

## HISTORY AND SIGNIFICANCE OF NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT SERVICE (NDS): CREATING 'CIVIC SPACE' AND COMMITMENT TO SERVICE IN NEPAL DURING THE 1970S<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

During the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Nepal witnessed an increasingly complex and dynamic mix of rising political, economic and social awareness and expectations, alongside societal disruption and conflict, and increasingly disparate lifestyle conditions, rich and poor, punctuated by dramatic socio-cultural changes. Yet, in the midst this seeming turmoil, the nation's civil society and varieties of 'civic service', 'volunteerism' and 'social action' have thrived and grown. The social and political inclinations of the nation's youth, in particular, have had profound impact on historic and current events, including a major role in support of a potentially powerful, though short-lived National Development Service movement during the decade of the 1970s. This paper documents the rise of civic service and volunteerism in Nepal, and discusses some of its manifestations and impacts.

Beginning in the early 1950s, as Nepal turned away from a century of repression and stagnation and opened up to outside influences, and as modern systems of education and political action began to develop, the nation's students became seriously involved in causes and movements that injected change and innovation into the social development scene. During most of the 1970s, the Nepal government through the Tribhuvan University inaugurated a creative youth civic service program called NDS, the National Development Service (*Rastriya Bikas Sewa*). First

inaugurated in the early part of the decade, the NDS grew to enjoy phenomenal support until the end of the decade when adverse political concerns forced its premature closure. Despite its short life span, the NDS is still remembered today as a model program of civic service.

The NDS is considered by many to have been a catalytic social development experiment in the life of the nation. It was founded in association with the New Education System Plan of 1971 (NESP). Under that program, all post graduate students were required to dedicate one year during their Masters degree studies to service in a rural community. At first, the NDS was vigorously resisted by students who saw it as an unwarranted disruption of their studies and career development, but as the first year's participants returned to campus from the rural communities their enthusiasm and support for NDS sparked a reversal in student interest, and it quickly became a hallmark of development and modernity, with strong and lasting support across the university and in the broader society.

The NDS had profound effects upon both its participants and host communities and, it is argued, on the development of the strong civil society movement that arose immediately after the 1990 national 'Movement to Restore Democracy'. Since then, Nepal has experienced a concerted effort to effect a democratic polity (with difficulty) and an active civil society (with relative ease). Some observers believe that the NDS experience created a certain 'civic space' in the society, which was rapidly filled by community-based organizations (CBOs) at the local level, and various group-based federations, networks, NGOs and social movements at local, regional and national levels (Biggs, Gurung & Messerschmidt 2004), many of which have been founded on an ethic of 'civic service'.

### The Cultural-Historical Context of Civic Service and Volunteerism in Nepal

Civic service (volunteer service to society) is not new in Nepal. It is built upon a strong cultural heritage. There's a story that every Nepali school child knows, about charity, service and volunteerism. It describes a village grasscutter, materially poor but rich in spirit who, by digging a spring for drinking water created a monumental legacy for all. The story

has been immortalized in what is probably the best known short poem in Nepali: Ghāsi Kuwa ('The Grass Cutter's Well') by Bhanubhakta, Nepal's 19<sup>th</sup> Century 'Pioneer Poet'. In English translation, the poem begins:

*Devoting his life to cutting grass, he earned some money, and  
wishing to be remembered, dug a well.*

*The grass cutter is so poor, but what spirit! And I,  
Bhanubhakta, have done nothing with my good fortune.*

*Of wells, inns or resthouses I have made none. All my wealth  
lies at home.*

*And from this grass cutter, what do we learn? That it's a  
shame to sit idle doing no good deed.*

Digging a spring or well (kuwa, inar), constructing a fountain or waterspout (pani dharo), building and maintaining a shady trailside resting place (chautaro) or a resthouse (pati, pauwa), and contributing free labor (shramadan) to public works, are all traditional acts of volunteerism, good neighborliness, public service, and charity, which many Nepalis aspire to perform or achieve before they die. The high value of doing good things and serving others is captured in such terms as paropakar garnu ('to do selfless service for others'), swechhalé paropakar garnu ('to serve selflessly and freely, of one's own will', 'volunteerism'), and swayamsewa garnu ('to serve others of one's own accord', 'to volunteer'; i.e., the 'act of serving'). It is only a small step from such simple acts of duty and thoughtfulness to more expansive forms of civic service.<sup>5</sup>

The tradition of voluntarily serving others has deep roots in Nepal and across South Asia. In contemporary times, disrupted and distorted by social, political and economic strife, the origins of the volunteer spirit and civic service are sometimes forgotten. Much of what passes for civic service nowadays, through community-based organizations (CBOs), local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society organizations (CSOs) is thought by some to be new and novel. 'Except for a few,' writes one observer, 'all the NGOs have no roots in the native soil. They are the inventions of donor agencies' (Maskay 2000:106).

We take a more positive view, grounded in historical tradition—that modern civil society organizations in Nepal are founded upon a long, strong and proud tradition of civic service, originating ages before such terms as 'CBO' and 'NGO' were invented. We agree with those who point out that modern Nepalese NGOs have deep roots in temple-based endowments and trusts such as traditional guthis (Timilsina 2000:1) and in similar public-minded associations (samsthan). 'Modern NGOs of Nepal,' writes Ghimire (2000:212) 'are basically transformed Guthis [Trusts], and are an outcome of the 20<sup>th</sup> century social transformation movement of South Asia', although most have been transformed recently towards 'a development orientation [with] global interaction and assistance'.<sup>6</sup>

### **Civic Service Movements in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Nepal**

The culturally ingrained spirit of civic service and volunteerism saw its first public expression in Nepal beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, under the leadership of several prominent individuals, each of whose pioneering spirit had great effects in generating a civic service awakening in Nepal (Chand 1998:49). One was Tulsi Meher, a follower of Gandhi, who has been called the 'Founding Father' of Nepal's NGO movement. His Charkha Movement was one of Nepal's first local NGOs (Chand 1998, Maskay 1998:75). Another was Khagendra Bahadur Basnet, who founded the Disabled Society of Nepal. Yet another was Daya Bir Singh Kansakar, who established a voluntary medical dispensary called Paropakar Aushadhalaya. Kansakar, until his recent death in 2001 at age 90 was considered one of modern Nepal's best examples of selfless service to others (Limbu 2001). His initial organization was later transformed into the well-known Paropakar Samsthan (Paropakar Organization) consisting of an orphanage, ambulance service, maternity hospital, and secondary school. Both Kansakar and Tulsi Meher and their respective movements had great effects in generating a civic service awakening in Nepal (Chand 1998:49 & 2000).

