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# The Fruits of Panchayat Development

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*(This article is based on the field research conducted in 1987-88 in the western mid-hills of Nepal)*

## Introduction

Development theorists and social scientists including anthropologists are divided over what development is and what it does. Whether development planning and development agencies are a "part of a great collective effort to fight poverty, raise standards of living, and promote one or another version of progress" (Ferguson 1990: 9) or whether development is an apparatus of the elites, ruling groups and capitalists to exploit the masses in any country is an ongoing question. Most contemporary writers on development "fall into one of these two contrasting theoretical camps" (Long 1982 [1977]:9). Just to name a few, Hirschman (1967), Gunnar Myrdal (1970), and Robertson (1984), call planned development a "force for beneficial change" (Ferguson 1990:10). Lappe et al. (1980), Blaikie et al. (1980), on the other hand, view the development apparatus as an exploiting device of the capitalists and their agents which does not eliminate poverty but rather reinforces "the system which in the first place causes poverty" (Ferguson 1990:11).

In Nepal, too, people hold differing views on development, or *vikas*. Development discourses and activities in Nepal leave room for different interpretations. Scholars' views of development range from the liberal democrats' modernization theory to neo-Marxists' dependency theory. The Nepalese government started development planning in the late fifties and early sixties, the hey-day of modernization theory, which combines rational planning, transfer of scientific knowledge and modern technical know-how combined

with modern values and attitudes (Long 1982 [1977]; Worsley 1984), and Nepal seems to have followed the tenets of modernization theory. In 1960 the Panchayat political system replaced the first popularly elected government, allegedly because "(t)he Ministry did not pay any attention to the miserable and poverty-stricken conditions of the people" (Shah: 1967:5). The Panchayat government also appeared committed to bring about changes in the economic and social conditions of the people, to promote nationalism, and to further the legitimacy of the Panchayat political system.

I did not go to the field to investigate development from a particular theoretical perspective, nor did I form any preconceptions about development. I went to see what approach the government had taken, how development was manifest, how the people perceived it, and most importantly, whether development programs had changed people's quality of life. When I say "quality of life" I mean how development was responsible for changes in their economic, social and cultural well-being.

Various *vikas yojanas* (development plans) have been implemented since the mid-fifties. From 1956 to 1988 six Five Year Plans were completed and in 1988-1989, when I was in the field, the Seventh Five Year Plan was half-way through.<sup>1</sup> No plan policy in any of the plan periods specifies any special program for any group nor does it specify any particular area. All the plans have tried to bring about gradual changes in economic and social infrastructure by expanding

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<sup>1</sup> The First Five Year Plan was started in 1956. The Second Plan, which was implemented in 1962, was a three year plan. All the other Plans were Five Year Plans.

development agencies, building transportation and communication systems, and gradually replacing older social rules and customs by the enactment of new laws (e.g. legal abolition of caste system, enactment of land reform act, etc.). There have been both national level projects and district level programs. These have had different impacts on the three villages I studied.

After some discussion of the relationship between development and nationalism I will describe the local level projects and programs which were being implemented in the three villages during the period of my fieldwork. I will examine the national level projects and programs, and explore what the villagers think of those programs. Finally, I will analyze people's responses to development programs and their impact in the villages.

## Development and Nationalism

The word *vikas*, long a part of the day-to-day Nepalese vocabulary, has gained prominence in the national and local media since the introduction of the slogan *vikas ko mul phuTaunu* (to open the fountain of development) in the early seventies. Anyone working in Nepal between 1970 and 1989 would have noticed the use of the word *vikas* in political speeches, in the day-to-day business of government offices, in the local Panchayats, and in local and national papers. One anthropologist rightly observes that, "It has become almost a mantra, repeated by high and low government officials, foreign observers of the contemporary scene and increasingly, the citizenry at large, that "development" now occupies pride of place in the national agenda of Nepal" (Fisher, 1987:29). Despite this, when asked, "What does *vikas* mean?" even those who used the word frequently would fumble for a precise meaning. When pressed, a senior government official, coordinator for one of the integrated development projects, answered: "*Vikas* is anything that we do together for the benefit and progress of Nepal and the Nepalese" (Gonga 1989, personal communication). Although an impromptu response, it captured the essence of development's slogans: 'doing together' 'for Nepal' and 'for the Nepalese.' as the King explained:

Today as ever, we need cohesion, diligence and productive employment rather than clichés and platitudes, the creative ability to confront problems rather than romanticized daydreams. In 1951, the King and the people forged a common bond and fought unitedly to usher in democracy. In the same spirit we have to work

in unison to rally the forces of development in the country. . . Moreover, the onerous task of national development cannot be fulfilled by the efforts of a few individuals. It demands an active and co-ordinated effort on the part of citizens of all strata of society . . .

We have been convinced that the basic problem confronting the nation concerns the development of Nepal and the Nepalese people. We have, accordingly granted the highest priority to economic development.

Let us not forget that Nepal's development depends on the dedication of the Nepalese themselves. This explains why our Panchayat Constitution grants equal opportunities for all our citizens to advance both personal and national interests. . . (King Birendra 1977:34-35, *Proclamations, speeches and messages*, HMG Press, quoted in Borgstrom 1982: 317-319).

