

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JLS-6: DAUGHTERS OF THE GURUNG



August 2, 1974

Dear Mr. Nolte,

The Gurung live in scattered agricultural villages on the southern slope of the snowy Annapurna range, high above the malarial terai of southern Nepal and the arid Gangetic plains of northern India. One of perhaps 36 ethnic groupings of Nepal, they are of comparatively recent Tibetan origin (likely no longer than 1000 years ago) and speak a dialect of the Tibeto-Burman family. The Gurung comprise twenty exogamous clans within two largely endogamous sub-castes, one Hindu, one Buddhist. Monogamy is general, but polyandry (both fraternal and avuncular) and polygyny carry no stigma. As in the days before Indian independence, Gurung men who are able join the famous British army regiment of Gurkhas, visiting their homes for only brief periods. And so women predominate in the villages of the Gurung.

It is a day's bus ride from Kathmandu west to Pokara and three days' trek from there to Ghandrung, Landrung, Kuldi and Chomro, the Gurung villages where these snapshots were recently taken. They are tendered in hopes that they may revive in the viewer that perfectly natural obsession that can with luck be the lot of us all and that in the present author was brought to light fifteen years ago with the first of many readings of a masterpiece by Nabokov.

Regards,

*Jeff Steingarten*  
Jeff Steingarten

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Jeffrey Steingarten is an Institute Fellow exploring the relevance of law and psychology. This newsletter arises from a recent recreational hike in the mountains of Nepal.





popping popcorn

When Gurung girls reach nine or ten years, they customarily enter a society of their peers, relieve their mothers of some household chores, and exchange their dresses for the costume of women--a close-fitting blouse of rough gray cotton or red or black velvet with openings on each side that are later used for nursing, a skirt of printed, imported cloth wrapped around their haunches and reaching to the ankles, a very long belt in a single color encircling many times their little waists, and a triangle of black velvet covering their seat with the two points tied in front. They tend to the domestic animals and their younger brothers and sisters, collect water at the village well, hull and grind the rice and millet, delouse their mothers. Otherwise they keep to themselves, but they are ready always to becharm unwary travelers.

Later that evening we hear the tinkle of bracelets and the rustle of cotton as five or six girls visit the house of a friend, to whisper together in a dark corner of the kitchen. When they are fifteen, they will go in a group to the campfire where the young men wait for them and sit most of the night together. But now it is different.

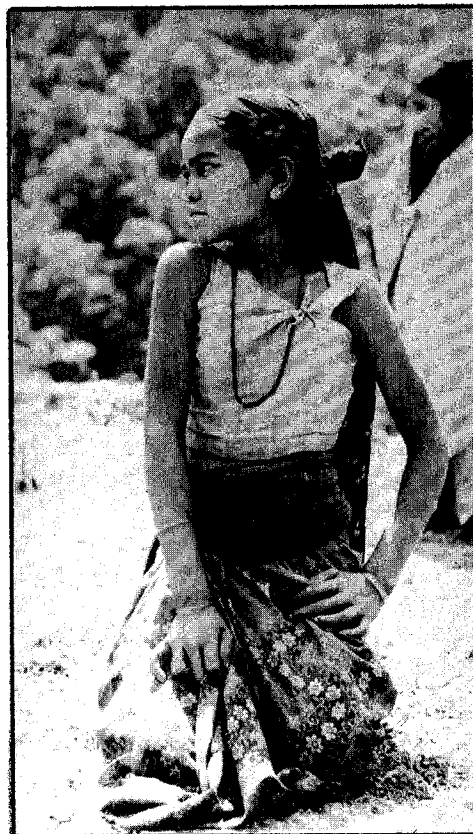
Soon the soft speech and laughter give way to the sound of one voice and then two in an improvised song, and there is singing until I am asleep.



"Now I wish to introduce the following idea. Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as 'nymphets.'

"It will be marked that I substitute time terms for spatial ones. In fact, I would have the reader see 'nine' and 'fourteen' as the boundaries--the mirrory beaches and rosy rocks--of an enchanted island haunted by those nymphets of mine and surrounded by a vast, misty sea. Between those age limits, are all girl-children nymphets? Of course not. Otherwise, we who are in the know, we lone voyagers, we nympholepts, would have long gone insane."

--Lolita



In mid-afternoon after a difficult seven hours' walk, we cross the Modi River halfway between the Gurung villages of Landrung and Ghandrung and find a flat campsite on the terraced hillside just beyond. In a half-hour our tents are pitched, water is boiling for tea, and I stretch out for a nap on a square of canvas. When I open my eyes, two Gurung girls perhaps ten and twelve years old are watching me from the edge of the terrace. They smile and join their palms in front of their faces with the word 'Namaste.'

Out of a rhododendron grove come two more girls, one with a large basket hung behind her from a strap over her forehead, her body pitched slightly forward and her hands crossed in back of her head to relieve the weight. They walk surely on the rocky terrain, keeping their upper bodies almost immobile and hardly lifting their bare feet from the ground. They sit on their heels next to their friends and array their skirts between their brown thighs in a quick gesture. None of them takes her eyes from me except when they huddle to discuss the significance of something I've done--dab alcohol on my sore feet, purify water through a charcoal filter, locate film for my camera.

I try to explain and they find my attempts ridiculous, but they politely hide their laughter behind their hands or the cotton head-cloth that falls over their bare shoulders. It is no use calling over our guide to translate because he speaks only Nepali and his native Sherpa language and a little English, and the girls speak only Gurungkura. Eyes and gestures are all we have.

One of them slips away and returns awhile later with a large plate of hot popcorn. She sits nearer to me than her companions, her two legs bent in front of her with one knee up and the other resting on its side on the ground, feet together. As I snap their pictures, one is bashful but the others look past the lens with a directness that makes me uneasy.

It is getting dark and the mists inch up from the Modi gorge. A mother calls to her daughter and the others get ready to follow. The girl with the basket--in it is a copper jug of water that must weigh thirty pounds--squats down in front of it, passes the strap over her forehead, leans forward onto her knees with her legs still crossed, and pushes up with one leg as she straightens the other behind it. She smiles and goes toward a house several terraces away up the slope. The water slaps against the jug with the rhythm of her walk.





Gurung shepherdess

"Marriage and cohabitation before the age of puberty are still not uncommon in certain East Indian provinces.... After all, Dante fell madly in love with his Beatrice when she was nine, a sparkling girleen, painted and lovely, and bejeweled, in a crimson frock, and this was in 1274, in Florence, at a private feast in the merry month of May. And when Petrarch fell madly in love with his Laureen, she was a fair-haired nymph of twelve running in the wind, in the pollen and dust, a flower in flight, in the beautiful plain as descried from the hills of Vaucluse."

"You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy...in order to discern at once, by ineffable signs--the slightly feline outline of a cheekbone, the slenderness of a downy limb, and other indices which despair and shame and tears of tenderness forbid me to tabulate--the little deadly demon among the wholesome children; she stands unrecognized by them and unconscious herself of her fantastic power."

--Lolita



Received in New York August 5, 1974



Science would be superfluous if there were  
no difference between the appearance of  
things and their essence.

Karl Marx, Das Kapital  
Book III, vol. III

It is only shallow people who do not judge  
by appearances. The mystery of the world  
is the visible, not the invisible.

Oscar Wilde, in a letter

And whether a man dispassionately  
Sees to the core of life  
Or passionately  
Sees the surface,  
The core and the surface  
Are essentially the same,  
Words making them seem different  
Only to express appearance.  
If name be needed, wonder names them both....

Lao-tse