

Travel report Nepal August – September 2016

by Stefanie Christmann

Stefanie Christmann, chairman of Esel-Initiative, was in Nepal for five weeks in August/September 2016 to assess the project in the northern high altitude Dolpo region. She mitigated the air pollution of her flight via a donation to www.atmosfair.de and donated her travel expenses.

Six years after the first naks were allocated in Dolpo (travel report 2010), I have met so many successful mothers that I do not know which ones to choose for this travel report. The 53-year-old widow **Pema P.** had specially driven her nak and her two female calves to Danegard the day before my arrival, so that I should see the animals, but during the night, the three naks had run back to their greener pastures. Pema received her nak four years ago. She sold the oldest male calf a little earlier than planned, but still managed to get more than 60,000 rupees (100 rupees = about 1 US\$). She needed this money urgently to pay for the education of her two daughters and their hostel accommodation. They are in the 9th and 10th class in Phoksundo. This is a very high educational level for Dolpo. Every year, Pema must raise 20,000 rupees for each daughter to pay for their school fees, clothing, accommodation, food, etc. She still has some money from the sale of the nak as a reserve. Normally, she can cover half of the costs with the sale of butter and chhurpi (hard cheese made from nak milk) and day labour, but it is difficult to get paid in cash instead of the usual remuneration (in barley). In most villages, the sale of dairy products to travelling traders is the only way for the women to get rupees. For 1 kg of butter the traders pay about 2000 rupees and for 1 kg chhurpi 1000 rupees. Many of our mothers had 5-9 kg of butter in stock and were waiting for traders to pass through, since buyers in the village pay significantly less and "in barley". According to the locals, well-prepared butter from an altitude of 4000 m (4000 m is the average altitude of the villages in Upper Dolpo, the high pastures are at a much higher altitude) can be stored and consumed for up to two years.

What is experienced as prosperity

The women consider dairy products and having an income as the most important improvements from owning a nak. **Karma J.**, a 34-year-old single mother of a 9-year-old son, said that her nak had brought her the "prosperity to be able to raise her child without having to borrow food". By now, Karma's nak has three offspring. Karma wants to keep all the female calves. Her only male calf she wants to sell, "but only when it is so big that I get 80,000 rupees for it". The money will be needed by her and her son, for when her old mother dies, Karma cannot stay in the house of her brother.

Some of the mothers dream of having their own nak herd. Some have already come a long way closer to the dream: **Nima S.**, the former group leader from Tinjegaon (allocation of 2010), already has five animals: the mother animal, three female calves and one male calf. In 2017, she wants to use the yak for trading with nearby Tibet and transport (to the grain mill and the high altitude pastures etc.). Many mothers now have three calves. But some have also

lost very young animals in heavy snowfall or severe cold weather. Also, several small calves were killed by snow leopards. Dolpo is a protected area for these endangered big cats.

The mothers have joined other herding communities

The mothers take enormous efforts to feed their valuable animals (usually the only possession of a single mother) and to keep the milk. Laxmi, the president of our co-operation partner Sahayog Himalaya-Nepal (SHN), brought together all the single mothers/grandmothers of one or more villages to form new herding communities (travel report 2010) so that each mother could become a member of such a herding community. The rules stipulate that the group also takes care of the herding duties of single grandmothers or disabled single mothers, while they still receive their share of dairy products. However, these groups were disbanded after 1-3 years. "The women often did not know each other well enough, and they did not trust each other enough. When the snow leopard caught a calf, or a calf died because of the cold of winter, some reproached the mothers, who were in charge at the time" almost all the former group leaders reported.

Now, all mothers rely on relatives and friends to look after their animals in rotation. In the winter, many herds (and within the rotation system also the single mothers) travel downhill to southern (Lower) Dolpo, since, for example, in the region around Saldang, the snow cover on the pasture is too high even for naks. There, the mothers usually live in traditional tents made from nak wool. Grandmothers and disabled single mothers now depend on relatives or friends to take on their herding duties and to treat them fairly. **Pema G.** (travel report 2010), a grandmother, has also been very successful with this new regulation: she has a nak and four calves (two females, two males). She bought herself an inferior local cow, which she successfully crossbred with a yak. This new generation also gives lots of milk. Pema's youngest daughter has taken on the herding duties, but gives her all the dairy products. Each year, Pema earns 20,000 rupees through the sale of her dairy products even though she also eats her own butter and chhurpi. Of this amount, she sends 5000-10,000 rupees for food and clothing to her grandchild, who now goes to school in Kathmandu. She is no longer able to spin and weave, her main source of income in 2010, but "my grandson and I are doing well, regardless".