Sometimes volunteer service groups arise out of disaster events. Nepal's original Paropakar medical dispensary, for example, was founded during the cholera epidemic in 1948. In addition, a temporary

service organization called the *Bhukampa Sewa Dal* was organized immediately after the devastating Nepal-Bihar earthquake of 1934 to help cope with the effects of homelessness and displacement. Many such groups last only for the duration of the emergency and its immediate aftermath.

In a recent study of development groups in Nepal, a long list of customary voluntary and civic service groups was prepared and is presented below.<sup>7</sup> In that study, a distinction is made between 'customary groups' (longstanding, both 'indigenous' and 'traditional') and 'sponsored groups' (established and supported by development agencies, NGOs, and the like).<sup>8</sup> The large number of customary groups on the list, performing various functions, firmly establishes the fact that there are strong traditions of civic service in Nepal. Most examples predate modern times, although there are a few that are relatively new. The list is illustrative (not exhaustive):

1. Natural Resource Management (e.g., communal forest, pasture, and irrigation management, etc., including resource processing \_ ban samiti is an example );
2. Agriculture, Horticulture, Livestock and Fisheries Management (e.g., production and income generation, and temporary field labor, etc. \_ parma and nogar are examples);
3. Savings & Credit (e.g., mutual aid, rotating credit, etc. \_ dhikur/dhikudi is an example);
4. Education & Human Resource Development (e.g., local school management, indigenous language preservation, non-formal and functional education, etc. \_ cheli-beti is an example);
5. Community Multi-Purpose & Support (e.g., settlement, hamlet or tol management; caste, ethnic and clan affairs management and development; also temple affairs and festival management; funeral and graveyard management; welfare and philanthropy \_ guthis are an example);
6. Health, Emergency Management (e.g., community health, and emergency response \_ Bhukampa Sewa Dal, noted above, is an example);

7. Dispute & Conflict Management (e.g., pancha bhaladmi and dharma panchayat)
8. Children & Youth Affairs (e.g., san/thuli samuha and rodi);
9. Infrastructure Development & Management (e.g., trail and bridge management, canal management, drinking water system management, etc. \_ khane pani samiti is an example);
10. Enterprise & Income Generation (e.g., local money raising and entertainment \_ ama samuha, sorathi nach and Krishna charitra are examples); and
11. Other, Miscellaneous

Some of the voluntary organizations and movements listed above have relatively short, ephemeral life spans, often formed on a seasonal basis or in response to a crisis. But a great many of them are more permanent, lasting many generations. Some are motivated by communal solidarity, others by personal feelings of religious service or generosity. Most are localized at the neighborhood level, and many are based on ethnic group or clan/lineage identity. A few crosscut the boundaries of class, caste, ethnicity and gender. All tend to be bound together by the crosscutting ties of mutual friendship or interpersonal loyalty, by good neighborliness, and by trust—a key ingredient to the survival of all self-help groups and volunteer service societies. 'Trust', in the sense of reliance, responsibility, confidence and authority, is the foundation stone underlying volunteerism and, indeed, all of civil society (Fukuyama 1995; see also Brown 1999:17ff; Wilson and Musick 1999). Virtually all such groups or movements noted for Nepal fit the concept of 'civic service', which we define as an organized period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national or world community, recognized and valued by society, with minimal monetary compensation to the participant (after Sherraden 2001a:2; see also Sherraden, Moore & Cho 2002.)

None of the examples from Nepal listed above involve reward other than feelings of good-neighborliness, self-esteem and satisfaction. But, taken together, they set the socio-cultural stage upon which the Nepal government launched the NDS in the 1970s.

### **Rise of Nepal's National Development Service (NDS)**

The NDS was created as an integral part of the New Education System Plan of 1971 (NESP), a central feature in the government's attempt to modernize education and development.<sup>9</sup> An early NDS volunteer and noted Nepalese diplomat and educator has said that the NDS 'was a great program, with the students making such rapid changes in the villages! It brought important political, social and economic exchange and awareness...' And an international volunteer and life-long development worker posted to Nepal has observed that 'NDS was perhaps the best thing that Nepal ever did for rural development... If you ever meet people working in rural development in Nepal who seem to stand out from the pack, just ask them if they were in the NDS. Chances are that they were, and remember it as transformational in their lives...' These statements indicate, first hand, how important the 1970s NDS program is still considered in Nepal today, by Nepalese and knowledgeable expatriates, alike.

The Nepal experience with NDS must also be examined in terms of its political significance, an important aspect of volunteerism in some societies. It may not be universal but, in both the development and the premature demise of the NDS, politics and Nepal's struggle to create a Democracy have played significant roles. The NDS was begun on a pilot basis in 1972, inaugurated in 1974, and enthusiastically sustained until 1979. Despite its short life, it provided a vital and significant learning experience both for the participating youth and their host communities, and an early breeding ground for Democracy and a vital civil society that, by definition, accompanies Democracy. In the opinion of many, it was an unquestionably successful student study service program (Aditya & Karmacharya 1988, Karmacharya 1980, Pradhan 1978, Shrestha 2002, Upadhyay et al 1989, Vaidya 1978 & 1992a, 1992b).

