

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 PhD in anthropology which was subsequently published as *Resources and Population: A Study of the Gurungs of Central Nepal* (Cambridge University Press, 1976). The planned republication 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 making use of 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: namely 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 were invested in the village. From the middle of the 1970s, 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 the 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 number 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-1990s 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 a huge expenditure of energy is 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, and 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 were settled arable farmers living on 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 wage 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 *lākh* in Nepalese money). Much of the borrowing is for special occasions, weddings, funerals, and illness, but the main reason is to pay '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 *lākhs*), 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 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 be seen at work only 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 Gurung 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. 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 good works, and there are at least two main, over-arching, Gurung 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 bio-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.



Some responses to Alan Macfarlane's 'Sliding Down Hill'

Locating Population and Resources

Ben Campbell

Alan Macfarlane's book *Resources and Population* was published in 1976, the same year that I travelled overland to Nepal and spent two monsoon weeks in a small house by the then tranquil lakeside in Pokhara, marvelling at my first close-up experience of the muddy and musical interaction between people and paddy fields. By the end of the year I was attending Macfarlane's lectures at Cambridge. In the library I found the agricultural detail of his book awe-inspiring, and its conclusion deeply disturbing. His historian's training offered an interpretation of the ecological consequences of demographic growth in Thak village that spoke of no forest by the year 2000.

On reading 'Sliding Down Hill' I find Macfarlane's account of why the projected ecological collapse did not occur surprisingly silent on a number of issues, which would probably take a whole other book to respond to. First and foremost, *Resources and Population* had an enormous impact on the community of Himalayan scholars and policy-makers. It became one of the key sacred texts of development project intervention for the next fifteen years or so, before Ives and Messerli published their *Himalayan Dilemma* (Routledge 1989). Its alarming narrative contributed to a landslide of aid funds for family planning and environmental protection. Yet in 'Sliding Down Hill' we learn that the village of Thak still has no health post, and no electricity, nor has the basic agricultural technology improved over the last thirty years. The forest has improved as a result of the village's emigration through out-migration. What conclusions ought to be drawn from the fact that the primary empirical case that was to inspire so much development activity in the hills remains

in a state of under-investment, and is peripheralized in relation to the growth in urban conglomerations? Has the idea of rural development failed completely? Have the activities of research centres like Lumle promoting improved crops and breeds had no diffusionary impact? Have the villagers themselves checked their rate of forest consumption in the light of all the messages given out by agricultural extension services and organizations such as the Annapurna Conservation Area Project and community forestry programmes? Macfarlane's locally focused story of why one village has ended up not eating its forest but moving half its progeny elsewhere has side-stepped the importance this village took on as an iconic case in the regional narrative of human-ecological destiny.

In *Resources and Population* the scenario of 'no forest by the new millennium' depended on a simulation that had no input from the human capacity to take cognizance of change in environmental surroundings, and to alter practices of resource use so as to avoid disaster. The book posited the Gurungs as a people entrapped in external ecological conditions of decline that their natural child-bearing rate could only exacerbate. The revised village history now posits urban growth as a new ascendant externality to which, again, the Gurungs can only respond as an overpowering fact of life. Both these scenarios are anthropologically unsatisfying if we are to take seriously ideas of human agency and deliberative interaction with rural and urban environments. The teleology in both narratives overshadows the presence of people who do far more than simply follow in the wake of larger forces.

Twenty-five years on from the publication of *Resources and Population*, the fate of Nepal's rural communities is still precarious, but the institutional and political contexts in which they exist have changed dramatically, as have scholars' and villagers' standpoints for understanding them. 'Sliding Down Hill' offers a version of agency from the Gurungs' standpoint in its mention of a vibrant culture of civil society organizing support committees and raising money for 'good works', but there seems to be a lack of fit between this component of reflexive engagement with change, and the general undertow of the income-seeking migratory imperative. It is important that empirical studies continue to be generated about the ongoing negotiation of flows between forests, fields, and fireplaces, and these increasingly need to be set in terms of the multi-sited realities of people's communities of extension, whether in Pokhara or further afield. The community of *Resources and Population* was attributed a bounded coherence for the conclusion to be credible. The people would continue to increase in number, in place. That this spatial coherence dissipated is not unconnected to problems with theories of community being deployed by many development and conservation agencies, which attempt to substantialize people's livelihoods, activities, and relationships in bureaucratized

