

THE PAHARIS: IN QUEST OF AN IDENTITY

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The factor that led me to study this little known ethnic community of Nepal was the ambiguity of the term 'Pahari'. While reading Haimendorf's paper on the Chhetris of Kathmandu Valley in a book entitled *Caste and Kinship in Nepal, India and Ceylon*¹, I came across a statement which said that the 'Paharis' are a Tibeto-Burman language speaking community who inhabit the vicinity of the Kathmandu Valley. This was puzzling because I had previously taken this word to be a synonym for Parbatiyas who are definitely not a Tibeto-Burman people.

I asked this question, which had been vexing me for some time, of Professor G. S. Nepali during one of his classes. Prof Nepali replied by saying that 'Paharis' are different from 'Pahadis'.² The name of the Brahman-Chettri people we are familiar with ought to

¹ Similar to the Tamangs in physical make-up as well as in their overall economic and social position are the Paharis, a small tribe of Mongoloid race and Tibeto-Burman language. In the hills surrounding the Nepal Valley and even in some areas within the borders of the valley, Paharis live in small settlements of scattered houseds They are skillful and industrious cultivators, and normally do not engage in any occupation other than agriculture. Little is known about their linguistic affinities, and though resembling Tamangs in appearance and the general manner of living, the Paharis do not follow Buddhist practices and perhaps partly for this reason, are not included within the category of bhote, a term used by Parbatiyas indiscriminately for Tibetans, Sherpas and Tamangs. Christoph von Fürer-Haimendorf 'The Chhetri Caste of Nepal' in Haimendorf, *Caste and Kin in Nepal, India and Ceylon* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966), 16.

² 'Pahari' is a language spoken in the hills of central Nepal. It literally means hill language. It is also written as Pahar or Pahadi. No information is available about the

be spelled and pronounced *pahādī* while the name of the Tibeto-Burman people that Haimendorf was talking about in this context ought to be spelled and pronounced *paharī*.

Although the intellectual puzzle associated with the term 'Paharis' was thus solved, it had by then already generated a curiosity which I could not easily subdue. While undertaking a household survey of small farmers living in Khopasi, a village which lies several kilometres east of the Kathmandu Valley in the course of my thesis work, I came across a name which paved the way for this study: Gopal Pahari. Thus it was accidentally that I found the people I had wanted to study in the very place that I was working. This was how I landed up among the Paharis.

The current article was written while living among the Paharis. I stayed as a family member in the house of Gopal Pahari, ate with them, slept with them and lived with them. During the course of my observation a dim but meaningful picture of the Paharis slowly emerged which I have tried to capture in these few pages. Although this article is not a complete study, I believe it will pave the way for a deeper understanding of this small but unique Nepali community.

Geographic Distribution

The Paharis inhabit the southern and eastern fringes of the Kathmandu Valley. They are to be found in small numbers in seven villages. These include Kodku (half an hour's walk south of Badegaun), Pare (a basin south of Lele by one hour), Champhi (a village near Badegaun), Itati (near Tika Bhairav on the way to Dakshinkali), Basan (near Chobhar Ganeshthan), Kitini (on the way to Godavari) and Khopasi itself (35 Km. east of Kathmandu). Besides these traditional seven villages, several households of Paharis are to be found in Sikharpa (a hilly area adjoining Pare), Betani (in Makwanpur district across the Bagmati River), Sangachowk (in Sindhupalchowk District) and in Kulekhani (near the Hydro-electric power house).

In Khopasi where I undertook this study, the residence of Paharis is scattered. They are to be found in four clusters. Mathillo Gaun has ten households, Maaj Gaun five households, Tallo Gaun fifteen households and Dangat eight households. All in all there are about 250 Paharis in Khopasi village.

number of speakers in Nepal..... Pahari is so closely related to Newari that it can be properly described as a sub-dialect of that form of speech.' George Grierson, *Linguistic Survey of India* Vol III, Part I p. 227.

Historical sketch

The historical background of the Paharis is not clear. The Paharis claim to be a people who were once well off but who then fell from grace. According to popular legend recounted by elder members of the community, their ancestor was a cook in the palace of a Newar Raja of Bhadgaun. (The cook then, as now, enjoys a high status being associated with ritual purity.) Now this cook used to make excessively delicious meals. The Raja was curious as to how this person would go about cooking such delicacies, and so he sent a minister to spy on him. What the minister saw was that this cook would taste every item and then wipe off his hands on his dhoti. The minister reported this to the king. The king then summoned the cook and rebuked him as *phohari* or 'dirty'. This, they say, is the origin of the term Pahari. The cook was then exiled and had to spend the rest of his years hunting roots in the wilderness.