### **Inception and Design**

The origins of the NDS are often attributed to the 'noble philosophy' and inspiration of Nepal's late King Birendra (1945-2001), when he was Crown Prince. Formal plans for a national development study service first emerged in 1971 as an integral part of the NESP. This education plan was intended to remove some of the defects of Nepal's older system

of learning that was increasingly seen as insufficient to meet the nation's growing development needs. It was also designed to better prepare youth for public service in the development of the nation, as a training ground for the civil service.

The NDS motto was 'Education for Development' and its vocational and development service goals were so closely linked that at first it was considered anti-intellectual and un-academic. It appeared as a very traditional and hierarchical structure based on a bureaucratic view of knowledge systems. That, and the added fact that it was mandatory, at first aggravated some students who saw it as a system of national conscription (not unlike military conscription) and as an unwarranted interruption in the midst of their formal studies. Although resistance was expressed at first, after the return of the first volunteers from the field and their convincing accounts of its importance and promise in socio-political terms, the NDS became embraced positively as a cause célèbre among the students. Later in the decade, it was reported that 96% of future participants sampled (i.e., incoming new students) were enthusiastic about joining the NDS (Pradhan 1978: 174-175).<sup>10</sup>

All Masters level students enrolled in Tribhuvan University, then the nation's only postgraduate educational institution, had to participate. Completion of a year's service and final written report counted for one of the nine papers required to earn the degree. Service began with training and orientation, followed by a mandatory 10 months in a rural community (although some students stayed longer). It ended by return to campus and submission of the final report. Assignment to remote areas was given priority. Most students were sent out to teach, and were typically posted together in groups of two or three. Their work was overseen by the local school headmaster and the district education officer, and by a supervisor who occasionally visited them from Kathmandu.

The program's operating expenses were funded entirely by the government, and were increased annually (see Table 1). The only outside help came from a few U.N. agencies and the Canadian IDRC who together provided minor logistics support, consulting services, some publications costs, a few vehicles, and some field supplies for the

Table 1. Synopsis of Nepal's National Development Service (NDS), 1972-1979

New Education System Plan (NESP) launched	NDS Directorate established	Pilot program tested	NDS formally launched	NDS operating normally			NDS formally closed
1971	1972	1974	1974-75	1975-76	1976-77	1977-78	1978-79
	Batch:	pilot	1 <sup>st</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup> summer	5 <sup>th</sup> winter
	Number of participants:	22	212	416	356	519	665
	Participation by gender:	f m	f m	f m	f m	f m	f m
	Number of districts:	0	54	88	87	107	124
	Number of villages:	3	27	35	33	71	72
	Annual budgets (NRs):	14	124	324	189	670	414
		n/a	1,700,182	3,124,444	2,734,523	3,846,386	6,090,563
<b>Inspiration:</b>	Similar to study service schemes operating at the time in Ethiopia and other countries. Encouraged and supported by royalty. First met with suspicion, then enthusiastically supported by students.	<b>Objectives:</b>	Make education broader in outlook, more practical, attuned to national development needs.	<b>Requirements:</b>	Mandatory service as part of Masters degree program.	<b>Original 4-Corps Design</b>	<b>Total Students:</b>
<b>Funding:</b>	Nepal Government, plus a little support with materials and logistics from donor agencies, through Tribhuvan University.	Encourage students to assist in rural development activities.	2 months orientation and training.	2 months orientation and training.	Education Service Corps	Health Service Corps	2,927 (22% f, 78% m)
		Give students opportunity to interact with the rural populations.	10-months assignment to rural districts.	10-months assignment to rural districts.	Agriculture Service Corps	Construction Corps	Total Expenditure (1974-79): NRs 17,406,099 (c. US\$800,000)
		Give students practical development experience	Prepare village profile, teaching, special projects, final report.	Prepare village profile, teaching, special projects, final report.	Only the Education Service Corps was fielded between 1972 and 1979.		Postings: To 1,735 villages in 72 of Nepal's 75 districts

**Sources:** Pradhan et al 1978; Aditya & Karmacharya 1988; Vaidya 1992, 2002; Shrestha & Upadhyay 2002; NDS Staff 1988. Some minor differences in statistics exist between these sources. f = female m = male

participants. Other than this, NDS was proudly promoted as a program conceived, funded and administered by the Nepalese (Poudyal 1979:64) in the well-established spirit of 'self-help' (on a national scale).

An NDS Directorate was established in 1972, and the first two years were a time of trial, error, correction and fine-tuning. It began with 22 volunteers who were posted to nearby rural communities on a trial basis. The program was formally inaugurated in July 1974, and a further 212 students were sent out. Between 1972 and 1979 (when the program was suddenly closed), nearly 3,000 students were involved. Altogether, 72 of Nepal's 75 districts received NDS volunteers (Table 1).

### Program Objectives and Activities

The plan's declared objective was 'to supply trained manpower for national development', led by the public sector, 'with the priority to be given, among others, to the "Promotion of active students' participation in nation building"' (Vaidya 1992b:129, quoting the New Education System Plan of 1971; also Chand 1988:109). The unwritten objective was to 'make the community the classroom' (Fussell & Quarmby 1974, in Chand 1988:109; and Poudyal 1979). Its designers wanted to assure that higher education would reflect more than 'theoretical bookish knowledge' by exposing young students to the realities of life and of development in the rural areas. Each student received a modest monthly stipend and a few field supplies. The stipend was enough to cover living expenses in the village, not enough to live any better than the average villager. It did not allow anything left over to save. The formal objectives and a synopsis of the program are given in Table 1.

