

Hope or Despair? Comments on community and economic development in rural Syangja (A reply to Alan Macfarlane)

by Steven Folmar & Morgan Edwards

Alan Macfarlane's recent article, *Sliding Downhill: Some Reflections on thirty years of change in a Himalayan village* (2002), has refueled the debate about Nepal's welfare in rapidly changing times. Like Macfarlane, the first author of this article has conducted research in Nepal for over two decades, most of it demographically related (Folmar 1992a; 1992b). Although this research did not focus on Gurung culture, much of it was conducted in Ghachok, where a sizable Gurung population resides. The second author, a graduate student in Anthropology, brings a fresh perspective to issues related to Nepal's development and economic growth. We just spent a month (June 2002) in Sirubari, a village reachable by a five-hour walk from Helu, a road bazaar about 20 km south of Syangja. We were there to study the cultural tourism program operated by local Gurungs and its effects on them and Damais, who are an integral part of the community and its tourism business. Our experience reminds us that the economic continuum for Gurungs and for all of rural Nepal incorporates not only economic decline in villages like Thak that spawns pessimism, but also prosperity and hope. We are compelled to report some of our findings now as we prepare them for a more thorough treatment; they bear quite directly on issues raised by Macfarlane and the scholars who responded to his observations.

Thak must not be taken as typical of village Nepal nor should Macfarlane's gloomy assessment be considered representative of anthropologists' views of its economic prospects. As he has said, the situation is complex, more so now than two or three decades ago. Macfarlane touches on this complexity, raising the intertwined issues of demographic, ecological, economic, health and social decline. Demographic problems include population growth and out-migration and their effects on the home village, which exacerbate ecological degradation. Thak's economy struggles with a lack of wealth and development and therefore a reduced quality of material culture; there is growing poverty; land is decreasing in value; wages are not keeping pace with inflation; more people are now in debt. Declining health is reflected in increasing evidence of hunger, perhaps even starvation in Thak. Society and culture are eroding as well, as traditions become lost or misplaced and social relations deteriorate.

In stark contrast, any tourist's initial encounter with Sirubari would impress her that this village is on quite a different trajectory than Thak. A typical tourist is greeted first by a band of wedding musicians and a committee of well-dressed, precisely groomed and friendly people, mostly in middle to late adulthood. She

traverses kempt footpaths of stone, leading to a small temple square, where the lama of the gumpa blesses her and her group. She and another person stay in the separate room of a tidy house of mixed traditional and modern architecture with many modern amenities, including electricity and a toilet. The hosts serve rakshi and *dāl bhāt* modified to fit Western tastes. Most of Gurung Gaun is like this, a quiet reflection of economic prosperity and development.

We concentrated our efforts on Ward 4 of the multi-ethnic community of Sirubari, where the hub of the cultural tourism program is situated. This area and the nearest houses of Ward 1 (of the Panchamul Village Development Committee) include 54 households situated in the cultural center of the village making them the core of cultural tourism. Ward 1 contains another 31 Gurung households that form a more or less separate *gāū* too distant (physically and socially) from the village center to be integral to the tourist program. Gurung Gaun's 54 households include seven that are temporarily vacant, their families alternating residence between here and either Pokhara or Kathmandu for the past several years. Of the remaining 47 households, 37 are headed by men ranging in age from 38 to 85 years, and 80 percent of these have served in the military and now draw a pension (one was a policeman in Singapore). Women headed the other 10 households, of whom four reported having had husbands in the army.

As in Thak, the Gurungs of Sirubari are experiencing unwanted population decline, spurred by similar factors. In June of 2002, the *de jure* population of Gurung Gaun was 232, with a *de facto* population of 172 people averaging a surprising 40.6 years of age. This contrasted sharply with the absentee population's average of 26.9 years, also not particularly young by Nepalese standards. The flight of younger people and a decreasing fertility rate are reflected in a population pyramid that indicates decline. Even more worrisome is permanent out-migration (on which we do not have complete data). Daughters have always tended to move away when they marry, but now many sons also leave permanently for better jobs, educational opportunities for their children and the modern lifestyle that they experienced as children of soldiers. These trends have left Gurung Gaun with a painful lack of youth, accounting for the quiet enjoyed by tourists but bemoaned by many Gurungs. Having too few children means not only that people must find ways to fill in a labor shortage but must also look elsewhere for social roles that substitute for parents and grandparents. This is the reason Sirubari is considered an unhappy (*narāmro*) place by some older people. To them, the paucity of children portends a dreary future, somewhat akin to that of Thak, an aging community, despite being able to sustain itself economically, declining socially, culturally and numerically.