However, it would be erroneous to accept this legend at face value. A more realistic understanding of the historical background of this community could be derived from an inscription which lies in Sukuldhoka in Bhaktapur which the Paharis say mentions their origin. However, due to lack of time and economic constraints I could not investigate this inscription.

Ethnic Origin

Among the Paharis surnames such as Nagarkoti, Harisharan, Udhas and Pahari itself occur frequently.

Taking into account their racial and linguistic characteristics, the Paharis can be categorized as a Tibeto-Burman people.³ They must have inhabited the Kathmandu Valley for a very long time being some of the earliest residents. Unlike their ancient brethren the Newars, who are basically an urban people, the Paharis have remained primarily a rural people. They weren't and aren't Newars for the simple reason that even today the Newars do not acknowledge the Paharis as one of their sub-groups. Nevertheless, the Paharis exhibit many Newar customs and practices in their culture. This could be due to the simple fact that they have assimilated the traditions of their more civilized counterparts in the interaction with the latter through the centuries.

³ *Ibid.*

Livelihood and General Economy

The Paharis were once subsistence farmers. They owned much of the land on a communal basis. Today, due to the unscrupulous ways of their more advanced neighbours--Brahmins, Chettris and Newars--they have become marginalized. The Paharis have had to supplement their farm income by selling their own labour. They work as wage labourers in the field, as porters and as masons. The men are paid according to their work ranging from Rs. 20 to 45 per day, while the women are paid somewhere in between Rs. 12 and 15 per day.

In Khopasi, even though many Paharis have been marginalized, none have had to migrate because of landlessness. Among the more prosperous Paharis farmers, some grow paddy followed by wheat, while others grow paddy followed by potatoes and peas. Agricultural production is gradually becoming commercialized and crops such as potatoes which fetch a good price in Kathmandu are being extensively cultivated by leading Pahari farmers. However, the involvement of Paharis in public and private agencies as salary earners is negligible.

Social Organization

The Paharis have four different clans. However, the relationship between these clans is segmental instead of being hierarchical. For this reason, the Paharis exhibit the social structure of a tribe and not of a caste. Members of a clan marry only outside the clan. In other words, marriages which occur with traditional religious rites have to be exogamous but within the community.

Monogamy is the normal form of marriage which occurs among the Paharis and non-formal marriages predominate over the formal ones. By non-formal marriages I mean those marriages which have occurred without traditional religious rites but which are nevertheless accepted by the society and therefore not illegal. Many young men bring wives from other communities of the area like Newars, Chettris, Sanyasis, Brahmins, Tamangs and untouchables.⁴ Likewise, women elope with men belonging to communities other than their own. In fact, marriages which have occurred with traditional religious rites appear to be rare. The reason for this, in part, could be economical. As the Paharis have become very marginalized, they cannot afford a marriage in the traditional

⁴ Untouchable are those people defined by the old Mulki Ain as '*pānī nachalne*', i. e. those people from whom water cannot be accepted by the clean castes.

style which costs a lot of money, and so they prefer to simply elope with a woman, which is much less expensive.

Among the formally married wives in Kahopasi, many have their maternal homes in Kodku, while many brides from Khopasi are given to bridegrooms in Kodku.

After marriage the bridegroom takes the bride to his parents' home. Residence is usually patrilocal. However, if the household is too large or if some quarrel crops up, the couple leave the extended family and begin a nuclear household nearby.

Property rights pass on directly from the father to the sons, each son receiving an equal amount. The inheritance system can be regarded as patrilineal.

The life cycle rites of the Paharis are in some ways similar to and in some ways different from the Brahmin-Chettri tradition. Birth taboos are observed for only seven days after delivery. The name giving ceremony (*nwāran*) takes place on the seventh day after birth. The woman is allowed to rest for a month's period following delivery, after that she has to start work again. After six months the rice eating ceremony is held.