The NDS objectives have been interpreted in two complementary ways. For one, it was an attempt to induce change in the outlook and skills of the nation's educated youth by building upon Nepal's traditional culture of service. For another, it was designed to affect the attitudes and develop the skills of the rural populace, under the rubric of self-help development and modernization. While the latter objective is not very clearly articulated in official documents, it is generally acknowledged that the program was all about awareness-raising among the rural poor, assisting them to more fully utilize their local resources, and to help instill in their lives and communities a more active participation in the

development process and a strengthening of national unity (Vaidya 1992b:132, NDS Staff 1988:7). Recent discussion underscores the importance of civic service in general for its impact not only on the server but also on the direct and indirect beneficiaries in communities where service is being performed (Perry & Thomson 2004).

The initial plan was to field NDS volunteers in four sectors: health, education, agriculture and construction (engineering). During its short life, however, only the education corps was mobilized. Besides teaching, each volunteer had to complete a village profile, to link theory and practice as well as to demonstrate academic competence and experience rural reality. The profile's baseline data were intended to help planners identify local needs for development.

Many NDS volunteers also worked on small technical and social development projects in their communities. They assisted on small scale construction works, agricultural improvements, drinking water schemes, minor irrigation projects, bridge building, family planning, public health education and sanitation, literacy, and the prevention of alcoholism and gambling, for example (Pradhan 1978:273-274 & passim, Poudyal 1979, Karmacharya 1980, Aditya & Karmacharya 1988).

### **NDS Impact on Both Student and Rural Communities**

That the NDS program was 'successful' in several ways is widely accepted in Nepal. Unfortunately, only two impact assessments of the NDS exist (Pradhan 1978, Karmacharya 1980). One focuses mostly on initial impressions of the student volunteers and their rural village hosts, the other on economic aspects. In addition, one early NDS Director conducted a limited cost-benefit analysis after the first few years. He determined that the return to the nation was four times the investment (Vaidya 1978).

Given the dearth of studies, the subject needs further analysis from one or more independent sources. No studies exist, for example, of the program's impacts on local economy, on social structure or politics, on community organizations or the level of social capital formation, or about the long-term social and political effects of involvement on the participants themselves.

The program's impacts in these areas are largely conjectural, based on a few brief observations at the time (Baral 1977, Fussell & Quarmby 1974, Poudyal 1979, Poudyal and Tiwari 1978, Vaidya 1978), as well as several more recent retrospective observations (Chand 1988, Gurung 1988, NDS Staff 1988, Pradhan 1988, Shrestha & Upadhyay 2002, Shrestha & Upadhyay et al 2002, Vaidya 1992a,b & 2002), and on extensive interviews. Extrapolating from these sources, it appears that the NDS served well to introduce students to rural conditions and realities, to enhance rural education in selected villages and schools, and to bring some of the rural populace more closely into the development dialogue.

The NDS program helped create social capital in participating communities and schools, thus creating a better atmosphere in which to build trust and reciprocity among citizens and between local communities and development agencies. Similar trends have been noted in the international literature on volunteering (see Smith: para 24-28). Drogosz (2003:250) summarizes the link between civic service and social capital: 'We cannot strengthen the ties that bind us as a nation unless our civic duty is fostered by 'bridging' social capital that helps us create links across groups. There is a 'strength in weak ties' that stretch across lines of race, class, and religion since these weak ties allow us to recognize our dependence on one another so we can become more than communities of strangers'.

NDS provided just such an opportunity for bridging social capital where students and citizens in impoverished rural communities forged new alliances. It also raised political consciousness and the potential to change the nature of existing and highly conservative political culture. The new alliances, however, threatened to dismantle existing traditions, the status quo, and old entrenched relationships between local elites and the monarchy. This was one of the main reasons that the life of the NDS was cut short in 1979. That it was closed before it was sufficiently mature is considered by many observers to be one of the great tragedies of Nepal's recent socio-political history.

For the volunteers themselves, NDS service provided a type of social development experience that led directly to the enhancement of human capital. It subsequently influenced lifestyle choices and career directions of many participants. Razzaque, Masud and Mian (1978:5)

point out that NDS students, predominantly of urban backgrounds, had a unique opportunity to grasp 'the country's problems and assess actual needs in preparation for careers in government service after graduating. Many NDS graduates went on to become well known leaders, academicians and professionals, including participatory development practitioners and human rights activists. During their year long exposure to the facts and conditions of rural life, the volunteers made new friends, learned new skills and enhanced their own self-confidence and respect. NDS is generally acknowledged to have raised awareness and personal satisfaction among participants. The value of volunteering in creating social and human capital is widely noted in the literature (cf. Smith 1999: para 29-31).

The NDS program also impacted on villagers, district administrators, traditional leaders and local school teachers, as well as on university teachers and the students' parents. Its impact upon traditional local leadership, however, was mixed and often controversial. When the student volunteers first arrived in the villages, many of them were perceived as a threat to the entrenched and powerful local leaders of a system where development activities were closely guarded and controlled, where development allocations were well-kept secrets, and where the village elite monopolized the flow of information and largesse. Into this traditional scene came energetic university students who encouraged participation and practiced consultation, transparency, trust and sharing (all deeply political), serving as good communicators, facilitators and motivators. They encouraged locals to undertake a number of self-help development activities. As they raised the consciousness of many villagers, the old style of closed and unaccountable leadership came under scrutiny. As Pradhan has noted (1988:10-12): 'The villagers would ask themselves why the NDS students are so dedicated [to] village development activities despite the fact that they were not from the village... [while, in contrast] the local leadership did not have the same amount of dedication...'

Furthermore, NDS volunteer activities included campaigns against usury, polygamy, child marriage, bonded labor, and other 'social evils' such as alcoholism and gambling, the profits of which often lined the pockets powerful local elites. Thus, while it threatened the existing

power structure, the NDS experience also had the potential for significant social and political change.

