he is wearing it now. This one is for you'. (Panday 1997)

I was in grade nine when I started reading books. Tekendra, Santosh, Bhisma, Sarad, Toya and I read books of fiction. I never bought a book. One of my friends had a book, he read it and passed it to the others. The book came to me and I read it through. As I went on reading, I wrote in my notebook the sentences I liked.

The school organized a poetry contest when I was in grade nine. I made up my mind to submit a poem. I had never composed one before but had confidence. I had already started to scribble lines. I thought I would use meter and chose one. I learned the rules.

The poem was about nature. I do not have its lines in my memory. I went to the stage and felt nervous seeing a large audience in front of me. I had not participated in any school events in Sanischara. I thought too much about what I was going to do. I needed to sing the poem because metrical poems were meant to be sung. I sang with a shaky voice. I did not win the competition.

Later that year I found one of Khagendra's poems. It was a word picture of contemporary social reality. The persona in the poem expressed the anxiety of a common man. I liked it so much that I wanted to make it my own. I did not copy it and present it in a competition. I wrote it again, changing the content, keeping the form and style. The content was different but similar to that of the original poem. I never read it in any programme but left in my notebook.

I got through high school and joined Hattisar Science College in Dharan, a town in eastern Nepal, which was four hours' drive from home. I came home during festival holidays and found that Govinda had won first prize in the poetry contest at school with the poem I left in my notebook. Then I could write poems on my own. Poetry contests used to be held in Kalisthan and Sanischare before festivals. Govinda asked me to write one for him. I wrote, he submitted to the contest, read and brought home awards.

Parsu had migrated back to Chuthai and had his own house near ours. He had three more kids. The eldest, Ramu, had quit school. The youngest son Chetan was also grown up. Chandra was married and had three sons and a daughter. His eldest son Ramesh was also grown up. Chetan and Ramesh came to me and asked me to write poems for them to read in festival contests. I sat down, wrote one for Chetan, and the other for Ramesh. They went away with poems, read and brought prizes.

In Dharan I had an excellent literary experience. I came in contact with a group of young poets who read literature from the west, discussed and were exploring novelty in Nepali poetry. They talked about poet Bairagi Kaila from Nepal and T.S. Eliot from the west. They had given a name to their group: *Arko Jamat* (The Other Group). The poets who formed the group were Ramesh KC, Tanka Ghimire, Nabin Subba and Chandra Ghimire.

In English text books there were poems and short stories. I remember a couple of poems. One of them was *The Highwayman* by Alfred Noyes and the other was *Gitanjali* (Number fifty) by Rabindranath Tagore. Ramesh KC compared the repetition '.....riding/ riding, riding' in Noyes' poem with the repetition in one of Bairagi Kaila's poems. Bairagi Kaila had only one collection of poems published. It was not available in the bookshops. Ramesh KC and Nabin Subba talked a lot about Kaila's poems. I looked for it everywhere and got a copy in a bookshop in Biratnagar.

Nabin Subba was also in my college. He edited a wall magazine in the college. It was not a print magazine. The poems and write-ups were hand-written on a broad drawing paper. The editorial team did it and when the magazine was ready, it was pasted on the wall. One of my poems found space in that magazine, my first published poem.

I wish I had a record of my first poem I read in the school competition and the first poem I published on the wall magazine.

PART II

The Wooden House I

Farthest I remember is the wooden house,
next to a thick bamboo grove,
raw and unkempt, its poles
were whole tree trunks,
the tin roof was colour of cloud, holey,
it sounded dull during rainfall, rain dripped in
and mother gathered it in the silver bowl.
Often the wind grew angry, made rough noises.
The house shook. She fumbled for the matchbox,
lit the kerosene-lamp against the wind,
shifted things, closed windows.
I sat up, then crouched on the bed,
in feel of dampness, some drops strayed
up to my brow, my heart shrank
with the sound.

The morning after the rain
looked bony as a calf. The fields rich
with shiny pools of water,
frogs trilled full throated, hidden
in grass and water, under the clods.
Some honked like a bus, very near, that drew
me closer to see how the one there
looked, if its throat bulged.

The cattle shed
smelt of dung. The calf was a miracle.
I watched it from the time
it started to swell its mother's womb.

