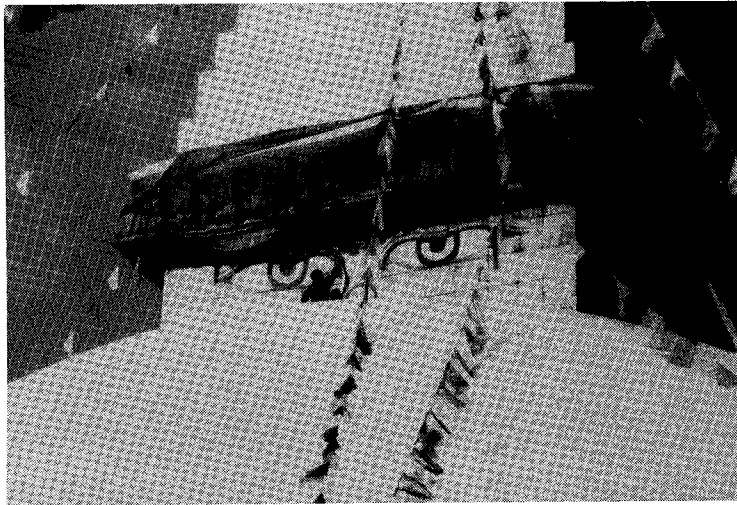


CVR-8

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

February 1991  
Kathmandu, Nepal



Painting eyes on the Bodhnath Stupa in Kathmandu in preparation for the New Years celebration.

NEW YEAR IN NEPAL

by Carol Rose

"So, So, So!" shout thousands of Tibetans in a mass prayer to the gods of good fortune, a wish punctuated as the crowd throws handfuls of tsampa barley flour into the air.

The New Year celebration for the Tibetan refugee community is one of the more colorful events in Nepal, itself a country famous for festivals. This year marks the first time the 14,000 Tibetans living in Nepal have held the fete since the victory of Nepal's pro-democracy movement last year, which transformed Nepal's absolute monarch into a mere Constitutional one.

"Our celebration is the same but it feels different in our hearts," said one Tibetan. "There aren't any police around this year, so we don't have to worry about getting stopped like in the past."

This also was the first time in five years that the Tibetans in Nepal were allowed to display publicly a photograph of the Dalai Lama, their spiritual leader and head of Tibet's government administration in exile, who fled to India after the Chinese invasion of Tibet more than 30 years ago.

---

Carol Rose is an ICWA fellow writing on the cultures of South and Central Asia. Photographs by Thomas Harrington, Jr.

---

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.



Dressed in style, a Tibetan man and his son wear traditional garb at the New Years celebration in the Jawalakhel refugee camp.

decorated with small statues and piled high with tsampa barely flour. People entering the gate tossed a pinch of the tsampa into the air as they prayed, scattering flour dust on the man's face. When we arrived, he was covered in flour but smiling good-naturedly.

Inside the compound, a couple of hundred people sat in rows upon burlap sack cloth laid down on the ground. Old men wore traditional Tibetan costumes: robes with too-long sleeves, some fleece-lined and others cotton, tied with belts from which small daggers dangled. Many sported fur hats that covered their ears and were decorated with gold, red or green thread. Married women wore traditional Tibetan aprons, woven in a multi-colored stripe pattern. Young boys strutted around in new ill-fitting suits. Girls glided by in shiny colorful "chubbas" -- Tibetan wrap-around pinafores. Everyone had new shoes.

The celebration took place over three days: February 15, 16, and 17. The first day was reserved for neighborhood celebrations, the second day for family togetherness. The festivities culminate on the third day with a massive celebration at the Bodhnath stupa in Kathmandu.

#### CELEBRATION IN THE CAMP

My husband, Tom, and I were invited to spend the first day of the New Year at the Jawalakhel refugee camp in Kathmandu. We arrived at the settlement's carpet factory around 7 in the morning. Families dressed in new clothes streamed toward the factory gate. Nepalese workers had been hired to prepare the factory courtyard. For weeks they had been laying new brickwork on the ground and building a new cement-and-brick gateway entrance.

A man dressed in a fur hat stood at the doorway, holding a tray that was

The milling stopped and people rose to their feet when a large portrait of the Dalai Lama was carried through the crowd. The portrait, draped with a white silk scarf, was taken to a nearby shed where a makeshift shrine had been erected. As we sat down again, an army of women emerged with pitchers of Tibetan butter-and-salt tea. Two glasses appeared for us, and were refilled as quickly as we could sip them down. Tibetans living in the upper reaches of the Himalayas reportedly drink as many as 50 to 60 cups of this butter-salt-tea mixture a day. No doubt, consumption of the brew contributes to the above-average levels of high blood pressure among the refugees.

