

ABOUT HIDDEN VILLAGE

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History

The name Gurja Khani derives from the word *Khannu* - to dig/mine - and it was the search for copper ore which first brought explorers of the Chantyal tribe into the Dhaula valley over two hundred years ago. Place-names scattered through Baglung and Myagdi districts such as Sisa Khani, Phalam Khani, Gurja Khani, record for posterity the unique history of mining in this mid-western belt of Nepal. Chinese pilgrims visiting Nepal in medieval times reported on significant exports of Nepali copper to Tibet and India. But it was during the later Rana period (1850-1950) that mining really expanded, with ores such as lead, copper, tin, and iron being extracted in this area.

According to their oral history, Chantyal people moved northwards from Gulmi district into Baglung, establishing mines in many of the higher valleys, including Dhorpatan. From Dhorpatan they continued north-eastwards, discovering further seams of copper in the rocks lining the Dhaula valley at the foot of Gurja Himal. Today's villagers recall that the explorers identified new sites for mining not just by searching for the quartz veins containing copper, but also by their sense of smell.

The Chantyal people were followed to Gurja by a distinctly different ethnic group – the *Kami* people, one of the artisan castes of Nepal. Mining was a partnership between these two – the Chantyls of Tibeto-Mongolian ethnicity, and the Kami blacksmiths of Indo-Aryan. While the exploration and mining was done by the Chantyls, it was the Kami people who were guardians of the knowledge for purifying copper and the skills for working it into utensils.

Originally the miners lived in makeshift shelters, sleeping under rock overhangs or in tents of bamboo matting or wool, but as the seams of ore proved productive they began to build more permanent dwellings. Locals estimate that the settlement of Gurja Khani was established by their forefathers some eight generations ago – most likely around the beginning of the 19th century. In 2014 the last of the Chantyal miners of Gurja Khani died at the reported age of 100 years, but mining ceased much earlier, around 70-80 years ago when the mines became uneconomic with the import of aluminium utensils from India. Above Gurja Khani and across the gorge, old mine tunnels remain hidden in forest. Some can still be seen and visited. Many of the mines seem to have been at high and inaccessible spots on precipitous cliffs or craggy mountain tops.

Life must have been miserable for the miners. The tunnels which remain visible have extremely narrow rock entrances; water seeps continuously through their walls, filling them with pools of water so that miners had to squirm along on their tummies through pools of water at temperatures near freezing point – and in the winter months they must have become iced. The copper ore deposits in the region south of Dhaulagiri are mostly chalcopyrite, occurring in quartz veins in the dominant phyllite rocks, and the miners' task was to follow these quartz veins, chipping away by hand. For illumination they would carry a lighted straw in their mouths as they wriggled forward to the face where they would chip away with crude hand tools. Presumably there was no method for air ventilation, and there is no sign of any attempt to shore up the walls.

Locals say there is an extensive labyrinth of tunnels in the rocks above Gurja Khani village, some cutting right through the ridge from the south face to emerge below a cliff on the east slope.

If there was a flat spot the ore was processed close to the mine working, otherwise it was carried down to the village. Porterage was the women's job. At the height of the mining era there must have been a constant stream of women with *doko* loads of ore on their backs scrambling down unforgiving scree slopes near cliffs or slithering on muddy tracks through dense wet vegetation.

The next step was to grind the rocks containing the ore to a fine powder. The powder was sluiced in water, which allowed the denser metallic particles to sink to the bottom of the pan. Cow dung was mixed with these particles, rolled into balls and left to dry. This much was done by the Chantyal; then the Kami metal-workers took over. Using bellows made of goatskins to achieve the necessary temperatures, the balls were fired in charcoal furnaces. The dung would burn and the metal ore would reduce the copper sulphates and oxides to metallic copper which would liquefy and flow out of the fire in runnels forming crude ingots on cooling. These were sold or worked into utensils. Most of the copper from Gurja Khani was taken to Takam (See Trail Guide: Route One) for sale where Thakhali merchants controlled the trade.

There are four sites around Gurja Khani where you can see old copper mine tunnels:-

- Jemba – above and east of the village
- Burkhani – directly above village
- Arho – below and east of the village
- Kumse – directly across Dhaula river from village

The best ones to visit are Burkhani and Kumse. Locals will be willing to guide you to them, but entering the tunnels is entirely **at your own risk**. No inspection of their safety has been carried out since they were abandoned, and wild animals may use them as lairs. If you decide to take the risk, a head torch is essential – and a ball of string to find your way out, as the tunnels above the village are reputed to have various forks in them. Nearby the tunnels you can see the spots where no plants grow. These are where the refining was carried out, and the tailings remain.

The village today

Lying on a narrow shelf of land wedged between the cliffs of the Dhaula gorge and the southern flanks of Gurja Himal, the village basks in sunshine most of the short winter days. It currently comprises around 230 households; 160 Chantyls and 70 Bishwakarma (Kami).

