

From **Cambridge Anthropology**, vol.14, no.1, 1990.

FATALISM AND DEVELOPMENT IN NEPAL (1)

It is possible to take very different views about the way in which Nepal is currently heading. An optimistic assessment culled from official statistics and superficial impressions could be made. In contrast to India there appears to be little absolute poverty, with no begging and no real shanty towns. Famines are infrequent. There is a notable absence of violence; the police are few, crime rates are low, and political violence has been limited.

These impressions could be backed by impressive statistics. From a standing start in 1950, when the Ranas were overthrown and Nepal began to be transformed from a medieval oriental despotism into a modern nation-state, a great deal has been done. An all but roadless country in 1950, Nepal had built more than six thousand miles of properly paved highways by the late 1980's. Between 1950 and 1980 the cumulative growth in various sectors has been estimated as follows: "70 times in power generation, 13 times in irrigation facility, 134 times in school enrolment, 12 times in number of hospital beds" (Gurung 1980: 246). Epidemic diseases have been practically eliminated. Infant mortality rates have been halved. Piped water has been brought to most villages. An international airline has been started. Nepal now exports goods worth more than 25 million U.S. dollars a year. A large tourist industry has been created, with over 300,000 tourists (other than Indians) a year. A literacy rate of 2% in 1951 had been increased to over 40% in the later 1980's. There are more than 150 university campuses. Kathmandu and other towns have grown remarkably and now have many facilities, including television, computers and many modern goods and services. All this has been achieved with no significant revolution or bloodshed. It looks like an economic and social miracle.

Yet an equally convincing case could be made to support a pessimistic assessment. Despite a long-established family planning policy, there has been little success in controlling population. In 1800 there were less than two and a half million people in Nepal. By 1941 there were about six million. By 1971 the population had nearly doubled to eleven and a half million. It is currently over eighteen million and is projected to be at least twenty-five million by the year 2001. It will thus have increased four-fold in sixty years. At present the population is growing faster than almost anywhere in Asia, at 2.7% p.a. and the use and knowledge of contraception is lower than in any other Asian country. (Seddon 1984: 1,87).

This population pressure is particularly worrying because of the ecological situation. The population density in relation to cultivable land is as high as in many of the far more fertile Asiatic deltas. People press on land that is usually a thin covering of soil on extremely steep rocky slopes, swept by torrential monsoon rains. The growing numbers exploit the remaining forest ever more intensively for firewood, fodder and grazing. The results are very serious. Moddie concludes that "Nepal provides the most dramatic example of the spread of desertification...In a flash, within the decade ending 1971, Nepal had lost 50% of its forest cover..."(quoted in Gurung 1980: 191). Eckholm claimed that Nepal faces "the

world's most acute national soil erosion problem". (quoted in Seddon 1984: 72). One expert estimated that Nepal was losing 164,000 cubic inches of top soil each year. (Gurung, 1980: 192). A figure quoted by the Annapurna Conservation Area Project, suggests that "one hectare of cleared forest loses 30-75 tons of soil annually. In Nepal, approximately 400,000 hectares are cleared each year..." As Seddon puts it, "the country now faces a crisis whose major components include serious over-population, ecological collapse in the densely populated and highly vulnerable hill areas...and overall declining yields in agriculture..."(Seddon 1979: 46). In one hundred years, with present trends, the mountains will be stripped of forest and soil, and a population of over one hundred million will be forced to live in absolute poverty or migrate elsewhere.

These facts are well known and easily visible. Less obvious is the serious deterioration in the material standard of life of a majority of the population, despite the massive inflow of "aid". One of the most ominous developments in the last thirty years in Nepal has been the way in which the formerly rice-surplus middle hills have become grain deficit areas. The western hills, for instance, became short of grain before 1976, which an average of up to 3% decline in food production p.a. over the last few years. (Seddon 1979: 91; Gurung 1986: 166). It is predicted that the food deficit in Nepal will increase at least ten times between 1985 and 2000. (Gurung 1986: 182). Hill farmers, who once produced a surplus, now only survive with the help of a steady flow of outside grains. Harka Gurung quotes a recent estimate that "in comparison to the 2.12% annual increase in population during 1964-78, annual agricultural growth was only 0.78% and this indicated a reduction of annually 21 kg. per head in food consumption." (Gurung 1986: 182).

What these general trends mean for individuals is best seen in one central hill village where data has been collected over the last twenty years. Between 1970 and 1990 there has been an almost 50% drop in grain production as the land loses its fertility and goes out of production. In 1970 most families had enough rice for themselves and practically no rice was bought outside the village. By 1990 only a quarter of the villagers had enough rice for their needs; rice had become a luxury rather than a necessity and a large amount was being bought from the south.

The number of animals had also dropped by half. This means that less manure is available for the fields, hence there are reduced crops. It also means a worsening of the diet. Twenty years ago people in middling families had a protein-rich diet, eating meat every two or three days, drinking milk at almost every meal. Now they eat meat only once or twice a month and drink milk occasionally. Their personal wealth has visibly declined; the women have sold their gold ornaments, the clothing is less adequate, the houses and paths are deteriorating.

This growing impoverishment reflects a dramatic decline in the return on labour. It is estimated that the maize equivalent (the poor eat maize) of wage rates fell by roughly 30-60% in the period 1968-9 to 1976-7 alone. (Seddon 1984: 115-6). In the sample hill village, there has been an approximate halving on the returns on labour during the last twenty years, thus a halving in the standard of living. For instance, in 1970 it took just over a day's work to earn enough to buy a chicken. In 1990 it takes two to three days work to do so. A day's hard work in the fields produces grain worth 15-20 rupees

(30-40p sterling); this is certainly not enough to feed a family, let alone clothe, house, marry, bury, nurse and educate it. Many villages are propped up by money from migratory labour in the army or civilian work in India.

Thus, on the one hand, we have the national statistics of growing literacy, improved health, water, roads, trade, while on the other the majority of the population are year by year growing poorer and worse fed and the environment is rapidly deteriorating. A strange contradiction. Furthermore, the contrast between a small affluent minority in Kathmandu and other towns, who enjoy almost First World standards, and the 95% who live in growing poverty, is growing ever sharper.

