

*Women's Work and Child-bearing Experience:
Two Ethnic Groups of Salme, Nepal*

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In many societies, women play a dual role: they contribute to the subsistence economy and they are primarily responsible for childcare. This has important implications for their position in society. The idea that there may be a conflict in these responsibilities has been supported with interesting ethnographic documentation (Chen and et al. 1979; Lee, 1980; Popkin, 1980) and has led to a concern for the health of mothers and their children (Jelliffe, 1979; Thompson and Baird, 1967; Ginneken and Muller, 1984). Childcare strategies must fit in with the expected working schedule, and conversely, work-loads must be adapted to ensure infant survival. The women with very small children may thus be identified as a vulnerable group in many communities, and a target for action in perspectives of development, especially in third-world countries where women have a determining role to play.

My own research was primarily directed to studying how motherhood came to affect the working behaviour of women in a difficult mountain environment in Nepal: a sample of 78 pregnant, lactating and non-child-bearing women was selected for continuous observation; each woman was followed throughout the day and her activities were recorded minute-by-minute. This study took place in the village of Salme (Nuwakot district), situated at 1870 meters in the middle hills of central Nepal, north-west of Kathmandu, and lasted one year from October 1982 to 1983. It was an integral part of a multidisciplinary project undertaken by the French National Centre of Scientific Research (CNRS, n.d.) in Salme village from 1979-85. In this paper, I summarize my observations and exemplify them with individuals case history. This is an account of the daily working and child-bearing responsibilities of women, their status in society, and the differences in behaviour between the two ethnic groups of Salme: the Tamang agriculturalists and herders, of Tibeto-Burmese origin, and the Kami blacksmiths of Indo-Nepalese descent.

1. *The Daily Work of Women*

Two ethnic groups coexist in Salme and have adopted very different subsistence strategies. The Tamang operate in a mixed agricultural and pastoral economy. They have terraced most of the mountain side, except for the forest and meadows below the ridge, and planted a number of crops at different altitudes. They work on a tight schedule throughout the year: the paddy rice grown at lowest elevations (1400-1660 meters), the maize and finger-millet on middle-altitude grounds (1600-2000 meters), the wheat and barley at higher altitudes (2000 m), and the other minor crops are planted

and harvested in rapid succession. The Tamang also own cattle, such as cows, oxen, water-buffaloes, and transhumant sheep and goats. In contrast, the Kami depend for livelihood on the blacksmith trade, supplying the Tamang with agricultural and household implements for a payment in grain. The Kami also own a little land, a water-buffalo and a few goats or pigs, and offer their services as casual labour to work on Tamang land.

As can be expected, the organisation of labour in Tamang and Kami groups is rather different. The Tamang woman ('Tamangni') is expected to work in the fields, to cut fodder and herd the animals, to pound crops and grind flour in the mill, to keep the house clean and to look after small children. Interestingly, her responsibilities relative to a man's work are not sharply demarcated: the sexual division of labour is not a rigorous one, because each task may usually be done by either men or women. Men contribute to household work, and frequently cook meals, sweep floors, and also carry young children to the fields, cut fodder, and take grain to the mill, although they are rarely observed to pound crops. Men and women, young and old, participate more or less equally in economic activities. This is exemplified at times of 'parma' (Nepali) or 'nang' (Tamang), when work must be speedily accomplished, and kinsmen, neighbours or friends organise themselves in groups of 5-20 people to work a number of days for each participant in turn. One example of 'parma' work occurs in the month of April when a reserve of wood must be cut in the forest and carried home before the monsoon: both men and women carry up to 40 kg of wood, and take the whole day to bring in two loads. Of course, many tasks are in fact preferentially assigned to one or another sex. But when men were unavailable to help, 'traditionally' male activities, such as digging the rice fields with a spade, or weaving bamboo baskets and mats were undertaken by the women. There is however one religious interdiction which forbids a woman to touch a ploughshare, if the village is to be prosperous: consequently women cannot plough the fields.

