

NEPAL: THE CHINA ROAD

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WHEN, in 1963, I asked the Nepalese: "When will the China Road be finished?" they answered: "It will take a long time yet because there is a considerable section to be cut through rock, which will be difficult."

The Nepalese could have avoided this error of judgment which underestimated the ability of the Chinese; the latter acquired great experience during the fifteen years they spent constructing roads in Tibet. When I put the same question this year (1965), the reply was: "Oh, the new road is getting on very fast! It is almost finished . . . jeeps use it every day."

Let us have a glimpse from the sky of this far-off region where many of the deep-cut valleys which constitute Nepal jostle each other—Nepal, whose paths and tracks are too steep to be used by beasts of burden.

Leaving Kathmandu and its old brick houses the jeep travels in the direction of the rising sun, now warming the fruit trees and rich vegetable gardens. We pass quite near the residence of King Mahendra, whose father took over the government in 1951, having overthrown the Prime Minister: he was the last representative of the Ranas—the usurpers of power for 104 years.

On the way, we meet many coolies who walk towards the town bare-foot, their baskets filled with leeks, or their bamboo poles evenly balanced at either end by loads of earthenware pots. Peasant women, wearing black skirts with red borders, go as devotees to Pasupatinath, the ancient Shivaite sanctuary whose golden-roofed pagoda can be descried in a hollow in the valley; their brass offertory-plates glint in their hands and the red poinsettia thrust into their black chignons enhances their golden complexion. This is the age-old way of life. . . .

By contrast it is the ultra-modern way of life that obtains when we reach—in the heart of this Himalayan valley situated at 1,300 metres—the plateau where the airport is to be found (which started by being the maharajah's polo ground at the time of my first landing in Nepal, in 1951).

Here are King Mahendra's private planes, tied next to the little plane bearing the federal cross of Swiss Technical Aid. I notice also the emblem of the United Nations, on a Pilatus Porter; this last is about to transport metal girders to Western Nepal, far away where they want to build a dam on the river Karnali. As this involves three hours of mountain flying the pilot carries a thermos flask and some food with him—for one never knows! It must not be forgotten that certain gorges in the Himalayas are virtually gigantic bottle-necks which can turn the wind into a hurricane; moreover, during the three months of the monsoon, flying becomes impossible.

At first we head northwards to fly over the Pilgrims' Lake (Gosain Kund) situated at an altitude of nearly 4,500 metres. I once got up there on foot after a five-days' climb. Flying direct, it takes only twenty minutes—what a contrast! I wonder if farther east I shall be able to identify the Chinese road which will link Kathmandu to Lhasa and, eventually, India to China through Tibet?

As we rise above the paddy-fields, evenly terraced and looking like half-opened drawers, high summits appear. To the north-west I recognize the 7,700 metres of white Ganesh Himal, first climbed by Raymond Lambert; to the east, in a mist which hides Mount Everest, still too far off, I can see the steep, harsh Gaurisankar; to the north-east, striped Hodler-fashion, the massif of Jugal Himal dominates the whole region. One of its peaks was climbed by an Englishwomen's expedition.

We have left far behind us the smiling region of Kathmandu, that kind of elongated plain stretching for about 25 kilometres, with its 800,000 inhabitants; where medieval, overpopulated towns rise above fields dominated by many-roofed pagodas, and where an occasional white stupa looks like the top of an egg laid on the very ground.

Now we are flying above the wide, deep valley of the river Indravati, a landscape of predominating beige tones. The Indravati is the westernmost branch of the river Kosi (formed by seven streams that drain the whole of Eastern Nepal topped by Mount Everest), whose terrible floods often devastate the Indian plain of Bihar. I can clearly see how the small, horizontal, carefully terraced fields are gashed again and again by vertical ravines.

Some widely spaced scars denote the road under construction. It rises, no doubt, to go over the round back of an enormous hill; it descends again to plunge into the long valley of the Sun Kosi. There the ground is so steep that the two banks are just huge landslips where nothing grows. Higher up, minute white dots on a mountainside indicate Gumthang and its thatched huts among cultivated fields.