The village is so compact that the corner slates of one roof almost touch those of the adjoining street. Alley-ways twist and turn through the labyrinth, some so narrow that oxen can barely squeeze through when they go out to plough. At intervals the maze opens into stone-flagged courtyards where children play, old women weave blankets, and grain is spread to dry. In the artisan quarter in the lower western quadrant, space is particularly tight so some families have begun to build on the steep slope above, saving the flatter ground for crops. All the houses are stone with a mud mortar, some with a façade of ochre-mud. The most striking feature of the older houses are their intricately carved wooden windows. (see Box).

When the village becomes snow-bound in the months of January and February, the villagers descend with their animals to temporary dwellings near the river. Recently, this custom has begun to change, partly because the severity and duration of snowfall has become less over the past few years – a symptom of climate change – and partly because with the arrival of electricity a few years ago, some villagers prefer to endure the snow and enjoy lighting in the village rather than descend to their un-wired winter shelters.

The village benefits from a strong sense of community and solidarity. You will find the villagers friendly and open, willing to answer tourists' questions and help in whatever way they can. But please be considerate: they are also very busy with the constant demands of herding and cultivation and the practicalities of life.

The Carved Windows of Gurja Khani

The carved windows of Gurja Khani are a memorial to the skills and values of an artisanal community. While simpler than the celebrated Newari windows of Kathmandu valley, these ones decorate the everyday small cottages of peasant farmers. The designs and structure vary from twin and triple windows, to small single squares. Their motifs are taken from the natural world – sun, moon, stars, flowers, trees – and there is no overt religious symbolism. They appear to be motivated simply by the desire to make something beautiful and functional. One or two Chantyal men still retain the wood-carving skills, but these are in danger of being lost since the more recent homes have plain windows.

Farming and other occupations

With mining a distant memory, the present-day villagers of Gurja Khani depend largely on subsistence agriculture. Scraping a living in this environment requires an incessant round of daily toil. Over the years every scrap of cultivable land up and down the valley has been turned into fields– small far-flung terraces up to four hours' walk from the village. Staple crops are maize, millet, buckwheat and potatoes, with barley or wheat grown as an additional spring crop on the warm sun-bathed fields surrounding the village. Vegetables are grown during the summer months, especially items such as radishes and pumpkins which can be dried and stored through the winter.

Herding is a vital and integral part of the farming cycle. Buffalo are kept for milk, sheep and goats for their wool, while cows are kept purely to manure the fields. In the wet summer months the animals ascend to high-altitude pastures on the slopes of Gurja and Churen Himal. In the winter months they are quartered in temporary folds on the village fields, their droppings fertilizing the soil for the next crop. The herders sleep year round with their animals wherever they may be. They are mostly old men, assisted by a grandson - a hardy lot who think nothing of sleeping in sub-zero temperatures under a woolen blanket draped over a stick frame. Their large black and tan sheepdogs are a familiar sight around the village and a necessary guard against night predators.

Women spin the wool from their flocks, creating thick wool blankets and jackets which are worn by the men. After weaving the woolen strips on backstrap looms in their courtyards, it is the men's job to felt the wool. This is done by soaking the woven strip in water, rolling it into a tight ball, and kneading it with their feet. As you wander around the village you are bound to see some women engaged in these tasks.

Only three Kami families remain engaged as blacksmiths, serving the villagers' need for kukhri knives, sickles/scythes, and cooking pots. The single household of Damai work as tailors for the village population. In both cases, payment remains the traditional system whereby each household pays an annual retainer fee in grain (dependent on their size and wealth), rather than a job-by-job payment.

Further sources of cash income are the gathering of medicinal herbs including yarsa gumpa, *alo* fibre (a type of stinging nettle), and, most importantly, the remittances of foreign workers, although Gurja Khani is less affected by this recent trend than many other villages.

Nepal's migrant workers

Labour has become Nepal's major export. The number of men working outside the country continues to grow and nearly half of all Nepali households have at least one member working abroad. Altogether there are believed to be nearly two million Nepalis working overseas, the most popular destinations being Gulf countries and Malaysia. Migrant workers can earn 3-4 times the average Nepali wage. While their remittances provide a vital source of cash income, the men's absence puts a tremendous burden of work onto women – and children.

The men jokingly refer to their work as 3D – dirty, dangerous, and difficult. They arrive to start work unaware of the climate, the identity of their employer, their rights, the local language, culture, social norms, rules and regulations. In Qatar in 2014, Nepali workers died at the rate of one every two days, largely from heat-associated cardiac arrest and accidents at work. In Kuwait, there are believed to be 28,000 undocumented Nepali women workers. The Nepali Embassy has helped to remove over two thousand who complained of abuse at work, and there are currently 135 women sheltering at the Embassy awaiting permission from Kuwait to leave the country.