forms of committee memberships, territorialized identities, and static user groups, contrary to the principles of movement, exchange, and interdependence which a consideration of the historical perspective on any Himalayan community reveals. The actual fate of the villagers of Thak chronicled in ‘Sliding Down Hill’ should indeed provide ample food for thought for understandings of and interventions in Nepal’s rural communities.

Micro Truth—But what about the macro?

Kul B. Luintel

This account of three decades’ developments in Thak does not make for pleasant reading. Frankly speaking, the scenario is a move from bad to worse. The author details that people have become thinner and more unhealthy, the livestock population has been depleted, farm productivity has plummeted, the real earnings of village workers have considerably shrunk, etc., and that this has culminated in the staggering indebtedness of village households. People have lived on capital consumption, whatever little they had. All this has led to out-migration by the young and energetic in desperation. Another casualty is the age-old cultural tradition of the Gurungs, which has become almost extinct in Thak. The author appears to concede that his prediction of ‘Malthusian checks’ has not happened due to out-migration, as the population pressure did not turn out to be as bad as predicted.

I am an economist rather than an anthropologist. Therefore, my comments have to be viewed in this light. I am not a fan of the concept of ‘Malthusian checks’, because it ridicules the whole endeavour of innovation and development. I would argue that the large part of the Third World that suffers from underdevelopment does not do so because Malthus predicted it that way; instead these economies lack a genuine development effort. Therefore, I have no qualms whatsoever over this predictive failure. However, this piece of work has both its strengths and weaknesses.

Its strength lies in the fact that it carries a striking message to all concerned that Nepalese planners, policy-makers and politicians have failed measurably. When planning was introduced in Nepal it came with slogans such as ‘Back to the Village Campaign’ and ‘the Nepalese should achieve in 20 years what others (the world) have done in 100 years’. All of these turned out to be nothing more than gimmicks, and this monograph is the proof—hence it is a valuable piece of work. Sadly, some of the mentors of these gimmicks still hold high and influential positions in Nepal. I would argue that the multi-party democracy of Nepal, in which the Nepalese, including those of Thak did place their faith, has now become a captive of sloganeering and gimmicks. I come from a village in the eastern Tarai in Nepal

which I visit once every two years or so. I assert that the sad picture of Thak is representative of all the villages of Nepal, whether they are Hill or Tarai. It is ironic that this trend has become worse over the last decade, and more so in recent years due to political turmoil. In short, this paper truly describes the plight of Nepalese poor village dwellers.

The paper may however be criticized on the ground that it is a simple tale of the situation that Thak is facing. It does not analyse the root causes of underdevelopment and deprivation. Thak village is a micro-entity, which cannot escape from the overall macro situation of the country. It would be interesting to know what the author makes of the macro-mismanagement of Nepal and how this impinges at village level. Second, given his intimate knowledge of Thak village, the author could perhaps suggest what sort of local-level provisions could help ameliorate this downward trend.

Sliding, Shifting, and Re-drawing Boundaries

Ernestine McHugh

Two decades ago I walked down from Tebas, the Gurung village in which I was living, to Pokhara, a trip of two days. There were some Gurung households in town at that time, but not a great many. I was tired after the long walk, and I stopped at the top of the bazaar to speak with someone I knew. A middle-aged Gurung man, he stood in the street in front of his house and told me he and his family had recently moved. "Soon," he said, "only poor people and old people will be left in the villages." I thought his remark was preposterous. As Macfarlane's article shows, time has proved him largely right.