Bartamān yau, the male initiation ceremony, takes place when the boy is between seven and thirteen years of age. During this ceremony, which is similar to the thread wearing ritual of Brahmins and Chettris, the maternal uncle of the concerned boy sacrifices a goat, or, if he is unable, a duck or a chicken. The Paharis do not put on the sacred thread during this occasion; and instead of the plain *dhotis* worn by Brahmins, the Paharis wear either a *jāmā* (a long white gown) or *daurā suruwāl*, the traditional Nepali baggy trousers and shirt.

In the case of girls, when their first menses takes place, they are hidden from their brothers and other male members of the family for fifteen days.

Marriage usually takes place between fifteen and twenty-five years of age. Marriage has to be exogamous but within the community if it is to be a traditional one. However, as most marriages take place in a non-formal manner, inter-caste and inter-community marriages are abundant.

For a formal marriage, the parents of the girl give a dish consisting of black legumes (*kalō bhaṭmās*) to the persons who come to ask for their daughter's hand. This is a formal acknowledgement that the marriage has been fixed. It is accompanied by a feast of beaten rice, various beans (*sissā bhusa*), eggs and alcohol. During the garland wearing ceremony the would-be bride and groom exchange rings. During the marriage itself there

is not much singing and dancing, although alcohol is served profusely. Buffalo meat, mutton and chicken are also served. As a dowry the bride is given a bed, a cupboard and a few utensils which she may need later on. The bride is then placed on a palanquin (*uling kād*) and with a band playing *pusle bājā* is taken to the bridegroom's house.

In a marriage that is entered into without formal religious rites, a man elopes with a woman and brings her to his house where they then live as husband and wife. In case the parents of the boy do not let them enter, the new couple moves to a new place. It is not the norm among the Paharis to give compensation to the parents of the girl who has been abducted. Similarly, a man who elopes with another man's wife or a woman who elopes with another man are not expected to pay any ransom. As a rule they leave the place and reside elsewhere.

During the funeral ceremony the sons of the deceased person carry the corpse to the cremation ground which is usually a river bank. The actual lighting of the pyre is done by the eldest son. Mourning takes place for twelve days.

In all of these life cycle ceremonies a *nau* (nail-cutter) officiates instead of a Brahmin priest. The priests refuse to officiate at the ceremonies of the Paharis because they regard the latter as non-thread wearing people and of low caste. However, there have been a few cases of Brahmins officiating at Pahari ceremonies.

The *nau* is assisted in the life cycle ceremonies by a community elder who is called *thakālī*. In Khopasi there are two *thakālīs* (first elders) and two *kokālīs* (second elders). For certain ceremonies like funerals, there used to be a *gūthī* (religious association), but this *gūthī* has been defunct for several years.

Festivals, Rituals, Dress

As for other Nepali Hindu communities, Dasain is the most important festival for the Paharis. For them the Dasain festival starts from *saptamī* (the seventh day of the fortnight) and ends on *pūrṇimā* (the full-moon day). On *aṣṭamī* (the eighth day) they sacrifice a buffalo to the goddess. On *dasamī* (the tenth day), another important day during the Dasain Festival, they put on *jamarā* (barley seedlings) and a *ṭīkā* on their foreheads.

Tihar is another important festival for the Paharis. It is similar to the Tihar of the Brahmins and Chettris in many respects. However, unlike the Brahmins and Chettris, the Paharis, give special attention to *Gobardhan Pūjā* and *halo* (plough) *pūjā* during Tihar.

Yo Mari Puni, the full-moon day in November is especially sacred to the Paharis. On this day the Paharis cook sweet breads made of rice. They sacrifice buffalo, chicken, etc. to Bhūmi Deutā (the Earth God). They worship this god whom they call the 'king of the earth' so as to enrich the fertility of the soil.

Diwali or the worship of clan deities is a special festival for the Paharis. They sacrifice various items to the clan deities: Saraswati, Gombār, Baniskhāni and Nāśvari. To Saraswati and Gombār they sacrifice either a cock or a he-goat, to Naswari who is a malevolent deity a duck, and to Baniskhani who is a vegetarian they offer sweet breads. During Diwali, the elder members of the community undertake the function of priest.

Aside from the aforementioned ceremonies, the Paharis do not attend festivals which take place in various parts of the Kathmandu Valley.