Tamang society is rightly described as being fundamentally egalitarian (Toffin, 1976; Toffin, 1976): there is little socio-economic differentiation between families, and very flexible work organisation within the household. However, one should not assume that people perform the same kind of work each day. On the contrary, there is a high variability in the working behaviour of individuals (Panter-Brick, n.d.) a family has to meet simultaneous labour requirements in the home, the fields, and with the cattle, and its members will exchange responsibilities from day to day.

The work of Kami women ('Kamini') is, on the other hand, strikingly different from the work of Kami men, because the latter spend most of their day in the smithy. The Kami men do not seem to cook, cut fodder, and rarely herd the animals, but they do supervise the children left under their care in the smithy; they also work in the fields when necessary. The place of a Kami woman is more

fundamentally in the household, as will be made evident below, and her most important role is to cook and care for the children. But since the men are engaged in their trade, the women also work the land and in husbandry.

The most substantial difference in the work pattern of Tamang and Kami women is respective mobility. The Tamang must often walk considerable distances to their fields and may spend up to 120 minutes a day travelling up and down the slope on uneven and difficult terrain. Since they plant their crops in careful rotation and at different altitudes, their actual movements will vary according to the time of the year. In contrast the Kami own fields which are mostly very close to the village; the women will only walk a fair distance when they work as casual labourers (N: 'kethalo') on Tamang fields. This difference in mobility also holds true when women engage in husbandry. The Tamang have large herds of cattle which are too numerous to keep in the village: each household may have some 2 to 30 animals. They shelter them on the mountain side, in a 'goth' (N) or 'gora' (T), a temporary structure of wooden posts and bamboo mats. A man or a woman will stay in the 'goth' to watch over the cattle. The Tamang will erect, dismantle, and move the 'goth' and the cattle from terrace to terrace, since the cattle must fertilise the fallow areas with their droppings, and also be kept away from the standing crops. The Kami, on the other hand, keep as a rule only one she-buffalo, and mostly stall-feed this animal or herd it in the village. The Kami women cut fodder daily, but collect grasses and weeds in the fields and on the paths close to the village: their round trip may take them 20 to 45 minutes. Finally, the Tamang women go far into the forest to cut good quality wood for their fuel needs; the Kami women do not do so, since the men are the ones who go to the forest to replenish the reserve of wood.

One Tamang woman expressed the different behaviour of the two groups in saying that the Kami were afraid to go far from the village; they went just to the outskirts of the forest, and brought firewood which burnt poorly and blackened the inside of houses. The Tamang in contrast were neither lazy nor afraid to travel long distances to collect the best grasses for their cattle, medicinal herbs, 'bramji' yeast to ferment their beer, and the best quality wood.

2. *Maternity and Working Behaviour*

The pressure of work on the Tamang women in Salme is such that a woman's normal role in the subsistence economy may be largely unaffected by pregnancy right up to the birth of the child. Some pregnant women continued heavy physical work right up to the time of delivery. Thus one woman joined a 'parma' group to plant millet in the fields some 20 minutes away from the village; she felt labour pains in the afternoon, was rushed to her husband's home and gave birth. Another woman joined the wood-carrying 'parma' group when eight months pregnant, and carried out strenuous work for some

15 days. Thus in most cases, it is difficult to tell from a woman's working behaviour whether she is pregnant or not, even when at the most advanced stage. One case was indeed quite incredible: my immediate neighbour was an older woman who gave birth one night to a baby girl, but until then, the fact that she was pregnant was not known to anyone outside her family; my local assistants, who were actively recruiting pregnant women to participate in my research, had been unable to guess her condition.

Pregnancy is indeed difficult to recognise for various reasons besides continuation of work. The fashion of clothing does not reveal the size of the stomach: women wear a skirt (T: 'syama') made of three meters of cloth which they pleat on the front, and which they secure with another cloth five meters long. Very few women walk with particular difficulty, even when they reach the term of pregnancy; local people say that the best way to identify a pregnant woman is to look for a change in her complexion. Moreover, women do not easily admit to being pregnant. One woman believed that the foetus first wanders in the womb (N: 'Petma ghum-dai chha': it is walking about in the belly); only after five months would she accept that she was pregnant (N: 'pet bokdakeri': carrying in the belly). This belief may be a way for the women to account for the high frequency of miscarriage they experience.

