

# Himalayan Children

Growing up in Sikkim, Nepal and Pakistan  
(1970-2014)



Fritz Berger

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**VAJRA**  
BOOKS

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# Introduction

One of the first pictures I took after arriving in Kathmandu in 1973 was the scene of a group of children playing at the door of a Newar house, where a man was seen smoking hookah beside a motorbike. More photos of children followed soon. They were bright smiling girl from the north of the Kathmandu Valley and a group of jolly children in Pokhara playing a Sarangi. I captured many more scenes like this.

During my ten-years long work in Nepal and Pakistan, I took photos of many children. I must mention here that I photographed my own children too, but photographing local children has turned out to be a more interesting passion for me. Local children appeared very new, unusual and colorful to me.

The bright and breezy faces of these innocent kids fascinated me from the very day I set my feet in Asia. Wherever I went I



found a few, mostly a dozen, children with their dark eyes looking at me curiously. I found Nepali boys and girls very frank and open. But the little girls from Pakistan were mostly very shy, and they did not like to come to the front.

As I took out the camera in my hand the bravest would start laughing while others would huddle together staring at the ground. When I let them have a look through the viewfinder they would be pleased. In the recent years, as they see their faces on the screen of the digital camera, they feel very delighted.

Soon, I lost interest in taking photos of smiling children only. I started looking for the children in their actual lives, as I travelled along. And this, I confess, revealed to me other important aspects about their lives including those of their parents. First of all, I was stunned by these children's self-confidence. Though uneducated, the hill children and youngsters had a sense of pride in them. They looked bold and confident. I found them to be very respectful and social towards their parents and strangers. Years later, I learned that this could have been the result of treating children in a human manner from the very beginning of the civilization here. The very category called

*If you wish to build a new house, get the best quality of cement and steel!*

*If you wish to build a new town, plant trees!!*

*If you wish to build a new Humanity, begin with the child*

J. P. Vaswani

'childhood' was recognized in Europe only three to four hundred years back at the beginning of the industrial époque.

While I was in Rolwaling in 1975, I could observe girls playing with carefully dressed dolls they had made themselves. The dolls were made from the branches of pine tree, and were dressed according to the traditional Sherpa clothes. Such dolls reminded me the ones the girls from neighborhood made in my childhood days.

I managed to get nice shots especially while travelling around in my free days. In my travel to the very remote valley in northern Pakistan, I encountered people living in very isolated and geographically difficult terrains. But I was surprised to see the creativity of children. They made toy cars out of simple recycled material themselves. (See the chapter 'play'.)

I was so fascinated by these little playing cars that I purchased a series of them and took them back home to Switzerland to be used in workshops for school children. Finally, I deposited them in museums in Basel and Luzern. In the course of my travel to many parts of the world, I learned that children all over the world construct vehicles similar those shown in the book.

To me it was very depressing moment to take pictures of the children left alone in the streets of cities. I found them living a miserable life by begging or collecting garbage. That even toady children are exploited in construction sites, shops and factories is a very unacceptable matter.

I have also included texts and brief captions to each picture so that the reader will enjoy the photos and develop his or her own thoughts about them. I believe readers and viewers will come to know many things about each picture in particular, and the children in the Himalayas in general.

My intention is to show a broad spectrum of children's life in the Himalayas, in the book. And I am confident that the readers looking carefully at each picture can share the life of the children growing up in Sikkim, Nepal and Pakistan.

I dedicate this book to all the children from the Himalayas. And my heartiest wish is that the book will help the readers to develop a better understanding and respect for these children's lives and families as well as their religions and cultures in this extremely beautiful part of the world.

I thank Nadia for supporting me in selecting photos and helping me write the text. My thanks go to Dr. Ramesh Kant Adhikari for writing forward for the book. I thank Nilima Raut for her interest and support. I thank Bidur Dongol of Vajra Books for all his efforts and interest in publishing this book. My thanks go to Shiva Rijal for carefully editing the text, to Dongol Printers for the layout and photo preparations. Finally, I thank Archana Advertising Pvt. Ltd. from New Delhi for printing this book.