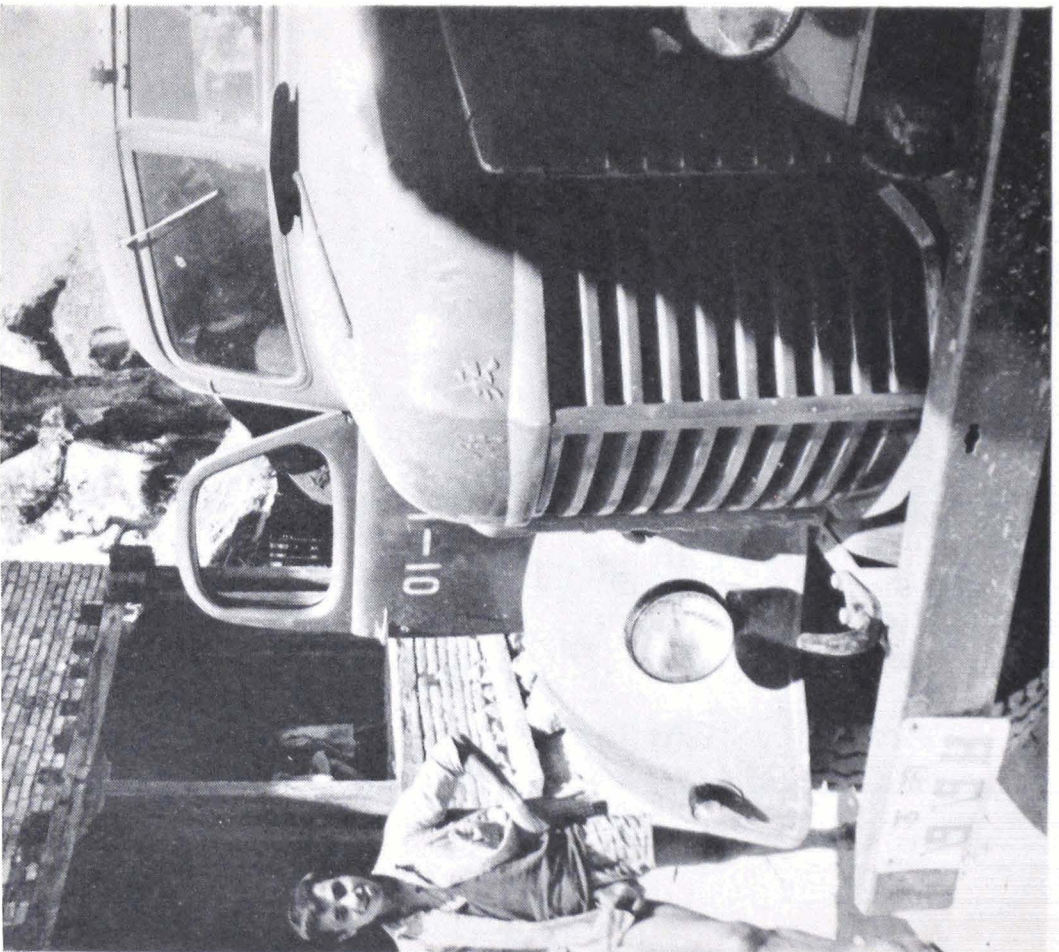
In order fully to understand what modern roads cut into the heart of Asia will mean, one should have followed a silent track for weeks at a time according to age-old customs adapted to man's walking pace, endlessly climbing up and down passing from cold to heat, and pitching camp every evening near some running water. One feels far away from everything—almost at the end of the world. But as soon as there is a road everything is changed; one feels linked to a network that covers a continent . . . or two continents. Going from Paris to Peking becomes a possibility, by the simple addition of wheels' revolutions. Along with a variety of goods, ideas and new ways of life cross the deserts with great rapidity. In the past, the silk caravans used the tracks of Turkestan during many slow centuries as did the Buddhist pilgrims. Today, thanks to the internal-combustion engine it is the wireless set, the aluminium pan, the plastic basket and the ideas of the Communist pilgrim which infiltrate everywhere within months.

At last I see, far below in the blue shadows, the narrow gorge of the Ehoté Kosi rising towards the north-east. It is there, no doubt, that the road will be cut in the rock for a distance of about twenty kilometres before

PLATE I



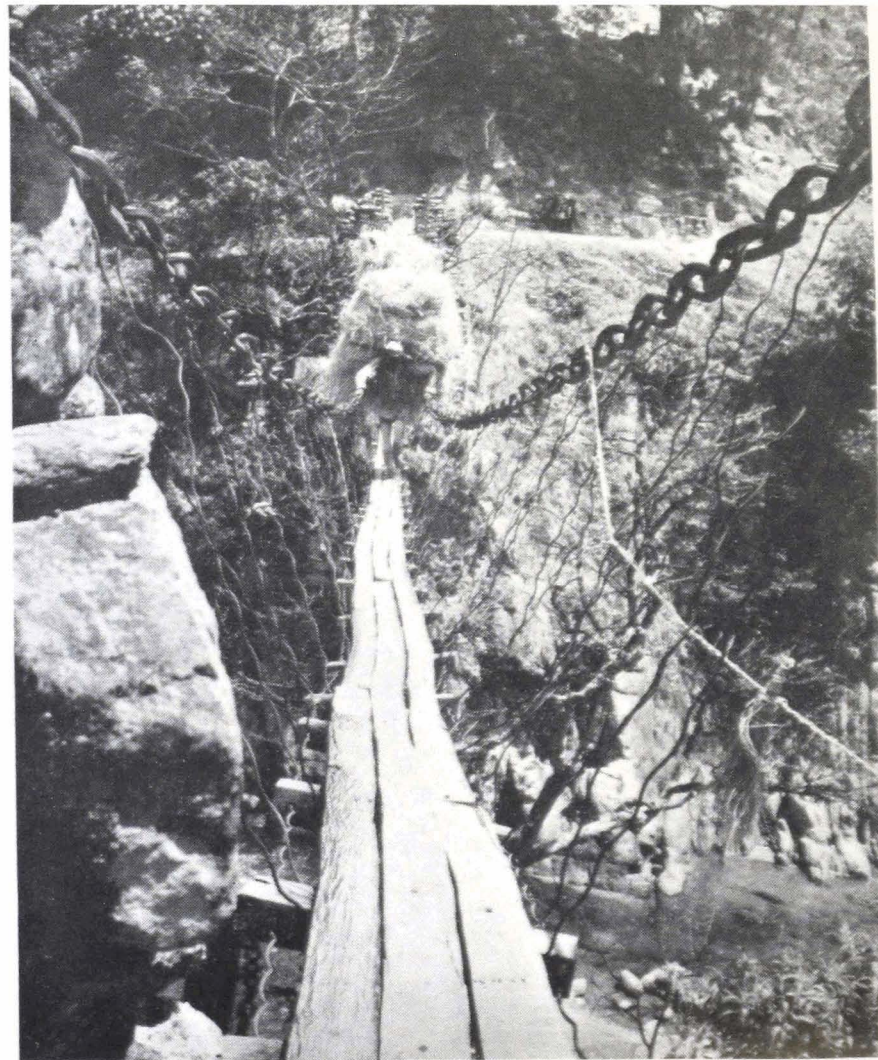
WHEN THE KODARI ROAD IS FINISHED, SICK PEOPLE WILL NO LONGER NEED TO BE CARRIED IN BASKETS LIKE THESE.