In the mid-1970s I read Macfarlane's *Resources and Population: A study of the Gurungs of central Nepal*. The problems of overpopulation and limited land resources he reported for Thak seemed only slightly more pressing than those in Tebas, a relatively land-rich and prosperous village. As he has documented with precision and care, these are not now the central problems of village life. In the area in which I lived, tourism thrives on the Annapurna trail, which used to run below the village without troubling it much. Tourists would tramp across the path that traversed the rice land, attracting little notice except when they strayed, confused, into the village. Now the trail is integral to the economy of Tebas. The families who owned the rice land have built lodges on it and the area there is, as one villager put it, "just like a little bazaar". Fields above the village, once prized as fine potato land, lay fallow and choked with weeds when I visited in 1999. I lived with the large family of the *jimwal mukhiya*. Now, except for one lodge-owning son, all the family has moved to Pokhara, and that son, I heard in my last telephone conversa-

tion with family members, is now building a house near theirs in the town.

The shift that seems most profound to me, though, has more to do with value than population. It is reflected in the statement “there is no one in the villages anymore”, one that I heard repeatedly in the Pokhara bazaar. Clearly this is not so. There are people in the villages but they are older and poorer, and are seen as at some remove from a good and proper life (a view once applied by villagers to those living in the bazaar). They are not the people who count. This is worrying when heard from the mouths of the town-dwellers whose relative wealth now sets them apart, but it is painful when it is reflected in remarks made by villagers themselves. “Only people without enough money, like us, have remained in the village,” the headman’s daughter-in-law said apologetically when I arrived from Pokhara. In point of fact, she and her husband ran a lodge on the rice fields and inhabited that ‘small bazaar’, not the village proper. The family house there was sold recently. Of all the shared activities, cooperative work groups, and agricultural rituals that expressed the moral core of Gurung life as I knew it in the 1970s and early 80s, only the rituals of death remain and they are, I was told, now often performed in a truncated form.

Though outwardly the village had not changed enormously, many of the features that Macfarlane has described for Thak were also present in Tebas: houses padlocked shut, fields untended, and conversations indicating that village life has diminished in value. There were also large numbers of men working abroad in civilian employment. The formerly teasing “Take me to America” was said in earnest now, and the headman’s daughter-in-law seemed to capture a situation that extended well beyond her own life when she said, “My son won’t do agricultural work and he couldn’t complete his schooling, so he just sits around and asks for money. Will you take him to America?” I last heard that he had been matched with work in the Middle East through a broker and is living there while his wife and children stay in the family lodge.

Many young men seem caught between the visions of the good life (captured in films and embodied in wealthy leisured tourists) and the realities of scarce opportunities gained only through education, connections, great effort, and luck. Girls have also been attracted by romantic scenarios and entered ‘love marriages’, some of which emerged through friendship and others as a result of sexual liaisons. These marriages, unlike the formal cross-cousin marriage system, do not link lineages in a systematic way. The new situation might be appreciated for allowing young women to express their own choices, but several of those I knew who had married in this way found themselves bound with their infants to men who offered little promise as husbands and would have been hard-pressed to acquire a bride

without seduction. The West has become a reference point, a standard of value, but the goods it displays are out of reach for most villagers, and seeking its glamour can sap family resources and undermine community values that might provide alternative models of worth.

Like Macfarlane, I found greater hope and optimism in Pokhara and a kind of multi-dimensional solidarity there. There was the effervescence of a community under construction, taking shape in reference to at least some shared ideals. Some of these were expressed in the Gurung associations Macfarlane describes, some in ties of neighbourhood reformulated in the bazaar, some in religious activities. In the households I stayed in family members visited often, as did people from the village when they came to town. Daily life seemed sometimes tedious for those without jobs to go to—women and retired soldiers. People occasionally remarked on their boredom during visits and card games, but day-to-day living was enlivened by marriages and funerals, pilgrimage trips, investment schemes, and the movement of people home from abroad or on their way out for army service, study, or labouring jobs.