Men carrying pails of rice and raisins appeared next. Everyone pulled out plastic bags, which were then filled with a this cooked rice-raisin mixture. Bowls of rice were brought to us. Instead of eating it, however, people tossed grains of rice into the air while muttering prayers. Rice rained down upon us, nestling in our hair and clothing. Everyone then formed a line at the shed to pay respects to the Dalai Lama's photograph, offering white silk scarves to "his holiness" along with money.

People then began to joke, laugh and greet one another with the phrase "Tashi Delek," meaning "Good Luck." The atmosphere was easy and relaxed. Soon thereafter, cadres of men and women bearing food appeared again. This time, they brought Tibetan toast -- an deep-fat and oily version of Native American fry-bread -- which they distributed generously among the crowd. One Tibetan

friend commented dryly that many of the Tibetans who live outside of the camp came to the festivities only to collect toast. We were given four pieces of bread, dripping with oil and resembling styrofoam in consistency. In Tibetan homes, this bread is stacked two-



Women wearing Tibetan "marriage" aprons join arms for a traditional New Years dance in Jawalakhel.

by-two to form a tower upon which fresh fruit, candy and scarves are placed next to portraits of the Dalai Lama.

The final event of the morning was Tibetan dancing, initiated by a drummer who lured the older men and women into the center of the courtyard.

At first, there were two lines of people standing arm-in-arm: women in one line, men in the other. Soon, however, they formed a giant circle around the compound, singing and chanting songs of praise for Tibet and the Dalai Lama. The dancing consisted of intricate footwork, led by one elderly woman who apparently knew all the steps. As the songs progressed, the beat gradually increased getting faster and faster until the song suddenly ended. Our friend explained that this was the first time he had seen dancing at the factory -- another sign of Nepal's democracy movement.

#### CELEBRATION AT THE STUPA

The third day of the New Year is celebrated at the Bodhnath stupa, one of the holiest shrines in Buddhism and site of the annual celebration of the Tibetan New Year in Nepal.

The stupa itself is a magnificent site: a massive white dome rising up from the courtyard in three concentric levels, topped by a twelve-tiered golden tower, each step representing a stage of knowledge. Giant red, white and blue-painted eyes on all four sides of the tower cast a merciful gaze on the devotees who



Men carry baskets of Tibetan toast for distribution to the community at the Jawalakhel New Years celebration.

circle below. The stupa's base is ringed with 108 inset images of the Buddha Amitabha. Surrounding the triple-terraced dome is a brick wall with 147 niches, each holding four or five prayer wheels. Each wheel is a canister, engraved on the outside with Tibetan



Tibetan monks sit for a group portrait at the base of the Bodhnath stupa as prayer flags fly overhead.

prayers, while within each brass wheel there are more prayers written on paper. A spin of the wheel sends the prayers heavenward.

Bodhnath is worshipped primarily by Tibetans, especially at the New Year, when Lamas gather from around the world to perform special rites. The origins of the stupa are unclear, but one story suggests it was built by a woman named Maa Jartse, a goose widow who also amassed a fortune from her work as a goose girl. As a reward for her hard work, the King agreed to give her as much ground as a buffalo hide would cover. At that, she cleverly cut the hide into strips and stretched them out over the distance now covered by the enormous stupa. Since then, the Tibetans have called the stupa, "Ja Rung Kha Shor" -- or "done with the slip of the tongue."

We arrived at Bodhnath around 8 AM, in time to watch young men and children attaching streamers of multi-colored prayer flags from the top of the spire. Hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of colored flags, each with prayers printed upon them, flapped in the gentle breeze, carrying wishes heavenward. Young men shimmied up flag poles to hang additional pray-flags, or "wind-horses," from poles spaced every four feet surrounding the enormous complex. Other men put a fresh coat of paint on the eyes of the stupa.

Anticipation was in the air, as monks and lay people from Kathmandu and beyond gathered together for the most sacred holiday of the year. People burned incense, fingered prayer beads, chanted mantras and paid homage at various shrines

---

### Challenges of a New Era

Despite the atmosphere of freedom at the Tibetan New Year celebration, Nepal's fledgling experiment in democracy proved itself unprepared to cope with a trip by the Dalai Lama himself. Days before the celebration, a scheduled visit to Nepal by the exiled Tibetan leader was canceled after objections by Nepal's left-wing political parties and a formal protest by the government of China, which has been blamed for the death of over one million Tibetans.