The program's impact on rural schoolteachers was also significant. In many instances, NDS teachers brought improvement to school administration and, by their example, promoted 'academic values' such as holding class regularly, facilitating a proper examination system and keeping good records (Pradhan 1988).

Among the 385 villagers and 111 local authorities interviewed during Pradhan's 1978 assessment, researchers found near unanimous support of the program.<sup>11</sup> Local support was made explicit when almost all villagers interviewed favored continuing the NDS program in future. When asked why, they referred to the role of volunteers in disseminating new information and ideas, in raising people's consciousness by promoting literacy, in understanding the priority needs of the villages and pursuing appropriate development programs, and in expressing cooperation and an enthusiastic 'voluntary spirit'. And, because they were different from local leaders, as generally selfless, creative and informative friends, the villagers did not want to lose their company (Pradhan 1988 & 1978).

Former directors of the NDS evaluated volunteers' impacts on host villages in similarly positive terms. The students were respected locally as 'catalysts of reform and change'. They brought awareness to the villages and were looked upon very positively, as people in whom the villagers could confide and place their trust. Implicit in these observations is recognition of the diverse and versatile qualities of the volunteers.

Respect for Nepal's NDS program also spread internationally. Civic service planners, leaders and administrators from as close as India and as distant as the United States looked closely at the Nepal NDS as a model program of volunteerism. Its leaders were invited abroad, to Indonesia and the Philippines for example, to describe and discuss the Nepal program, and give advice to others. UNESCO formally praised it, and it was written up for a broad audience (see Fussell & Quarmby 1977, Poudyal & Tiwari 1978, Razzaque, Masud & Mian 1978, Vaidya 1992a,b).

Despite the largely positive reflections on the NDS at home and abroad, a few negative criticisms have also been voiced. The program's inability to spur revision and improvements in university education, for example, is noted by both Shrestha (1988) and Mishra (1988). Mishra describes it like 'a horse that trotted briskly, often unaware of its destination...' and as 'a great opportunity lost' (1988:102-103). Mild expressions of suspicion have also been discussed, that in some of the remote districts the NDS experience may have raised unfulfilled expectations that, in turn, fueled the sort of rural discontent that found its expression two decades later in the start of Nepal's debilitating Maoist insurgency. This sort of criticism, however, can be brought against any democratic movement, NGO or government aid project trying to address inequities and the causes of poverty.

Amidst all the praise for NDS, one important outcome of this national youth service program has been overlooked—the role students played in mobilizing communities and how new alliance between students and villagers arose as credible threats to local elites that were aligned with the monarchy. Such threats put in motion a series of events that are still unfolding in Nepal, a society that by any measure is dominated by a narrow elite, and disenfranchised masses. It is important to recognize the role of NDS in stirring the seemingly calm waters of Nepalese society.<sup>12</sup>

### **NDS and the Interplay of Students and National Politics**

Government-sponsored civic service programs always operate within a political context. While the literature on volunteerism generally avoids or neglects reference to its political ramifications, in Nepal the politics of NDS and the national political context within which the NDS was created, operated and closed down are important to understand. The ups and downs of national politics, including volatile student movements, combined with the activities of the banned political parties, various other socio-political activism, and the inevitable difficulties and disappointments that arose during the decade of the 1970s, were all associated with how the NDS was viewed, and ultimately influenced its impacts.

To understand the situation behind the design and implementation of the NDS the reader must forebear a brief (simplified) introduction to the recent history of Nepalese socio-politics. In 1960 King Mahendra abolished the nation's first struggling multiparty parliamentary system and replaced it with a partyless Panchayat system, sometimes characterized as a form of 'guided democracy'.<sup>13</sup> Because all political parties were banned, there was only one official or legal point of national allegiance and political articulation—the partyless Panchayat system, with the royal palace at its apex.

The new Panchayat system was based upon popularly elected village and municipal assemblies (Panchayats) that articulated up to district assemblies. At the center was the national assembly, the majority of whose members were elected by District Panchayat members from among themselves. For three decades, from the early 1960s through the national referendum of 1980, to the 'Movement to Restore Democracy' of 1989-90, powerful and largely conservative Panchayat leaders called 'Panchas', and various government administrators and functionaries, arose within the system to dominate and control both local and national politics.

A relative insider and one of the severest critics of Nepal's royal rule has categorized Nepal's modern style of governance in Weberian terms as a 'patrimonial system' focused on the royal palace in Kathmandu (Shah 1982 & 1993). He describes the manner of palace rule under the Panchayat system as a highly authoritarian style of 'peremptory command' (hukumi shashan), much the same as in autocratic Rana times prior to the revolution of 1950-51. The populace remained 'subjects' beholden to the king and the powerful elites, though many were chafing to become 'citizens' under a more truly democratic form of sovereignty.

It is not hard to imagine the Panchayat era, 1960-1990, as a time of political turmoil and struggle. 'The regime's inability to achieve qualitative changes in the economic conditions of the people despite its uninterrupted monopoly of power... added to the woes of the people generally' (Baral 1993:41-42). Despite their being banned, political parties existed, nonetheless—illegal and underground. There were also several student constituencies—active, open and above ground, which



reflected and often served as mouthpieces for the banned political parties (Baral 1993:46).

Into this political stew, the government attempted sincerely but ineffectually to create change and development, especially in the educational sector. Within a few years of its promulgation, however, the New Education System Plan (NESP) of 1971 was considered a failure, a fact that did not bode well for its NDS component. While the government's avowed goal was sweeping social and economic change and national unity, and while some profound changes in Nepalese society did occur, political and social life was guided from a citadel of conservatism beneath which personal and political freedoms remained severely restricted. The overarching goal of encouraging education and development, and of broadening social perspectives, was thwarted by the very fact of the severe constraints the leaders placed on society and politics.