The outflow of people maintained the inflow of cash on which the maintenance of status depended. Much more than in the village of Tebas, Pokhara required cash to keep one's social footing. Women spoke of concerns about gossip in the bazaar if their saris or shoes were not in fashion, and marriages were arranged on different terms than they once had been. I was told by women in Pokhara that cross-cousin marriage might still operate in the villages, but that it no longer mattered in the town, where one looked for 'a good family', that is, one with wealth. Wealth and social standing had been important factors in marriage as long as I had been working with Gurungs (since 1973), but these considerations had been played out within at least a symbolic framework of cross-cousin marriage, which could work in tension with economic concerns. The moral demands of cross-cousin marriage could also knit together branches of families which were drifting apart because of differences in their economic fortunes: I heard more than one story in the village about marriages that were forced by the claims of a cross-cousin though the bride or groom's family might have preferred to make a wealthier match elsewhere. In Pokhara, it seemed, that moral balance to material interest was gone.

Macfarlane describes the fundamental ethos of Gurung society, one that revolves around mutual aid, as intact in Pokhara, and I would agree. Though members of the family with whom I lived have fared differently in terms of wealth and status and have weathered some strains, they come together enthusiastically for ritual celebrations and rely on one another for help. Even so, there are shopping trips in

town and pilgrimages to distant places which only the richer members of the family can afford, and it seems possible that in subsequent generations the wealthier and poorer branches of the family will drift apart. This is not simply a matter of self-interest shaping a relationship but has to do with the erosion of a common ground of experience. When I first went to Tebas, people would sometimes remark off-handedly, "You have lots of money, but rich or poor makes no difference here because there is nothing to buy." Obviously, this is no longer true, even in the village. At that time, too, wealth made a difference, but it was less visible and less significant. People's lives now differ greatly on the basis on their wealth. Some of what is bought is experience: education in English-medium schools, trips abroad. The army travel that provides much cash is itself a basis for a shared bond among many women, who talk about having been in Hong Kong or the UK together, experiences their poorer sisters cannot share. Those who remain in the villages share little day-to-day experience with town-dwellers. While they now remain important relatives in the minds of their families, in a generation or so ties may attenuate as those in Pokhara who have consolidated their status their through urban marriages focus on their more proximate kin.

As Macfarlane has shown in his comparison of his vision for the future in Thak with the reality that has unfolded there, the future is hard to predict. Boundaries are blurring as global media and widespread travel make distant places immediate. (I watched Prince Edward marry Sophie on a large-screen TV in Pokhara, in the sitting room at the house of my adopted sister from Tebas. Her own daughter was away in London.) Boundaries also crystallize as lack of cash makes participation in common social realms impossible for some. (Another sister regretted that she could not attend the feast for the rotating credit association because she no longer had enough money to invest.) Even for those in the village, the frame of reference within which people judge their own value is global. Gurungs have for generations been involved in international politics and the global economy, but now these impinge more profoundly on daily life and are implicated more deeply in their worldview.

Clearly, the material aspects of Gurung life examined so carefully in Macfarlane's article and the moral dimensions explored here are tightly linked. The question of whether existence in the villages can be made more secure and satisfying remains open, although, as Macfarlane shows, prospects for that seem poor. One place, though not typical, suggests a more cheering set of possibilities. During my last trip to Nepal in 1999, I visited a village I call Torr. It is a popular tourist centre and the Annapurna Conservation Area Project figures prominently there. The people I stayed with, whom I have known as long as I have worked in Nepal, were

prospering as owners of a large tourist lodge. They extolled the virtues of village living and said the noise and materialism of the town held no attraction for them. It was slow season, and relatives drifted in and out of the courtyard. The father and daughter went down the hill to participate in a cooperative tree-planting group. I was told of improvements to the school and the high quality of the village health post. They said the air was better, the food fresher, and life generally more fulfilling in Torr than in Pokhara. Given the tourist trade, many in Torr are at least as wealthy as those who have moved to Pokhara, and no one I spoke to apologized for remaining in the village or described it as a lesser place than the town. The man in whose house I stayed told me, "Everyone is leaving other villages, but people in Torr like to stay here. You can earn a living and the atmosphere is good." This is not the rhetoric of sufficiency expressed in Tebas thirty years ago, when 'our country' meant the village and its surroundings, and the rest of the world seemed to have limited relevance. It reflects a sense of comparison within a field of options. The situation in Torr also depends on unusual circumstances—a village operating as a hub of international tourism. The frame of reference available there is vast: foreigners inundate the place, dignitaries visit, village children study in boarding schools in Kathmandu and beyond. Yet local solidarity and dignity remain. It is not a place that conceives of itself as receding into a condition of invisibility where 'no one' lives. Walking out of Torr, I chatted with a man from the village whose eldest boy had recently returned from the Middle East. The sun came out from behind clouds and the Annapurnas showed themselves. "Can you see them from America?" he asked.