To become "nyellu" is a danger, but it may also be necessary

Many mothers take their older daughters to the high altitude pastures, not only in the winter when all schools are closed in northern Dolpo (except for Dho-Tarap, which has a sun-warmed classroom), but also during the green season. They are afraid that the daughters might become "nyellu" (unmarried pregnant/mother). Upper Dolpo is located a few days' journey from the Tibetan border, and many nak and mule herders bring alcohol, along with other goods from China. They and many of the men in Dolpo drink a lot of alcohol, which causes suffering to many women, who are also victims of domestic violence. A mother with a small daughter joined our trek along the way to escape this situation and instead opted to work as a day labourer (with a rented room). Both just had a rucksack with clothes, barley as provisions, a cooking pot and blankets. That was all they could carry. They had neither tent nor tarp. - Upper Dolpo is not a safe place, especially for young girls. It is a rough male

world. "Nyellu" is considered to be a severe disgrace to a girl in most places of Upper Dolpo, although the high number of unmarried mothers is an almost inevitable consequence of the lack of marriageable men. Many sons enter a monastery, others move to the cities or to India. Polyandry is widespread (since the inheritance can often provide for just one family, only the eldest son, the sole heir, can marry and his brothers are then "married" to his wife). If a mother from Tinjegaon or Charka notices that her daughter is pregnant, the parents will first try to find the father-to-be, to get him to recognize the paternity and to marry. But this is rarely successful. If the man admits paternity but cannot marry the girl, he can buy his way out for 1500 rupees (less than 1 kg of butter). In almost all cases, the girl, if she cannot marry, will become an outcast while still pregnant.

To have a child, however, is a necessary provision for old age - or even earlier, when the mother can no longer work for health reasons. Single mother **Nima L.** from Tinjegaon now sends her 10-year-old daughter for day labouring, which she has to fulfil to secure her rent or livelihood. Many of the unmarried mothers become "nyellu" only at the end of childbearing age, as they obviously can no longer expect to get married but need support for their old age. The sponsoring of school attendance in Kathmandu or India from class 6 (the village schools in Upper Dolpo usually only go as far as class 4 or 5), which is offered by several organisations, is good for the children, but bad for those mothers who cannot provide an inheritance to attract their child to return to the village. Many single mothers invest almost all of their income in the support of their far-away child and to keep in touch. **Karma P.** from Dho-Tarap sends almost all her income to her two sons. One son studies in the monastery in Kathmandu, he will become a monk and will not return. The other has been sponsored to attend a secular school in India and Karma does everything she can to keep in touch with him so that, hopefully, he will return. Karma has neither her own room nor a field; she speaks neither Nepali nor Hindi, only Tibetan. But when she has enough money (40,000-50,000 rupees), she walks to Nepalgunj and from there travels by bus for two nights and one day to visit her son. Very few children return to the poverty of the Upper Dolpo mountain villages. The aging society is much more evident in Upper Dolpo than in Germany, which in comparison is rich in juveniles.

"Nyellu" means having a difficult life

The living conditions of single mothers are often catastrophic, even dangerous. If they are lucky, they will find a landlord who will let out a small room in exchange for 10-15 days labour (field work/clearing snow/chopping wood etc.) per month. This greatly reduces the working days that can be used to provide for food, clothing, school fees, etc. Many of these rooms have roofs that are leaking, letting in snow and rain and the mothers have to spend time and effort to repeatedly seal the flat roofs. Some pregnant/single mother may be able to temporarily live with a brother, but mostly in the worst room. For example, when we visited **Shinzin G.** at home, it turned out that the basement room - as it often happens when it rains - was impassable as it was covered 10 cm high with mud. Others, such as **Chiring J.**, have a small dark room with no wooden floor and almost no furnishings. Light (or snow and rain) comes through a roof hatch and there is no electricity.

The circumstances of **Tsüнди G.**, a 24-year-old unmarried mother of a 4-year-old daughter, were particularly catastrophic. Tsüнди comes from a middle class family. When she was 12 years old, first the father married again, then the mother. Tsüнди stayed behind in the village and worked as a shepherdess for other villagers. "At some stage, I became "nyellu" and was expelled from the village," she reported weeping. She found shelter for the summer months in a tent settlement outside the village, where traders, who move goods from China to Nepal, stay overnight. The owner of the tent is also working as a trader with China and can rarely provide protection. Tsüнди has been told to use the tent as bhatti (cook-shop for locals and traders) and to provide accommodation for traders. Half the income goes to the owner of the tent. In return, she can live with her daughter in the tent during the summer months. Since alcohol and - according to local people - violence is widespread, especially in the tent settlements, this very pretty woman with the appearance of an 18-year-old girl is exposed to potential (sexual) violence, especially from overnight guests. In the winter, Tsüнди returns with her daughter to the south of Dolpo, where she tries to find work and accommodation and in the spring when the trade with China increases again, she travels back to the tent settlement. She has had her nak for six months, and although the villagers have not yet given her a room, together with her nak, she has been able to be accepted into a herding community. "The nak is the only property I have, and I take great care of it." She saved some money this summer and hopes to find a landlord in the village next year.