What makes for hope for Sirubari is that these demographic problems are not the tip of an iceberg of other ecological, economic, health and social problems as they appear to be in Thak. There is hope for Sirubari primarily because its people have taken a proactive stance toward their own future, exploring environmentally and community-friendly ways to develop their village and the surrounding area.

The local effort to conserve their environment is a good example of how Sirubari attempts to grapple with the undesired consequences of development. There are potentially many ways the environment can be harmed in this process and the community has exhibited varying degrees of response to the possible problems. For instance, although deforestation and erosion have long held national attention as symbols of environmental degradation, the damaging effects of these processes are minimal in this area. This situation may change, however, as development in Sirubari continues. Two obvious threats to the local ecology are tourists and the new road. Increasing numbers of tourists will demand more energy, packaged goods and sanitary facilities, leading to increased deforestation, litter and groundwater pollution. Construction of the road has gobbled up some farmland and, due to the steep terrain, land above the road threatens to slide downhill. The most immediate hazard is to one house, which sits perilously close to a recent landslide. Although land above the road will eventually stabilize, the road will attract more traffic and along with it the associated problems of pollution and safety, among other issues.

Sirubari is actively attempting to deal with a few, but by no means all, of these problems. For example, until this year, litter was meticulously cleaned from the thoroughfares in the village, but once collected was simply dumped into a nearby stream. Concern for the environment however has prompted villagers to construct a small trash pit, or mini-landfill, where litter will be placed and covered over by earth. Once this pit is full, the plan is to empty it and move the fill to another permanent location, thus keeping this nearby facility open for ease of use. Other more difficult environmental problems have not been addressed yet. An example is disposal of sewerage, a by-product of the detached toilets and bathrooms built to serve the dual purposes of sanitation and tourism. Locals have opted for septic tanks over biogas plants because they view the latter as having too unpleasant an odor for tourists. Unfortunately, they do not appear to appreciate the problems of ground water contamination presented by septic tanks with openings at the bottom to allow the sewerage to seep into the ground below. This design is considered superior to septic tanks that need emptied periodically due to the difficulty of access to the tanks by trucks equipped to perform this task. Besides, this service does not seem to be available anywhere in the Western Development Region. Thus far, attempts to address environment problems related to the building of the road up to Sirubari have not materialized. Nonetheless, one critical observation must not be lost. Even though many ecological problems remain, Sirubari is actively engaged in the process of identifying and evaluating them and is committed to finding effective solutions to them.

The critical factor in Sirubari's approach to its future is its wealth. Local affluence depends on a historical connection to military service. People in Sirubari are fond of estimating that "80 to 90 percent have served," in the armies of Great Britain, India or Nepal. And our statistics bear them out. The economic prosperity

that has followed on the heels of military service in these armies has left its mark on the material wellbeing of the people of Gurung Gaun.

Signs of economic decline in Gurung Gaun are next to impossible to find. Military service means salary during active duty and, more importantly for Sirubari, a pension once a man has retired. Having spent seven or more years in the military a man draws a basic pension which increases with more years of service and higher rank. Thirty-two men reported the amount of their pensions to us, which averaged 5190 Nepalese rupees or \$67 U.S. per month, a considerable income when compared to the approximately \$210 per capita GNP reported for the country as a whole in 2001. Other sources of income reported to us added another Rs. 350 per month.

Of course, this wealth is not evenly distributed, even in the Gurung community, but abject poverty was not apparent in any of the households. Perhaps the poorest Gurung family was virtually landless and had to stretch a monthly income of only Rs. 3,000 (\$40) to provide for a family of five. Consequently, they had none of the modern economic status symbols so prevalent now in Gurung Gaun, such as televisions, dining room furniture, electrical appliances or even a toilet and bathroom. Such items are becoming almost universal now. Among the 47 households in residence during our project, 40 had radios, 28 televisions, 44 an electrical connection and 38 a septic toilet. Other evidence of material wealth includes such items as plastic flowers, screens on doors, dining room tables and chairs, display cases for dishware, tea sets, linoleum floor coverings, rugs, veranda furniture, as well as modern appliances like crock pots, blenders, electric irons, and even an electric generator.