In fact, the contradiction between progress and impoverishment is not as dramatic as it seems, for behind the impressive statistics, the actual progress is far less notable. The figures giving total numbers of schools, hospitals, health workers, miles of road constructed, are meaningless without taking into account the quality of what is being developed. Those who have worked in Nepal all have their own stories. The following tiny set of examples, all taken from one small valley over a short period of time, could be multiplied a million-fold.

The school statistics are impressive and some of the private schools are good. But the average village school is very badly equipped, often not even having benches or blackboards; it teaches a curriculum which is of practically no use to the children unless they obtain one of the scarce office jobs in a town. Many of the teachers do not understand the language of the ethnic group they were working with and are disillusioned and homesick. Much learning is by rote, there is high absenteeism, and a high failure rate in exams. Attempts to reform the educational system have been unsuccessful and the general standard is very low. Likewise the universities are very poorly equipped, the staff badly paid and in constant turmoil. Education is avidly sought by the wealthier, who send their children to expensive schools, thereby using up all their own capital and producing an alienated middle strata who find it impossible to re-integrate into the basically agrarian economy.

There has been a massive foreign investment in medical improvements and a superficial counting of the number of medical personnel or health posts would suggest a country going through a medical revolution. Yet if one visits the hospitals and health posts, or talks to villagers who have tried to use them, there is an overwhelming impression of a waste of resources and considerable inefficiency. The government hospital in the second largest town, Pokhara, is notorious for its absentee doctors, poor hygiene, careless operations, shortage of medicine. The wrong limbs lopped off, all the nurses absent when women are in labour, totally inaccurate diagnosis and prescription, the siphoning off of time and medicines to private stores, all are endlessly alleged. Even allowing for exaggeration and gossip, there seems to be much to be concerned about.

Likewise, the health posts are over-staffed, but under equipped. One near the sample village has ten workers, but anyone seeking the simplest medicine for sores or cuts will be told to walk a day and buy their own in the bazaar. There are two nurses, but neither has even the simplest of gynaecological instruments. Other large villages have no health post or health worker and women die needlessly in

childbirth, unable to make the eight hour journey to the nearest nurse. The government contribution in one such village of a thousand people is one rupee per year (about 2p sterling). This is the reality of medicine in Nepal today.

The situation with agricultural development projects is broadly similar. Most of the budget goes on constructing buildings, often in the towns, and on paying staff. Very little reaches the villages and fields for which it is destined. The staff themselves are often disinterested in agriculture. As Bista writes, "Agricultural training institutions are built yet farmers are not the ones who go there for training. People who have no interest in the soil are the ones who get degrees in agricultural science."

A typical example in the related field of veterinary medicine concerns the locations of the nearest veterinary station to the sample village. When I asked why it was located in the plain, two thousand feet below any of the villages where the animals which it was to treat were located, I was told that the expert who worked there lived in a nearby town. He did not want to walk up the steep hill to his office. It is not surprising, with no animals, that it is seldom used. Furthermore, villagers allege that they are unable to find anyone present most of the time. When there was a chicken epidemic and they enquired about vaccinations, the official demanded a large amount for merely walking to the village, let alone payment for the injections. They did not bother and almost all the chickens in the village died.

Another example could be taken from the massive effort to install piped water. A large system, starting in the sample village, is currently being built. It is in its early stages, but is already a catalogue of inefficiency. The pipe joints are inappropriate and will soon break, the junction pipes are set at the wrong angle, the pipe is left exposed at crucial points to be punctured by passing livestock, the inflow and outflow pipes in the tank are at the wrong level. After a few months, a landslide fell and blocked the top reservoir entirely, and a rock fell a little lower down and severed the pipe. This was quickly reported and a team came to investigate. Eight months later, nothing has been done and no engineers have been seen. The water dribbles down to only one or two of the taps in the village.

Again, there are constant complaints about the working of minor bureaucrats, who need bribes, are insolent, and are usually absent from their offices. Villagers commonly allege that even for the most minor business they are told to come back another day, unless they produce extra cash, when the business will be quickly done. There are fears of the police, who can be brutal, indiscriminating and not accountable for their behaviour.

As for the transport revolution, many of the bridges are unfinished or badly maintained, the roads soon deteriorate into a bad condition, the public transport is ramshackle, public facilities scarce.

The question then is, why is Nepal heading towards economic, ecological and demographic crisis, and why has foreign aid had so little impact? Two possibilities can be immediately ruled out. The first is that the people themselves are incapable of developing. In fact, the country is rich in human talent. For a century and a half the middle hills have supplied the Gurkha troops in the British and Indian armies. With training, leadership and organisation, these hill soldiers have earned a reputation as one of the most

efficient, brave, hard-working and efficient fighting forces in the world. They are full of initiative, practical, flexible, quick to pick up new ideas. These qualities, if effectively harnessed, could have turned Nepal into a small example of the south-east Asian economic miracle. The religion, social structure and egalitarian values are very similar to what are called the 'confucian cultures', which have been so successful. Yet this is not happening.

Another possibility is that aid has not been at a sufficiently generous level. Again this does not seem to be the case. It is probable that in terms of its Gross Domestic Product, Nepal has received more foreign aid per head than any other country in the world. Its strategic position as a zone between two power blocks, with India and China competing for friendship, and Russia and America for cold war influence, is combined with the sentiments of the Gurkha association and Swiss-like environment which bring in British and European aid. This means that Nepal has been flooded with aid and advice. Nepal was only able to spend less than 65% of the total allocated aid budget during the first five year plan period of 1956-61. During the two decades 1951/2 to 1969/70 foreign aid totalled more than 178 dollars. (Gurung 1986: 61) If we remember that at that time the total exports of goods were worth less than an average of 10 million dollars a year, we can see that money from aid far outstripped all foreign earnings. There can be few countries in that position. Since 1970 the amount of aid has grown substantially. Of course, much of the money went back to the donor countries in the form of large salaries to their 'experts' and to pay for machinery and goods from the donor country. But even after this, there has been a great deal left to spend. Combining this money, the offered expertise and the natural talent might have led to real advance. As it is, while the towns grow and a small segment of the rich get richer, the population rockets and the number in considerable poverty grows daily. How and why has this happened?