The king blends development, nationalism and equal opportunity under the Panchayat system. This tendency to infuse development with nationalism is omnipresent in development discourse. Inauguration speeches and dedication ceremonies try to instill a sense of a shared Nepali nationhood to the people. Government officials replace old non-Nepali place names with Nepali-sounding names in the context of development (Adhikary 1991). For example, when inaugurating a post office at *Arebhanjyang*, the name was changed to *Aryabhanjyang*. *Are* does not mean anything in Nepali, whereas *Arya* is truly Nepali because it means the best people [i.e. Aryans]. Similarly, when inaugurating a newly constructed bridge the river's age-old name *Arung* was changed to *Arun*, invoking the sun to glorify the place.

## The Emergence of the Panchayat

The thirty years between 1960 and 1990 are unique in Nepalese history. The panchayat government replaced an allegedly corrupt and dysfunctional democratically elected government (Shah: 1967). The panchayat government banned all political parties on the grounds that they were "obstacles to this task of creating a favorable climate for the new movement for national reconstructions" (Shah: 1967:9), and also banned any organizations, clubs, and associations that were not sponsored by the government. Any form of leadership and organization independent of the government was

considered a threat to the system and the authority of the new government. People were thus forced to follow centralized authority. Power was so concentrated in the center that local leadership effectively died out. To do anything new or innovative the local leader had to sense whether the government might give its approval. As a result, local leaders lost all initiative. They simply followed government directives. The government not only enjoyed a monopoly of power but also a monopoly of the media. In this environment leadership and independent thinking leading to innovation was blocked. This in turn brought about a loss of leadership, initiative and enthusiasm on the part of the local people.

Bureaucrats at all levels had very little respect for the people, including the elected Panchayat members (except when paying lip-service on formal occasions). As the bureaucrats held power over the people, a bureaucrat could think of himself as the boss of the people rather than a person to serve them. The only person to please was a superior. This situation encouraged officials to seek their own self-interest rather than to give public service.

For nearly three decades, development discourse infused with nationalism was a device for Panchayat politicians to quiet alternative views. National media highlighted government promises and exaggerated development achievements, sustaining this process. However, as the Nepalese people increasingly noticed the discrepancies between the proclaimed gains of development and the realities they experienced, even the normally quiet people in the hills began to protest.

University professors in Kathmandu told me in 1989 that development works were carried on more to sustain the Panchayat political system rather than to develop the country. The discrepancy between what was promised and what was actually done shows that these observations to be correct. It is true that Nepal has limited resources and trained manpower to implement development at village and district levels. But what seems to be the cause of the discrepancy between development talk and actual work is, as Blaikie et al. (1980) put it, "the lack of total commitment on the part of the ruling classes and top bureaucrats to rural development through mobilization of the whole population. . . despite ministerial speeches, public proclamations, and at least verbal encouragement from the Palace itself" (1980: 61).

## Village-Level Programs

### Baugha Gumha

*School.* In Baugha Gumha very few projects have been funded by the government. The one high school was completed seven years ago. According to the villagers the main contribution of the government to this village was to give formal recognition to the school. The school building was built with funds raised from the village and by specific labor contribution from each of the households. The school receives annual government aid of Rs. 72000 (\$2400) that goes to pay part of the salary of the school staff. Although the school was established mainly by the efforts of the Gumha villagers, who fought the ministry of education for its approval from for 15 years, it caters to the children of three Panchayats with a population of about 9000 people.

This school is in the center of the four wards of Baugha Gumha, where all the households except one are Magar. Attendance data show that most children go to school very irregularly during the peak of agriculture season, and in the upper grades the drop-out rate for Magar students is very high. As a result, few have graduated from the high school: only 39 from 1983 to 1988. The drop-out rate of female Magar students is much higher; indeed, most Magar girls do not even complete the 9th grade. By about the age of 11 they begin to drop out, and few stay in school past age 15. Not a single Magar girl has yet graduated.

These data give a rough picture of literacy and education among the Magars in Baugha. To be more specific, children between the ages of 6 to 10 can read and write to some extent, but not all are functionally literate. However, what they have learned can serve the basic literacy needs of the village, as they can read letters sent by their fathers and brothers in the army, and they can also write letters as they are instructed by their mothers or sisters-in-law.

There is a wide gap in literacy between the adult males and females. Out of 204 males over the age of ten, 165 (81 percent) are literate, whereas out of the 186 females over the age of ten, only 52, (28 percent) are literate. Needless to say, higher education is very rare among the Magars. Out of the 122 village households only 5 boys are attending college, and 2 are Brahmins from the only Brahman household.

Although these data show that literacy is low, villagers say that it has greatly increased compared to what it used to be in the past. Ninety-three-year-old Lila Bir Thapa told me that until the seventies no Magar was educated enough to teach the children of Baugha Gumha. It was he who started a school in a thatched shed so that his younger children would not remain illiterate. He invited a Brahman teacher from another village to teach the Baugha children in the shed. Gradually his neighbors supported him, and at the beginning of 1980 the villagers built a more permanent structure, which later became a high school. Since that time parents have sent not only boys but also girls to school so that they could at least write letters to their fathers, brothers, and husbands who would be in the *lâhur* (members of the Gurkha forces of the Indian or British armies).