It was in this paradoxical atmosphere that the NDS was launched, surprisingly succeeded (despite the failure of the rest of the NESP), and was summarily closed, all within little more than half a decade. Notwithstanding the glowing accounts of local support for NDS volunteers, many district and local leaders (the Panchas) watched with growing alarm as student volunteers brought social and political awareness into rural communities. A few volunteers were even reprimanded for their outspoken contempt of certain powerful, corrupt or oppressive Panchas. The NDS was supposed to be free from politics, political pressures and local rivalries (Pradhan 1988:4); but clearly, in the overheated political environment of the times, political neutrality by students in far off rural villages was very difficult to monitor or achieve.

By the end of the 1970s, social and political life in the capital, Kathmandu, and in other cities and towns around the kingdom was also considerably unsettled. Strikes and other confrontational civil actions were being staged almost daily against an overriding incompetence and corruption in government. The Panchayat system was a failure, and the people wanted to return to a multiparty parliamentary democracy. On May 23, 1979, a violent confrontation occurred in Kathmandu between a combined force of police and army troops and an estimated 20 to 30 thousand university students. It was the culmination and expression of a deep and growing discontent among the citizenry. The following

morning, King Birendra, in a bid to quell the unrest, made a famous royal proclamation, announcing that a national referendum would be held to choose between continuing the partyless Panchayat system with suitable reforms, or reinstating the multiparty system of parliamentary democracy (Shah 1993:51-52).

### **The Fall of NDS**

The king's announcement alarmed many Panchas and other powerful politicians. While they did not dare speak out against the king's will, their actions nonetheless had an immediate and chilling effect upon the NDS. Some Panchas were convinced (with good cause) that NDS students would try to persuade rural voters to vote against the existing system and select the multiparty option instead. If that happened, their local power and position would be doomed. What the Panchas least wanted was what some NDS volunteers encouraged grassroots consultation and ownership of development initiatives, opposing (head-on) a culture of partisanship and ignorance of democratic principles. Although they could not stop the referendum, the Panchas and others were able to exaggerate the gravity of the situation (the threat to their power) and persuade some of the very conservative decision-makers in Kathmandu to force the university to withdraw the NDS.

Under the circumstances, King Birendra backed its closure. His palace directive forced the NDS Director to order all NDS participants home immediately, for their 'physical protection', it was said. In the 'official' view, NDS was closed due to funding problems, but few people believed it. The polite reason, reported in the news media, was 'to keep the NDS above the controversy in the context of the proposed national referendum' (The Rising Nepal, Kathmandu, June 29 1979, quoted by Poudyal 1979). Most informants interviewed for this study put it more bluntly: 'Closing the NDS was basically a political decision, a political act.'<sup>14</sup>

Earlier, we pointed out that the NDS, as part of the new educational plan of the 1970s, was implicitly designed to prepare the nation's youth for public (or civic) service. Paradoxically, this was the root of its undoing. It was created and deployed under conditions not fully conducive to the sort of democratic citizenship that both the students and

villagers began exercising. Once the NDS its participants experienced realities of life in the far-flung districts of the realm, however, the disjuncture between state-sponsored ideal of 'Democracy' and the democratic citizenship fostered in students and ordinary citizens threatened the power and privilege of the few, and eventually contributed to its demise.

Nepal's first serious nationwide civic service movement, was summarily abandoned in 1979, but its positive influence on so many lives and communities has not been forgotten. Its popularity and its place in the psyche of the nation, never waned, though they remained in abeyance. It is interesting to note that the short saga of the NDS—from first doubts and resistance, to enthusiastic support and success, to its threat against the establishment and its overnight closure, and its role in student and national politics of the 1970s—is strangely absent from most socio-political commentaries and recent historical analyses. If noted at all, the mention is typically a brief post mortem (e.g., in Maskay 1998:99-100). The reasons for its absence from contemporary literature seems clear enough. For one, much of that literature is written by outsiders or younger scholars without historic perspective. And, for another, the NDS was part of the failed New Education System Plan, virtually all formal reference to which has died with the erasure of the memories of that by-gone and (now) irrelevant plan.

### **A Weak Revival, 1983 to 1991**

In 1983, after a three-year hiatus, the NDS Directorate was reopened at Tribhuvan University and a 'special crash program' version of NDS was reinstated. It lasted until 1991, and involved several thousand more Masters level students. But it was a tepid follow-on to the original NDS, watered down to a three months assignment, only one month of which was spent in a rural community, barely enough time to prepare the required village profile. During the interlude little remained of the original NDS objectives, spirit, or local self-help development activities that had characterized its predecessor. This was a classic example of redesigning a pre-existing model but neglecting to retain its 'soul'. The revived program was poorly planned and coordinated, and was run with minimal supervision, monitoring or evaluation. The original NDS spirit

(*rastriyatako bhavana*) was gone. What remained, in the words of some former NDS officials and volunteers, was a weak miniature NDS—'a formality', 'nominal and symbolic'.

Looking back on the NDS in its heyday, one former director has made this terse observation: 'The king's people were very sensitive to the program. The courtiers were more conservative than the king.'

Ultimately, politics prevailed, for by the late 1980s the Panchayat system was under its most serious threat to its survival so far, and conservative leaders and palace courtiers were on the defensive. Anti-Panchayat sentiments were heating up, only this time they led directly into the successful 'Peoples Movement for the Restoration of Democracy' of 1989-90. Politically, the timing for a rejuvenated NDS program was all off; the context was not right.

