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## The timekeeper

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## THE TIMEKEEPER

OLIVIA AUBRIOT

In Aslewacaur, a village in the middle mountains of central Nepal, irrigation is precisely managed: individual water rights are defined, the water is distributed to each irrigator according to a very specific time schedule and each canal user has to participate in the maintenance work according to his water right. Maintenance work is indeed important as landslides often occur on the six-kilometre-long canal located on a hillside. It is collective work, supervised by the canal chief (*kuloko mukhiyā*), who is also responsible for the attendance register. Dhanapati Pande was the canal chief of Aslewacaur from 1964 to 1994.

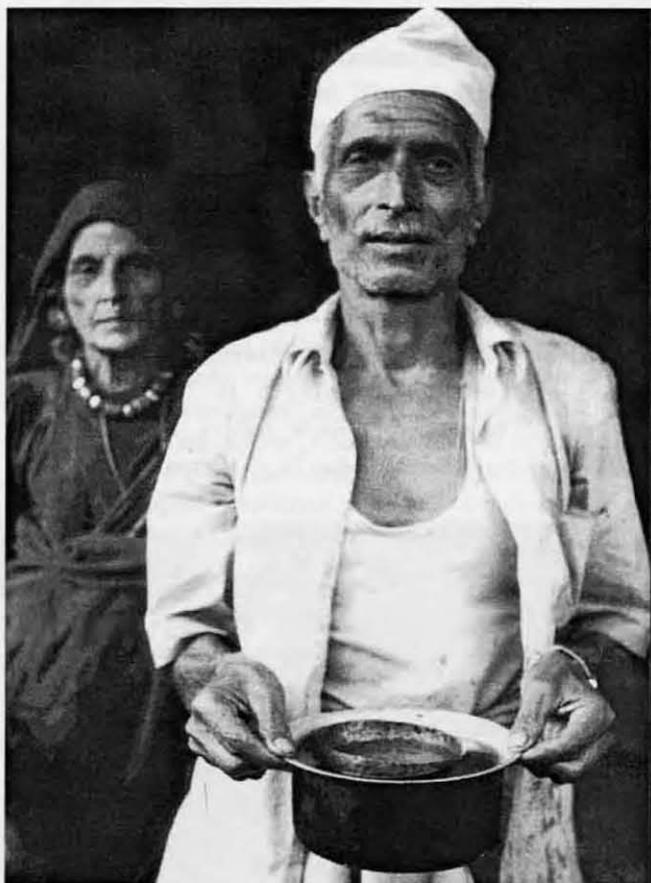
Dhanapati Pande was also timekeeper. In the photograph, we can see him carrying a waterclock (*pāniko ghari*), used to count the irrigation time granted to each canal user. The water-clock consists of a bowl with a small hole in its bottom, placed in another bucket full of water. The water slowly enters the small bowl which sinks when it is full, thus defining one *ghari*, the traditional time unit in India and Nepal. The operation lasts 24 minutes and must be repeated. Thus, a timekeeper is required to measure time continuously.

In Aslewacaur, time keepers<sup>1</sup> are designated for a duration of twelve hours every three days. They know the water right of each farmer. They inform irrigators when their turn arrives and verify that they use water during the time allotted to each of them. Then, they have to follow water distribution and to carry the water-clock along the canal. They must use clean water in order to avoid impurities to modify the measurement of time. They take cover from the rain and the sun in houses or in small shelters built along the borders of rice fields for this purpose. They must also be vigilant, because irrigators may try to cheat them! For example, they may disturb the timekeeper and put butter in the small hole of the water-clock, or during the cool nights of autumn, they may bring a blanket and take advantage of the guardian's drowsiness to irrigate their own fields longer!

The water-clock is not in use nowadays in the irrigation system of Aslewacaur, the wristwatch has been used since the 1960s. Dhanapati, who was one of the timekeepers, has kept a water-clock and uses it now to establish his home deities. The photograph of Dhanapati showing the container in its function as water-clock can hence be seen as a relic of the irrigation system of Aslewacaur.

This photograph was taken in the end of the afternoon, after visiting the canal with Dhanapati Pande who, at Corneille Jest's request, provided the local names of various places along the canal. This example is a good illustration of one of Corneille Jest's characteristics; he is indeed a field anthropologist. Moreover, he likes teaching students about investigative work and

field methodology (who has not heard about the notebook with a square pattern every 0.5 centimetres in order to draw to scale?). And, he is not reluctant to visit the field site of the student in order to "test" him or her, but above all, to show them field work in practice: how to obtain information, how to take notes and how to plan for the final illustrations; photography is important to each of these functions.



Dhanapati Pande, with his wife behind him, carrying a water-clock (*paniko ghari*). (C. Jest, November 1992)

### Note :

<sup>1</sup> In two neighbouring irrigation networks that have borrowed the distribution system of Aslewacaur, each farmer is in charge of the water-clock for the duration of the irrigation of his fields.