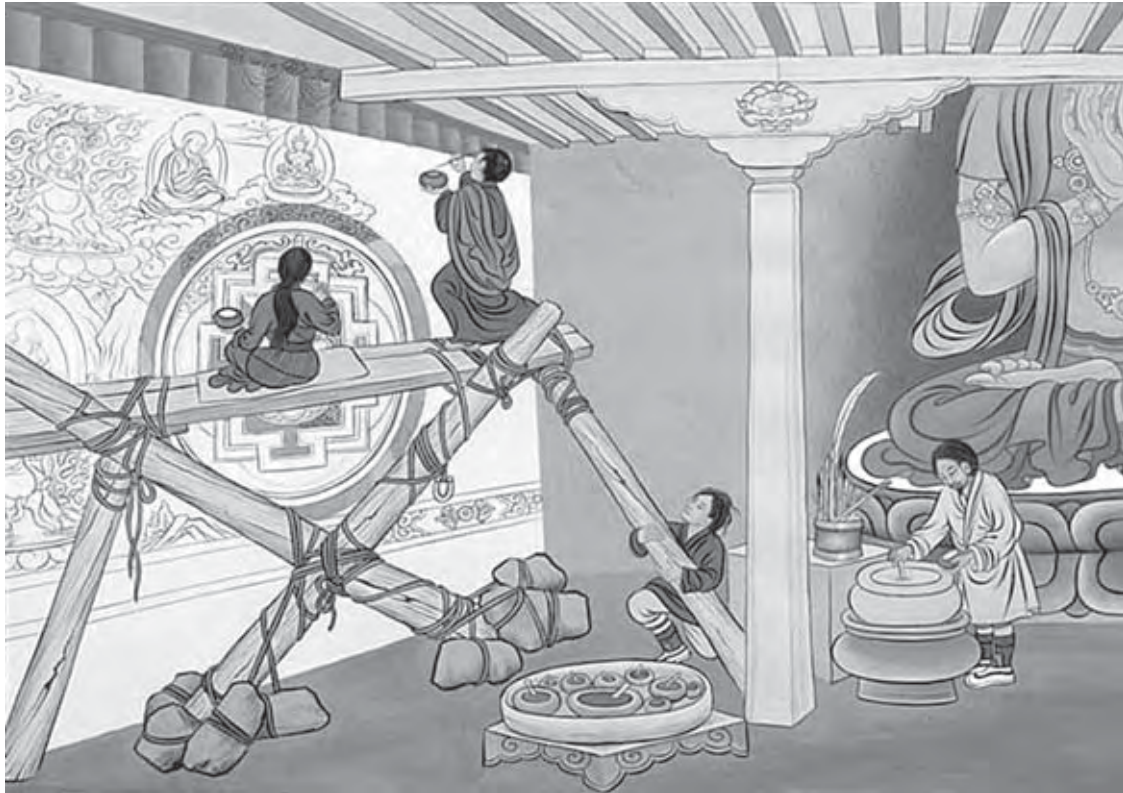


The girl from Dolpo

A classic fairy tale of triumph over social obstacles, mysterious creativity and the intervention of royalty



This illustrated book is the charming tale of Namsel, a young girl from Dolpo who exhibits an unusual artistic talent and succeeds in realising her dreams. Entirely suitable for adults but targeted at children aged seven and upwards, *Clear Sky, Red Earth* has all the makings of a classic fairy tale rooted in historical events such as the triumph over social obstacles, mysterious creativity

and the intervention of royalty.

Born to a modest family in Dolpo, the young Namsel Wangmo is a village girl who loves horses. After a death in the family, she moves in with her Aunt Dechen and Uncle Thondrup to help out in their house. Uncle Thondrup is an accomplished painter, as well as the village lama, and lets Namsel watch him as he works on his thangka paintings. Namsel

eventually becomes his apprentice and hones her skills as she travels with him to the court of neighbouring Mustang.

Clear Sky, Red Earth may also

BOOK
Mark Turin



be read as an allegory of a different nature. As compelling as the story itself is, the book is also

an example of the strength of collaboration between two individuals from vastly different cultures: an American woman and a Dolpo man. The writer is Sienna Craig, who has been travelling to Nepal and Tibet since 1993, and has spent several years living in remote villages of Dolpo and Mustang. She has worked a freelance writer, translator, development consultant and educator, and is currently completing her PhD in medical and cultural anthropology at Cornell University. The illustrations are by Tenzin Norbu, an artist whose work is featured in museums and private collections around the world as well as several in international publications including *Caravans of the Himalaya*, *National Geographic*, and the feature film *Himalaya*, which was nominated for an Academy Award in 1999.

