CHAPTER SIX

ROMANTIC DREAMS AND PRACTICAL LIVES

SPIRITUALITY AND CORRUPTION

Wrapped in innumerable myths and legends, Nepal is a land of magic and mystery. The confrontation between its millions of gods and goddesses on the one hand, and the most powerful demons on the other, at various points gives a meaningful perspective to this magic and mystery.

—Nepal Tourism Board tourist booklet

The Langtang region was Nepal’s first Himalayan national park, and for good reason! Nowhere else is so much high mountain landscape accessible with such ease and with so few tourists. This trek takes us through numerous Tamang and Helambu Sherpa villages (Tibetan related peoples), through high elevation pastures, and finally to the foot of Langtang Lirung. Tourism was late in finding this spectacular range, even though it is only a day’s drive from Kathmandu. The result is that the Langtang region is home to many endangered and rare animals including the bharal sheep, wild yak, and the snow leopard, as well as intimate villages that still live traditionally. Langtang is now one of the few places in central Nepal where traditional dress, lifestyles, and cultures abound. Despite the long history of conservation in the Langtang region, this is one of Nepal’s best-kept trekking secrets!

—www.earthboundexp.com/trips/FRMNPExA.html

The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.

—Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

While I was having my usual lunch of Tibetan bread and omelette in the kitchen one rainy afternoon, in came a trekker who had just returned from Kyangjin, which is the final destination for most trekkers to the Langtang Valley. At that time, Kyangjin was still under the ‘rotation’
system, under which throughout a particular week groups of hotels took turns to open for business. The system was devised so that hotels would not engage in cut-throat competition, sometimes offering huge discounts to tourists and large commissions to their guides to attract customers. The system was designed to ensure that all the hotels in Kyangjin had a chance to earn some tourist money.

This Italian trekker, fresh from being ‘fleeced’ by the hotels in Kyangjin, and in an indignant and pained tone, began an apparently heartfelt litany on the degeneration of Langtang Tibetans. In between sips of hot lemon tea, he accused the Kyangjin hotel owners of being ‘money-minded’ for charging high prices for food and accommodation, including Rs. 20 rupee for a mug of hot water, Rs. 150 for a room and Rs. 80 for Tibetan bread (shaped like chapatti, but much thicker). Due to the rotation system, on each day there was almost a monopoly in the supply of accommodation in Kyangjin, with hotel owners agreeing to cooperate and to fix their rates. Since Kyangjin was the highlight of the trek and the last permanent settlement in the Langtang Valley offering food and accommodation to trekkers, most trekkers had little choice but to stay there for at least one night if they wanted to explore the surrounding areas and to enjoy the stunning scenery, the finale of the trek. Perhaps not surprisingly, the Italian called the hotel owners a ‘Mafia’.

Because of the rotation system, this particular trekker found that he could not bargain down the prices of food and accommodation in Kyangjin, something that he could do in Langtang Village, where the rotation system had broken down. In the presence of my landlord and two other villagers, the tourist, without any sense of impropriety, lamented that the Langtang ‘Tibetans’ were ‘corrupted and finished’, for they had lost their Buddhist faith and piety, and were now concerned with making money from the tourists. He had previously met many Tibetans on his travels, and was especially impressed by the Tibetans in Dharamsala, the seat of the Tibetan government-in-exile in northern India, which he had visited eight times. The Tibetans in Dharamsala were the best, for ‘they were very religious and polite people, always praying and not so much concerned with making money’. The Tibetans in Kathmandu were slightly worse than their counterparts in India; but his most stinging criticisms were reserved for the Langtang people. To the bewilderment, and not to say slight bemusement, of my landlord, the tourist said that Langtang had been ‘spoiled by tourism’, and that he had been disillusioned and would not visit the place ever again. As he got up to leave, he wished my landlord and the Langtang people ‘good luck’, meaning, of course, that Langtang needed all the luck