

SOME SOCIOCULTURAL CONSEQUENCES OF TRANSPORTATION DEVELOPMENT IN THE JIRI VALLEY, NEPAL

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Introduction

The once isolated Jiri Valley of this hilly region of eastern Nepal came into prominence as a result of a Swiss developmental project. The Swiss Association for Technical Assistance (SATA) initiated a multipurpose development project in 1957 (Bista, 1980:70). At this time the Swiss government and His Majesty's Government of Nepal (HGM) began to expend a tremendous amount of effort in an attempt to develop the area, with such enterprises as the building of the Lamosangu-Jiri Road, agricultural development, health care, and education. The Swiss took the initiative in this effort and they supplied the funds and planning for the development projects (see Bajracharya et al., 1990). Interestingly, the Jirels as the indigenous population of the Jiri Valley were not given a role in determining priorities during the project implementation phase. The primary idea was that the Jirels would benefit along with everyone else in the area by participating in the local infrastructural development as laborers and lower level office workers, etc. While the Swiss project was in its initial stages, a major change took place in the political system of Nepal, from a multi-party system to the Panchyat system (see Joshi and Rose, 1966).

The project was based on the assumption that the creation of a new infrastructure and improvements in agricultural productivity would hasten the development process by raising income levels, which would in turn increase demand for non-agricultural products in the region (Bajracharya et al., 1990: 1). In this paper, we will examine the impact of the road construction and infrastructural developments on the Jirel culture. We will pay attention to issues of social organization, political structures, subsistence patterns, economic organization, and education.

SATA started with agricultural projects, constructing the necessary buildings and recruiting a local work force (Bista, 1980:70). In an attempt to improve health care, a hospital was built. In order to improve education a technical school was started. Moreover, to increase dairy production, the Jiri cheese factory was established (Bajracharya et al., 1990).

Social and Political Change

Prior to the onset of these infrastructural developments, Jirel marriages were arranged between clans with strict rules of clan exogamy and group endogamy. In fact, some clans engaged in complex patterns of reciprocity of marriage partners. The breaking of clan exogamy was and is still considered incest, while breaking group endogamy by marrying out of the Jirel group was stigmatized. Children resulting from such marriages were referred to derogatorily as *themsing*, or half-breeds.

The traditional Jirel marriage pattern of community endogamy and clan exogamy has weakened considerably, and the traditionally structured reciprocal clan-based marriage patterns are being replaced by marriage for the sake of socioeconomic upward mobility. A number of prominent Jirels have married members from other ethnic groups and their children have avoided the stigmatization of being called *themsing*.

These specific changes in traditional marriage patterns accompanied an even greater disruption of the community structure, which once was united by mutual interdependence. The reciprocal system of obligations has weakened as well. Also affected were the various forms of redistribution that occurred during numerous festivals, rituals, and life-cycle celebrations, in which context the wealthy shared their resources with those in need. While there were socioeconomic inequalities, usually in the amount of land one owned, it was often difficult to visibly distinguish the rich from the poor.

With economic development, came the notion of cash income, and materialistic motivations to accumulate cash and goods. Those who achieved economic advancement, moving up the economic ladder, were viewed as successes, while those who did not, were faulted for being failures. Thus, poverty was converted from a communal problem to an individual problem (Shrestha, 1997). An additional consequence of this was that the poor were excluded from participating in the development process. The wealthy could now pursue material advancement, relieved of the responsibility for the poor in the community.

This push toward individual values has also made its presence known in Jirel politics. Before development, Jirel politics focused on the group and internal disputes were dealt with at the clan level. There was essential autonomy from the central government. After economic development

efforts, however, new political affiliations, such as the Nepali Congress Party, the Communist Party, and the National Democrat Party, have supplanted much of the old clan-based political system. Thus the Jirel people are now organized along party lines rather than clan lines. Perhaps because of this change, the Jirels find it difficult to speak at the national political level as an ethnic group with their own group interest in mind.

Before the construction of the road, the Jirels had no say in the institutionalized Nepali politics at the local or national levels. Likewise, they were not able to impact the local political structure of the valley. Local politics was dominated by non-Jirels, especially Chhetri and Brahman castes. The situation has changed for the worse; while the Jirels are no better articulated to the national political system than they were previously, the national system now exerts more control over the valley. As a result, the Jirels have lost much of the autonomy they once enjoyed.