NEW KODARI ROAD, KATHMANDU—LHASA. GREEN TRUCK WITH CHINESE SIGNS "JAY FONG" ON THE HOOD.



ALONG THE KODARI ROAD TO THE NORTHEAST OF KATHMANDU. THE OLD WAY OF TRAVELLING, ON FOOT WITH ONE'S POSSESSIONS ON ONE'S BACK, IS NOW OUT OF FASHION.



NEPAL. THE OLD WAY OF CROSSING RIVERS OVER SHAKY BRIDGE WITH LOOSE PLANKS.

it reaches Kodari on the frontier—the place whose name is given to this international route. In fact we can see a great hairpin bend above the Bhote Kosi—the freshly cut signature of a new enterprise in the Himalayas.

According to the correspondent of the *Calcutta Statesman*, who has visited the roadworks, five important bridges are being built there. He confirms that this road, measuring 104 kilometres in Nepal, will be used by jeeps in 1965; its estimated cost of around four million pounds is part of the aid China is granting to Nepal in accordance with the 1956 agreement. Armed with spades, iron bars, wheelbarrows and, above all, baskets, 12,000 labourers were working on five sections of the road simultaneously—under the orders of six Chinese engineers and nine Nepalese engineers. They began with the easiest sections, so that 60 kilometres were quickly finished. The masonry work and the bridges will come later. (The long Kodari-Lhasa section, on Tibetan territory, was finished in 1964; beyond Nielam and the Pass of Kuti the ground is relatively flat.)

The monsoon rains will put this road in jeopardy every year. It has already happened to Rajpath, the 120-kilometre road which links India to Kathmandu, crossing a col 2,700 metres high. (Approximately the same amount of money was spent on the Rajpath—a present from India to Nepal in 1956.)

Thanks to our wings we soar to 5,000 metres, the height of the eternal snows of the Jugal Himal; so that to the north-east, beyond the indentation made in the mountains by the Kodari valley, I can make out the vastness of the greyish-yellow Tibetan plain. And over there on this fabulous northern horizon two white splashes mark some peaks of the Trans-Himalayan Range explored by Sven Hedin, long ago.

It is like flying over a relief map. But there is no coloured line here to indicate any frontier; the world is without divisions, peaceful under a luminous sky. At Kodari the frontier is only 2,000 metres high. We make a half-turn.

I have just seen one of the two historic passes of the Himalayas, deep fissures that give gradual access to the Tibetan plateau lying at an average height of 3,600 metres. (Here is no crossing of a high pass, as with the 4,300-metre cols of Nathu and Jelep which link Sikkim to Tibet.)

The Kodari Valley leading to the Pass of Kuti is as well known as that of Kyerong—to the north-west of Kathmandu. This may have been the way by which two elephants once reached Tibet, gifts from a king of Nepal to the king of Lhasa. (One of the elephants died on the way.) It was by this track that the Jesuits Grueber and Dorville arrived from China in time gone by, on their way to Rome through Nepal in 1661. This way of Kuti and Kodari was also followed by the Capucin fathers who were expelled from Lhasa, before King Prithvi Narayan drove them away from Nepal in 1768.

Today a new era has begun for the peasants of that region. Those who work on the road for the equivalent of five shillings a day are assured of a regular wage for one more year. The others rejoice in the thought that they can get to hospital at Kathmandu in case of need and that they can buy Chinese goods, reputed to be cheap.

But in the meantime the Chinese buy all they can in these valleys which were barely self-sufficient. Demand having increased, the price of millet, wheat and potatoes has already doubled. As happens all over the world, modernization causes an ascending price spiral—a bitter experience for those who gain no direct advantage from the innovations.