Land is still a primary measure of wealth in Sirubari. Informants estimated that *khet*, land use for irrigated rice farming, can cost as much as Rs 45,000 per ropani. Upland rain fed farmland, or *bāri*, is worth as much as Rs 30,000 per ropani. In Gurung Gaun, the average household owns 11 ropanis of the more valuable *khet* and 5 ½ of *bāri* fields. One household, inhabited by only one woman past the age of 80, has no land at all. Of the remaining 46 households, eight farm their own land (averaging only about 4 ropanis each of *khet* and *bāri*), the other 38 engaging people of other castes to work their land on an *adhiyā* or sharecropping, basis. Not only is the average farm more than sufficient to feed the family, but it is too large for the family to farm without help.

Not surprisingly, we saw no evidence of chronic hunger, malnutrition or starvation, either among the Gurung themselves or their neighbours living in Dalit hamlets. Quite to the contrary, when we report our demographic data more fully, it will clearly demonstrate that infant mortality is on the decline, even among the Damai, whose economic status is substantially lower than that of the Gurungs. Moreover, although the health post in nearby Panchamul does not figure directly into the relatively robust health of the area, one of its physicians rents a room in Sirubari, thus making health care readily accessible, locally. Contributing significantly to the

good health of this community's members is undoubtedly the near universality of toilets and piped water directly to every house or the neighbouring one. The availability of piped water has all but rendered metal water jugs as functionless; they now are displayed as decorative items in Gurung homes. Sanitation is valued in Sirubari as the recent and ongoing community-wide campaign to wash hands, particularly after using the toilet, vividly demonstrates.

Even with all these advantages, the people of Sirubari worry over the aging of their community and the threat of a deteriorating social fabric, instigated by the flight of its sons and their families to more desirable and modern places, such as Kathmandu, Pokhara, India and abroad. In fact, the leadership of the tourism project readily admits that, for them, the main reason for developing the area is to attract the youth back to Sirubari. Income is secondary, both in the sense that it is not the major purpose of the program, nor is it the primary source of income for these affluent farmers. As one man put it, "it is a side business" that helps to fill social gaps and will hopefully, along with other development efforts, entice Sirubari's youth back home.

Whether cultural tourism will accomplish this or other goals remains to be seen. It will certainly be difficult for Sirubari to compete with the lifestyle that lures the young to Kathmandu and places outside Nepal. But the people of Gurung Gaun are not trying to replicate city life; rather, they are striving to blend the best of rural life with the comforts of city life without the major drawbacks that accompany development.

To their credit, the people of Gurung Gaun have opted to exert control rather than fret over a bleak future. That they are taking matters into their own hands is consistent with Bista's expectations in *Fatalism and Development*, in which he asserts that when there is geographic and cultural distance from the Bahun-dominated ethos of Kathmandu a proactive stance toward development is more likely to ensue. As such, Gurungs have led the way developing their corner of Syangja District; their neighborhood has electricity, toilets, running water to each home, some of it even indoor; a motor road that is passable except in monsoon season now reaches Sirubari. Integral to their informal, loosely articulated development plan is the cultural tourism "program" they launched in 1998, which has come to serve as a model for similar programs across Nepal.

A balanced assessment of Sirubari's outlook would not be complete without comment on how other communities are affected by and figure into their development efforts. Overall, the Gurungs' tourism program has attempted, both in practice and theory, to better both their own community and that of the lower-castes in the area. However, differences in development goals between the Gurung and the lower caste communities have not completely been worked out. For example, when asked what people specifically wanted from this development project, answers varied from a functioning water system to nicer homes. Despite disparities between

intended goals of the tourism project, the Gurung and Damai people, in general, referred to the enterprise as “a good thing.” Although Gurung community leaders frequently mention their goals of including every Gurung household into the tourism program and expanding the program into Damai and other low caste households, realization of these goals seems a somewhat distant promise. The need for a more equitable decision making body that would include the thoughts of the lower castes, promotion of the practice of saving money to continue development into the future, and inter-caste cooperation and maintenance of the development efforts come to the forefront when investigating the Gurung tourism endeavor. Despite these kinks in their plans for the future, the Gurungs are actively seeking suggestions to improve their program for their immediate community, the nearby Dalit communities and tourists alike. In fact, they have specifically asked us to make recommendations to them. Sirubari exemplifies a Gurung community that has invested immensely in the preservation and development of their culture through actively initiating and participating in their cultural tourism program as part of an overall development effort. The positive approach they bring to these activities demonstrates that the development landscape of Nepal includes areas where optimism is well placed.

References

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