Protecting Nature In Growing Nepal
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Queen Fights Pollution In Pashupati Temple Area

Walking north from the ghats of the Pashupatinath Temple, across the sacred Baghmati River up into Himalayan Cherry groves and terraced millet fields, through reforested spruce pine foothills of the Kathmandu Valley, a Hindu can see three out of ten of the tallest mountain skyscrapers on Earth. Nepal cradles seven such great peaks in its northern side. State gray with an emerald cast, their diamond snow peaks thrust through clouds that shape-shift into devas and demons. Granite, frozen, Earth homes to the Hindu Gods whose bodies of light know no solid matter, feel no pain and exist everywhere.

We have hiked from Kathmandu's floor at about 4,400 elevation to the alpine foothills of 12,000 feet. The transition is breathtaking and in one way, saddening. It's hard not to hear the rhythmic sound of axes felling trees for the valley's main fuel, firewood. The forest groves of chestnut, oak and birch are almost decimated, spindly signposts of plentiful and profligate days when Kathmandu was a crossroads of India/Chinese trade. Erosion gullies scar the hillsides while newly planted pines of reforestation programs cling to precious soil. Out of 120,000 acres of forest cleared each year, only 17,000 are replanted. The Nepali sherpa mountaineers used to protect their forests like temple guards, but it is now more profitable to sell wood for Nepal's 200,000 yearly tourists then to farm. Firewood poachers stealthily gather wood at night for sale in the morning. One good plan is to lease land to tree farmers, planting and harvesting trees at the same rate.

From our vantage, in the far distance stands sacred Sagarmatha - the highest point of Earth's crust, what the West knows as Mt. Everest. Sagarmatha's lower forests are virtually gone, and mountaineering trash litters the slopes. It is cleaved down the middle by a national boundary that snakes through the Himalayas dividing Nepal from Tibet, an annex of China. It divides a small Hindu monarchy nation of 17 million from a former Buddhist theocracy tied in recent historical karma to a vast, atheistic, communist country of one billion. Sagarmatha has now become the hub for a proposed international nature preserve project between Nepal and China that will rival the Serengeti Reserve in Africa.

Under the banner, "Heart of the Himalayas Conservation Programme," the Woodlands Mountain Institute of Virginia, U.S.A., worked with Nepalese and Chinese officials to carve out a protected preserve that totals over 7,500 square miles. It's like a tiny Hindu/Buddhist ahimsa nation for animals, trees and plants. After touring America's national parks, the project overseers met in mile-high Denver, Colorado, and announced their proposal, each side independently establishing its contiguous preserves. Endangered animals, such as the snow leopard and lesser panda, rare flora and horribly thinned pine forests would all come under joint protection. The Nepali side, working under the Harvard-educated guidance of His Majesty King Birendra, is expanding the existing Sagarmatha National Park by 1,200 square miles. The Chinese are creating the Qomolangma Nature Preserve stretching through 5,000 square miles of Tibet.

But both the Tibetan and Nepali sides of the preserves are valuable not only for their unique ecological and geological features, but for their religious presence. The region is studded with sacred shrines, holy rivers, caves of yogic recluses and isolated monastery precincts. It is a high land infused with deep spiritual power.

Looking back down towards the valley, among the greens and yellows of undulating terraced fields are huge smoke-belching brickyards. They are a dragon symbol of development, Nepal's simultaneous boon and nemesis. A 1986 study warned that by the year 2020, 60% of Nepal's rich farmland would be urbanized at its present development pace. The country's population is expected to double by the year 2,000. Nowhere is the stark reality of urban density more apparent then at the famous Pashupatinath Temple on the outskirts of Kathmandu city.

There are some days in winter when the brickyard and cooking-fire smoke mixed with auto exhaust create a smog so thick it's hard to see the top pagodas of the Pashupatinath Temple from blocks away. Air pollution is a major Kathmandu concern. Water pollution is severe and the holy Bhagmati River, a tributary of the Ganges that flows by the temple, is suffering, often turning dark and foamy. Trash and filth litter the grounds and some devotees to the temple are so callous as to wear their sandals right inside the temple halls.

In 1986 His Majesty King Birendra established the Pashupati Area Development Trust (PADT) to counteract the pollution. Her Majesty Queen Aishwarya is the chairperson of PADT. On November 7th, 1987, a three-day seminar was convened to find solutions. It was the first such meeting to focus on the Pashupati area.

In cooperation with the Royal Nepal Academy of Science and Technology, the conference hosted a number of Hindu scientists. Their approach was exploratory. Dr. S.P. Dhaubadel stated that the air, water and soil pollution needs to be jointly controlled. One of the first steps is to differentiate the organic and inorganic pollution in Bhagmati River. Dr. R.S. Rana emphasized that the conclusions of the seminar would help concerned agencies to adopt appropriate measures to remove pollution. Eleven papers were presented covering pollution, land management and vegetation.

Already on the UNESCO World Heritage List, Pashupatinath Temple is a unique treasure for Hindus. As our Nepal correspondent concludes: "The delegates and participants of the seminar were hopeful that it would help the Nepalese to become responsibly conscious of human pollution and keep Pashupati clean."

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