Subsistence and Economic Change

Jirel subsistence, prior to the completion of the road, was a mixed pattern, which relied on horticulture supplemented by pastoralism (i.e., animal husbandry). The major crops were potatoes, corn, or maize, and millet. Jirel animal husbandry involved cattle, buffalo, pigs, and goats. They also kept chickens. Clans held rights to the land used for both tillage and pasturage. The products of the system were distributed throughout Jirel society in a complex pattern of clan based reciprocal exchanges, which were carried out in religious rituals, marriages, and other social settings.

Since the road was built, all major aspects of Jirel subsistence patterns have changed. In the past twenty or so years, these changes involve concepts of ownership, crops and animals, and modes of distribution. The inventory of animals in the system has changed both with the introduction of new animals by the Swiss developmental team and the elimination of others. For example, a new breed of pig was introduced. The Jirel refer to their traditional breed as black pigs and the newly introduced breed as Swiss or pink pigs. Today no Jirels keep black pigs; thus the pink have totally replaced the black in the local economy.

One of the first things we noticed when we arrived in the Jiri valley was that there were no sheep. The area looked like potentially good sheep grazing land to us. When we asked the Jiri people about the sheep, they reported that they did keep sheep before the road came in but gave it up when the road was completed.

In pre-road times, the land that was not under cultivation was controlled by clans as common land. It was on these clan lands that the Jirel grazed their sheep. After the road was built, the central government of Nepal

asserted control over the clan held lands, which included the forests in the valley, and barred the Jirel's from using these areas for pasturage. The government of Nepal also instituted a change in land ownership, from clan control to individual tenure. There is plenty of land that is not under national control and open to pasturage, but is so steep that only goats can make use of it. This is why goats are still in the Jirel's larder. The road thus brought with it the loss of significant land resources and ability to manage large portions of land, as well as a change in animal herding practices.

On the other hand, the inventory and proportions of crops the Jirel grow has apparently changed little with the introduction of the SATA program. The major crops were and remain potatoes, corn (maize), millet, and wheat. A small amount of rice is cultivated in the lower elevations of the valley. The only change that the Jiri people report is a change away from the production of *chang*, a beer brewed from millet, to *raksi*, a distillate of *chang*.

This change in production reflects the cash market economy that emerged after the road was completed. Two local bazaars (market places) have emerged. One is called Dhunge Bazaar, and is located at the road's end. The other is called Haat Danda Bazaar and is situated a few kilometers to the west. The Jirel people now distill *raksi* for these markets and act as suppliers to the non-Jirel merchants (Sunwars, Sherpas, and Hindu castes) who control most of the shops in the bazaars. Because of the loss of significant land, the Jirels can no longer grow enough to provide for their subsistence for the entire year. They have instead been forced to enter into the cash economy of the bazaars, and they have done this with the wholesale *raksi* business. This also reflects a change in the mode of distribution from one based on reciprocity to one based on cash. The Jirels have, in many ways, been forced to trade sheep and self-sufficiency for poverty on the lowest level of the cash economy.

When the agriculture development program was started, its basic aim was the dissemination of new techniques for crop and livestock production and the introduction of new seed varieties (see Bajracharya et al., 1990). Yet the Jirels were not the beneficiaries of this knowledge. For example, Jirels produced no vegetables other than potatoes. Vegetables are imported from surrounding areas and are offered for sale at Haat Danda market every Saturday. The vendors are non-Jirels.

Despite the fact that hundreds of thousands of trees, including fruit trees of various kinds (cf. Hocking, 1987), were distributed during the project period, our analysis show that there was no significant fruit production by the Jirels.

Prior to the loss of land that came with the road, goods and services were distributed among the Jirels in complex patterns of reciprocity. This has now given way to more emphasis on the cash economy. Public displays of these reciprocal obligations were evident in the various clan spirit festivals, life cycle rituals, and the co-operative exchange of labor at harvest time. These labor exchanges are still practiced, but the ritual aspects of clan reciprocity have declined. For example, at the frequent clan deity festivals, the host clan was responsible for assembling food, drink in the form of *chang* and *raksi*, and animals for sacrifice. They were responsible for distributing these and other goods at the ritual. These festivals are no longer being held because the food, drink, and animals must be purchased in the market with cash that few clans or individual have at their disposal.