*Drinking water project.* There have been two drinking water projects. One was completed with the partial aid of the government of Nepal, and the other was completed with the aid of the United Mission to Nepal, a missionary organization funded by Christian churches and private individuals mainly from the United States and the United Kingdom, with its regional headquarters in Delhi, India. There are five water distribution tanks, one completed under the government development program, and four completed with the help of Indian ex-army servicemen funds. The villagers carry water from outlet taps that are set in five places in Gumha. The taps are turned on only for two hours a day, from 6 to 8 in the morning. From the very early morning many men and woman line up at the tap and wait a long time for their turn to come. About 20 households--one sixth of the total--are far from any of the tap-water places and still collect water from the traditional water holes.

The villagers have not yet got the final payment that is due for the government project. The reason, I was told, was that the government overseer had not yet certified the completion of the project. I attended three meetings of the group that was entrusted to look after the tap water system and the distribution of water. At all the meetings they raised the question of the payment due from the district Panchayat office. They had several times requested the overseer of the local development office to certify the completion of the project. The overseer had postponed the visit under one or another pretext. One day I went to the Local Development Office and asked the official why the office had delayed certification of the project. He suggested that the

villagers had not reported that the project was complete. When I told him that the villagers had requested the overseer several times to make a visit to the project and certify its completion, he said that he would talk to the overseer assigned to that area and send him soon. I never saw the overseer as long as I was in the village and after my talk to the local development officer the villagers never mentioned the overseer. I assume that the overseer was not happy that I had talked to the local development officer and that this was communicated to the villagers.

*Health Project.* A small on-going health project is supported by the United Missions to Nepal. The government of Nepal has nothing to do with this project except that it has given permission to the United Mission to carry out the project in the village area. The project emphasizes preventive measures such as inoculation and sanitation. Under this project, village level health workers with minimal qualifications make house visits on a regular basis. They keep track of all the births and deaths in the village, and also the possible cause of death. At the earliest signs of any contagious disease they refer the patients to the Mission hospital in Tansen, the district headquarters. They also advise individual households to make a toilet, however simple it may be. Every household in Baugha Gunha has a toilet. This is rare, since even in towns and cities in Nepal not all households have their own toilets.

### **Cherlung**

*Kulo: irrigation canal.* In this village there is only one government-aided project, a drinking water project that was recently completed. In addition, there is one irrigation canal that was built nearly a hundred years ago at the initiative of a Magar, which supplies most of the villagers' needs. All the villagers periodically contribute cash and labor for the maintenance of the canal. As the canal comes from a distant river and passes through cliffs and ravines, continuous landslides make its maintenance expensive. In the development context the first thing one hears from the villagers is that the government has completely ignored their request for cement pipes to protect the canal from continuous damage.

### **Madanpur**

*Primary School.* As part of a development program, a three-room school shed was under construction in 1989. According to the local development program this school was to be built with partial support from the

government. The government would provide zinc sheet for the roof and wages for workers. Accordingly, the villagers carried the zinc sheet from the district headquarters, built the walls for the shed, and hired masons and roofers. The masons and roofers lived on daily wages, and needed to be paid every week. The local development officials knew this, but said that they would not be able to give the payment until half of the roofing was done. The roofers agreed to work as it was not for an individual but for the village school. They finished half of the roofing and asked for payment. The chairman of the school walked two days to the District Panchayat Office to report the progress of the construction and ask for the payment. However, the Local Development Officer said that the payment could not be made unless an overseer from the District Panchayat Office approved it, and that he would be on his way to the village soon. Assuming that the overseer would give approval, the chairman requested them to work further.

But the overseer did not visit the site. The masons needed money and they asked the chairman to pay them from his pocket. The chairman could not. The masons could not work any more and left the roofing unfinished. The chairman again went to the District Panchayat Office to request payment. He was told that the overseer was very busy and he would visit Madanpur after a few days. Again he did not turn up.

I lived in the village nearly a month; the overseer never came. One night, towards the end of my stay, it rained. Next morning three rooms had puddles of water in them. The villagers were worried that the newly erected walls might fall if it rained heavily again. They said that the LDO and his overseer never realized the difficulties of villagers.

### **Impact of the Village-Level Programs**

Construction projects, as described above, have brought two schools and a limited number of water projects to the villages. In Baugha only one of five water development projects has been completed with partial aid from the government. As mentioned before, although the project is already completed the villagers have not received the payment promised to them. They are not happy with the government's broken promises. The four completed drinking water projects combined foreign assistance and the local people. The foreign agencies did their part, then left the projects to the villagers. The villagers have benefited equally from the government aided water project, but they have had

hassles with the government even after the completion of the project.

The Gumha villagers are very proud of the secondary school, but understandably they do not give any credit to the government for it. What they remember is that it took years for them to get accreditation for the school from the government.

Regrettably, the school at Madanpur remains incomplete. The people's enthusiasm is dampened because they know that they will not get money to complete the school unless the district overseer comes to Madanpur and releases the promised aid. His priorities keep him away, and the school's future is in doubt: if the school is not fully roofed before the next rain the shed will completely crumble.

