In 1995, the year that I started conducting research among the ethni-
cally Tibetan enclaves of Nepal’s Nubri Valley, modern contraception
was nearly non-existent. The Nepali government, which for years had
advocated family planning as a national imperative to stimulate devel-
opment, maintained a small health post in the valley. Pasted to the
wall facing the footpath was a poster of the ubiquitous ‘condom man’
with a Nepali-language caption proclaiming the benefits of birth con-
trol. Rumor had it that a copious supply of condoms was kept within
the health post, and that these were to be distributed free of charge.
But there were few takers let alone people to distribute the condoms.
Absenteeism of underpaid government workers hailing from distant
regions of Nepal meant that the doors to the health post were rarely
opened. Even the poster had scant hope of propagating its family
planning message; the government’s goal of universal education had
totally failed in the valley. Virtually none of Nubri’s ethnic Tibetans
could read the Nepali-language caption.

Aside from the government’s ineffectual condom distribution program,
there were two other sources of contraception in Nubri. One was a
local woman who had spent time in Kathmandu where she acquired
a modicum of knowledge about family planning methods. Sadly, her
efforts to share this information were stridently opposed. For one,
powerful villagers alleged that she was a witch dispensing poisonous
concoctions. Many men in Nubri likewise distrusted the motives of
wives who used contraception, suspecting that they were having illicit
affairs rather than merely trying to limit childbearing within marriage.
Birth control methods were perceived by many as a threat to the moral
fiber of the community.

The other source was more innocuous. An elderly man had opened
a small shop where he sold cigarettes, biscuits, and other assorted items.
I also noticed that he had some condoms on display. When I inquired
if anybody ever bought them, he broke out in laughter and said, “No, none of the villagers ever buy them. But one day some monks came through here. They bought a bunch of condoms, blew them up like balloons, and hung them from trees along the trail”.

Such was the state of birth control when I first visited Nubri in 1995: condom-adorned trees lining a trail beset with ancient carvings of Buddhist scriptures, a woman reviled by fellow villagers for advocating the use of modern contraception, and an ineffective government health service that failed to disseminate the knowledge and means to control fertility. Together these present a fitting image of a society steeped in tradition, yet poised on the brink of a demographic transition.

The following chapter documents fertility and family planning in Sama, the largest village in Nubri. While modern contraception was virtually unknown during the 1990s, the total fertility rate was a relatively modest 5.3 births per woman. This case study explores how a variety of social and cultural factors helped regulate fertility and population growth in a pre-transitional society. As in Kyirong, fertility was not as high as we would expect among people who value children but do not have access to modern methods of contraception. Marriage, or more accurately the high frequency of female non-marriage, acted to restrain aggregate fertility. But in contrast to Kyirong, it was not polyandry that prevented many women from marrying. Rather, it was a socially sanctioned role of religious celibacy that effectively eliminated the chance for many women to reproduce. By designating one daughter to be a nun, parents retained her services within the household thereby ensuring a caretaker in their old-age. This was a household-level strategy for managing offspring with discernible demographic implications.

Introduction to Sama

Sama is the largest village in Nubri Valley which lies in the upper reaches of the Buri River in Gorkha District, Nepal. Access to the valley is impeded by deep gorges to the south, and by high mountain passes to the north and west. Positioned on the southern slope of the Himalayas, Nubri is ecologically distinct from the arid and sparsely vegetated Tibetan Plateau to the north where the mountain barrier creates a rain shadow. Adequate rainfall in Nubri allows some of Nepal’s best preserved forests to thrive (Hetts 1996), and permits the people to farm the land without creating complex irrigation systems.