Some families, however, may ease the work-load on a woman during pregnancy. For example, they may send her to the 'goth' where the work schedule is comparatively light. Thus one woman, five months pregnant, lived in the 'goth' with her husband, while her father-in-law stayed in the village home; her responsibilities were to cook meals, fetch water and herd the cattle in high pasture land. Pregnant women may also work at a slower rate if sent to the fields, but this is hard to quantify.

The Kami women do not have the same obligations to work as the Tamang. The Kami women, when pregnant, said they would not go to the fields when they felt lazy. The Tamang said the child-bearing experience does not affect their usual work: they must go to the fields, although they might not be sent very far or given the hardest work.

Once the baby is born, all women however are obliged to make greater adjustments. They are secluded after delivery in the husband's home. The Tamang women stay inside for 5 days if they have borne a girl, 7 days if their child is a boy; the Kamini are allowed 7 days for a girl, 11 days for a boy. Special foods are given to the new mother (N: 'sutkeri') such as rice, chicken meat, milk, and one 'mana' of butter (about 400 ml). According to village tradition, this will make her feel stronger. The mother also drinks 'bhaph', a fermented paste made of maize flour, in order to produce better milk; she should also avoid the meat of the buffalo, since it swells the stomach and gives diarrhea. In contrast, hardly any foods were recommended or prohibited during

pregnancy: one Tamang woman explained that each mother could follow her own judgement in this respect, but that she did not take special foods because she knew the foetus may not survive. Again, the women of Tamang caste seem to think little of a maternity until the baby is actually born. They also say they are happy if a child is born four or five years after marriage, but not if it is born quickly before they have had time to laugh and be merry. Both Tamang and Kami women accept as the will of God the number of children they will bear (N: 'jeti Baghawanle dincha, teti man parcha; teti tikai cha': that many children given by God, that many number will I like; this will be fine); but many women approached me in secret to see if I could not abort their coming child.

After delivery, the women quickly resume their habitual work. Since they must always be with the new-born to breast-feed, they take the baby with them to their usual place of work. They carry the baby in a cot (T: 'jholangye' or 'goyong') made of bamboo, which they sling on the back and support with a head-strap. This leaves them free to perform their ordinary tasks: they may even carry a heavy load on their back by securing the baby on top of it. When they work in the fields, they may either carry the baby or place the cot in the shade nearby; the mother's work is often interrupted to breast-feed the child when he cries. When the infant grows older and is no longer easily carried, it is increasingly left behind in the home or 'goth', under the supervision of elder relatives or siblings.

The close contact between mother and child in the first few years has important consequences on the health of children. The mortality rate of children under 6 years of age is 32% when both sexes are considered, but two thirds of these deaths take place in the first six months (Meyer, n.d.). Hygiene is generally very poor. Many women become ill after childbirth, because they fail to wash themselves properly: the water is very cold and there is no privacy at the village fountain. They may not wash the child conscientiously (dried blood may be left at the limb-joints), although they will oil the baby with mustard oil every week for about a month. The baby is dressed with strips of the mother's discarded clothes, placed in the cot which is entirely covered with part of the mother's thick cotton skirt. The young child is carried most of the time either by the mother or an elder sibling: this pattern of child-care has endured for most of human history (Lozoff, 1977). In Salme, I believe this seriously affects the motor development of children: some children aged three hardly knew how to walk. The young children of Salme are hardly ever separated from the mother and breast-fed on demand; many studies have explored the effects of prolonged lactation on the growth rate of children and anaevolutionary cycles (Jelliffe, 1979). The first solid foods are ritually given to a boy on the sixth month, or any odd number of months, and to a girl on the fifth month, or any even number of months. These foods are essentially the same ones which consist of the adult diet: 'chamba', a paste made of finely ground maize flour, or a porridge