The Contradictions of Rural Transformation in Nepal

David Seddon

It is excellent to have this essentially grim picture of Thak as the starting point for a debate about the changing situation of the rural areas and of rural livelihoods in Nepal. The western hills, in general, stand out in the national statistics as relatively privileged by most indicators of development and wellbeing. A study of rural change in western Nepal carried out by the ODG¹ in the mid-1990s indicated that the most pessimistic forecasts of the mid-1970s regarding the pauperization of the mass of the peasantry in the region had not been realized and that a significant 'middle peasantry' had managed to survive through a variety of livelihood strate-

¹ Overseas Development Group at the University of East Anglia. This was a 'follow-up' on a major study undertaken in the mid-1970s in West Central Nepal, as the Western Region was then known, which gave rise to various publications, including *Peasants and Workers in Nepal*, *The Struggle for Basic Needs in Nepal*, and *Nepal in Crisis*, all of which either have been or are currently being re-published by Adroit Publishers of New Delhi.

gies, including labour migration to other areas of Nepal and abroad (see Bagchi *et al.* 1998; Cameron, J. *et al.* 1998). Kaski District, by all accounts, stands out, even among the relatively privileged districts of the western hills, as relatively advantaged. This is not to say that there are not also indications of growing inequality, spatial and social, within the region, the district, and the village, and one would anticipate a picture of growing inequality from any contemporary village study. Certainly one might have expected the inhabitants of villages in Kaski District within half a day's walk of Pokhara (like Thak) to have been affected by the contradictions of rural transformation to a greater extent than those further away from this rapidly growing urban centre. But the situation in Thak, as Macfarlane presents it, appears almost entirely negative.

It would be good to know to what extent Macfarlane intends his 'Thak' to be representative of a wider reality. Is this supposed to be a picture of any Gurung-majority village within half a day's walk of Pokhara, or of any village in the vicinity of the town? Is it supposed to inform us about the decline of hill villages throughout Kaski District, or even throughout the western hill region? Perhaps it has no such wider claims, but usually anthropologists hope that 'their' village or tribe or whatever has more to say about general processes and trends than about a single group or place. It is likely that Macfarlane intends Thak to suggest certain more general processes. In which case, extreme caution is required, both as regards the situation in Thak itself and, even more so, as regards the extent to which Thak illustrates more general processes and tendencies.

We have only recently begun to recognize the crucial importance of non-farm income, labour migration, and remittances both as integral features of rural economy and society in Nepal and as mechanisms for the integration (incorporation and peripheralization) of rural Nepal within the national and international (global) political economy (see Acharya 2000; Seddon, Adhikari and Gurung 1998, 2000; and Seddon and Subedi 2000, for recent studies of labour markets, non-farm income, and remittances in rural Nepal). We have hardly begun to recognize the importance of urbanization in Nepal in the last two to three decades (not only in the sense of urban growth but in the sense also of the creation of the countryside as a hinterland), and continue to focus on Nepal as a 'purely' rural and agrarian economy and society. More locally, the importance for the western region of Nepal as a whole of the growth and development of towns both large (Pokhara) and small has not been considered in any detail until very recently (see Adhikari and Seddon 2001 forthcoming). To understand Thak's apparent decline, we cannot see it simply as a place but must look to set the social and economic transformation experienced by 'the people of Thak' in a wider perspective of rural transformation and regional

‘development’.