The conventional wisdom comes into two main forms, demographic-ecological-geographical, and politico-social. The first argument is as follows. Nepal is a barren, mountainous, country with little good agricultural land. Furthermore there are few useful mineral resources, coal, oil, gas, metals. Communications are very difficult because the country is long and thin, from east to west, while the ridges cut across this from north to south. There is no sea access and trade has to pass through India. All these geographical considerations make it unlikely that Nepal would become wealthy.

On top of this is the rapid and uncontrolled growth of population which has already been documented. It is truly a Malthusian situation, and it is not surprising that Malthus himself quoted Turner's 'Embassy to Tibet' to the effect that "It certainly appears that a superabundant population in an unfertile country must be the greatest of all calamities, and produce eternal warfare or eternal want." (Malthus, n.d.; i,122) It is argued that the combination of growing population and poor resources is enough to account for most of the problem.(Macfarlane 1976)

While it would be foolish to ignore such arguments, and they do indeed provide some of the essential explanatory frameworks, they do not account for all the present trends. The Malthusian argument only suggests possible tendencies, what will happen if all else is equal. But, of course, all else is not equal. As Malthus himself argued in the second edition of his 'Essay on Population', people can

control their population if they wish. Furthermore, since Malthus wrote, the equations have been altered by the industrial and scientific revolutions, which allow production to expand exponentially with the application of non-organic energy. Consequently, population and resources are not determining, they condition the situation. We only have to look at Holland, Japan, Singapore, or Hong Kong, to see how an inauspicious environment can be transformed into a centre of wealth through human ingenuity. In principle, there is no reason why this should not happen in Nepal. We therefore have to seek for other causes.

A second set of arguments concerns the political economy of Nepal. In a series of studies, Blaikie, Cameron and Seddon have extensively documented what they call 'Nepal in Crisis'. They give detailed evidence to support many of the impressions noted above. They quote the Fourth Five Year Plan (1970-75) to the effect that "although a number of development works have been undertaken in different sectors of the economy, there has not been virtually any noteworthy change in the basic condition of agriculture." (Blaikie 1980: 63). Most of the money from foreign aid and the surpluses generated in the villages is siphoned off to the Kathmandu valley. They quote Rana and Malla who wrote that "in terms of development expenditures, a disproportionately large part of the total investment in the last two decades has gone to Kathmandu and its surrounding areas..." (Blaikie 1980: 78)

They show that much of the wealth has been used to produce a massive expansion in the bureaucracy, a "combination of rural neglect with massive redistribution of State revenues in the form of salaries and rents to government officials and offices in urban areas." They quote Caplan's study which showed a 32-fold expansion in the number of civil servants in one district in 35 years, whereas administrative income had only increased three-fold. They contrast this bureaucratic growth with what has been achieved: "given the massive increase, both proportionately and absolutely, in officially 'development oriented' government departments situated in the (West Central) Region, the extremely feeble impact they have had to date on rural economy and society in West-Central Nepal is all the more serious in its implications. " (Blaikie 1980: 122). They show how Indian manufacturing has crushed indigenous manufacturing in Nepal, and how little real development is occurring. They conclude very pessimistically. They "see no reason to believe" that the peasantry (or anyone else) will act collectively in time "to save millions of people from impoverishment, malnutrition, fruitless migration, and early death." (Blaikie 1980: 284)

While the detailed statistics and analyses are very useful in providing an objective picture of Nepal's serious position, the explanatory framework they offer is only partially satisfying. They acknowledge the geographic and demographic difficulties of Nepal, but then proceed with two other kinds of explanation. The first is an application of 'dependency theory' as developed by various economists and historians in the 1970's. They summarise their argument as follows. "We follow more closely the general direction of dependency theory, which argues that underdevelopment is a consequence of the incorporation of a pre-capitalist system into the global capitalist system dominated by 'western' economics and 'western' powers." What this means in Nepal's case, which they equate with that of Afghanistan, Lesotho and Ethiopia, is described as follows. "Neither fully incorporated as a colony, nor genuinely isolated, Nepal suffered...the stagnation that is a product of its specific form of partial incorporation as a semi-colony of

the British Raj and more recently within the political economy of India..." (Blaikie 1980: 187) Elsewhere they write that this "experience as a 'semi-colony' ensured a degree of 'forced stagnation' in production and productivity which led to increased population pressure on marginal land, emigration, and ecological decline." (Blaikie 1980: 5)

In this last quotation the line of causation is made explicit. The semi-colonial status is the cause of the demographic and agricultural problems.

The idea of core and periphery, or metropolis and satellite, is applied in two ways. Firstly, in relation to India, their studies do indeed show that Nepal's development is constrained by India, though we may wonder whether it might well be that Nepal would be a net loser if Indian aid, markets, grain and employment were not available. Be that as it may, it is not a new or particularly major advance to portray Nepal as dependent on India. It is clear that such dependency is again not determining, but just one of the constraints within which the Nepalese are forced to operate.

A second application of dependency theory is within Nepal. While India is a periphery of the first world, and Nepal a periphery of India, most of Nepal is a periphery of the Kathmandu valley. Again this certainly true, and has often been affirmed, though not usually as well documented. But again this is largely a descriptive statement; it explains little, in itself needing explanation. Here dependency theory gives out, unless we take it to be axiomatic that predatory international capitalism will inevitably have such effects.