of rice, with salt and butter added. Because of their bulk, the child may eat very little at a time: between 3 to 6 months of age the intake of children ranges from 10 kcal to 50 kcal, and does not exceed 500 kcal until they reach 2 years of age. They may continue to breast-feed for a period of up to four years. Mothers give a number of reasons which affect the timing of weaning: they might not have enough milk, the child may not accept solid foods, or the mother may again be pregnant. The regular anthropometric measurements taken in Salme demonstrate an important seasonal dimension to the health of children, since the growth rate falters significantly in the rainy season. The weight of women, including pregnant women, also show erratic fluctuations.

The Kami have a slightly different pattern of child-care, since the Kami women stay generally closer to home base. When they go to the fields, they carry the baby on their back, either in a bamboo cot or strapped in cloth, and behave much as the Tamang mothers do. However, when they go to cut fodder, they generally leave the baby or children with their husband in the smithy, because they stay close to the home base and are not gone long. The results of the weighed food survey also indicated they feed their babies relatively better than do the Tamang, especially boys.

3. *The General Status of Women*

A very significant aspect of the difference between the Tamang and Kami is expressed in their socio-cultural denomination. The two groups are ethnies of separate origin, interact as distinct castes in the village, and have different traditions, beliefs and culture. It is often said that women of Tibetan origin enjoy a more egalitarian relationship with men, have a stronger tradition of female entrepreneurship, and have freer sexual norms relative to women in Hindu groups; the latter generally keep the rule of purdha, cannot separate or divorce from their husbands, and identify with their role as a mother bearing male children. This description has been supported by the work of Acharya and Bennett (Acharya and Bennett, 1981), who led a study on the status of women of different ethnic groups in eight villages of Nepal. An interesting part of their study concerns the classification of communities on the basis of observations made on the work of men and women: the extent to which a woman is limited to the household subsistence production, rather than participating in the local market economy or outside employment, was interpreted in terms of an inside/outside dichotomy. The most highly dichotomised communities among the villages studied were the Hindu groups Brahman, Chetri and Sarki, and at the other extreme were the Magar, Rai and Tibetan groups. The Tamang fell into the non-dichotomous group: they are Buddhists who retain strong links with Tibetan culture, but they have also been influenced by Hindu values. The Kami were not included in that study, but have been described elsewhere (Hofer, 1976), and may be classified with the Sarki, a low-caste Hindu group.

These characterisations of Tibetan and Hindu culture hold true for the people of Salme. They are reflected in the organisation of daily work in the community, and also in the experience of motherhood and the relationships established between men and women. First of all, the women tend to have a characteristic demographic history. The Kamini marry at a younger age than do the Tamangni, at age 17 compared to age 20. They tend to have children on average every two years, whereas the average birth interval of Tamang women is approximately three years; the completed family size is 4,7 for Tamang and 5,5 for the Kami. This difference is certainly related to the strenght of the marital bond and the permanency of residence in the Kami group, relative to the Tamang.

Every woman in the community of Salme is attached either to her natal household (N: 'maithi'), or to her marital home (N: 'ghar'). Residence is patrilocal, but in the case of Tamangni, a woman's transfer between 'maithi' and 'ghar' is not clearly demarcated: even after marriage, a Tamang woman has the liberty to move from one home to another. Indeed, it is very common for a married girl to live with her parents until the birth of her first child, especially if she is young and if the marriage was arranged between the families. Quite a few women, aged between 20 and 25 years, were also living in the 'maithi' after bearing their husband's child: they would not openly confess to disliking the husband chosen for them, but explained that the natal family needed their labour. The latter reason is a powerful one, since the smooth running of each household depends on the workers it can mobilise. For instance, one man and his wife had no male heir, and arranged for the daughter's husband to live with them and exploit their land. If a woman does not join the 'ghar' after marriage, she is supposed to work on both the 'maithi' and the husband's fields, at either family's request. On the other hand, a woman may well work for her own 'maithi' even when she has officially moved to the 'ghar'. There seem to be no set rules about such arrangements: it depends where the workforce is needed the most, how personal relationships develop, and what families contribute towards feeding the young woman. The only absolute rule is that the birth of her child must take place in the husband's home: this legitimises the child. After this event, there is ample opportunity to visit either 'maithi' or 'ghar'. Both houses are usually only a few minutes away - 81% of the marriages are endogamous to the Salme area. Such visits are very frequent, often daily. In case of a dispute with the husband, the woman simply packs her belongings and goes to stay with her mother for as long as necessary.