"The Dalai Lama is not an ordinary religious figure but a political exile who has been living abroad, carrying out activities aimed at splitting the motherland and undermining our national unity," said a press statement issued by the Chinese embassy here. "If the Dalai Lama comes to visit Nepal, it will be not only a religious activity but also an event with political motives."

The planned visit also may have ruffled the feathers of Nepal's King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah, suggested one Tibetan community leader. "Nepal is supposed to be a Hindu kingdom with a Hindu king who is a reincarnation of a Hindu God," he said. "The Dalai Lama -- a stateless Buddhist monk -- has drawn in crowds of 30,000 Nepalese. There is no way the King could match that."

The Dalai Lama won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989 for his campaign of non-violent resistance to Chinese rule in Tibet. The invitation for him to visit was extended by the Buddhist Welfare Association of Nepal. Officially, the visit was canceled by the Tibetan leader himself, on the grounds that he does not want to "cause any inconvenience to the host countries that He is visiting." The Buddhist association said they would re-extend their invitation as part of their New Years greeting to the Dalai Lama.

-- Carol Rose

---

surrounding Bodhnath. Many stopped to twirl the six-foot tall prayer wheel housed in a small shrine nearby. Here, too, everyone was wearing their new outfits, purchased especially for this occasion, including fur hats and long-sleeved robes from Tibet. Many women wore fancy silk or satin wrap-around pinafores rather than the grey or brown cotton dresses worn most days. Women also wore necklaces of jade, coral, and amber, many with stones measuring 3 inches in diameter.

A four-foot tall, conical-shaped clay oven stood on the central stairs leading to the stupa. People began burning sage and juniper in the oven. Some smeared butter and barely flour -- tsampa -- on the outer walls of clay stove. Billows of fragrant smoke belched from the chimney at the top, enveloping passersby in the fumes. When the oven started to burn efficiently, people

would choke the chimney with branches and paper to ensure it would continue to smoke. As people climbed the stairway to the top of the stupa, they waved their prayer flags in the fumes before sending the cloth to be hung from the top of the stupa.

Another group of men erected a throne on the second-tier of the stupa, complete with a carpet-covered chair, an altar of Tibetan new years toast (or fry-bread), and offerings of fruit. This throne later would be where they would place a portrait of the Dalai Lama.

Suddenly, the air was filled with a deep blating sound, akin to a fog horn. Our friend, Karma Tashi, explained that it was the sound of the Tibetan trumpets, heralding the beginning of a procession around the stupa. A group of around 30 bald-headed monks emerged at the base of the stupa, clad in traditional maroon robes. Some of them carried a portrait of the Dalai Lama beneath a square yellow-fringed umbrella. Other monks played six-foot long copper trumpets and wore bright yellow hats with a mohawk-shaped fan on top, giving them a distant resemblance to Viking sailors. A cadre of officials in black business suits brought up the rear of the procession.

They marched clock-wise around the temple, then proceeded up the giant staircase to the second level, where they placed the portrait of "His Holiness" on the throne. Monks and others crowded in around the portrait, mumbling mantras and occasionally tossing dried rice into the air.

After about 45 minutes of chanting, the crowd of thousands suddenly pulled bags of tsampa flour from their pockets. In unison, the people raised handfuls of the brown powder above their heads three times, chanting "So, So, So!" On the third "So" they threw the flour high into the air, calling the gods of good fortune to bless them. Copper horns began their bass-note bellowing once again. Everyone was covered with the fine brown dust, laughing and wishing their neighbors a happy new year. The crowd began a mass procession around the stupa once again, as the horns continued to



Masked dancer performs traditional Tibetan opera for the New Years celebration at the Bodhnath stupa.

blat and tsampa dust filled the air.

Everyone then migrated to a nearby monastery, where hundreds of people gathered beneath a giant tent to watch a performance of Tibetan opera. Men wearing elaborate blue or red masks and multi-colored silk robes danced to the sound of a drum and chant-like singing. Red-faced clowns, I think pretending to be women, wriggled their hips and joked with the crowd. One man dressed in white fur with a fierce animal face pretended to be a Yeti. The crowd passed sweet cookies and Tibetan butter tea as they took in the performance.

As the sun sank low in the sky, people turned toward home and once again exchanged the traditional Tibetan greeting and farewell: "Tashi Delek! Tashi Delek!"

It means "Good Luck." I hope the Gods were listening.

Received in Hanover 4/4/91



**Tibetan woman spins a giant prayer wheel.**