The authors themselves are aware of some of the limitations of this approach and admit that "concepts of centre and periphery...are not by themselves able to provide the complete framework..." (Blaikie 1980: 84) In order to do that, they argue, a class analysis is also needed. Thus they try to provide such an analysis. Here they are immediately in trouble. Firstly, as they admit, it is practically impossible to isolate or delineate classes in Nepal. One can very roughly talk of a "ruling class", but its edges are very blurred and it is not at all clear that it has any sense of class-consciousness or monopolises the ownership of the means of production. It would be much more appropriate to call it a powerful elite. As for the bourgeoisie, "in so far as it can be identified", it is said to consist almost exclusively of the larger merchants "and those involved in such recent growth areas as tourism and construction". (Ibid., 86) This constitutes a rather feeble bourgeoisie and furthermore "it is difficult to distinguish individual members of this merchant class". (Ibid., 87) As for the petty bourgeoisie, they are "notoriously difficult to define", and in Nepal especially so. Only with the 'peasantry', who constitute the majority of the population, do we seem to be on safe ground. Unfortunately for the future of Nepal, they argue, the peasantry have no class consciousness or unity.

The difficulties of a class analysis are not limited to the impossibility of finding classes, or finding any real class consciousness. There is also the fact, noted several times, that caste and ethnic allegiances cross-cut any class identity and are often more powerful. All this means that a significant analysis in terms of the dynamics of class conflict is really impossible. While the authors assert that "the interests of the different classes outlined above are distinct and in some cases in over conflict with each other", not a

single instance of overt conflict is given.(Ibid., 89) It would appear that beyond the general statement that different people and groups have differing access and control over the means of production, class analysis is really inappropriate in this setting. It explains very little.

Thus we are left with an enriched descriptions of Nepal's plight, and a deeper awareness of the influence of India and of the inequalities between Kathmandu and the rest of Nepal. But we still do not know why Nepal is in its present predicament.

Most of the theories about Nepal's problems have been put forward by outsiders. Here we may consider a novel and interesting hypothesis put forward by Dor Bahadur Bista.(Bista 1990) Bista is both an outsider and an insider. He has an unrivalled width of experience in relation to Nepal. As a young man he travelled over most of Nepal in the company of the distinguished anthropologist Christoph von Furer-Haimendorf. On the basis of this experience he wrote the standard survey of **The Peoples of Nepal**(1967). He is trained in anthropology and became the first Professor of Anthropology in Nepal. Combined with foreign travels, this gives him the comparative framework which allows him to see his country in perspective. It has distanced him from his own culture.

Yet he also knows the culture from the inside. As a member of the Kathmandu elite, with powerful family and friendship connections, he knows the centre, as well as the periphery of village. He knows the political and diplomatic world intimately, having one son who has been the Minister of Education and having himself been the Nepalese Consul General in Tibet. He knows the educational world, having begun his career as a High School Headmaster in 1952 and later through his Professorship at Tribhuvan University. He has experience of the international aid world through his own and his son's involvement in the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development. He knows the world of business and trade, having been involved in setting up several businesses, a brick factory, carpet factory, metal crafts manufactory, and experimental dairy farm. He knows the world of hierarchy and caste, himself being near the top of that hierarchy as a member of an old family within the Chhetri caste.

This multifarious life experience of over thirty years has been distilled into this book, which is an attempt to give a portrait of a society. It attempts to diagnose Nepal's ills through the eyes of a sympathetic yet critical insider. It has something of the flavour of other such attempts; De Tocqueville's **Ancien Regime**, Weber's **Protestant Ethic**, Taine's **Notes upon England**. It is worth considering at some length because of its insights and because Bista, as an insider, can say things which no outsider could say. The Nepalese are a proud and sensitive people and the kind of analysis Bista makes, striking at the heart of many cherished institutions, could not be borne from an outsider. But these things need to be raised, and only Bista can do so.

Bista starts with the same problem, namely the patent failure of Nepal to make substantial progress. He approvingly cites Pandey, writing that "enormous financial resources are devoted to bureaucratic planning with very little demonstrated results. A former high level bureaucrat has even commented that,

in spite of almost four decades of foreign assistance, agriculture has not benefited; the poor have been by passed; the needs of women have not even been understood; the relations of production and distribution have become worse; and technical assistance has not contributed to the improvement of administrative capability. " He points to the "snowstorm of statistical wizardry" embodied in numerous reports "without any inkling of how these abstract figures relate to the conditions of the bulk of the people".

Bista provides plenty of instances of waste and corruption. For instance, in relation to education, he gives a very useful survey of educational development up to the present. The expansion in the 1950's led to a "certificate orientation" and in the 1950's and 1960's "education was becoming quickly a symbol of status, as high school and college degrees were used simply for the purpose of acquiring higher status positions." An attempt to reform the system in the National Education System Plan had collapsed by 1979; "students sabotaged the examination system through widespread and large scale cheating, which was largely ignored by supervisors and teachers". He notes that figures of educational expansion are "impressive", "but they belie the abuse and misapplication of educational qualifications..." Education is not directed to any practical ends, but merely to enable people to get a job where they will be able to do as little work as possible.

In the field of agricultural development, he cites the Pokhara Crop Development Project as an example of a total waste of time and resources. Those who are trained as agricultural specialists "loathe agriculture and hate soiling their hands with the earth. What they learn is never applied." the picture is a familiar one. What is novel is Bista's explanation of why it is thus.

Although Bista concentrates on the internal, cultural and social context, he does also refer to the external pressure of foreign aid which "reinforces a sense that Nepal is basically a weak and helpless country". He notes that massive foreign aid has helped to mask widespread economic abuse and corruption and points to the ethnocentrism of foreign advisers, who are "often insensitive to the peculiarities of the cultural system in Nepal". But it is this cultural system that he wishes to expose. For while others, such as Lohani point to "powerful external others" as the root cause of Nepal's problems, Bista considers this as yet another example of that evasion of responsibility and fatalistic attitude which itself is "the root cause of the problem".

Let us first look at some of the features of that cultural system. It is a complex of factors which Bista labels "fatalism" and locates in the Bahun (Brahmin) - Chhetri minority which dominates Kathmandu and other towns. He does not give statistics, but this disproportionate dominance is shown by a figure given by Blaikie **et al**, namely that while 22% of the population in 1972 were Chhetri/Brahmin/Newar, these groups held almost 93% of all the higher civil service and political posts. It is this culture, which Bista contrast strongly with that of the Mongoloid peoples of the hills and Terai, which dominates Nepal's development. As a member of this culture, Bista attempts to analyse its working.