The position of Kami women presents a stark contrast to the above picture. The married Kamini is permanently attached to her husband's home. Only 15 blacksmith families live in Salme compared to 300 Tamang households - the Kami are recent arrivals, the first of whom migrated from the plains some 5 generations ago - thus there are few potential local marriage partners. All Kamini wives were chosen from a village outside the area of Salme, when the Kami

men went to Trishuli bazaar, a day's walk away, to buy tin and copper metal sheets, and also when they toured other villages in the region to sell finished produce. Thus a Kami woman in Salme find a visit to the 'maithi' difficult to arrange, because of the distance involved. She may expect to see her father and mother only once a year, at the time of the Tihar festival in October, when all daughters are to return to the 'maithi' and place a 'Tika' spot on their brothers' forehead.

Tamang and Kami men may have several wives, although the Nepali law currently forbids polygamy. The wives generally live in different houses, sometimes in different hamlets. In 1983, there were several such cases in Salme. One Tamang man eventually decided that he could not maintain both his wives, and divorced one, paying compensation; her son will nonetheless receive his share of inheritance. Another Kami man took a second wife because his first spouse had born him five daughters but no son.

The Tamang woman may well marry more than once, but will not have more than one husband at a time. If she is discovered to have had sexual relations outside marriage, her husband can extract compensation from her lover. If this lover wishes to take the woman in his own household, he will have to pay an even higher fee. Divorces are very common among the Tamang, especially in the first years of marriage, and may be initiated by women as well as by men. Reasons given for divorce are laziness, barrenness, incompatibility with in-laws, cruelty on the part of the husband, and proof of unfaithfulness. The divorce procedure is a mere formality which will cost the sum of one Roupee stamp for the legal document delivered by the local administration (Panchayat). In practice, divorce can be much more expensive, because disputes must first be settled by the leaders of each lineage. Tamang men and women are free to remarry, and there is no opporbrium attached to one who enters several marriages: some men have married and divorced four or five times. While first marriages are usually arranged between families, subsequent unions often result from individual choice. In contrast, divorce and remarriage initiated by a Kami woman is unknown in the village of Salme.

Sexual liaisons outside marriage seem to be frequent among the Tamang, absent among the Kami women. A high number of illegitimate pregnancies are found among the Tamang every year. The unmarried pregnant woman must come forth and declare who is the father of her future child: the people of Salme say that hail might otherwise destroy all the crops. The head of each ward ('adashye') and his four deputees ('sadashe') form a court ('kachari') to resolve the problem before submitting the case to the Panchayat: this council questions and confronts the different parties, and presses for a solution. The man named by the pregnant woman may admit to fathering her child, and thereby accepts her in his household. If he is already married, he will have to maintain both wives: some of his fields will be re-allocated to the second wife, and the inheritance

divided between the sons of the two women. The man may however deny all responsibility: he may still be fined 100 Roupees towards the expenses of delivery, and asked for meal of rice and goat meat for the council, but will neither have to maintain the woman nor recognise the child. In such a case, the woman will not be allowed to deliver the child in her home, but must give birth in the forest, well away from the village; this is a grave sanction, which shows how important it is to legitimise a maternity.