After the new era of Democracy began in Nepal in 1990, the NDS died a quiet death. Meanwhile, the political unity that had won Democracy quickly dissolved back into contending factions. With party politics now legal and in the open, student strikes and demonstrations subsided. But, the new Democracy suffered one crisis after another and from 1996 onwards it was dogged by a growing Maoist insurgency in the rural areas, paralleled by corruption and inept leadership at the center. (And, since October 2002, there have been no local elections and local government at the VDC level has been on hold.) All of this has prevented political leaders and the government from moving forward constructively, aggressively, with programs of rural development and poverty alleviation.

But it has not stopped many well meaning citizens, some of them former NDS volunteers imbued with the spirit of civic service, to take advantage of both the socio-political vacuum and the new civil freedoms that came with Democracy, to begin to form a strong civil society movement. The 'civic space' created under the NDS was now becoming creatively filled by a spectacular rise of non-governmental organizations (NGOs, CBOs and CSOs). Many of them were led by or supported by former NDS volunteers (and by others inspired by their example). Thus, in an important sense, the notion of social capital bridging groups (Drogosz 2003) can be expanded to one that also bridges time.

During the decade of the 1990s, the organization responsible for registering NGOs, the Social Welfare Council (formerly the Social Service National Coordination Council) recorded and certified a tremendous surge of civic service activities. Prior to the 1990 Democracy Movement, at a time when the Panchayat system was highly distrustful of citizen movements, the council recorded less than 200 local and national NGOs in Nepal. A decade later, however, it recorded almost 9,000 NGOs, in ten categories of which the largest was Community Development (SWC 1999-2000).<sup>15</sup> It was during this recent burst of NGO and civic service spirit that the NDS was successfully rejuvenated in a new form.

### **NDS Reincarnated: The NDVS**

In 1998, amidst the phenomenal growth of Nepal's civil society institutions, the National Planning Commission decided (again) to revive the NDS, and after a period of planning, the new 'National Development Volunteer Service' (NDVS) was formally inaugurated in April 2000, in time to join in celebration of the International Year of Volunteers 2001. This time, a decade after the success of the Democracy Movement, Nepal's political climate was in some respects more favorable, more progressive, and the objectives of the new student volunteer were more broadly conceived than earlier (compare Aditya & Karmacharya 1988, Upadhyay et al 1989).

The first NDVS participants were fielded in a pilot program in 1998. Since then, well over 500 volunteers have been mobilized and posted widely across the mountain, hill and lowland districts of Nepal. Unlike its direct predecessor, the NDS, these volunteers are not active students, but are mostly new graduates armed with technical skills in agriculture, engineering, solar energy, health sciences, and water management, along with a few from liberal arts, management and planning. This emphasis on technical expertise marks one of the basic differences between the new NDVS and the old NDS, which was more of a rural teacher corps.

The NDVS strictly prohibits political activism and volunteers must sign a sworn statement not to engage in political affairs of any kind. From the perspective of the state, one of the key lessons learned from the NDS is that overt involvement of participants in political activities, even

the expression of a political opinion, is counter productive to the neutrality that volunteers should maintain (Shrestha & Upadhyay 2002).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The case of national service in Nepal underscores the importance of examining the social and political context into which service is introduced. Service programs can be a source of widespread societal change and a vehicle for expressing discontent with the status quo. Inextricable links between civic service and democratic citizenship have been noted in the literature, for the intent of civic service is often not only to promote democratic citizenship but also bring social change through new institutional arrangements (Perry & Thomson 2004; Dionne, Drogosz & Litan 2003).

If a significant consequence of civic service is to foster democratic citizenship, then, as the NDS case suggests, it is necessary to examine the nature and life course of service programs in repressive and undemocratic regimes that offer very little in the form of democratic expression to its citizens. In a Nepal with few opportunities to express dissent or mobilize communities outside of the traditional hierarchies, the NDS provided a ready-made vehicle for youth and rural poor to organize and mount a credible threat to the status quo. While national service is not usually envisioned as a vehicle for political activism, and on the face of it, curtailing activism seems appropriate, it is important to underscore that when avenues for democratic participation are few, as in the case of Nepal, national service programs can play a significant role in manifesting the urge to assert democratic citizenship. Therefore, in the absence of true democratization, Nepal's first formal civic service program was a welcome opportunity to assert citizenship rights, though it later become a casualty of its own success in fostering the beginnings of democratization.

The expectations and aspirations of volunteers to address social and economic disparities soared directly because of their participation in NDS. The NDS began dismantling the historical divide between the privileged and the poor, although certainly not by design, and only briefly. Student volunteers were able to instigate a more active participation by ordinary citizens—the economically and socially

impoverished and excluded—in the affairs of their respective communities. A direct challenge to local elite (a singular source of state power) and indirectly to the state quickly diminished the prospects of a national service that was giving voice to an independent civil society. NDS was quickly dismantled, but the ripples it created in Nepalese politics and society later were foundational to the Democracy Movement and the opening of civic space that came with it, and the still unfolding struggle for Democracy in Nepal.

Here we want to stress that while the NDS merely threatened the status quo, it is evident from current development discourse in Nepal that the dominance of an entrenched political and social elite in Nepal is still pervasive. NDS was important in introducing the ideas of democratic citizenship to far corners of Nepalese society that otherwise had not seen them. Subsequent calls for greater citizenship rights and democracy were not grassroots campaigns, but were, as Brown (1996:211-212) has noted, purely urban: ‘...born out of a compromise between the traditional elite and the professional middle class. The poor were not a party to the compromise. The urban poor participated in Nepal’s revolution in the sense that they gave the leaders of the Jana Andolan [the 1990 ‘Peoples Movement’] leverage over the palace.’

The outcome has been one of continuity, where power and wealth remain elusive to the rural and urban poor, and a narrow elite still governs Nepal. This, however, does not diminish but only strengthens our thesis that (a) national civic service under such conditions can foster democratic citizenship from the grassroots, but that (b) it becomes difficult to sustain such a program when it begins to threaten an entrenched elite and intense scrutiny of the powerful.