It trotted about the moment
it came out into the world.
I pushed it to the cow's teat and it suckled,
its head danced in a rhythm.

Farthest I remember is the wooden house
with all the rooms upstairs, and un-walled
ground floor; firewood stacked to the side.
A dark compartment of hay-work
and bamboo mattresses was made
on the mud floor where my father lay.
The stories of his sickness and death are fresh,
but his figure absent memory.

The Wooden House II

Two rivers ran past the house,
One dried to the width of a thigh
in winter. And swelled
and sounded mad in summer.

The muddied water
came close to the yard,
alarmed us
but never harmed.

The other, behind the house,
was bigger. Monsoon rain broke
its steady flow, currents in it cut
through the edges, and flooded the fields.

But in winter it came back to size,
workers from the neighbourhood
appeared there in the afternoon,
blocked the river in the middle,
channelling it to the side.

Men and women, their bare arms
and calves glistened in the sunlight.
Men in shorts, thin and semi-transparent,
Women, their *dhotis*
pulled up to their breasts.

They bent their bodies as low as the sand bed,
splashed the water out,
their sun-burned arms swung.
Tiny fish sprang off
the river-bed like tossed coins.

They spoke in sharp voices,
faces flashed, hands full of gesture,
their language incomprehensible,
but cadenced and lively.

They filled their bowls
with fish and crabs
no smaller than toes
and no bigger than their wrists.
Then they left.

Women carried the bowls
on their heads,
they walked single file on the causeway
through the fields, their huts
stood in the far side of the furrowed land,
close to the horizon.

The Wooden House III

These workers wheeled the time
forward in the village.

They built their houses in a day or two,
used jute stalks and thatch, twigs,
bamboo trunks, plastered the walls
with mud and cattle-dung.

Their houses were huts
with low roofs, narrow entrances,
They made bed with wooden planks
and bamboo shafts.

Their huts moved
from a farmer's field
to other's every year.

They wore hand-me-downs,
ploughed the land hardened
by dry wind and cloudless sky.

Their days began before dawn,
nights came as nomads
asked them to drop their work
and retire.

Grandmother I

Grandma's wooden chest
came from the hills
where climbing up and down the rocky slopes
she lived through years.
When she lifted the lid the hinge creaked,
something clanked inside
her *thailies* hidden
under pale *saris*,
head cloths, blouses.
She picked up a *thaili*,
stretched it out,
pulling the tie strings.

Her eyes flashed,
at the sight of a rusty coin
and a crumpled five-rupee note.
She went on touching things,
the tip of her fingers hovered
like bumble bees over flowers.

Immersed in the murky interior,
she lifted her head.
turned toward us,
told everyone how her single daughter
gifted her with nine grand-children.
Each time she opened the chest
She behaved as if she had woken
from a perplexing dream.

Grandmother II

That day grandmother was lying
on the bed in the balcony
that opened in the north
to the Himalayas.

Lunch was ready downstairs.
Sun poured a burning heat
on the tin roof over our heads.
It made us sweat all over.

I heard Khagendra
dropping the bundle of
grass with a thud,
mount the stairs.
Granny raised her head
to look at him
and burst into laughter,
face wrinkled,
gums exposed.

Laughter spilled over
as if she needed to let the pain
of her hard days flow,

as if the moments frozen
like blocks of ice needed an outlet.

I saw my brother go weak,
speaking in a meek voice:

Granny, granny, what's the matter?

Granny, please!

She looked at his face,
then at the ceiling, laughing.
Then laughter came to a stop.

We splashed water
over her face, her head,
fingers and toes.

We felt her feet to see
if the warmth of laughter
lingered there.
She clamped her teeth.

Was it the turn of her mind,
or the consciousness of her body
that led her through
laughter to a sudden illness?

Grandmother III

All day we tried many things -
from *tulsi* to *misri*³⁰ water,
Grandmother showed
no sign of recovery.
She lay semi-conscious;
at times she raised her head
gaspd hard for breath.
We readied her to take her to the doctor.
Neighbours came in and argued:
*The doctor will only mesh up with it;
it is a bad spirit, get a dhami*³¹.
Granny's face brightened.
Brothers hung their heads in confusion.