These regulations are best illustrated with examples which I witnessed in 1983; some affairs are particularly telling. A 22 year-old Tamang man married one woman from Salme, but also had a brief affair with a girl from another hamlet. Both women became pregnant, and both delivered their child in his home, on the very same night: his wife bore him a girl, and the other a son. There was ill-feeling in the household and the women returned to their respective 'maithi' within a week. Some months later, the wife's family instigated proceedings of divorce: she was young and could remarry someone who would offer more land to her future children, but she had little guarantees with her husband because inheritance is shared amongst male children. The husband agreed, not wanting to maintain both wives; the council decided he should award the one who seeking divorce 1800 Roupees compensation for bearing his daughter.

Such matters however are seldom devoid of animosity and violence. Unfaithful wives are beaten by their husbands: one night the men of one lineage climbed the hillside to where a Tamang woman lived in her 'goth', kicked her and broke her teeth to punish her for adultery when her husband was absent. Another time, one woman attacked another who was nine months pregnant, pushed her to the ground and jumped with both feet on her womb. The pregnant woman was known to have had sexual relations with the other's husband, and was carrying his child. The pregnant woman's husband, who was away in India when his wife became pregnant, threatened to throw her out of the house when he returned, and not recognise the child; but the council intervened and obtained on his behalf a heavy compensation from her lover.

The above cases seem to indicate that in practice the keeping of sexual standards among the Tamang is very lax, but that there is also a grave concern to legitimise children. The Kami group can escape this problem because their women are always kept strictly under the control of fathers and husbands. There are no example of such flirtations or contraventions of sexual standards among the Kami of Salme. There may be no rule of purdha in this group, or in the hills generally, but Kami women are nonetheless kept near to home. In contrast, the Tamangni, spend extended periods of time alone in the 'goth', in a mill away from the village, or on pasture land; people whisper they may be met there by lovers. Also, on occasion of a feast ('Cheychu', 'Dasai') young men and women team up in threes or fours to dance and sing all night: three

Tamangni, who became illegitimately pregnant in 1983, confessed to a short-lived affair on one of these nights. Finally, although the behaviour of women relative to their husband is marked with great restraint, the converse behaviour is often displayed between the Tamang young: within 'parma' groups especially, many explicit jokes are made between potential sexual partners, and suggestive improvisations sung on the verses of the village tune while they work. Very little opportunity exists for the Kami women in Salme to develop such relationships with the men of her group.

No sexual relation is permitted between individuals of Tamang and Kami caste. The Salme villagers say this has never happened and would be considered an offense as serious as incest. Many rules which are openly stated in Salme are in fact disobeyed in secret - for instance some Tamang ate cooked food in the Kami households, although the latter are a polluting low caste, but would never admit to it publicly: but this rule governing sexual relations between the two castes seem to be upheld.

It is interesting then, that the Tamang should have on average less children than do the Kami. On the one hand they are more sexually permissive, on the other, their cohabitation with men has less permanency. Neither group knows of reliable means of contraception. It is also possible, although difficult to quantify in this research, that the Tamangni experience more miscarriages (as they seem to do more strenuous work), and suffer from venereal diseases (which could lower their fertility).

An examination of the position of women in Salme reveals a fairly clear cultural and occupational differentiation between the Tamang and the Kami. The determining factor in the pattern of their work and maternity is neither gender nor physical environment, which they share, but the combination of ethnically specific division of labour and cultural inheritance. The Tamang succeed at this high altitude by working in a multi-resource based economy, and find in the 'goth' and the 'parma' important ways of maximising the benefits of their time and energy inputs. They would find it difficult to restrict their women as much as the Kami do, without curtailing their mobility; however, such action would endanger their strategy for survival, which depends so much on the spatial dispersion of labour. The Kami are more capable of placing restrictions on their women's movements and activities because their productive activities are more spatially restricted, being centered around the home and the smithy. The different productive activities and the different degree of socio-cultural control over women in each of the two groups in Salme are mutually reinforcing; moreover they serve to maintain the separation of the Tamang and Kami castes in village society.

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