Sonam L. – a success story

Under different circumstances, having a tent and trading with China can greatly improve the economic situation of a single mother. **Sonam L.** is 44 years old, divorced, the mother of a 14-year-old son and strikingly assertive. Three years ago, she received her nak and it has two calves already. She has bought a tent for 35,000 rupees. However, she pitches it not in tent settlements, but where her nak herding community is currently located and where Tibetan trading caravans are passing through, which is in a much more protected environment. She has added another component to the tent (used for bhatti and accommodation): she weaves bags for mules and yaks and aprons for the women of the drivers and sells both directly to her guests. "My hands never stand still," she says. The dairy products of her naks (butter, chhurpi) she uses directly in the bhatti and thus reduces the cost of the food. In good months, she earns 15,000-30,000 rupees with her tent (a top salary for a single mother), otherwise 5000-10,000 rupees. "I no longer do the hard work on the fields I had to do earlier."

The mothers are infinitely grateful for the naks

Support for the Dolpo people is still as rare as described in 2010. The gratitude of the mothers for the naks is overwhelming: almost all mothers handed us the Tibetan welcome scarves (khata), many wanted to give SHN and me a bag of chhurpi. We do not accept gifts, but I have repeatedly asked them for details on the value of or effort extended for the intended gift. **Tshumi G.** (49 years, unmarried, two children) wanted to give me 5 kg butter (value: 10,000 rupees, the production of three months/the winter reserve for 2.5 families). **Tsirring S.** from Khomagaon (37 years, unmarried, two children) wanted to give me 2.5 kg of chhurpi and 0.5 kg of djirrach, a wild plant that is a much sought-after condiment for lentil

soup. For the 500 grams of her intended gift, she collected the plant for two weeks, then cleaned, dried and cut it. **Pema K.** (46 years, one daughter, her husband left her) even wanted to give me a hand woven nak wool blanket. To make such a blanket, the wool has to be combed and gathered from the nak or yak for four years during spring, then washed, spun, partially dyed, woven, and sewn together from small strips. Nak blankets are much warmer than woollen blankets, they are comparable to llama wool blankets. For poor families, a nak blanket is a valuable possession.

Nak or dzo?

Generally, each mother decides what kind of animal she wants to receive. In Upper Dolpo, in the past three years, some mothers wanted a dzo instead of a nak. A dzo is a crossbreed (nak and bull). Unlike naks, they can be kept at the house and thus help to reduce herding duties. Especially mothers with very small children and mothers who look after their parents wanted to have a dzo, although they then have to collect a lot of winter fodder (hay). Dzos are much smaller than naks with a thin fur like that of a cow. They cannot stay on the high pastures in winter. While they yield a little more milk than naks, the proceeds for an adult male calf are only 25,000 rupees (yak: 80,000 rupees) because they have less meat and muscle and cannot be used for ploughing or caravans. Dzos do not give wool either. They are crossbred with yaks and their offspring can also be crossbred with yaks. - I consider naks a better choice for the mothers, but SHN and Esel-Initiative always respect the mothers' wishes. However, most mothers still want naks.

Malnutrition and missing toilets in Dolpo

Before the mothers received the naks, almost no single mother had access to dairy products; their diet consisted almost exclusively of carbohydrates (about 80-90% barley). Dairy products provide almost all of the protein and fat for the families of single mothers, since oil is expensive. Barley gruel (tsampa), barley soup, roasted barley grains and dirrho (very stiff buckwheat porridge eaten for dinner) are the main staples. For a few months of the year, the families have some potatoes as a side dish. For two months in the summer, they can grow sark (green vegetables similar to chard). Since a field is often only 20-40 square meters in size and many mothers own/lease only one field, they must carefully consider what to grow. Leasing a field is not very lucrative. To have it ploughed, the mothers must work as day labourers. For example, of five sacks of harvested barley, they have to hand over two for the lease and keep one as seed for the next season. Hence, with all the effort, only two sacks remain to feed the family. There is no fruit cultivation or harvesting of wild fruit. Raising chickens is not possible at this altitude (there are also many eagles). Most single mothers can only rarely afford rice and many mothers did not know what lentils are. If possible, mothers breastfeed even their 2-year-old children. When their babies are only 14 days old, the mothers will place a thin layer of barley gruel on the babies' lips to get them used to this supplementary food as early as possible.