### **National-Level Programs**

National level programs can be grouped into three categories: (a) Economic (b) Social and (c) Infrastructural

#### **Economic Program**

Land Reform was the most important program introduced in the second half of the 1960s. Implemented in phases to bring about agrarian reforms, the Land Reform Act (LRA) attempted to ensure the rights of the tillers: to redistribute excess land from large landowners to the landless, and to eliminate high rates of interest on loans taken out by peasants, thus loosening of their domination by the landlords and money lenders) The Land Reform Act of 1964 in particular addressed the debt burden of farmers. To release farmers from their overwhelming debt, the Act required all non-institutional creditors to submit a full accounting of their actions. The Act addressed specifically the amounts already paid, and the redress of any interest paid at rates above the legal limit (Zaman, 1973:16).

According to the villagers, the Land Reform Act has indeed ameliorated the domination of the money lenders over poor Magars. In the past there were those who paid a very high interest rate to money lenders and who plowed for them for food only.

Before the implementation of the Land Reform Act, a peasant debtor of a landlord was like an indentured worker. It was particularly so in the case of Magars, Gurungs, and members of other lower caste groups. A debtor could work for his creditor for years but still his principal amount would remain the same or even

increase as the "unpaid" interest would be added to the principal amount. Thus the indebtedness of a debtor might not decrease at all, and the debtor would remain a traditional servant almost indefinitely (Hitchcock 1966; Miller 1980; Shepherd 1982; Adhikary 1986). As a part of the Land Reform Act of 1965 the debtor is not compelled to work for the creditor. He can work wherever he can get better wages with which to pay the debt.

The provisions in the land reform act have greatly reduced the exploitation of the poor by the village landlords and money lenders. The poor still work as agrarian laborers and porters. However, they work not as traditional *halis* (plowmen) as they did until the early sixties, but as free workers paid wages. They can no longer be treated as quasi-servants by their upper caste creditors. Lending and borrowing still go on and a few of the villagers pay very high interest rates--as high as 60% annually. Since the money lender cannot claim it legally, the number of such deals is very few.

As for the redistribution of land, there were few areas in the hills where landowners had land in excess of the maximum spelled out in the Land Reform Act. There was no one in any of the three villages whose holding was in excess of the ceiling set by the government.

The rights of the tillers would be an issue only in the case of rice land. Because of its scarcity, the landlord would have many tillers willing to cultivate his land, and he could evict a tiller at will. In the case of dry land, however, it would be hard for the landowner to replace an evicted tiller because every household has such land, and cultivating somebody else's dry land has little advantage for the tiller.

### **Social Programs**

The principal acts that were passed to bring about social reforms were the legal abolition of the caste system, and the legal abolition of child marriage and polygamy.

Legal abolition of the caste system was introduced in 1963. A member of one caste cannot be discriminated against by a member of any other caste in public places, jobs, or schools. It has not abolished caste altogether, but it has brought about a change in people's behavior towards the members of other castes.

The impact of the legal abolition of caste is easily seen. The honor and respect that used to be shown a member of a Brahman family are now things of the

past. No one is respected in the village simply because he or she belongs to a high caste. Whatever the feelings and prejudices about caste may be in private, in public the villagers show no overt deference to members of different castes. This is nowhere more clearly seen than in the exchange of day-to-day greetings and in the use of honorific expressions. The age-old unequal *ta-tapai* (analogous to the *tu-vous* of French) relationship based on caste alone between the Magars and the other caste groups is discouraged. The Brahmans use the same honorifics to the Magars as they use to other Brahmans and Chetris, varying only with the age and socioeconomic and political influence of the persons addressed. In other words, caste in itself receives very little overt expression in everyday interaction. On ritual occasions, however, a Brahman priest is given deferential treatment. Similarly, the Magars are still Magars in caste, but their caste position in itself is no longer a social stigma.

Another impact has been on dietary restrictions. Since caste is abolished legally, nobody can be made an outcaste on the grounds of eating food cooked by member of any other caste group. Thus when Brahman youths eat rice cooked by Magars, no action can be taken by the Brahman community to degrade them from their caste. This has also affected the consumption of other foods that Brahmans and Chetris were formerly not allowed to consume. For example, in the past it would be unthinkable for a Brahman youth to drink liquor in the house of any of his neighbors, although he might drink secretly outside the village. These days Brahman youths are free to drink *j-aD* and *raksi*, (beer and alcohol) at their neighbors' house if they like. They also eat boiled rice at the Magars' without any fear that they might be excluded by their fellow caste members. This has gradually broken the social wall between the Magars and upper caste groups.

Caste difference still matters in the formal exchange of brides and food, because Magars do not formally give their daughters to Brahmans, nor do the Brahmans formally accept brides or grooms from the Magars. But caste does not directly affect the social status of the Magars vis-a-vis other social/caste groups. However, the network of caste is still very strong, and the Magars and similar caste groups are still excluded from the networks of higher caste groups that have influence on important matters at the district and the national levels.