The complex has a number of castes and a number of manifestations. At its heart their lie two inter-acting principles, namely fatalism and caste. The most important feature is fatalism, the belief "that

one has no personal control over one's life circumstances, which are determined through a divine or powerful external agency. " This partly arises from the Hindu notion of **karma**, that one's fate is written on one's forehead at birth and there is nothing that can be done to alter it.

This fatalistic belief undermines personal responsibility: "under fatalism, responsibility is continually displaced to the outside, typically to the supernatural. There is a constant external focus for the individual. The individual simply does not have control. " Bista contrasts this to the situation in western societies and Japan where people have an internalised sense of responsibility. " The current dominant value system does not teach people to accept responsibility for their failures or to accept defeat with dignity and grace. " They characteristically blame others. "Altruism is suspect. Similarly, one is never obliged to anyone for anything because everything occurs as it should. No sense of obligation is instilled."

The second main thread is hierarchy, or caste. Bista argues that the caste principle is not intrinsic to Nepal; "Nepal's native Hinduism has not included a belief in caste principles...only in the last 135 years has the caste system gained any kind of endorsement..." But now it pervades all parts of the elite, who feel themselves superior to the majority of the population. In particular, it makes the elite identify with the anti-practical, non-work, ideals of the Brahmin priests, who abstain from all physical work and depend on the charity of others. This ideal has been secularised and re-directed through education, so that "as a career objective in modern Nepal, every Nepali tries to have a **Jagir**, a salaried job where one does not have to work but will receive a pay cheque at the end of each month." In Brahmin belief, the material world is **maya**, an illusion, hence "there is no dignity in labour. High caste people have always despised physical labour and are accustomed to believing, as well as teaching others to believe, that erudition and ritual are the only important things."

While despising those below them, the hierarchic mentality produces sycophancy and dependence on those above; "whenever Nepalis receive good treatment from anyone and become comfortable, they begin to identify that individual as a father figure". The institution of **chakari**, or institutionalised sycophancy, is one important manifestation of this hierarchical tendency.

Chakari, originally "to wait upon, to serve, or to seek favour from a god", was institutionalised in the nineteenth century court of the Ranas. As in all despotisms whether in Rome or Versailles, a court system was instituted whereby potential over-mighty subjects were forced to be constantly visible, and constantly spying on each other by attending daily on the most powerful rulers. Later, "government employees had to perform **Chakari** to ensure job security and in order to be eligible for promotion". The system has flourished behind the facade of modern bureaucracy; the vast expansion of the salariat, which feeds off foreign aid, merely exacerbates the tendency. "Though it will be commonly denied, today **Chakari** remains a solid fact of social life, and is evident at all levels of government." It is a way for information to pass informally through the organisation, endless gossip and back-biting is encouraged as each morning junior officials wait around their seniors, "paying court" and offering small presents. This leads to widespread paranoia, as each person maligns others whom he thinks may be gossiping behind his back; an alternative to the anonymous poison pen letter which is so prevalent in India.

The **Chakari** system also interferes with the development of a Weberian 'rational' bureaucracy, by warping appointments and decisions. The superior is forced to recognise some of the **chakariwalas** and receive their gifts and servile courtship. This "leads to a point where the patron is forced into actions that he would not normally perform, and that are not in the best interests of his higher obligations to the organisation of which he is a part", in other words, corruption. Decisions are often made on the basis of the needs of **chakari**. Bista concludes that **chakari** is a "built-in guarantor of incompetence, inefficiency, and misplaced effort".

Chakari is a vertical relationship, a particular manifestation of those widespread, personalised, dyadic, ties, called patron-client relations, which anthropologists have widely documented in Mediterranean, South American, Indian and other societies. The description by Bista fits well with these accounts, which adding the special courtly feature of bureaucratic organisations, namely that the main service of the client is to provide information, and his main duty is to spend long periods of time attending on his patron.

Complementing **chakari** and flowing from it, but lying on a horizontal rather than vertical social axis, is the other main institution, **afno manchhe**. There is a strong distinction made between "us", who are trustworthy, loyal, to be helped, and "them" to whom one has no responsibilities, and who deceive and are to be deceived. In Bista's words, "**Afno Manchhe** is the term used to designate one's inner circle of associates - it means 'one's own people' and refers to those who can be approached when need arises." Almost every activity is influenced by it: the length of time it takes to cash a cheque, whether one receives a permit, the treatment one receives in hospital, one's child's success at school, all are influenced by **afno manchhe** connections. '**Afno manchhe** is a critical institution. It is integrally connected with the smooth running of society.' Sometimes it is institutionalised into Rotary Clubs, Leo Clubs, Lions Clubs and the numerous equivalents of western masonic-type associations. But usually it is just a circle of mutually-supporting associates, whose personal ties cut across and through the supposed impersonalities of bureaucracy.

The workings of a combination of fatalism, hierarchy, **chakari** and **afno manchhe** are examined in studies of education, politics and government and foreign aid. We have seen that education becomes a path to non-manual jobs which are secure and work-free. In the burgeoning bureaucratic and governmental system, "the practice of **chakari** is so ingrained in the modern situation that an attempt to by-pass it or eliminate it is treated as an act of social deviance..." In the growing Ministries, based on an Indian model, '**chakari** was rapidly institutionalised as an integral part of all the ministries'. There is a ritualised use of "meetings" and "conferences" and "seminars" to cover over the fact that nothing much is being done, just a lot of talking.

One central feature is the fear of decision-making and the taking of responsibility. "As the level of responsibility increases within the administration, the fewer the decisions actually made. Making decisions can be a risky business...In a fatalistic society people are not thrown out for not making decisions but for making bad decisions...People do not really expect things to happen...But doing

something means taking responsibility for it." Anyone who has tried to get anything done in Nepal will know how true this is. Requests are passed from place to place and years may pass before a simple decision, to release some corrugated iron or bridge-building cable or cement, which has been agreed in principle, can be taken. "A variety of not doing work, which might entail risk, is to pass it on to a higher level." Often this means that the simples of decisions on small matters goes right up to the top, to be decided by the King or a senior Minister. Passing the buck is an endless, and often infinitely circular, game.

