

a brief profile of the chirimar people of belaspur village, banke

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This article is written in the style of "notes preliminaires" pioneered by French Social Scientists in Nepal. It is a by-product of a larger research undertaking under the auspices of and with a grant from the Institute of Nepal and Asian Studies, Tribhuvan University.

Information collected on this group of untouchables, the Chirimar, whom we encountered incidentally in the course of our field work, does not readily lend itself to inclusion in the report of that large project. The data are meagre, having been acquired from two mornings' conversation with Birja Bahailiya Thakur, Ram Autar Bahailiya Thakur and the small crowd of villagers that usually gathers at such meetings, rather than from lengthy participation and observation. Nonetheless, it seems worth making record of what we learnt for two reasons. First, nothing has been written about the Chirimar before, and the information may be of intrinsic interest. Secondly, the Chirimar are peculiarly isolated from the mainstream of development in Nepal despite living almost in Nepalganj. Their lives are autonomous and intragroup-directed. In consequence they could be said to be neglected, although it is probably more true to say that they themselves are still reluctant to break through an invisible barrier of ignorance and shyness to take advantage of new institutions which might bring them advantages they do perceive and are beginning to covet. Any record of their situation in 1976 may be useful as a yardstick for a later study that investigates what constitutes the barrier and accesses their progress towards participating in and benefitting from the national goals of development.

Four generations ago, in 1857, the four districts of Banke, Bardia, Kailali and Kanchanpur (the Nayamuluk) were returned to Nepal by the British in recognition of the military aid provided by Jung Bahadur Rana to quell the Indian Rebellion. Amongst the people who were persuaded to settle in and around the new town of Nepalganj as tenants on the tax-free birta land given to members of the Rana family was a hitherto nomadic group of Awadhi speaking people whose occupation consisted principally in hunting birds. In consequence they are popularly known as Chirimar, though their jat name is Bahailiya Thakur. There are now sixty to seventy households of Chirimar living in Belaspur village which makes up wards one and two of Indapur gaon panchayat on the western outskirts of Nepalganj. There are several Chirimar families a day's walk North East in Shumsherganj panchayat and many south of the border, some of whom reputedly follow the old migratory pattern, settling in one place for a few days to hunt before moving on.

Only four Chirimar households in Belaspur have land of their own. The remainder are either tenants on land owned by town-dwellers and the few Kurmi families of the village, or work as labourers and porters. The tenants divide their produce, less that which goes to pay off debts, on a fifty-fifty basis with the land-owners, an arrangement little different, so they claim, from that which they had before the Land Reform Act. One or two work as peons in government offices but interaction with any official is limited to exceptional court cases and the treasury office. Any discussion of land tenure and relations with landlords is laced with not unusual bitter suspicion that they may have been tricked, some of which arises from failure to understand new tenant rights and land registration procedures. Their mud plastered wooden frame houses, some of which have tiled roofs, cluster about the more substantial walled houses belonging to Kurmis, some of whom have built tube wells. The Chirimar have their own, original, well.

Almost forty per cent of the Chirimar of Belaspur, however, still hunt birds. (see Fig. 1). The main season is winter and the main prey parrots, although they will catch whatever they can. They sell what they can in the bazar and eat the rest. In Marg, Fagun and Chaitra after the harvest when seeds are scattered in the fields, partridges (titra), quail (battai) and doves are caught, and in Chaitra and Jeth, parrots. A quail or partridge can be sold for five rupees and are sought for their fighting prowess, an old form of entertainment during which there may be some gambling as much as for eating. Parrots are sold in cages that they buy in Lucknow.

They have three ways of catching birds. When the harvest is in and there is little work, informal groups of up to six men, women and children will gather to drive birds under nets hung from pigeon pea bushes (arahar) on the edges of fields. This is a technique similar to that employed by Tharus. Groups are made up of anyone who happens to be available and willing. The nets are made by men and women with cotton string bought in the bazar.

The other two techniques are used by the solitary hunter. The first consists of a diamond shaped net covering about four square feet which is laid over some grain. (see Fig. 2). To one end is attached twenty feet of rope which is held by the hunter concealed behind any suitable cover. When a bird steps onto the net, he jerks the rope and enfolds the bird in the net. This method is popular with patient old men. The third technique requires a long chain of sticks and glue. Five-foot lengths of a kind of reed (narkat: *saccharum spontaneum*) are fitted into one another beneath a tree in which birds are roosting until the pole is tall enough to reach them. (see Fig. 3). The top piece is made from a light wood and terminates in a fork in which a thick sticky glue (lasa) is pasted. The glue is prepared by boiling together



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A Bahai
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Fig. 1

A Bahailiya Thakur with a quail
he has caught.