(ii) With regard to the abolition of child marriage and polygamy, the government does not seem too eager

to see the new laws implemented uniformly in all villages, nor do the villagers take the laws very seriously. They are, no doubt, cautious about its implications, but they know how to circumvent the rules. During my stay in Baugha three men acquired second wives in violation of the marital law. There was plenty of disapproving gossip, mainly because the first wives of the three men had done nothing to anger their husbands. The men found younger girls, who eloped with them. One of the first wives went to the village headman and protested against her husband. The headman, rather than suggesting that she go to court, asked her to forgive her husband as he would be the one who would have to support her financially.

### Infrastructural Programs

In infrastructure the most important project was the construction of Sidhartha Raj Marga (Pokhara-Bhairawa Highway).

Sidhartha Raj Marga affects all the three villages of my study. The road goes through Tansen, the district headquarters of Palpa. Baugha village is 7 miles from the highway. Although this road has very little effect on the village in a productive sense, it has indirectly made the villagers' life more comfortable. As mentioned before, the villagers are not self-sufficient in food grain. They need to buy from outside. Before the road was opened they used to walk one whole day to Butwal, a commercial town 20 miles south of Baugha Gumha, and it would take two days for them to carry rice and salt back to the village. But these days they can buy whatever they want in Tansen at almost the same price that they would pay at Butwal. Thus, the road has saved them time and trouble to buy daily necessities. The Churlung villagers have benefited from this road in the same way as have the Gumha villagers.

Madanpur is quite far from the road. It takes a day and a half to walk from Madanpur to Arungkhola, a newly sprouted town through which the road passes. However, compared to the distance they formerly had to walk to Butwal to sell ginger or to buy salt, villagers now save 50% of their time and the hazards of the difficult road to Butwal.

Roads have tremendously increased the volume of business in district centers but have brought limited benefit to the rural areas. In fact, they have diverted human and material resources to the district centers; thus, they have not helped village economies in a productive way. If, along with the construction of

roads, there had been increased resources and production in the villages, roads might have played a positive role in village economies. On the contrary, they have made villages more dependent on the center.

Thus, the real benefit of roads have gone, as Stiller and Yadav observe, to the

Larger landowners, merchants, and those with the security of government service. The poorer sectors of the community. . . are forced to search for new ways to supplement their inadequate farm income, which means, practically speaking, either seasonal migration or permanent migration (Stiller and Yadav 1979:171).

Certainly for Nepal "the building of motorable roads may appear to be a necessary priority" but, as Blaikie et al. point out, the idea

that merely building a road through an area to join two administrative centers will have the required effects upon the productive base of the economy (even with the provision of a complementary package of other inputs) is so misplaced as to raise suspicions that strategic and security considerations were fundamental to the decisions regarding road constructions (Blaikie et al. 1980:4).

To be fair, besides fulfilling strategic purposes the construction of roads has increased cultural interactions among people of different parts of the country. It has enhanced cultural exchange and understanding. And, as discussed before, it has made life much easier as people do not have to walk for three or four days to buy food grains. On the other hand, the people's former diet of local corn porridge has been replaced by Terai rice. Previously rice was consumed only at festivals and served to guests. But now as my village *ba* (father), put it, "it is too much work to eat corn. It has to be ground, flour and granules separated, and so on. Rather than doing all this, it is much easier to go to Tansen, buy rice, and boil whenever you need. It is much easier." This, however, drains cash from the village.

The increased number of new offices in the district headquarters has encouraged the opening of new shops. More office workers mean that the rent of residential houses has gone up. All this may have given a boost to the local economy, but has had no positive impact on the village economy. The increased volume of money does not trickle down to the villages because



very few goods and services go to the town from the village.

## Villagers and Officials

Although recently passed laws have brought about some egalitarian changes in social relationships of groups in the villages, the relationship between government functionaries and the villagers seems to have worsened. The government workers show no respect for the villagers, and in turn the villagers show their mistrust, dislike and even hatred for the government's agents.

I have found that the increased number of officials is quite tiresome to villagers. Government officials will go to a village, stay and eat in a house of a villager, and leave without paying for the food. When I went to Madanpur with the Panchayat secretary, we ate our morning meal at a Magar house. Before leaving the house I asked the host if I could pay for the food. The host did not say anything and I gave Rs. 5 as a token payment. At this the Panchayat secretary was very annoyed. He told me that I did not have to pay. He added that I was there just once, it was easy for me to pay, but he would go to the village again and again and it would not be possible for him to pay. I could not understand his reasoning. He was given a salary for his job, and on the top of that a *per diem*. He wanted to save that by not paying for his meal. Government officials have not done much to change the rural economy, but rather have added a burden to it in some ways.

It is true that the Nepalese traditionally treat outsiders as guests. But villagers cannot afford to feed government officials. Government officials ignore this, and take advantage of the hospitality of the villagers.

Throughout the 70s and 80s local and national papers carried news about the inception, inauguration and prospective achievements of various development programs. Radio Nepal was another vehicle that disseminated development news to Nepalese about the efforts of the Panchayat system and the achievements of development. As alternatives were not represented in the media, one could not separate fact from propaganda. In the absence of resistance from the people, one might assume that a lot had been accomplished and that the people were happy. However, one who lived in a village and watched people's response to the rhetoric of development would find a different picture. I found that villagers do not expect government-sponsored activities

to bring about miracles. They generally do not challenge the government about things that do not directly affect them even if the programs make no sense. Sometimes they simply laugh at so-called development programs, sometimes they are mildly critical, but it is rare that they challenge them openly. However, it seems that when they find too many contradictions between rhetoric and action even the most docile people begin to break their silence.

