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‘Sliding Down Hill: Some reflections on thirty years of change in a Himalayan village’

Alan Macfarlane

I first came to Nepal in December 1968 with my wife Gill and stayed for fifteen months. We spent a year working in the Gurung village of Thak, about five hours walk north of Pokhara. I returned with my second wife, Sarah Harrison, in 1986 and we have visited Nepal and Thak for periods of between three weeks and three months in almost every year since. The first fieldwork led to a Ph.D. in anthropology which was subsequently published as **Resources and Population: A Study of the Gurungs of Central Nepal** (Cambridge, 1976). The planned re-publication of this book by Ratna Pustak Bhandar of Kathmandu makes it appropriate to reflect on some of the changes which have occurred in one village in the more than thirty years since I first visited it. This brief account, based on arguably the most intensive longitudinal study of a single Himalayan community ever made, can only sketch in a few of the changes. We hope to publish a more detailed ethnography, possibly based not only on the extensive genealogical and survey accounts but also the many films and photographs which we have taken, at a later point.

In one sense, at least on the surface, there has been little change in the village since my first fieldwork. The basic agricultural and craft techniques described in **Resources and Population** are still used. The amount of labour input for various tasks is roughly the same and the village lands shown in the maps to the book have not changed greatly. The main village and the nearby hamlets are not greatly changed in their physical form, though a number of houses have tin roofs and there is now a diesel mill and two television sets (powered by car batteries) in the village. The track up the valley is somewhat improved and it is possible to get a car to the bottom of the steep climb up to the village, saving a three hour walk. The water pipe is larger and a number of houses have taken small pipes off it. Yet there is still no electricity, no telephone, no motorable road, and no health post. The children no longer have to climb down to a school forty minutes below the village, as there is a village school with five classes in it. There is a government office and a large water tank with watchman’s house (unoccupied). The two ‘shops’ have a much wider range of goods, including beer and coke, than in 1968 when they basically only had tea.

The major prediction of **Resources** was that with a population growth rate of over one per cent per year, and a doubling time of thirty years or so, there would be ecological disaster in this and other villages like it. The already over-stretched forest and land resources would collapse and the Malthusian checks of famine and disease, if not war, would probably return.

One part of this prediction has been fulfilled. The population of the hundred sample households in the original survey has indeed at least doubled in that period and so

there are now over two hundred households stemming from the original hundred. Yet when one visits Thak itself, the village is, if anything, slightly smaller in the number of occupied houses than it was in 1969. The paradox is explained by something, which it was not possible to predict in 1969, that there would be very extensive and permanent out-migration.

The pattern described in **Resources** was of temporary labour migration, with many men leaving for army service in the British and Indian armies. These soldiers returned with their pay and pensions and the profits from army service was invested in the village. From the middle of the 1970's, as army recruitment dried up and towns such as Kathmandu and Pokhara grew, the pattern changed. Waves of young men started to go to wherever work was available. They went first to India and later to East and south-east Asia, the Middle East and a few to Europe and America. When they and the remaining army service men retired they no longer came back to the village but settled in the town, in particular in nearby Pokhara.

So there is now not only the core village in the hills, but a 'dispersed' village of equal size, particularly concentrated on the road that leads from Thak into Pokhara. Currently young people from the village are in Hong Kong, Malaysia, India, the Arab States, Europe and elsewhere. If they are lucky enough to make any money, they will invest their savings in buying land and building houses in towns and cities, not in the village.

The beneficial effect of this out-migration has been to prevent ecological collapse. If anything, the forest above Thak is in better condition than it was in 1969. The tree cover is growing back closer to the village. This is the result of a slight decline in the need for firewood and also because of another large change, which I shall describe, the dramatic decrease in number of larger animals. So, although there has been erosion and loss of some land through landslides, the catastrophe, which I predicted in relation to the forest, has not occurred.

The negative effect on the wealth and development prospects of the village is, however, equally great. These steep and rocky hills cannot sustain people at a reasonable level of affluence from settled agriculture. In the earlier study I showed that over a third of the total income in the village came from army pay and pensions and civilian work abroad, and this constituted almost all the cash that was available to villagers. This has declined to a thin trickle from the few labourers abroad who save a little and send it home. Furthermore, those with most initiative and experience of new ways, who used to return, no longer do so. Only the young children, the old and the poor are left in the village. Consequently there is little leadership and little experience of the wider world, and few political contacts available to the village.

The results can be seen in the material culture. The clothes are often ragged, the numbers of brass pots and cauldrons is much reduced, the gold ornaments of the women that were so apparent in 1969 have almost all been sold off. One receives the strong impression that people are actually poorer now than they were then, despite the massive growth of wealth in parts of Asia, Europe and America.

Thus the village is not facing imminent famine or disease, but it may well be facing malnutrition. One of the major changes in the thirty years has been in diet. Although

new foodstuffs are more easily available for those with cash, for example iodine salt, oil and sugar, the basic foodstuff, rice, is becoming too expensive for many villagers. Currently only two of the hundred households in my original sample area are self-sufficient in rice, a considerable drop from the situation thirty years ago. Most have to eat millet and maize for much of the year. In 1969, most of the medium families had enough meat and milk to consume one or both at least twice a week. Now even the wealthier families only eat meat once or twice a month and milk is a luxury for everyone.