Despite the horror stories, queues at recruitment agencies remain long, and most rural schoolboys aspire to a job in the Gulf. The agencies have made enormous profits, some bogus agents disappearing with the hefty enrolment fees, leaving the would-be worker and his family with massive debts

Social and development challenges

The local school goes up to 10th grade when children sit their SLC (School Leaving Certificate). Higher education requires children to board in a larger settlement. School enrolment is high in the early years, but absenteeism and drop-out increases during the teenage years. Pressure from families to help with herding means that students from low-income families may miss weeks of classes during the school year. Eventually they fall so far behind their peers that they drop out altogether. Girls are vulnerable to early arranged marriages which forces them to leave school before completion.

Although the village has a government Health Post, the difficulties in providing quality health care in a remote outpost are highlighted by the fact that three young mothers have died in childbirth in recent years. This not only reflects the challenges of remoteness and the poor standard of the government health system, but also the tremendous work load which women carry. Their lower status combined with their menfolk's fondness for alcohol, makes some of them vulnerable to domestic violence.

Agriculture and livestock husbandry, as practiced in Gurjakhani over the centuries, features environmentally sustainable techniques of terracing, irrigation, crop rotation, and use of natural compost fertilizers. The vast local forest resources have also been managed sustainably, with firewood and tree fodder collection controlled and shifted to allow natural recovery and regrowth. With increasing population, comes increasing pressure on soil, water, and forest resources – there is a limit to the population that can be supported by this fragile, high altitude environment.

The future of Gurjakhani very much depends on the hopes and aspirations of the young people. If they spend years of their lives working abroad (see Box Nepal's Migrant Workers) in a very different culture and lifestyle, will they later return to their remote home village and a

traditional life of subsistence agriculture and herding, or will they seek greater opportunities for their families in the cities of Nepal? Some individuals have returned, determined to invest their savings locally. Pro-poor tourism seeks to provide such business opportunities, enabling families to live an improved quality of life in their traditional homes.

Beliefs

Gurja Khani has been nicknamed the 'village of the temples'. It is true that every possible approach is guarded by a small temple, a sacred tree or rock; every footpath is strewn with leafplates from some ritual ceremony. The extraordinary high number of temples and shrines which encircle the village are perhaps less a sign of their devotion to Hinduism, than their sense of isolation and vulnerability to the myriad malevolent spirits hiding in the forests, rocks, and rivers ready to wreak mischief. Nominally the inhabitants are Hindus, but in most practices they are shamanists. Their shamans are referred to as *lama*, and one of their roles is to treat ill-health by identifying and exorcising the evil spirit which is causing the sickness. To do so they go into a trance and become possessed by the malignant spirit, speaking with its voice and giving instructions to the patient what they must do to be free.

A few people in the village have become Christians. They have constructed a small church about 15 minutes east of the main village in a small outlier settlement overlooking the Dhaula gorge.

Tourist activities

Gurja Khani is a pleasant spot to rest and spend a few days. There is a Tourism Development Committee whose members will be happy to help organize guides for you and facilitate your other activities. Chairperson/Contact: Jhak Bahadur Chantyal. The following activities may be possible to arrange depending on time and availability:-

1. Village craft tour A. During the tour you will view and learn all about the process of spinning, weaving, and felting. Contact: Mother's Group
2. Village craft tour B. During the tour you will visit the best of the carved windows, see a demonstration by one of the locals who still has the skills in wood carving. You will also visit a blacksmith's forge, understand more of their current work. (Contact: Metal-workers Laxman Bika; Dhani Bika; Jaule BiKa).
3. Short walk to apple orchards and Gurja Himal viewpoint. A gentle uphill walk of 30-45 minutes to the west of the village takes one through some apple orchards to reach a viewpoint onto Gurja Himal.
4. Visit to copper mines and upper viewpoint for Gurja Himal. The suggested itinerary is to walk up the ridge to the north east of the village. A flat break in the slope is reached in about 2 hours from where the whole of the south face of Gurja Himal is visible. On the return journey, descend through the forest where the old mine entrances lie.
Alternatively, you can cross the Dhaula river and ascend to a different old mining site where a tunnel may be entered (at your own risk) for several metres. From here, one can hike higher to get a viewpoint for photographs which includes the village and the whole south face of Gurja Himal. Contact: Jhak Bahadur Chantyal.
5. Trek to Churen glacier and basecamp (3 days). Contact: Tam Bahadur Chantyal or Mohan Chantyal.
6. Pony trekking. Hourly/half day/full day. Contact: Mohan Chantyal or Beg Bahadur Bishwakarma.
7. Walks. Flora/fauna/bird watching. With a guide. Will explain the uses of important forest species. Medicinal plants, yarsa gumpa, sea buckthorn, etc.

8. A visit to the school or the health post can be arranged with the Head Teacher or Health Post in Charge.
9. Cultural programme. The school or Mothers Group are happy to put on a cultural program of songs and dances in the evening for an agreed fee. 24 hours' notice is needed.