Those that disseminate the ideas of development from the center to the outlying areas are the low and medium level government workers and political leaders at the district level. While carrying out official development ideas and programs many workers at the district and village levels do not always seem to be enthusiastic. Those who are very enthusiastic about development programs often seem to be motivated by political interests.

I asked villagers about their agriculture and its problems. Some of them showed me orange trees that had been destroyed by white moths. I asked the villagers whether agricultural extension workers visited the village: they said that they did. I later saw a JTA (an extension worker) visiting the village. He was very friendly to the villagers, but uncertain about their questions. I asked about the white moths. He suggested that the villagers buy an insecticide at the district headquarters that could kill the white moth. I asked him what it was, but he could not tell me. That insecticide was available in the agriculture office was useful information, but considering the severity of the problem, I had expected a demonstration of the insecticide in one of the orange trees or a sample of the insecticide's effectiveness. He did not suggest anything like that. He seemed to lack interest in his job.

Most JTA's are high school graduates. They are sent out as village extension workers after a short training in general agriculture, but they are not trained in development. The government wants them to play different roles in the village. Following the Royal directives of 1985, government and political workers, mainly at district and village levels, were instructed to hold meetings to tell people about the basic needs programs and ask them to start something new in the name of this program. Extension workers carried the major burden as they were supposed to live in the assigned villages and implement this program.

One day the Gumha JTA visited the village to hold a meeting with the villagers and talk about the "Basic

Needs Fulfillment Program." However, it was the middle of the day and all adults had gone out to work in the fields or to collect fodder and firewood. He sent for the village headman. The JTA asked the headman to inform people about the meeting to discuss the benefits of the Program. The headman said that with sufficient notice he could have collected a group, but with such short notice it was not possible for him to gather people. He did promise to inform as many people as possible. After a while he came back to the JTA and told him that he could get hold of only six others.

I was also curious what he would say, and whether what he said would be followed by the villagers. Surprisingly, the JTA did not tell the villagers about the "Basic Needs Fulfillment Program" in the open. He took them inside the Panchayat office building. He did not ask me to participate in the meeting, so I remained outside. After about fifteen minutes they came out of the office and the JTA left. When I asked the villagers what happened they told me that he briefed them about the program for a few minutes, then asked them to sign a paper that stated that he (the JTA) had visited the village in order to tell the villagers about the Basic Needs Fulfillment Program. The headman laughed and said that the JTA did his work on paper so that he could save his job. The villagers did not really blame the JTA. They simply commented that he had to do it in order to save his job.

This incident shows that government workers perform their jobs on paper rather than in the field. They do not seem to have any motivation to work, probably because they feel that have been ordered by the government to do things either that they do not understand or in which they do not find any sense. In such cases, villages simply laugh at what they do rather than take offense at them.

There are other instances where politicians and government officials introduced a program to further their self-interest regardless of the impact of such programs on the people. For example, in regular radio advertisements it is said that *hariyo ban Nepalko dhan* (the green forest is the wealth of Nepal), and in children's programs children are asked to sing a song with the ending '*rukha mero sathi*', (the tree is my friend). One would expect that national policy would

try to protect trees and the environment. However, what the opposite often happens.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Just before I reached the field in 1988, an incident of cutting trees in a park took place in my home town. The incident was mentioned to me by my neighbors and was later narrated by a woman who challenged the authorities and saved the park.

There is a beautiful park in the heart of Tansen, the district headquarters of Palpa. Its name is Amar Park, named after General Amar Sing Thapa, who annexed Palpa during the territorial unification of Nepal. During his short stay he built a temple and created a park planting hundreds of trees around the temple. He entrusted the upkeep of the park to the local people before he left for Gorkha. In addition to enhancing the beauty of the town, the park is a source of perennial water as it has a natural spring in it. Virtually every resident of Tansen loves the park, and people consider it a sin to cut trees in the park or to destroy the park in any other way.

However, in 1988 a local politician who was vying for a post of a zonal commissioner suggested that they should construct a building in one corner of the park in the name of Her Majesty the Queen. He knew that in the Panchayat system nobody could oppose any proposal, however stupid it might be, if it was associated with the name of the king or the queen. I was told that the people knew that the politician wanted to further his interest by showing what he did in the name of the queen. In private conversation people commented that it was foolish to cut trees in the age-old park to erect a concrete building. In public, however, nobody opposed him. The politician introduced the proposal to the Town Panchayat to construct the building in the park honoring the queen's birthday. The Town Panchayat passed the proposal, and a date to inaugurate the laying of the foundation-stone was decided.