Certainly, the progressive subordination of small local communities to the dynamics of the wider economy and society is familiar to all students of rural change, whether in developed or developing countries. So too is the progressive ‘decline’ of the hill village, whether in the Alps or the Himalayas. Both have a great deal to do with the flow and movement of people as well as of capital and commodities. In Thak, the major change, which Macfarlane suggests “was not possible to predict in 1969”—although this has been a standard feature of change in ‘developing’ rural areas (Lenin discusses it in his study of the development of capitalism in Russia)—has been the growth of the rural exodus and “extensive and permanent out-migration”.

Temporary labour migration was always a reality in the hills of Nepal, particularly where recruitment into the British army was a long standing historical tradition: it started 200 hundred years ago and Pignède signalled its importance in the villages of the Modi Valley to the west of Thak and two days’ walk from Pokhara in the late 1950s. Pignède even talked (in language similar to that of Macfarlane’s on Thak) about its effects on the village of Mohoriya, and that was nearly half a century ago. But it is certainly the case that during the late 1970s and through the 1980s the progressive integration of hill villages in Nepal into the wider national and international political economy was achieved by the export of labour, *par excellence*. In areas near to Pokhara we know that many hill villages became deeply involved in a process which combined integration (incorporation) with peripheralization, as those who were able to do so began to invest in the town (rather than the village), and move to the town (rather than stay in the village).

In other villages, that process was certainly by no means always negative, as Adhikari’s excellent study of agrarian change in the Lahchok-Riban village cluster not far from Pokhara (or Thak) demonstrates (Adhikari 1996). Furthermore, as Adhikari’s study suggests, permanent migration from the rural areas to the town usually has complex effects at both ‘ends’. Incorporation and peripheralization take many forms and the precise implications cannot be assumed to be either positive or negative *a priori*—they require detailed investigation, in large part because they will be different for different groups (defined by location, age, gender, class, ethnic group, or caste). Also, village communities of different types will be changed in different ways—and the heterogeneity of village communities in Nepal is well documented and recognized.

It is hard to debate the accuracy of Macfarlane’s observations as far as Thak itself is concerned for, as he himself remarks, his brief account is based on “arguably the

most intensive longitudinal study of a single Himalayan community ever made". But the task is made harder by the general absence of detailed data: we are given impressions, examples, illustrations. When we are given more precise information, such as the relationship between daily wages and the cost of livestock, conclusions are drawn which may not be warranted. What, for example, would be the effect of measuring wage trends against the cost of imported cheap grain? We are told that the villagers, particularly the women "were abnormally thin"—but against what is this measured? Macfarlane himself reports that "we have noticed [this] for the first time", and concludes, dramatically, that "the people may be starting to starve". This is possible, but the account remains impressionistic. Perhaps we shall have to wait for the more detailed ethnography, but that is a little unsatisfying.

The number of occupied houses is smaller today than in 1969, largely, it seems, because of substantial emigration. But we are told that "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." There is also a significant community of 'Gurungs of Thak' in Pokhara. In fact we know (from other reports by Macfarlane) that by 1987 there were already 46 households (that is, about 275 people, presumably mainly Gurungs) in Pokhara from Thak alone, most having retired on a pension. In this regard there are some basic questions to which it would be satisfying to have answers. In particular, given that the focus is almost exclusively on 'the village', it would be helpful to know not only *how many* and *who precisely* now live and work in the 'core' village, but also the same for the 'dispersed' village (of equal size) concentrated on the road that leads from Thak into Pokhara, and for 'the people of Thak' in Pokhara itself, let alone how many and who precisely work elsewhere in Nepal or abroad and send remittances back. 'The people of Thak' clearly now inhabit a space larger than that of 'the village': this needs more careful conceptualization, documentation, and analysis.

In the village itself (we are told virtually nothing of the 'dispersed' village along the road to Pokhara and little enough about 'the Gurungs of Thak' in Pokhara) we learn only that, in general, "only the young children, the old and the poor are left in the village" and that "many of the inhabitants are now elderly or children" (who looks after the children, who are sufficiently numerous as to fill "a village school with five classes in it"?). But "the proportion of poorer Blacksmiths and Tailors has increased", so presumably the departures are mainly of Gurungs? At the same time, we are told that a number of houses have tin roofs, and that there is a diesel mill and two television sets in the village. These are presumably indicators of some degree of wealth, but whose? The ethnic and caste pattern of inequality in 'the village' has evidently changed, but again, what we have on this is only impressionistic.