Fig. 2



A Bahailiya Thakur demonstrating
a net technique used by Chirimar
to catch feeding birds.

Fig. 3



A Bahailiya Thakur demonstrating pole and glue technique used by Chirimar to catch Roosting birds.



Fig. 4 A Bahailiya Thakur and Birja Bahailiya Thakur (ward sadasya) preparing glue (lasa).

mustard oil and the sap from a peepal tree and from a kind of fig tree (khannyu or gular: *ficus cannia*) (see Fig. 4). Feathers immediately adhere to it on contact.

Apart from occasional bird drives, no other work is done co-operatively amongst the Chirimar. They are, however, bound together by a social organization, a traditional structure of authority and above all by ceremonials which have kept them outside the mainstream of national developments. New aspirations are emerging but participation in activities that could realize them are held back by this social autonomy which still provides a sense of identity and security.

Within the village there are five exogamous patrilineal clans: Shri bahathan, godsaha, gaudafla, haduwa and kanwajiya. Marriage is permissible between any two of these. Marriage usually takes place when the partners are nine or ten years old. At the wedding ceremony, attended by anybody in the village, the bride is brought to the groom's house. There the girl's parents present their daughter with dishes, a lotah, cooking pots for rice and lentils, and spoons. These are kept in the groom's father's house along with money given by the girl's relatives. After a short ritual, during which the bride is worshipped, the boy's parents give her ornaments and cloth. Cohabitation (patrilocal) begins five or six years later when the father of the groom, followed by his son with the rest of his relatives, goes to the girl's house to fetch her.

No ceremony is complete without the drinking of spirits (rakshi), and only ritual specialists are concerned with its provision and distribution. No outside priest is brought in for any ritual. The man who makes arrangements for the drink is called the nayab while the man who actually distributes it is called the kotwal. Community money matters are handled by the dewan. The community leader, who is not the ward sadasya, is called the chaudhari. All four of these men are the direct patrilineal descendants of men claimed to have originally held the positions. Every year the village gathers to appoint them. New men to these offices can be elected but this has not happened in Belaspur.

The chaudhari, nayab and dewan meet to discuss any problems or quarrels that arise in the village. Courts and police are avoided if possible but if their decisions are ignored or disobeyed they may resort to them. Usually they exact fines of two or three rupees and rakshi is drunk by all present.

All the gods of the Hindu pantheon, but principally Krishna and secondly Shankar, are worshipped. The dead are buried, not cremated. After nine or eleven days, everybody gathers for the funeral rites (kriya), after which the relatives provide food and rakshi. Close relatives shave their heads and as soon as possible make a pilgrimage to either Ayodhya, Benares, Gaya, or Nimshaha

in India. On their return they will again feed as many as they can.

No Chirimar in Belaspur can yet be said to be anything but poor and yet none seems to hark back to a better time before they were settled. Unlike other Terai dwellers they do not make fuel from cowdung. With increasing settlement and receding forest, fuel shortage is one of their most pressing problems. Baskets are made for their own use but none has yet thought to sell them. When asked about development (bikas), they express no interest and claim to know nothing about it. They say they do not have sufficient food or clothes to send their children to school but six have now been enrolled in a primary school. They eat most meats except buffalo, and many would like the chance to raise improved strains of chickens and pigs. Any Chirimar can train to be a bhuihar who treats the sick, but increasingly they are making use of the Nepalganj hospital, less than half-an-hour's walk away.

Unavoidably, then, their proximity to Nepalganj has changed and broadened their particular ideas of what is possible and desirable, but they do not yet perceive a relationship between them and the national process of development. Education is probably the most essential step towards bridging this contradiction. The next steps to getting better living standards almost certainly imply giving up a little of their social autonomy which keeps them alienated from the institutions which can or should be serving them. A little stimulus from an interested JTA for example could lead to initiatives in chicken or pig farming with a ready market in expanding Nepalganj. If it is poverty that inhibits any effort to seek opportunities in a wider world than Belaspur and thereby improve their lives, it would only require a small economic success to begin to break the cycle.



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