As for dress, they have simply accepted the costumes of the wider section of Nepali society. The men folk wear *daurā suruwāl*, coat and the Nepalese cap, while women wear the *dhoti*, blouse and petticoat. The male children wear half-pants, shirts, *bhoto* (an inner garment); and the girls wear a frock. However, due to their low economic condition, the clothes the Paharis wear are often overworn and tattered.

Relations with the Wider Community

The Paharis previously owned much of the local land on a communal basis. However, their rights to the land have been usurped by Brahmins and Chettris. The Pahari has today become a poor man and a minority in his own land.

The Paharis are regarded as a comparatively low caste people by the local society. They have been deliberately placed in the caste hierarchy and at an unfavourable place. Brahmins and Chettris place them in the category of *matvālī* or alcohol consuming people.⁵ For this reason their status in the local community is quite low.

⁵ Of the two classificatory schemes, i. e. the four-fold caste (*varṇa*) system which is common to all Hindu societies and the three-fold categorization ('thread wearers, alcohol drinkers, the impure) which is an indigenous Nepali framework, it is easier to classify the Paharis according to the latter as '*matvālī*' alcohol consuming people rather than as *vaisya*, because they are a clean caste who nevertheless do not wear the sacred thread.

The Paharis have internalized this system of hierarchy to a certain extent among themselves. A previously segmental, egalitarian society, the Paharis have now started labeling themselves in terms of ritual purity. The so called 'cow-eating' Paharis of Sindhupalchowk and Makwanpur districts are treated with contempt by Paharis living elsewhere. The Paharis of Khopasi do not even take water from their hands. Thus the Khole Paharis, as the Paharis who live in Sindhupalchowk and Makwanpur districts are called, have become untouchables in the eyes of Pakhe Paharis living elsewhere.

Ritual purity is reflected in their interaction with other communities. For instance, although they would accept cooked rice from Brahmins, Chettris and Newars, they would not accept it from a Tamang or a Magar, not to mention untouchable castes.

The Paharis take pride in proclaiming that they are Newars. Remarkably enough their language shows certain affinities with the Newari language. A few examples are illustrated in Figure 1. Although the Paharis claim that they are Newars, the Newars themselves vehemently deny this. To the Newars the Paharis are little better than Tamangs.

Nepali	Pahari	Newari	English
Ma	Ji	Ji	I
Timi	Chi	Cha	You
Bhai	Bhai	Kija	Brother
Bahini	Mana	Ki	Sister
Ama	Ma	Ma	Mother
Buva	Ba	Ba	Father
Bhat	Ja	Ja	Rice
Dal	Maske	Makhe	Lentils
Pani	Lakhu, Na	Na	Water
Gai	Sa	Sa	Cow
Ghar	Che	Che	House
Ek	Thipa	Chau	One
Dui	Nispa	New	Two
Tin	Soppa	Songu	Three
Char	Pippa	Pigu	Four
Paanch	Voppa	Nyapa	Five
Das	Jirka	Jhigu	Ten

Figure 1

A Persisting Problem

A persisting problem for the Paharis has been their lack of proper identity. Although racially and linguistically they are a Tibeto-Burman people, the Paharis have wholly absorbed the Parbatiya (Brahman- Chettri) culture. They speak fluent Nepali and intermarry with Indo-Aryan Stock. However, the Brahmins and Chettris regard the Paharis as being ritually low and the Newars do not accept the Paharis as one of them. Thus the Paharis do not know whom to identify themselves with. This has resulted in confusion, and many Paharis have resorted to using false surnames to become more acceptable to the wider community.

For instance, Gopal Pahari joined the Indian Army, which he served for over eighteen years as a gunner, by giving his name as Gopal Magar. Similarly, Gopal's only surviving son who currently drives a night bus from Kathmandu to Kakarvitta calls himself Sitaram Shrestha. If the Paharis continue to switch to more acceptable forms of surnames because they feel too insecure to use their own, their identity could be completely submerged and lost in the vast humanity of Nepali society within a few years.

Thus to ensure the survival of this community as a distinct cultural entity, a greater knowledge and information regarding their customs and traditions is essential. Only when their identity becomes clearly safeguarded can the Paharis live as what they really are: a unique Nepali community.



