

**THE ORGANISATION OF SPACE AND THE SYMBOLISM
OF THE INDO- NEPALESE HOUSE IN CENTRAL NEPAL -
PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS DURING FIELDWORK¹ .**

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The House has a central role in the organisation of Bahun (Brahman) culture and society. It can be seen as part of a general conception in which the self (microcosms) and the world (macrocosms) are all considered to be 'living temples'. The house is related to and built according to this model which combines two perceptions. The first sees the house as a living entity which, like a Bahun, should go through Hindu life cycle rituals and can become sick etc. The second views the house as a temple, a pure and holy place for the gods. The Bahun also perceive other artificial constructions they build around their houses, such as *cautara* (a resting place for travellers built in and out of the village), Bhume (the earth god) temples in and near the premises of the rice fields, and other temples that surround the village like *kul deota* (clan gods) and *ban Devi* (forest goddesses), in a similar way.

The Bahun view themselves as being an organic part of the house: being the house *ama* (soul). Moreover, people actually identify themselves with their houses. The house, the way it is built and used can be seen to symbolise human perceptions of the self. The exchanges of evil messengers (through witchcraft and sorcery) between the village houses or family temples, reflects the social milieu to be found there. That social milieu is sodden with mistrust and suspicion, people are continually acting behind masks and playing role games up into the most intimate levels they may have.

The house has a primary role in a series of security fences that Bahuns try to build around themselves and their village. Mainly, it is seen as a shelter from the majority of the evil spirits found in the village and its surroundings. However, the lifelong daily effort of guarding one's own body/family/house borders and the endless quest for safety and purity seems to be somewhat futile.

¹ Field work going on in a Bahun village in hills of central Nepal. This is done as part of Ph.D. research under the supervision of Professor Alan Macfarlane at the Department of Anthropology, the University of Cambridge, England.

Houses and people alike are believed to have no immunity to the invasion of *birs*, which are considered to be the most the most terrible evil messengers to be kept by people in their houses. They keep them in order to send them to other people's houses and by that try to harm and destroy each other. *Birs* actually symbolise the inevitable danger to one's body and house. This concept of *birs* shared by the Bahun in the village in which I am working is indicative of the main ambivalence that governs their life. Although they might have liked to see themselves as Leibniz's Monads, closed in a bubble with no window and thus immune to invasion of evil and impurity, they are compelled to have families and live as part of a society. That inevitably brings with it an immanent danger that is to be found in almost every facet, stage and action through life.

The main function of the houses or living temples seems to be connected to the keeping and consuming of food. Eating in itself is seen as an act of sacrifice or *puja* done for the gods of the house and those within oneself.

The relative way in which the borders of a house are defined suggests a perception of a continuum between interior and exterior rather than the definite concept to which we might be accustomed. This relativity, or perception of things as being on a continuum between two extremes resembles another main concept in the Bahun culture, the concept of purity.

In sum, understanding the place of the house in the Bahun culture, its stages of construction, and the social relationship of living in it seems to be the key to the uncoding of the self and society of the Bahuns, who are the most influential social group in Nepal.