Fatalism and hierarchy also influence the impact of foreign aid. Firstly they heighten the sense of powerlessness and dependency which such aid on such a huge scale is in any case likely to instil. Foreign aid donors "are seen as father surrogates; the only active agent of development becomes the foreign party." The infatuation with speculative, abstract, non-practical and ritualistic thought deadens action. Those who go abroad and see alternative systems are soon defeated by the fatalistic attitude when they return. Often they leave the country, those who remain "become cynics and adapt to **Chakari** and **Afno Manchhe** culture."

With this corrupt and corrupting system there is a massive squandering of resources. Putting it charitably, "the Nepali foreign aid civil servant operates from Kathmandu, and is oriented to the Kathmandu valley as the real hub of national life. The welfare of ethnic villagers in remote places is hard to identify with." Thus the many dangers of foreign aid, the political motives of donors, the over-paid and ethnocentric advisers, the high degree to which aid is 'tied', the absence of any involvement or consultation with those for whom the aid is supposedly designed, are compounded by the administrative system through which the development effort is filtered. It is not surprising that, as Bista writes, the National Planning Commission's five-yearly planning document "is worth very little", since it has little power; "roads and schools get built, but most often in areas not designated by the NPC." Development is unco-ordinated and ill-planned, reflecting the random interests of donors and local patronage networks. "The size of such administrative machinery requires a vast amount of resources for its maintenance", but, Bista writes, "the contribution of such an apparatus to real development has been negligible."

It is a brave man who reveals these characteristics; it is an even braver one who honestly tries to explain the source which he believes is poisoning a potentially viable development. Bista locates two main causes, which are again interconnected.

According to Bista, the root cause of fatalism and hierarchy is 'bahunism' or Brahminism. 'Bahunism' is a cultural configuration combining caste and fatalism. To demonstrate this, Bista provides an overview of Nepalese history from ancient times, showing the gradual spread of Brahminic values. Caste principles began to be seriously introduced into Nepal in the fourteenth century, and were strengthened by Jung Bahadur Rana in the nineteenth. an overview of caste principles in each region of Nepal is provided. Various features of priestly Brahminism are stressed; its dislike of manual labour, its hierarchical view of the world, its dependence on ritual and magic as opposed to practical behaviour. For instance, in relation to education, "Being educated, then, has a superstitious connection with high caste, and the act

of being educated becomes the magical act that draws forth a sympathetic and supernatural supported result of being treated as a Bahun...education is another form of ritualistic behaviour..." The belief in fatalism arising from the idea of **dharma**, the **chakari** system arising from the seeking of favour from a god, the strong distinctions between 'us' and them in **afno manchhe**, all stem from priestly Brahminism.

One needs to add the adjective 'priestly', because Bista is not talking about the majority of Brahmins, hard-working farmers who do not practice as Brahmins and who work alongside the other ethnic groups in apparent harmony. It is a small stratum, which also includes higher-class Chhetris and some Shrestha Newars and Thakuris, of whom he is writing.

Bista examines how the upbringing within such 'Bahun' houses contributes to the fatalistic and hierarchical attitudes. Young children are brought up without much discipline; long breast-feeding on demand, an absence of any parental control or strong standards lead, he believes, to an absence of an internalised morality. "There is no moral pressure or guilt feeling regarding immoral acts, because there is little sense of morality instilled in children: a sense of social responsibility is simply not internalised and social sanctions are only effective in an external form." Only fear leads to good behaviour, and fear can be mitigated by building up a network of friends, **afno manchhe**, and a dependency on outside forces. Bahuns grow to adulthood "being self-righteous but without an ability to be self-critical".

Much of this picture of relaxed child-rearing applies to most ethnic groups in Nepal. What differentiates Bahuns is their attitude to women. "Women in Nepal generally have equal status except among Bahun-Thakuri and some middle and upper level Chhetri." Whereas Gurung women, for instance, control their husband's purse, are consulted on all major decisions, are not considered inferior or impure, work at similar jobs to men; none of this is true of the Bahun culture. Bahun women are part of the hierarchical system, impure and inferior, given no control of money, often badly beaten, often carrying huge loads while their load-free husbands walk ahead of them. This applies to hill Brahmins as well.

This attitude to women affects the family at a particular point. High caste sons, who have formed a deep bond with their mothers, are suddenly taken from them and taught to treat them as second-class, polluting, inferior: "relations are autocratic, with females subservient to males". A Bahun father, on the other hand, is an autocrat whose power remains very strong throughout a son's life. A son thus learns both dependency and autocracy in his family and applies this to the world outside. The system of partible inheritance, which shields all sons from the world, leads to "a protective and patronising attitude towards junior children, especially the youngest" which "helped develop the dependence syndrome to the extreme..."

Thus Bista's explanation combines sociological and psychological features arising from the Brahmin priest's role and his family system. During the last hundred and fifty years, this small group have taken control of Nepal politically and bureaucratically, submerging the majority whose ethics and attitudes are much closer to the protestant values of hard work, honesty, equality and internalised conscience, which Bista clearly admires.

Two other insights are worth considering. One concerns the attitudes to time in Nepalese culture. Time is seen as a river, with no sense of past, present and future. It is circular rather than progressive. There is thus no idea of time as a 'commodity', no idea of 'wasting' #time, little idea of being able to plan or control future time, little interest in past time or history. Bista's account reminds one of many discussions of the contrasts between protestant and catholic, 'modern' and 'medieval', 'agricultural' and 'industrial' attitudes to time and work discipline. Certainly the relaxed lack of punctuality, the "timelessness", which tourists often find so attractive, is less appealing when it is found within an attempt to introduce modern bureaucratic methods. The absence of a strong sense of the future, and the fatalism and lack of any sense of control, combine to make forward planning, saving, investment, weak. "They squander whatever food, grain, or money they get at once without any consideration for the future. Being highly consummatory, no savings take place and there can be no investment. The society must remain dependent on foreign investment in the future..."