1. A Pahari young woman



2. A Pahari thakali smoking tamakhu.



4. A Pahari man



3. Gopal Pahari with his wife



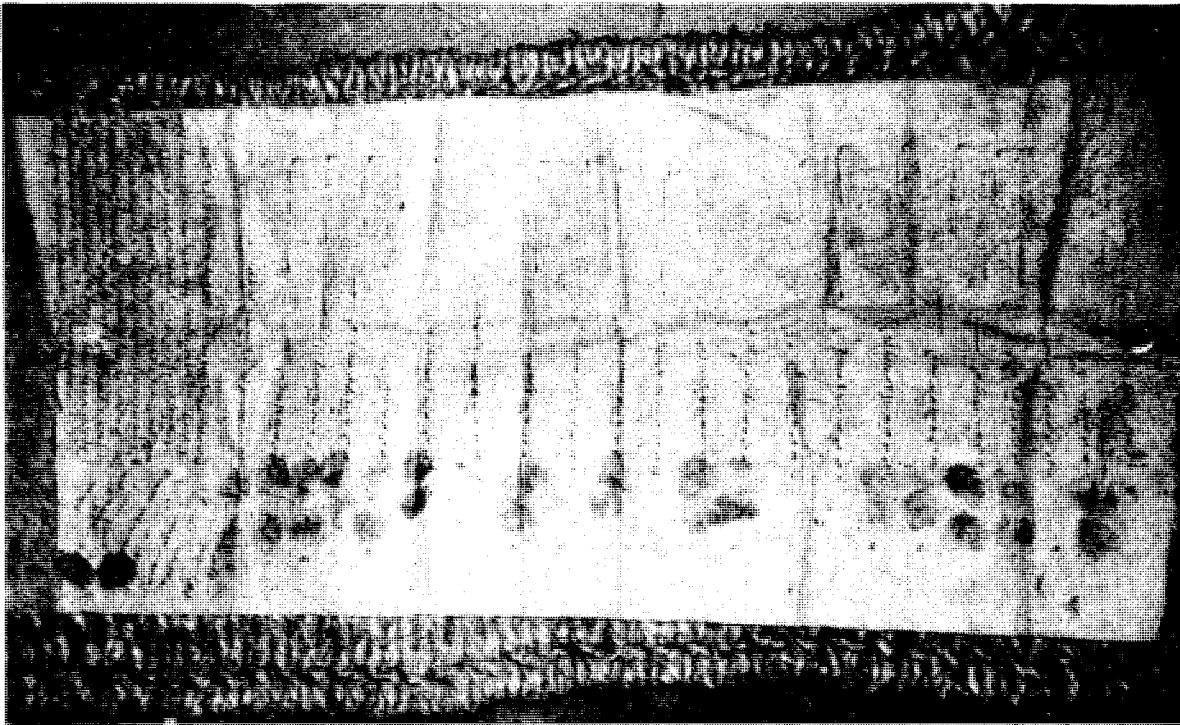
5. Old Pahari women with grandchildren



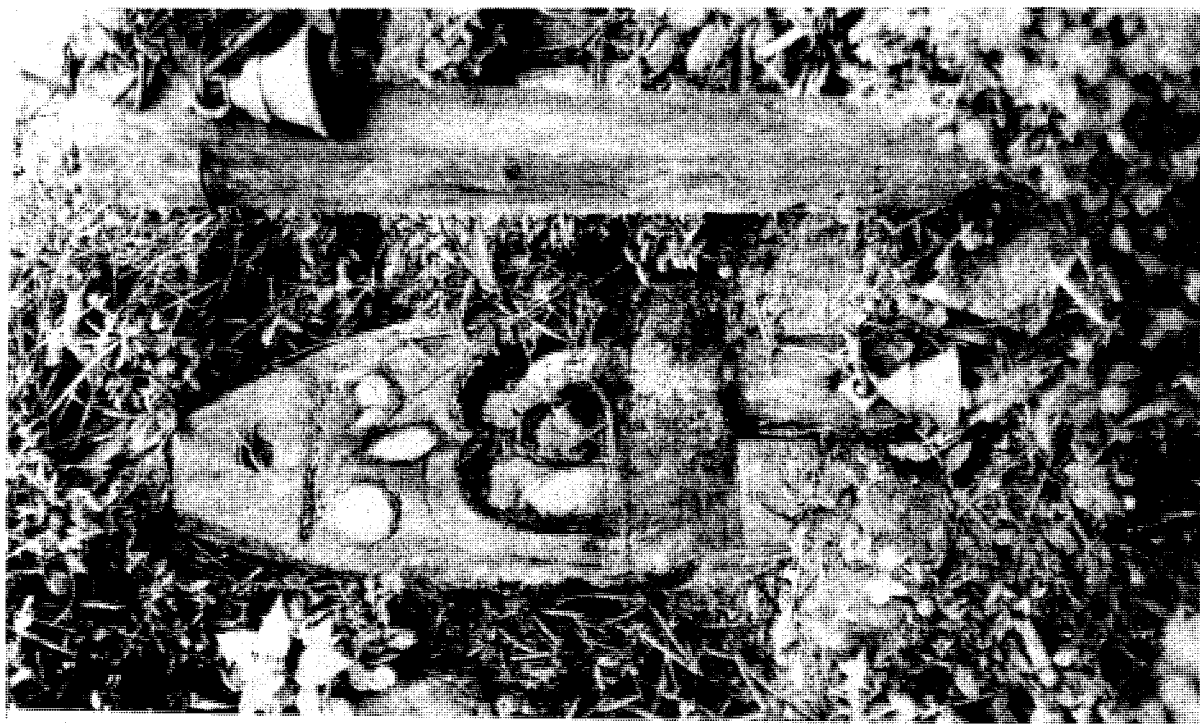
6. Kailash Pahari (right) with his brother-in-law (centre) in the shop of a Chettri (left)