The road did enable other ethnic groups to come to the valley and essentially gain economic control. All of the small businessmen from the village areas who had small shops along the old trail to the Everest Base Camp shifted their businesses to Jiri. When the Lamosangu-Jiri Road was built, it replaced the old trail, which went south of the Jiri Valley, as a way of getting to the Everest Base Camp. The flow of trekkers and tourists was thus diverted through the Jiri Valley, so all the small shop owners and people who operated businesses from Lamosangu onwards then migrated to Jiri. Consequently, the Brahmans, Chhetris, Newars and Sherpas largely controlled the development of the Dhunge Bazaar, which has become a large local market.

These merchants bought the land from the Jirels at very low prices. The Jirels were enticed to sell by the prospect of quick cash, and practically gave away the land. Now they realize their mistake and complain that the outsiders tricked them. The petty businessmen proceeded to open shops, lodges, and restaurants, and now they are the most powerful economic force in the area.

Hence, the road has not had any positive economic consequences as far as the Jirels are concerned. This is quite evident by the fact that only three Jirels have lodges in Dhunge Bazaar. The rest of the stores, lodges, and teashops belong to non-Jirels. The same situation is true of the Haat Danda Bazaar. Here only one store belongs to a Jirel. All the other shops belong to non-Jirels, who migrated to Haat Danda after the road was built.

The SATA cheese factory is still in operation and now belongs to the HMG. The milk obtained for cheese making comes from the Sherpas, who maintain herds of yaks at high altitudes, near Cherdhung Peak. The Sherpas and others control milk production; the Jirels do not keep Yaks. Thus the Jirels do not profit from the cheese factory and few can afford to buy the dairy goods produced there. Most of the cheese is exported to Kathmandu

94. The Jirel Issue (January 2000)

and very little of what is produced is consumed locally. The only direct benefit to the Jirels is that the cheese factory employs a few of them who earn cash wages. Jirels did get some jobs working for the Swiss or the Nepali government as laborers, but this did not have any lasting economic benefits since the total economy of the Jiri Valley was controlled by the Brahmins, Chhetris, Newars and Sherpas.

A major reason for the Jirels economic disadvantage was that many of them were fairly unsophisticated politically and not business minded. Moreover, the majority of them were not educated, in comparison with the outsiders, and those few who were left the valley in pursuit of better opportunities in Kathmandu and elsewhere and never came back.

Additionally, the Jirels were not able to capitalize on the benefits of tourism. This is because a few years after the road was built, HMG allowed airline operators to fly mountaineers and trekkers directly to the Everest Base Camp, thereby reducing the flow of tourists and cash along the Jiri road. In terms of the numbers of people who travel along the Jiri road no more than five percent are foreign tourists (Bajracharya et al., 1990: 50). What little cash flow associated with these visitors goes to the non-Jirel lodge-keepers and restaurant owners. Finally, as a result of this change, Jirels who were once employed as porters, carrying merchandise and equipment to the connecting districts and the Everest Base Camp, find these jobs no longer available.

Conclusions

Overall, the road has had a significant impact in the district as a whole. It has affected the flow of information as well as consumer goods, and it has also made access to Charikot, the district headquarters, much easier. It has stimulated immigration and has contributed to the diffusion of new values and ideologies. It has made the area more accessible for military purposes, both for the central government and insurgencies. Hence, the road has both integrated the district as a whole to the national government, and it has contributed to social, political, and economic changes in the lives of the people.

Prior to the road construction the Jirels did not participate in a cash economy to any great extent. Instead they relied on a barter system, exchanging one item for another. This was part of a larger system of communal reciprocity, which included both the exchange of goods, as well as helping one another during planting and harvest times. Planting and harvesting are still done in the traditional way. The whole community comes on a prearranged day to plant or cultivate the crops, and they do this

for free. The host provides food and *chang* (millet beer), and the work is done in a festive mood. People work, eat, drink, sing, and dance.

Since the road was constructed, a larger variety of consumer goods have become available in Jiri itself and it has made the Jirels less dependent on the community.

Involvement in the cash economy and consumerism has resulted in families competing with one another as they seek higher statuses, purchasing televisions, sending their children to boarding schools, etc. The road has not only brought in a cash economy, but has also increased the flow of western ideas, tastes, and preferences, and has fueled a new consumerism. This is one reason many people were quick to sell their land to non-Jirel migrant merchants. They were anxious to obtain hard currency and participate in the glamorous cash economy. Production is still based on a system of reciprocity, while consumption is based on a cash economy. This has considerably weakened community solidarity and cohesion among the clans. An effect of this may be seen in many of the clans having given up their traditional festivals, and the worship of their respective clan gods. Since consumption is now based on cash, it has become too expensive to hold such festivals anymore.

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