In the afternoon clouds gathered in the sky.
A wind blew raindrops into the room.
Brothers listened to the neighbours,
to the noise of the wind.
Anxiety clouded their faces.

Rain stopped, the sun came out.
Brothers rushed granny to the pharmacy.
They came back in the evening with granny
growing worse – her face paler, eyes more vacant –
and a bag of antibiotic syrups and pills.
The pills almost took her breath away;
everyone hovered around her,
her body half reclined in mother's lap.
All night the elders guarded her.
Near daybreak she vomited,

³⁰ Sugar candy

³¹ A local shaman self-practitioner, a witchdoctor

making sounds as if a huge rock
struggled to come out of her throat.

Mother began to weep,
constantly murmuring –
Ama, Ama, how's your pain?

And the elders questioned:
why is she not getting better?
Mother's voice cracked as she spoke –
Go and get a dhami.

The eldest brother nodded,
and walked off -
footsteps
quick as raindrops.

He came back, a slim figure behind him,
Bijuwa -- that's what mother called the man --
who would combat granny's illness.

The man flicked rice grains
on a brass plate,
pairing and separating them.

He sang mantras,
some grains between his fingers,
eyes now turned towards granny,
now away from her.
He tossed the grains in the air,
granny lying near him
with a child's face now.

When he was done,
he had a cup of tea and left.
Granny rose to her feet.

She went downstairs to eat,
went out to the toilet by herself.
She told stories and laughed.

The pills and bottles of syrup
sat in a dark
corner of her room.

Yamuna Sister

Yamuna sister was married
to a man who did not know
what he was doing.

He came to our house,
his bulging eyes staring at things,
his scrawny face marked with polka dots.
He smoked and the smell
of the bazaar cigarettes
felt luxurious in our house.

Yamuna sister must have been surprised
when her wedding ring faded
much sooner than usual.
She never spoke of it.
It was not fitting from the beginning,
it was not her choice.
She did not seem to care.

Then things began to reveal themselves
through whispers.

He stole the food stock,
sold and drank away.

Then she fought death
when she delivered stillborns,
one after another, three times.

Every year the river cut the edge of their field,
the produce dwindled.

Every year his drinking worsened.

Once she tried to fix him
as if he were a broken machine.
She left him for months.
He came up to her and promised
he would go better.

She had two sons
in the years that followed.

Her husband did not know
what he was doing.

She kept on stitching
the worn out clothes
while the boys grew.

The elder, moody and exuberant,
got sickness in his urine.
He made his way through high school
and dreamed of the next step
in college corridors.
The sickness took him.

She wriggled when she cried.
Pain and sorrow stained her face.
Her husband did not speak,
as if he had a lump in his throat.
He did not know what he was doing.

He smoked, drank, turned on the radio,
listened to the news.
He coughed and blabbered

about politics.

He cooked chicken
with red chilly flecks all over,
gobbled it up and coughed.
As if he knew that he did not know
what he was doing.
The locally brewed spirit
made him stop eating.

She insisted
and he ate but his insides
could not keep anything down.
He coughed to death.

She ripped her red clothes.

The window

The window of my room is open.

It won't close.

I saw its slender hands working on it.

The grass down the field has opened the window.

I saw its liquid hands curving during a pull.

The brook stretched its hands to open the window.

Wet pebbles from the sand bed

have scattered in the middle of the floor.

Shoving aside everything,

I begin to play with them.

They push the corner of the shelves

to make space for themselves.

The mango tree standing on the humped part

of the field has opened the window.

A bluster shakes its branches

causing leaves to fall on the floor of my room.

These leaves carry the smell of my childhood.

I play with them for hours.

From the open window I see the horizon

hanging low beyond the rice mill.

The mill's intermittent noise is heard

together with *damaha* and *dhols*.

Grandmother's voice comes alive
with echoes of them.

The clothes she hung on the wash line
flutter in the backyard.

However much I strive to close,
it remains open.

Face I

So you said you carried a piece of the hill
as a scarf all the way to the sea.

You said you came to climb another hill
in water. How would you climb a hill in water?

What about the new skin on your face?

Does the hill you carried know of the weekend
and wineglasses? You say you are mixed up.

You say you have given your tongue to the air.

Have you also dyed your hair? A morning
is rising as your children sing.