**Fritz Berger**  
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# *The Homelands*

The homelands of the children whose photos this book contain, are indeed the deep valleys lying between high snow covered mountains. Most of these places were isolated in the past and one could reach there only after a weeklong walk. People in these places rarely get to meet strangers. As the British Raj didn't reach Nepal, Sikkim and the hidden valleys of the northern Pakistan, deep-rooted traditions and faith could be seen guiding the rhythms of people's lives in these areas.

The historical towns of the Kathmandu valley fascinated me as soon as I landed in Nepal in 1973. I remember the people living in the hills of Dolakha had transistor radios, but no telephone and electricity services then. That was the time when school and health posts along with other governmental services were being introduced at a very slow pace. I could see that the farmer families had to struggle it very hard, as they did not have enough land to produce sufficient crops for the family. I saw many people going to India to earn, bring food and money back home. I was very happy to see people of various tribes and faith living peacefully together, and nobody could think then that the 1996 -2006 deadly civil war would ever take place in Nepal. I hear that millions of Nepali youths now have left the country to find jobs in East Asian and Middle East countries in the recent

years. The money they send home has become the major source of economic sustenance of Nepal. After roads were built in the 1980s, lives of villagers have become comparatively easier.

During my Kalam assignment in northern Swat from 1982 to 1987, I often visited the isolated valleys of the Kohistan, Hindu Kush and Karakorum. I saw farmers living in small settlements struggling hard to make a simple living.

Sikkim has very old Buddhist culture, and was a gateway to Tibet for a long time. It is famous for its rice terraces, cardamom plantations and tea garden, forest, wild flowers and orchids. This small kingdom located between Nepal and Bhutan was integrated as a new state of India in 1972. India has made huge development efforts in this new state by constructing roads, providing electricity, establishing schools and healthcare centers. The immigrations from Nepal in the nineteenth century outnumbered the traditional inhabitants, the Lepchas and the Bhutias.

# *Happiness for baby*

**H**aving children is regarded as the prime goal of marriage in Asia. Baby is considered a gift of god. A baby is expected to bring happiness in the family. People pray for a safe delivery. After the baby is born everyone present in the family starts taking care of both the mother and the newborn. The mother naturally gets holiday from usual chores, and is advised to take a rest for a swift recovery. In old times, babies were delivered at home with the help of midwives. The rate of child mortality was high since the death rate of the children below five was up to 50%. With better health care systems and hospitals, this has changed fortunately. And in urban areas family with two children has become a norm these days.

In Nepal new born is soon laid in a handmade bamboo basket probably made by its father. The mother carries the basket on the back when she starts working or going to visit neighbours. If the weather is warm and sunny the baby receives daily bath and warm mustard oil massage. A Newar lady married to a Swiss introduced the traditional Nepali baby massage practice in Europe.

In a Hindu family son plays the central role. The religion requires the son to perform the last rites of his parents. The son is also the first heir to parental properties. A girl, on the other hand, might be helpful for some time. For many parents, her marriage becomes a burden economically.

I found that women in Pakistan were restricted to their homes. On the other hand, father or grandfather felt pride in taking mainly the male child out to socialize with their friends in bazaar. Babies were wrapped in handmade clothes to protect them from cold. But these days, baby-care materials including their clothes are easily available in shops. It was really an exciting scene to see children covered in a gently and richly decorated cap and clothes made at home.

In Sikkim I observed that mother with a newborn was fed freshly cooked chicken soup. It looked like a luxury. Also the newborn is taken care in the beginning by members of the family. Mother is not allowed to work except breast-feeding her child. Newly born babies were fed a small spoon of cooked rice before they enjoyed mother's milk, so that they would grow stronger and healthier.