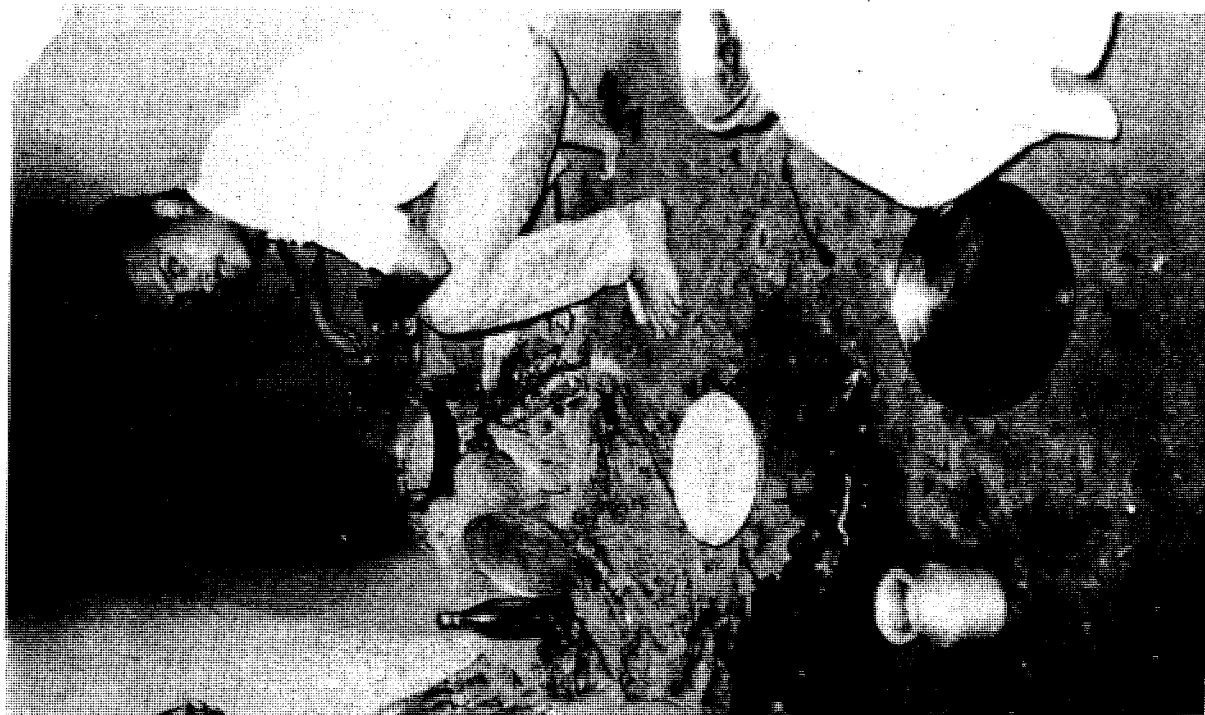
8. A Pahari woman with her children



7. A Pahari guthi manuscript



10. A gombar statue



9. The author cooking dhedo