Another important side-effect of Bahunism is on the relations between individual and group. Bista argues that under the pressure of western models, "traditional group orientation" is being replaced by "individualism". But it is not that individualism which De Tocqueville perceived in America, namely "a mature and calm feeling, which disposed each member of the community to sever himself from his family and his friends...", but rather the earlier form, which De Tocqueville calls "egotism", namely "a passionate and exaggerated love of self, which leads a man to connect everything with his own person, and to prefer himself to everything in the world." "Nepali individualism operates largely at the more primitive egotistic stage."

This egotism is the worst solution to the problem of individual-group relations. It leads to a mild version of the Hobbesian war of all against all, where there is no sense of public duty or service. "Very few people take high positions responsibly, as a duty to society at large". Although there is a residual sense of the local community and the family, "by contrast, the public, the state, the nation, are all abstract concepts" which mean little to most people. One effect of this is visible in the corruption and laziness of those in positions of responsibility, whose main goal is to promote their private and sectional interests. Another is in the field of development.

Bista points out that despite the rhetoric of "grass-roots development", "back to the village", "community participation", the vast majority of "development"£ projects are undertaken with little involvement or consultation with local communities. Bridges, roads, dams, health posts are built often with serious disadvantages to particular communities. They are perceived by local inhabitants as "the whimsies of the foreign project directors". When the bridge, road, dam, has been built and the facility has been left as "public" property, supposedly to be maintained by "the public", "people lack any sense of either pride or of possession, as they would towards things they build through their own efforts."

Bista argues that "locally initiated projects, when funded by the central authorities, have the greatest chance of success." This is certainly true. But the absence of a sense of the "public good", which is a very unusual and abstract idea which it took many centuries to develop in the west, is even deeper than

this. The idea of 'citizenship', of doing a job for the good of an association larger than the family, is little developed throughout Nepal. Thus in the villages, each development initiative fails as the individuals employed to carry it out take their salary to be an entitlement to do the minimum amount of work. The tree nursery is allowed to fade away; the young trees are not watched by the paid watchers and are eaten by animals; the water bailiffs fail to inspect the water pipe and it leaks badly; the health workers at the local health post sell off the best medicine privately and refuse to visit sick villagers without large payments; the schoolmaster appropriate school funds and absent themselves frequently. These are widespread activities. Of course, there are honourable exceptions, but the pressures of insecurity and family need are usually much stronger than some abstract idea of generalised good. The acts of religious merit, the making of resting places, of temples, of paths, are quite frequent. But the idea of merit, the nearest equivalent to the protestant idea of 'calling', does not seem to be applied to the new tasks generated by development. It is almost as if the payment of a salary automatically deadens any sense of public responsibility. It is a social equivalent to the well-known finding that, contrary to classical economic laws, the more people are paid for their labour in pre-capitalist economies, the less they work.

Much of Nepal thus seems to be in a position where primordial loyalties, to family, neighbours, oneself, are very much stronger than impersonal ones; people see no benefit in putting their efforts into doing things well for the general good. Anthropologists have investigated "amoral familism" quite extensively, a morality where people only apply ethical rules within their own family. One might well apply the concept here. But in the Nepalese context, and especially in the ethnic communities of the mountains, the community of moral and responsible behaviour is wider than the nuclear family of the Mediterranean and South American examples where the concept of "amoral familism" was developed. All villagers are bound together through marriage, kinship, friendship, work associations and patron-client ties and hence will work together in what is perceived as their mutual self-interest. But this only applies to traditional activities where mutual support is essential. It is an entirely different matter with something which an individual, paid by the State, is expected to do for some larger abstract entity such as "the community", "the country", "the nation". In calculating the best course of action, the individual state servant finds that the advantages of leisure or private reward far outweigh any feeling that he has a duty to help such abstract entities, or that he should do so because he is paid for his services.

The idea of "paying back" something to a society, which lies behind a vast amount of vaguely altruistic voluntary behaviour in western societies, of the **noblesse d'oblige** variety, such as justices of the peace, jury service, voluntary associations and institutes to do good works, is absent. For instance, only a tiny proportion of the large amount of money brought back to Nepal by returning British Gurkhas, millionaires by local standards, is ever spent on public works in the villages where they were brought up and their families. life. If one hundredth of this money had been productively invested in the villages, they would have been transformed. But such ideas are not at all familiar. They would probably be considered luxuries, only suitable to societies which had escaped from the knife-edged insecurities of subsistence living.

Examples from non-Bahun ethnic villages suggest one type of criticism that could be made of Bista's

explanation. He tends to idealise non-Brahmin groups. He does this for two main reasons. Firstly, he uses them as a stick to beat the Bahuns with, a way of pointing up the insidious and powerful, but ultimately "un-Nepali" character of their culture. The majority of the population are not hierarchical, but hard-working, with a conscientious discipline, a sense of guilt and responsibility and a practical attitude to life. The village is "an efficiently productive and harmonious social group". Secondly, Bista sees these ethnic groups as providing an alternative to the present disastrous tendency; the only real hope for Nepal lies in giving their culture priority over the recently imported Hindi culture of priestly Brahminism. "Among the ethnic peoples, then, are located some very significant human and cultural resources. These people are hard-working, persevering and long suffering, co-operate well and work with a dedication towards collective well-being, and have the qualities necessary to be successful merchants." But instead of cherishing their cultures, Bista argues, they are belittled, ignored and destroyed by the spreading Bahun culture.

Bista would probably argue that the instances of lack of public spirit instanced above are the result of the spread of Brahmin values into the villages. Everyone has become aware of the corruption, laziness and inefficiency that pervades most of the salariat. There is widespread cynicism and a lack of any models for hard-working and public-spirited activities. Each individual feels disinclined to make marginal sacrifices for his short-term good for the long-term general good when he thinks no-one else is doing so. Everyone believes that all others are 'one the make'. Even if an individual shows some deviant altruism, his family and friends would soon put great pressures on him to desist.