At an altitude of 4000 m, greenhouses are the only way to grow vegetables for longer periods and with more diversity. In 2010, I saw only one greenhouse in Upper Dolpo. In 2016, there were several in each village. But the single mothers cannot afford these vegetables, and even

we (although SHN is very much appreciated in Dolpo) could only occasionally buy sark from the rich producers, because to date, there is simply not enough grown. One single mother, the already mentioned **Tsiring S.** from Khomagaon, had started on her own to build a greenhouse on her little field (barley and buckwheat). The mud walls were finished, but the poles were too short to support a plastic tarpaulin. Nevertheless, even this still unfinished building is an enormous achievement for the single mother. In Dolpo, instead of a "wooden truss" often only a few poles and wire netting are used to hold the tarpaulin. Wood must be carried all the way from Phoksundo or Tibet on the back of men or yaks into the villages.

SHN and Esel-Initiative have therefore decided to extend the construction of the small greenhouses, which we started in Upper Mustang, to Upper Dolpo. Since the villages in Upper Dolpo are on average 1000 m higher than in Upper Mustang, the mothers will be able to use them for vegetable growing for only 8-9 months a year. But in the winter, greenhouses in Upper Dolpo can be used as living rooms as they are the only rooms that will get warm during the day. Prior to receiving assistance, the mothers, as in Upper Mustang, have to prove in writing that the land has been left to them permanently. Laxmi and I agreed that before introducing the assistance for greenhouses, SHN will carry out a new survey in the villages of Upper Dolpo, to establish who is currently a single mother, so that "new" single mothers will also be included. The single mothers who have not yet received a nak/dzo will also receive this most important survival aid.

Since most of the villages in Upper Dolpo still have no toilet, and men and women, children and old people have to leave the village to find a place, we also agreed to build toilets there. As only very few mothers own a house, we cannot build the toilets in the houses where they live. Therefore, several toilets are to be built scattered over the village. All villagers will be allowed to use them, but by agreement with the village development committees (VDC) the entire manure is to be used only by the single mothers. This will greatly improve the mothers' farming, as it is time consuming and hard work to gather the dung of the yaks and naks on high pastures and to carry it down to the fields near the villages.

Midwives

SHN has tried several times to organize midwife training for Upper Dolpo, but every time, it was impossible to coordinate the women's travel schedules so that they could arrive in Kathmandu simultaneously. Only a few villages have a telephone and there is no reception for mobile phones. We brought a satellite telephone for potential emergencies, but even for that there was no reception in some regions. Many of the villages are separated by several days' trekking - with mountain passes between 5000 and 5600 m in altitude. Unfortunately, in view of the current infrastructure, we are unable to provide midwife training.

However, in Santa (about 1 ½ days' march from the hospital in Jomsom), I met the midwife **Tensing P.**, who was trained by us (she had participated in the first course for the Upper Mustang/Manaslu regions). The young woman attends 4-5 pregnant mothers in Santa and Phalak each year (distance between the two villages: on foot: one day, by horse: ½ day, she received a horse from us after the training). Tensing visits every pregnant woman three to four times. "Phalak is closer to Jomsom and there, the knowledge of the need for a sterile birth is higher than in Santa. In Santa, I am much more needed for education and

information," said Tensing. "In both villages, the families know that I have received the training and the pregnant women contact me directly. Sometimes, I have to talk with the mothers-in-law about the best method of, for example, cutting the umbilical cord or the importance of sterile sheets for the newborn baby, but ultimately they trust the skills I have learned in Kathmandu. Of course, a blanket made of yak wool is warmer and cosier for a newborn baby, but how can you get such a blanket really sterile? As a first layer, you need a sterile cloth. But you must always acknowledge that even the mothers-in-law, with their traditional knowledge, only want the best for their grandchildren." Mothers who already have children often opt for a homebirth with Tensing's help. Tensing insists that all potentially difficult deliveries take place in the hospital in Jomsom. It is theoretically possible to summon help by helicopter from Pokhara in case of complications during the birth, but de facto, hardly a family would be able to afford this service. In the case of a possible difficult birth, Tensing leaves her two young sons with the in-laws and accompanies the pregnant woman to the hospital in Jomsom so that she can provide the staff with all the information about the course of the pregnancy and, above all, to deliver the baby on route if necessary. There is now a track between Jomsom and Santa which is passable for jeep, tractor and motorcycle, but also with an enormous number of potholes that can trigger a sudden birth. Nevertheless, the track is an invaluable advantage for the transport of patients.

Translation: Sabine Dentler und Ronan Carroll