

## Goats in Flip-Flops

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Hark! The sound of well-hacked phlegm hits the dirt floor! Ritualized spitting is an integral part of village life and is used to herald the day and sustain it. It provides a stark contrast to the icy cold silence of the Himalayas that rise in front of me, cutting a crisp clean line on the horizon. However, here in Nepal the two exist amicably - Beauty and necessity unified in this Holy Land. So holy it is, that for your village to be an auspicious one and blessed by Gods a plenty, 'male' and 'female' trees must be planted side by side in Holy matrimony for worship in the village centre.

Auspicious or not, a village is made up of a cluster of clay houses, running children and would put Orwell's farm to shame for the amount of animals present inside of houses as well as out. A village is not complete without its heard of rampaging water buffalo and jail-breaking goats, kicking up a fuss as they run past on the dusty road.

The buffalo provide milk of the creamiest nature, to be found in a fine brew of Nepali tea at the numerous 'chiyaa' shops for 3 rupees a cup. Whilst chiyaa drinking one can observe the men of the village scoring in the open-air game of karem board with acute precision. It's a cross between pool and tiddly-winks, which is fun for a while, however a villagers' main purpose whilst there is to acquire local gossip. As a girl, one simply has to drink alcohol or reveal one's shoulders to be branded a lady of ill repute.

"Parka ho?" one can often hear, meaning "Is it true?"

Within the assortment of village characters, the male/female roles can be seen as clearly as the mountains ahead. Maidens to crones with bushels of wood on their backs trudge past the chiyaa shop men sitting and discussing important affairs such as the rise in the price of kerosene and sugar, and of imminent strikes. Sometimes though, both sexes can be seen shinning up bamboo trees sickle in hand, and then weaving baskets and roofs with the cut shoots. To wash away the grime of the working day, they tread 20 minutes to the communal water pipe where they join the pecking order to wash clothes, themselves and fill up great urns with which to return home.

Here, where I live high on the hill of Kaski kot, in the mountainous part of Nepal, there is just one dusty road winding its way to the top (4 hours by flip-flop) where you will find an old temple. Close by is the home of my adopted family, a typical abode made of stone and plastered in orange clay that is cold to the touch in the morning and at night. By midday the sun bakes it to its former glory bringing busy activity onto the open porch. The children play, the women cook, and my volunteering partner and I just watch. Our embarrassed attempts at their mother tongue of offers to help are always rejected with a firm sweep of a Nepali hand.

Occasionally though, a baby is thrust into my arms as I assume my secondary family duty of Chief baby holder (my primary duty being to eat as much rice and dal as I can and comment gratefully on its good taste). At first the baby and I looked uncomfortably at each other, but our relationship has now progressed into a catch 22 situation. It stands up and I catch it 22 times. Progress is slow, but at the last count it maintained a vertical position for a full 2 minutes before its knees gave way and its face unintentionally toppled into mine. 'It' will take a name after 6 months, as is the tradition, and until then will endure the title 'Baboo' as all Nepali baby boys do. It is in keeping with the Nepali address system as all women are called 'Didi' meaning 'sister', and all men called 'Daai' meaning 'brother'. Nice and easy for the foreigners' etiquette administration, as you always know everyone's name. Daai Daai Didi Didi, Daai Daai. Everyone's happy. And even if they think otherwise, they still have a smile on their face, along with the goats in flip-flops and myself.