This idea of the spread of egotistic values is partly true. But it is a little over-simple. The features described are very widespread in agricultural peasantries which almost everywhere have little idea of the public good. But Bista is right that if the elite had by some extraordinary accident shown a very different and more "rational-bureaucratic-protestant" character, then the response at the village level as the new institutions were developed would have been very different. One can see this from the enormous difference between the behaviour of Gurungs when in the British army, self-disciplined, hard-working, altruistic, co-operative, and when they are working in government employment in Nepal where they are often listless, unmotivated and as prone to pursue their self-interest as the most acquisitive Brahmin or Chhetri. There is nothing intrinsic about the differences, but Bista is right that the tendencies of Brahmin-Chhetri culture and the Mongoloid cultures of Nepal is very different, and the balance is swinging towards the former.

In assessing the degree of success of Bista's analysis it is important to distinguish three levels of problem. In order to understand Nepal's predicament one cannot ignore the gross geographical and demographic facts. Scarce, land-locked, resources pressed on by a very rapidly growing population are bound to make the task of development difficult. This is one type of explanation, a necessary but not sufficient one. Ecology and demography, for instance, do not explain why many aid schemes fail, or bureaucracy is so clogged. But cultural explanations do not account, in themselves, for the shrinking of the forests and the soil erosion.

As a second level, Bista is right to say that it is not sufficient to blame outside forces, international

capitalism, neo-colonialism, Indian imperialism or whatever, for all of Nepal's ills. They do not explain the waste and inefficiency in local health posts or aid projects. But they do help to explain why Nepalese manufactures have been so unsuccessful, why hill agriculture is withering, why Nepal is a minor dumping ground for medical drugs, drinks and tourists. It is an incomplete explanation which does not take the international politico-economic context of Nepal into account.

At a third level there are the social and cultural factors which have largely been left out of account until Bista was prepared to state them. Many of his observations are tacitly accepted, but as with the Emperor's invisible new clothes, no-one has dared to say them out loud. They help to explain a good deal. But there are qualifications to be made even at this level. To start with, they do not explain many of the pressures on the Nepalese, which are undoubtedly demographic, economic and external. Secondly, it is not clear how much of the phenomenon of fatalism/hierarchy is due to Brahminism.

It is indeed true that the only Hindu kingdom in the world, Nepal, is to an exceptional degree dominated nowadays by a Brahmin-Chhetri elite and their values are as Bista describes them. The problem is that anyone familiar with other developing societies, whether in Africa or Asia or Latin America, will recognise many identical features. Much of the lack of western 'rationality' appears to be an integral feature of such societies. In particular, anyone familiar with India will recognise a good deal of Bista's world in the pages of Kipling, Paul Scott, V.S. Naipaul or Varindra Vittachi.

We might expand Bista's argument to say that certain structural features of a society with little experience of competitive, individualistic capitalism, suddenly thrown into such a world, have been combined with pressures which are more generally Indian, rather than specifically priestly Brahmin. The thesis would then probably be nearer the truth. Much of the educational, political and bureaucratic system of Nepal is modelled on India, and it has inherited the defects, as well as a few of the merits, of that land. Nepal is thus a periphery of a periphery in another sense also.

What Bista does show, and this is his major argument against fatalism, is that it need not be so. If present trends continue, Nepal will grow more and more impoverished and dependent on foreign aid, as Blaikie and his collaborators argue. But there is nothing inevitable about this. Miracles have happened before, and in particular in cultures not dissimilar to Nepal. In the 1950's, most professional commentaries were still predicting that Japan was doomed to poverty and insignificance, would never recover and so on. In a relatively short time it has become the most powerful economy in the world. No-one could have predicted the success of Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand and other 'miracles'.

Current prophecies of Nepal's imminent collapse could prove equally wrong in this rapidly changing world. The sudden demise of international communism and the Cold War; the new scientific discoveries which may make it possible to properly harness Nepal's one immense natural resource, hydro-electric power; new international communications which suddenly open up Europe and the Far East to Nepalese products, avoiding the Indian stranglehold, all these may have unforeseeable consequences.

Yet they are unlikely to do so unless those who decide Nepal's future, both insiders and outsiders, are

prepared to take seriously the grave defects of present developments and try to change course. It is too early to say whether the result of the recent elections will make this easier or more difficult.

What is clear is that it will be tempting to dismiss Bista's work, even though he cannot be swept aside as an ignorant outsider, or as a jealous member of an inferior caste. But it is important that his arguments, as well as those of others who love Nepal and care for its future be heard. Their anger at the wasted potential, the unnecessary deaths, the grim future, arises not from malice but a genuine care for one of the most beautiful countries and peoples in the world. Furthermore, Nepal's fate is part of all our fate. Ask not for whom the bell tolls.

NOTE

(1) This article was originally published in **Cambridge Anthropology**, 14:1 (1990). I am grateful to the Editors of that journal for permission to re-print it in this collection. Some of the fieldwork upon which it is based was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. Sarah Harrison gave valuable advice on earlier drafts of the article and helped with the fieldwork. Some interesting comments on an abbreviated form of the article are contained in a letter by David Seddon to the **London Review of Books**, 16 August 1990.

REFERENCES

- Bista 1990 Dor Bahadur Bista, **Fatalism and Development: Nepal's Struggle for Modernization** (Orient Longman, Madras, 1991)
- Blaikie 1980 P.Blaikie, J.Cameron and D.Seddon, **Nepal in Crisis: growth and stagnation at the periphery** (Oxford, 1980)
- Gurung 1986 Harka Gurung, **Dimensions of Development** (Kathmandu, 1986)
- Macfarlane 1976 Alan Macfarlane, **Resources and Population; A Study of the Gurungs of Nepal** (Cambridge, 1976)
- Malthus n.d. T.R.Malthus, **An Essay on the Principles of Population** (Everyman edition, no date), 2 vols.
- Seddon 1979 D.Seddon, P.Blaikie and J.Cameron, **Peasants and Workers in Nepal** (Warminster, 1979).
- Seddon 1984 David Seddon, **Nepal - A State of Poverty**

Copyright: Alan Macfarlane, King's College, Cambridge. 2002

(Univ. of East Anglia Monographs in
Studies, no.11, April 1984).

Development