You say the hill is in trouble, the hill
stirs when you speak. Do you take off
and put on your face like a coat every day?

Face II

I drive to the sea for the love
of its blue expanse and a family
of wind, gulls, fish, sailors and ships.

From the depth of the sea a hill rises,
from the heart of the hill
noises: dogs' bark, hens' cackle, birds' twitter, children's
scream and mother's call for supper.

I reach out for the hill.
It is tugging at the trousers of the Himalayas
like a young boy beside his father.

Faces pass before my eyes.
I go loafing with them.
I go into the dark,
the air heavy with smells of cooking.

The *mela's* up on the hill there.
The wind swings, the loiterers sing *selos* and *dohori*,
drink *Tongba*, perform *dhan nach*.

Here in the sea the heart of the hill flashes like a mirror.
I plod ahead, closer to the hill,
It sinks like a drop and vanishes.
I perspire in the cold,
sweat beads cover the brow.
I wipe the sweat off and search my face.

Home I

Back home,
home begins with its physical shape
you dream about. You have an appointment
with a piece of land, you look at it, try it on,
as if it were a wedding suit.

Back home,
to have a home means to own a house,
a building you build on your own.
Mother says, everyone has one;
are you going to leave your kids a wind?

Back home,
you work to earn money, a school teacher,
a civil servant, if you have no qualification,
run a tea stall, or work on the farm, for years
Or get visa to go abroad and work like a mule.
Even if the blood in your veins has dried,
you need to have home of your own.

After you own a strip of land,
your budget needs scaffolding.
your dream haunted by sand,
bags of cement, electric wires, pipes and pebble.
You keep moaning against the builders who do not show up
in time, or do not show up at all, and the delay bites you.

You wonder when you will have
a house with open yard and a window
from which you see a full moon.

Home II

I still do not know how my home came apart.

Its bone dislocated, flesh
refused to stay in shape.

It all began when the weather
disbelieved me and dreams had not enough room.
It began with vultures, they preyed on the roof.

Ants carried off the floors, termites devoured the walls.
The taps summoned a flood, air invited more air.

Then with the weight of hills upon my chest,
I crossed the river, lake, walked across
lands and deserts.

Mathematics

When you clasped my hands, then spread a linen
on the bed of my room, you hardly knew
that you had to face mathematics.

You say : the bills this month have drowned
us, and what shall we do to your university fee?
I say ‘ look at the roses in the yard,

ah ! their pretty faces.’ you lose your temper at me,
‘stop kidding, fourteen odd years
have been a joke,

’10 hours a day, 6 days, even seven,
over 60 hours a week,’ a grin
on my face cannot pull you out of these sums.

I slip into the memory, the day I said I would fly
with those wings stuck to my shoulders,
you believed I would land you in the world of miracles.

But through these tired hours,
you chew numbers, your fingers
move as you sink your days in sums.

‘The amounts of debt have worn wings,’
you mumble in sleep, as you travel
in dream across ocean to cuddle our young one,

who is tossing numbers in kindergarten.

Father's Fingers

Father's fingers have taken
the shapes of letters.

They lie next to the images
of the deities in mother's puja room.

The subtle shapes that lie
mute in tiny, pale volumes of Lokta paper.

Mother says:

*your papa burned diyalo,
stole letters from darkness.*

She points to the paper:
I see her cracked fingertips swinging in reflection.

He is dead for years but his fingers
have grown more distinct in time.

When I am away over the seas
his fingers grow in length and reach me.

Lunar Eclipse

On a night of a lunar eclipse

Grandmother told us a tale:

The goddess will soon be in trouble,

Rahu will swallow her.

A shadow crept on the moon's face.

Granny sighed, people in the village chanted,

Leave chamare, leave her.

Granny never ate a thing

and told us not to.

You should not eat

when the goddess is in trouble!

Then Granny went quiet.

I looked at her face and wondered

if the moon ever knew her,

if the moon ever heard the villagers' cry.

The cry rose from the edge of the village,

and spread. When the moon

was swallowed, their cry grew shriller.

After the eclipse ended,

the villagers took an open bath,

splattering buckets of water;

they sang, ate and slept,

as if they had been at war and won it,

as if the moon were their own sister.

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