Since the mid 1990's we have noticed for the first time that a number of the villagers, and particularly the women, were abnormally thin, their bodies appeared to be wasting away, with no reserves of fat. The amazing way in which villagers metabolize food so that the huge expenditure of energy are possible on the basis of a very small calorific input has long puzzled biological anthropologists. But the limits seem to have been reached and the people may be starting to starve.

The shortage of meat and milk is one aspect of the most dramatic change in the village, the decline in domestic animals. The number of livestock in the sample area of Thak has more than halved in the period between 1969 and 1999. The traction power available for the fields through the use of oxen has declined the milk, oil, meat and manure provided by stalled and herded buffaloes and cows has declined. The Gurungs were still pastoralists to a certain extent in 1969, as they had been for thousands of years. By 2000 those remaining in the villages are settled arable farmers with a meagre carbohydrate diet.

The growing poverty is also the result of a third major change, the decline in land productivity. Land, which produced, say, 100 kg. of rice or maize in a good year will now produce on average only a little over half that amount. The decline in the amount of manure, far from compensated for by fertilizer (which most people cannot afford), is but one reason for this. Thirty years of constant use and the leaching effect of monsoon rains have lowered productivity hugely. Meanwhile cheap grains from the Terai and India have skewed the costs of grain in the village.

The total result of both local and national changes can be seen in the rapidly falling value of land in the village over the thirty years. While land prices have rocketed in Pokhara, they have hardly risen in the village. Again, the decrease in income is shown in the decline in returns on labour. The wages for ploughing in the fields in 1969 was 10 rupees for a day's work. The cost of a chicken was 8 rupees. Now the wages are about 50 rupees and the cost of a chicken is 400 rupees or more. In 1969 forty days of work would earn enough to buy a buffalo. Now one would have to work for more than two hundred days to do the same.

Only one villager has enough rice to sell some, so all of the clothing, education, medicine and extra food have to be paid for from the trickle of gifts and foreign earnings. There is a serious shortfall. One result of this is massive indebtedness. I was unable to make a systematic study of indebtedness during my first fieldwork, but subsequently we have been able to make extensive enquiries. The results are staggering.

Almost every family is heavily indebted, often for very large sums of more than a thousand pounds sterling equivalent (over a lak in Nepalese money). Much of the borrowing is for special occasions, weddings, funerals, and illness but the main reason is to 'agents' to facilitate work abroad. To go to South Korea or Hong Kong or Japan (in all of which most work illegally, so without the simplest of safeguards) families often borrow up to ten thousand pounds sterling (10 laks), on which they pay interest of up to seventy percent per year. For the Gulf States the sums are roughly seventy to eighty thousand rupees. Frequently the money is lost through theft or police corruption in the country where, often illegally, the migrants are working. In conclusion, then, while the ecological situation is stable, the economic position of the village has declined greatly and real poverty is emerging.

The social and cultural situation has also changed. When I first visited Thak it was a rich cultural community. There were young people's associations (the 'rodi'), much co-operative labour, singing and dancing in the evening, communal picnics and so on. Almost all of this has gone. So too has most of the ancient shamanic tradition of the local 'poju' priest, who can now only be seen at work on special occasions in the village, such as the memorial service or 'pae'. In what is relatively a twinkling of an eye, after several thousand years of maintaining a cultural tradition, the old ways have largely been wiped out. Ironically, it is more resolutely maintained in the towns, where numerous Gurungs associations are flourishing which emphasize the older ways, particularly in the impressive Gurung Centre (Tamu Pye Lhu Sang) in Pokhara which is building a museum and ritual centre.

Thus the village has very few of the 'benefits' of civilization – some plastic, inoculation campaigns, a diesel mill – but carries many of the costs, alienation, individualization, dependency and corruption. These are features of town life as well. Yet these undermining effects are mitigated by a number of features of Gurung society, one of which is worth stressing. This is the way in which the Gurungs, mainly in the towns, but also villages, are energetically building up a non-political 'civil society'. This gives them some control over their lives and will increasingly strengthen them in relation to factional politics and the power of the State. The Gurungs have for long been noted for their co-operative labour organizations and other ways of working together. Currently in Pokhara the Gurungs of Thak, for example, have set up a 'Thak support committee', there are also lineage-based social groups which meet and have picnics or celebrate other occasions and provide mutual support, there are local groups of women (as in the village) who raise money for goods works, and there are at least two main, over-arching, Gurungs societies.

All this activity, which crosscuts lineage and locality, although building on that as well, gives purpose and strength to their lives. They support each other in their migrations as they have always done, and the demoralizing atomization caused by moving into the towns is mitigated.

There are thus grounds for both optimism and pessimism. At the end of **Resources** I was extremely pessimistic, predicting mass hardship and little 'development' of any kind. Now the situation is more complex. There are many successful Gurungs in the towns and a number of the young are well educated and idealistic. It is in the villages such as Thak that amidst the tremendous beauty and social warmth one finds increasingly impoverished people. Many of the inhabitants are now elderly or

children and the proportion of poorer Blacksmiths and Tailors has increased; all of them are struggling to make a living from almost impossible mountain slopes. Their backbreaking labour is day by day leading them into greater debt and food shortage. Whether electricity, which is now about five years away in the most optimistic estimate, motorable roads, telephones and bi-industries will alter this trend it is impossible to say. I would like to be optimistic, but the situation in the village leads me to be as pessimistic as I was in 1969, but for different reasons.