When the trees on the proposed building site were being cut and part of the foundation was being dug, people started talking about the foolishness of the town Panchayat, and the fate of the natural spring. Yet there was no organized protest against the proposed building. On the scheduled date of the ceremony officials and guests gathered at the site. The usual ritual of giving long speeches on development was done and the politician who proposed the construction was ready to lay the foundation stone of the building. Exactly at that moment a local woman came and lay down where the foundation stone was supposed to be placed. The officials were rather surprised. The woman told them that the park was the only place with trees in the town, and the spring of the park was the life-blood of the residents of Tansen, because the residents could not depend wholly on piped water whereas the spring in the park was a continuous source of water. Construction work in the park would destroy both the park and the spring. The woman said, she would not see the

Development is entangled with politics, and politicians try to create an illusion of development both falsely to impress the people and to further their own cause. What has happened at the local level has been happening at the national level also. In the media one hears everyday that Nepal is on the path of development, and the politicians claim that there have been many gains of development. If the government, media, and the politicians' claims were true, Nepal should have been self-sufficient, at least in certain basic products, and people's living conditions should have been much better. After so much talk of development and the official claims of many achievements for the last thirty years, people seem to be getting poorer and more dependent than ever on others for their day-to-day things like salt, sugar, oil, cigarettes, clothes, and even food grains and vegetables. Working in the midwest hills in the seventies Blaikie et al. (1980) reported that development programs had not much helped the rural areas and that poverty was growing in the hills. They predicted that Nepal would have a serious crisis soon if the government of Nepal could not correct the problems of underdevelopment before it was too late. They warn of

destruction of the park, and they could lay the foundation there only after killing her. Otherwise, she said, it was not possible. People were stunned at the courage of the woman. Although the politician implored her to leave the place and let him lay the foundation, she did not move. She said she was ready to die rather than see the destruction of the park. The local authority did not dare move her forcefully because it knew she had no other interest than to save the park. They also sensed that if she was moved forcefully it could stir the whole town. She remained there until the district chief promised that the proposed building would not be constructed there as proposed, and the program of the morning was canceled. The woman was praised by the residents for her courage and wisdom.

I knew the woman well. My father had introduced her to me as *kaki* (aunt) in my childhood days, and her confectionery shop was my favorite place in those days. On one of my visits to her during my field research I asked her about the incident. She narrated the whole incident to me, and at the end, she said that she did not know what development was about. She reflected that even an ordinary man would know that cutting trees and constructing building in the park would destroy the park and the spring in it. On the one hand, she complained, these *netas* (political leaders), gave long speeches about preserving trees and parks but on the other, they themselves order the trees of a well preserved park to be cut down. She wondered what kind of *netas* (leaders) they were and what they could do for the development of the country.

the growing shortages, and consequently, . . . the development of widespread unrest in both rural and urban areas, which together will threaten the viability of the prevailing political system and even Nepal's position as an independent state (Blaikie et al. 1980:14).

What these anthropologists had predicted came to pass towards the end of my stay in the field. In 1988 Nepal's Trade and Transit Treaty with India expired. India refused to renew the Treaty, and it also blocked Indian goods going to Nepal. As soon as the news became public, prices of all goods soared and goods became increasingly scarce. As villagers had food grain and salt bought in the past winter, they could manage their basic meals. However, shortages of kerosene and cooking oil forced them to use the clarified butter they had saved to sell, and no kerosene lamp could be seen in the village in the evening. People ate their evening meal before dark. After the meal, if it was a moonlit night, they would sit chatting outside; otherwise they would go to bed early. Villagers also could get kerosene if they walked to the district headquarters and waited in line, but there was no guarantee that they would get the oil the same day. Even if they got it, it was time-consuming and frustrating to go to the district headquarters, get a coupon, wait in the line and walk three to four hours back to the village with one liter of kerosene. So most villagers did without a lamp.

For many days they thought that the government would do something but with growing shortages they became increasingly aware how poor Nepal still is even in the basic things. They began to talk about how little Nepal had done to fulfill the day-to-day needs of the people. For most male adults a few cigarettes a day was essential. Although they did not need a lot, it was hard for them to stop smoking completely. From the daily advertising on Radio Nepal they assumed that Nepal was self-sufficient at least in one thing, cigarettes. However, cigarettes were not available after a few days of the Indian blockade, and when some of the villagers went to buy cigarettes in the district headquarters they could buy no more than four sticks unless they paid three times the usual price.

One day it happened that the village headman came to the school compound. I asked him how he was and how things were going. He looked unhappy. He told me that he had just returned from the town. So I further I asked him whether he had heard any rumor that the government was doing anything to prevent the growing

shortages. At this, he exploded in a very unanticipated way by labeling the government of Nepal as 'liar'. He shouted, "See, this is *vikas*. There is *vikas* on Radio Nepal. Every day the radio broadcasts that Nepal makes its own cigarettes, but now we cannot buy even a packet of cigarettes. Cigarettes do not come from India, so why have they disappeared? *PhaTaha* Nepal (liar [government of] Nepal)." He said angrily that if the existing situation did not improve there would be a big revolution and considerable bloodshed. The headman was not a man easily upset. He had always supported government programs. But he was angry that day because he found such a discrepancy between media propaganda and village reality. Even those people who supported the government were angry at the government's attempts to maintain the political status quo.