The text is engaging and joyful, full of gentle humour and cultural insight, not to mention a small dose of feminine victory: after all, the protagonist is a young woman. The illustrations are splendid, combining fiery reds with muted and natural earthy browns. Tenzin Norbu's precision to detail, be it the saddle-bags on the horses or snow leopard's spots, makes the experience all the more immersive. His paintings are at once cartoon-like and photographic, blending impressionist pointillism with a powerful sense of perspective.

The book is rounded off with a helpful, if slightly quirky, glossary and pronunciation guide, not a standard feature of children's books but one which

will satisfy the appetites of culturally-interested readers.

It is pleasing to note that a portion of the profits from the sale of *Clear Sky, Red Earth* will help support projects in Dolpo and Mustang, funded by DROKPA, a non-profit organisation whose mission is to partner with pastoral communities in the Himalaya and Tibet to implement grassroots development and catalyse social entrepreneurship. This socially-responsible children's tale suffers from only one drawback: its price. At Rs 950, averaging around Rs 20 a page, most Nepali families with suitably-aged children and Nepal's English medium primary schools won't be able to afford it. We can only hope for a more economical edition of this delightful tale in the years to come. ●



Clear Sky, Red Earth: A Himalayan Story
Text by Sienna Craig,
Illustrations by Tenzin Norbu
Mera Publications, Kathmandu,
2004, Price Rs 950,
pp 48, 20 colour illustrations and
eight line drawings.

Mark Turin is Director of the Digital Himalaya Project at the University of Cambridge.
www.digitalhimalaya.com

Thalara's black and white world

AARTI BASNYAT

The visual history of a village in western Nepal that is frozen in time

They are stark and beautiful, almost unreal. The fine details like a hole in the skirt or patchwork clothes and heart-warming smiles make Devendra SJB Rana's exhibition of black and white photographs "Thalara Framed" at Siddhartha Art Gallery, remarkable.

Devendra was brought up and educated in England. He wanted to know his country better, to understand life beyond the Valley. On a visit to a village, he saw the people drink water, wash clothes and defecate in the same river. Shocked by the poverty, he decided to do something in a small way. With his background in agriculture development, Devendra started a project for rural development. He chose Thalara in farwestern Nepal.

Far removed from the bubble reality of Kathmandu, Thalara is in that part of Nepal which is most neglected, most deprived and most marginalised. The disparity between the upper and lower caste dominates social interactions, and the status of women in the community and even within the family is medieval. The women do all the household work—fetching water, fodder, firewood and they are still treated like dirt. Poverty was intense and all-pervasive.

Devendra lived in Thalara for five years 1991-96 and fought daily to change the *ke garne* mindset of the local menfolk. Thalara was also Devendra's mother's home but



KIRAN PANDAY

even his own relatives failed to understand his desire to eat and live with people from the lower castes. He saw poverty face-to-face and understood what drove some into the Maoist fold later on. "People were so poor that they didn't care anymore," he says quietly, "they had nothing to lose but their lives, which they could barely sustain anyway."

Fatalism was rife in Thalara and Devendra discovered that here more than anywhere else, many felt fate is written on their foreheads. People were content to sit back and let things take their course. "It is



often easier to overcome poverty than change that attitude," says Devendra.

Devendra documented his stay in Thalara with black and white photography, a wonder he discovered at the age of eight. Now he is ready to exhibit some of this photographs. "I want to raise awareness among the people of Kathmandu, to gauge their reaction to these stark pictures of life in the villages and the desolation even before the Maoists," he says.

Devendra hasn't returned to Thalara since 1996, the year that the Maoist 'people's war' began in nearby Rolpa.

Today, the area is a conflict zone, even the few development projects have stopped, and Thalara has become more remote than ever before. But we see into the souls of its inhabitants from these pictures taken 10 years ago. In black and white, shorn of photogenic glamour, the struggle and grinding poverty is more poignant.

The exhibition is supported by the Bank of Kathmandu and Devendra plans to take it to the Netherlands also. ●

Thalara Framed at Siddhartha Art Gallery, Baber Mahal Revisited, 15-30 April. 4218048