We conclude with the idea that civic service is inherently democratic, inviting citizen participation in social development, especially when other roads to democracy are blocked. In Nepal, national service program became the magnet for democratic participation in the absence of other legitimate avenues of democracy. The observations of Clotfelter (1999:10), from an international perspective are that: ‘however politically neutral in their conception, these service programs tend to stir up waves in the pool of politics, especially when they are funded directly

by the government... Much more prominent on the political radar screen, though, are the actions of those recruits.’

Amartya Sen’s call for expanding real freedoms of citizens and the removal of unfreedoms to unleash development seems appropriate even for understanding how national service unfolds in the absence of Democracy (Sen 1999). The case study of Nepal illustrates some of the complexities surrounding a national service program. We contend that if a significant aspect of service is to foster democratic citizenship, then it cannot be divorced from the climate in which it is deployed.

...Citizenship will not be strengthened if service is entirely divorced from politics. Yes, service is essential to civil society and it is part of what makes us citizens. (Drogosz 2003:250-251)

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors acknowledge help from the staff of Nepal’s Tribhuvan University Library, Center for Nepal and Asian Studies, Central Department of Sociology and Anthropology, National Development Volunteer Service and National Planning Commission. We also thank our many informants (former NDS volunteers and educators), and several other key figures in Nepal’s social development and political scene, past and present. Reader comments and suggestions are welcome. Contact: <dmesserschmidt@gmail.com>

#### ENDNOTES

1. For a more extensive version of this paper, describing and analyzing civic service and youth volunteer movements in South Asia, with the Nepal NDS case study, see Yadama & Messerschmidt 2004.
2. Don Messerschmidt is an applied anthropologist, consultant, researcher, writer (and former American Peace Corps Volunteer). He has authored several dozen articles, many reports and several books on Nepal, mostly dealing with development topics.
3. Gautam Yadama is an associate professor in the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, USA.

4. Bhuvan Silwal is currently with the U.N. in Eastern Europe on assignment to a local governance and development project in Albania. In 2001 he served as Nepal National Coordinator for the International Year of Volunteers (IYV) program under the office of the U.N. Volunteers/Nepal. He has considerable experience as an advisor on volunteer affairs in Nepal, including the new National Development Volunteer Service (NDVS).
5. At the root of volunteerism in Nepal are the strong cultural-historical concepts of 'service' (Nepali: *sewa*) and 'duty' (*dharma*) constituted to promote a dharma-based 'good society' where the weak and the powerless are served by those occupying a better position in life (Dahal et al 2002:34-35, Menon, Moore & Sherraden 2002). There is a very thin line between the meaning of 'service' that is freely given and 'duty' that is expected to be given. Engaging in some voluntary 'service' to society is easily interpreted as simply the socially expected performance of one's moral 'duty'.
6. Maskay (who questions any association of Nepal's contemporary civil society movements with past service traditions) saw it slightly differently when he wrote: 'Evidence exists here and there that NGOs existed in Nepal in the remote past, long before the written history of Nepal...' (1998:68).
7. The list is slightly modified, from by Biggs, Gurung & Messerschmidt 2004. It is based on their own research as well as an extensive literature: Bhattachan 1996, 2000 & 2002; Chhetri & Kattel 2004; Dhakal 1994 & 1996; Fisher 1989 & 1991; Gurung (J.) 2000; Gurung (S.M.) 2000; Joshi, Sharma & Thapa 2000; Limbu 2001; Messerschmidt 1979, 1981, 1985, 1986, 1987 & 1995; Pradhan 1983 & 1989; Pun 2001; Regmi 2002; and Shrestha 1999.
8. Bhattachan (1996) designates the same as 'indigenous' and 'induced'. We have adapted 'indigenous', 'traditional' and 'sponsored' from Fisher 1991. *Indigenous* refers to a system (or group) developed within a local community (by insiders), identified as locally-originated, locally-'owned' and 'customary'. *Traditional* implies well established and accepted, usually with some degree of antiquity, something 'old' in the eyes of the beholder, but not necessarily indigenous. *Sponsored* groups are those initiated or 'induced' from outside the host community by projects, programs, government agencies, NGOs or other outside organizations.
9. See Biggs, Gurung & Messerschmidt 2004 for an in-depth discussion.
10. The remaining 4% were undecided due to personal or family concerns, not in opposition to the program.

11. 'Local authorities' are identified as persons related to NDS program, as distinct from local leaders, many of whom were threatened by it. Of the 111 local leaders and 385 villagers surveyed, 100% and 99%, respectively, expressed their favor of the program (Pradhan 1978:275).
12. A recent assessment of the root causes of the Maoist insurgency, from districts where Maoism first arose in Nepal in the mid-1990s, points to local discontent with the status quo and, especially, with the neglect by the palace and royal retainers of local needs and aspirations (Gersony 2003). That study, however, makes no reference to the presence of NDS volunteers during the 1970s. Gersony's reference to outside influences begins, unfortunately, only with the implementation of a large donor-funded development project in 1980. Thus, the likely influence of NDS volunteers in the same districts over the previous decade was ignored.
13. For more detail on the political setting, see Baral 1993, Hofstun et al 1999: 26-45, and Shah 1990 & 1993.
14. In a close vote, the National Referendum resulted in a win for the king's preference to continue the Panchayat system with appropriate reforms although, in the end, it only marked time, one decade, until the popular revolutionary movement to restore Democracy won out in 1990.
15. By 2002 this number had risen to almost 14,000 NGOS affiliated with the Social Welfare Council (Pyakural 2002). Not all, however, are fully functional and professionally sound. This number does not count the scores of international NGOs that also operate in Nepal, many of which, along with international aid agencies, fund much of the national and local NGO community through which they channel specific development activities.

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