Despite all the claims of accomplishment in the last thirty years there is not one single thing in which Nepal is self-sufficient. Nepal is becoming more and more dependent on India and other countries for day-to-day consumer goods, and the local resources that helped sustain the local people without outside help are being depleted quickly. As subsistence cultivators the villagers need to keep cattle. For this they need plenty of grass or fodder trees. They also must preserve forests to retain soil moisture. However, the hills around Baugha are naked. All the trees have been cut down, and people need to go miles to collect fodder for cattle. Similarly, because of the lack of any alternative fuel, villagers must cut down trees. The worsening conditions stand in sharp contrast to the promises of the early sixties "to bring about mental and spiritual regeneration in the people and to associate them in the task of all-round development of the nation" (Shah: 1967:9), and to fulfill the "aspirations of the people" (Shah: 1967:12). The conditions strongly contradict the claims made by Panchayat politicians that the country is making long strides along the path of development.

## Conclusion

Nepal's stated approach to development is close to that of liberal democracy, which advocates a planned development to provide equitable opportunities to people of all social groups to improve their quality of life. In practice, however, the state seems to have tried to maintain the political status quo, while the elites who do the planning seem to have been the main beneficiaries of development.

Since 1956 six development plans have been implemented. The planning focus and implementation strategies have changed from one plan to the next. This is probably because every plan previously undertaken must have manifested "the general failure of the preceding strategies" (Shrestha 1990: 17). And yet the people in the center do not correct the weaknesses. That is the reason why there has been very little improvement in people's economic condition, as reflected by their standard of living.

If we look closely at the implementation of development programs, we find that they have been more effectively implemented in the center, first in Kathmandu, the capital, then in the district headquarters. The concentration of modern facilities in Kathmandu and a few other district headquarters reflects the fact that a disproportionately large part of the total investment has gone to Kathmandu and its surrounding areas. The hill region has been and remains on the economic periphery. Twenty years ago Rana and Malla already observed that

This has gone so far that the gulf between Kathmandu Valley and the subsistence economies of the hill areas of Nepal is growing similar to the gulf between the developed and the underdeveloped 'third' world. To the problems of cultural heterogeneity . . . , the process of development is adding the problem of economic heterogeneity to such a degree that truly disturbing dualities may emerge in the nation. The differences between areas are echoed by differences between social strata. The two decades of development have seen the emergence of a privileged stratum which skims the cream of development opportunities and benefits (Rana and Malla 1973:20).

Blaikie et al. (1980) say that the concept of the "inequalities of the core and periphery" (Wallerstein 1960) can be applied to the situation of midwest Nepal, as the center-periphery concept "can be applied within any given country to refer to uneven development and to the fact that the centre tends to appropriate surplus from periphery largely for its own advantage and to maintain the structure of domination and dependency" (1980: 78). If we examine Kathmandu, the district headquarters of Tansen, the surrounding villages, and Madanpur from a comparative perspective, it is clear that more resources are put in the cities and, to some extent, in villages

where the people are very vocal. The outlying areas, in which people are illiterate and not vocal, are ignored. It is, however, not only a question of geographical distance from the center; it is also a question of whether there are people with power network (that is, people with connections in the bureaucracy) or just socially peripheral people. Although it is beyond the scope of my research to compare development in other parts of Nepal, the comparison between Tansen, Baugha, and Madanpur validates what Blaikie et al. (1980) say about the unequal development.

The neglect of remote areas is exemplified by the condition of the school in Madanpur, and the remark the villagers made that the 'District Panchayat Office's overseer was too far away to see this situation'. This kind of situation has not only dampened villagers' zeal for any project sponsored by the government, it has also produced mistrust towards government officials and their promises.

There has been a vast expansion of bureaucracy, with an attendant increase in government officials, but there has been very little change in the government officials' treatment of villagers. Officials still think that villagers should show them deference, and accept what is being handed down from above without question. To government officials and Panchayat politicians, tangible results of development and consequent improvement in villagers' lives seem to be secondary issues. The overall data show that some of the social programs such as the legal abolition of the caste system and implementation of land reform have brought about certain positive aspects in villagers' lives. However, in terms of generating income opportunities among rural people, helping them utilize their skills, preserving their environment, and improving their standard of living, little has been done.

Have the national elites not seen the failure of development? It seems very unlikely that neither bureaucrats nor politicians have been aware of how little has been accomplished in the last thirty years. Why then do they generate more and more talk of development? The answer is: the only way to protect the system is by propagating the talks, rituals, and ideas of development so that the people can be constantly engaged in the discourse of development. It is not that the people blindly believe what the bureaucrats and Panchayat leaders say, as the incidents described in the text show. But they cannot challenge authority. Why? It seems that anyone who challenges the "great ideas of

development" is labeled not necessarily anti-system or anti-government but as *vikas-virodhi* (anti-development). To be labeled as *vikas-virodhi* would mean to be anti-people. Besides, people do not like to challenge openly the *vikas* talk because the discourse of development is always infused with nationalism. One who challenges *vikas* is allegedly not only people *virodhi* but *desh-virodhi* (anti-national) too. Who then would want to become a *vikas-virodhi* ?

Creating and propagating *vikas* talk is the surest way of keeping people where they are. Development discourse in Nepal is, as Ferguson (1990) says, an "anti-politics machine . . . the principal means through which the question of poverty is depoliticized" (1990:256). It is through the ideology of development that the government expands its "bureaucratic state power," intervenes in the day-to-day activities of people, controls their freedom, and all the while portraying itself as the great benefactor.

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