One problem here, of course, is that the focus is, as it was in Macfarlane's original study, 'the village' and mainly (although awkwardly not always) the Gurungs, rather than 'the people of Thak'. Of course, in a dynamic, changing, and spatially as well as socially extended 'community', a focus on the least dynamic 'part' will produce a grim and negative picture. The emphasis here is on 'those left behind', which is perhaps a valid, but is undoubtedly a partial vision. It would help to have a wider perspective on change which encompassed also the 'dispersed' village and those in the town. We do learn that "there are many successful Gurungs in the towns and a number of the young are well educated and idealistic", and also that "in Pokhara the Gurungs of Thak... 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 good works, and there are at least two main, over-arching, Gurung societies." This all sounds very positive. And in fact Macfarlane acknowledges as much when he suggests that the negative ("undermining") effects of modernization "are mitigated by a number of features of Gurung society...(including)... the way in which the Gurungs, mainly in the towns, but also villages, are energetically building up a non-political 'civil society'." Even if one might argue with the notion that this is 'non-political' in the context of *janajati* movements, the 'dynamism' and growth of new forms of identity and social organization, going well beyond the village, must surely be seen as a positive development?

But presumably the argument is that (a) those in the town (and perhaps even in the 'dispersed' village along the Thak-Pokhara trail) fail to re-distribute their affluence to those remaining in the 'core' village, and that (b) that those who work abroad do not bring their earnings back into the village: "currently, young people from the village [sic] 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." But the burden of debt that Macfarlane emphasizes as an indication of poverty in the village could also be seen as a substantial investment in the future, being made precisely in order to gain the benefits of employment abroad and the opportunity to leave the village. It depends rather on who is involved and on the success rate of those seeking foreign jobs in gaining employment which will generate remittances and savings.

It may well be that there is real poverty in the core village of Thak, particularly among those *dalit* households (which have become relatively more numerous) for whom the opportunities of foreign employment are more uncertain. But, even so, it would be good to know more about the effects on these groups of the current

pattern of land ownership, farming activities, and employment within the village, and the extent to which those who are no longer in the village maintain and control resources in the village. In other villages in the western hills, the absence of young men abroad has had the effect of creating local labour shortages, which in turn have increased the wages paid to agricultural and casual local labour—which is something that may not have happened in Thak.

The rich cultural life of the village, Macfarlane tells us, has declined: “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.” This, alas, has happened not only in Thak, but across rural Nepal, and indeed across the developing and developed world. Read, for example, John Berger’s tribute to the disappearing culture of the French peasantry in *Pig Earth* and other works. But in the western hills of Nepal and, as Macfarlane also points out, in the towns, “numerous Gurung associations are flourishing which emphasise the older ways, particularly in the impressive Gurung Centre (Tamu Pye Lhu Sangh) in Pokhara, which is building a museum and ritual centre.” This also is part of a more general trend across the world, of preserving, re-creating, and re-vitalizing old cultural patterns in new forms and new ways. Not the same, of course, but nevertheless perhaps worth celebrating. Perhaps, some time in the near future, the *dalits* (who keep slipping out of sight in Macfarlane’s account, as they tend to do in most such studies²) will find a voice and the kinds of association and collective social forms that will benefit them, the people who truly have benefited least so far from the process of rural transformation.

We cannot really tell, from this brief account, whether for ‘the people of Thak’ (wherever they may be) their situation is better or worse, or just different now, after thirty years of change. Perhaps a more detailed ethnography with a wider and more inclusive vision of social, economic, and political change in this part of Nepal will help us to draw some more robust conclusions. In the meantime, we should thank Alan Macfarlane for sharing his impressions and perhaps starting a wider debate on the processes and patterns of rural (and urban) change in contemporary Nepal.

² For an exception see Mary Cameron’s study (1998) of Bajhang in far west Nepal.

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