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CHANGING ENVIRONMENTS AND LIVELIHOODS IN NEPAL: AN OVERVIEW

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Introduction

The thematic issues in this volume include development, changes in environment and livelihoods and social/cultural change. Some of the concepts like development, environment and livelihoods are among the ever expanding haggage of everyday use vocabulary for people including academics, researchers, policy makers, development professionals and social activists.¹ Environment and development in particular have remained persistent themes in the discourses on Nepal's economic and demographic processes for several decades now (for detailed reviews of these issues see Ives and Messerli 1989, Ives 2006, Pandey 1999). The focus on livelihoods (in particular of vulnerable people) and the discourse surrounding it within the context of either 'development' or environmental (particularly natural resources) management or both is relatively new, perhaps going back to the mid-1990s only (see Chambers and Conway 1992). The changes in the environments and livelihoods of the poor and marginalized people are among the central issues of concern today among those involved in development programmes in Nepal (see Chhetri 2005a, 2006a for reviews on related issues). However, social and cultural change in the context of changing environments have received little attention thus far from development agencies, projects, as well as researchers in Nepal—perhaps because these themes may have appeared unimportant to many vis-à-vis the issues surrounding 'development' that are often placed higher on the 'to do' agenda by international development agencies and donors alike.

The papers presented in this volume are special in that their authors touch upon social and cultural change while examining the interrelationship between changes in environments and livelihoods for certain groups of people in Nepal. The authors discuss and examine the changing environments, livelihoods and life-ways of selected dalits (Damai, Kami, Sarki, and Poda/Jalari) and marginalized ethnic groups (Kumals and Tharus) living in eastern and western Nepal (Map 1 shows the study sites). The analyses of field level realities presented in the papers tend to challenge the received wisdom that development projects generally bring positive changes in the lives of everyone within their remit. A strong argument that emerges from a careful reading of these papers is that 'development' as a conceptual framework for explaining the social and cultural factors and processes may not be adequate (see also Chhetri 2005b).

In this introductory note I feel it useful to highlight some of the fundamental features of the essays presented in this volume. To begin with, I believe it essential to say a few words about some concepts and their

meanings as used by the authors. This will be followed by a brief description of the nature of the case studies themselves (i.e. study sites, people, and other relevant subject matter). I will then focus on some of the propositions emerging from these studies. Finally, in the last section, I note some implications of the findings, specifically for theoretical discussions on cultural change.

Some Concepts and their Meanings

Some of the concepts used in social science research tend to be such that different readers may interpret them differently—depending on the ideological, theoretical, disciplinary and other positions they align themselves with. The concepts of development, environment, environmental change and livelihoods are among such concepts. I must hasten to confess that my intent is not to get into the semantic genealogy of these concepts. However, I feel that I should inform the readers as to what the authors of the essays here mean (or as I understand these terms while reading the essays) when they use these concepts.

As we know the concept of ‘development’ (or *bikas* in Nepali) is generally used to refer to progress, growth, improvement or any other positive advancement. While the authors of these essays may not totally disapprove such usages of this concept, they nevertheless seem to have other ideas about it. The use of this term in these essays appears to be more neutral, referring to the construction of infrastructures (roads, airport, dams, etc), access to markets and amenities (hospitals, health posts, schools, etc), as well as urbanization, opening of new job opportunities, externally sponsored natural resources management initiatives, etc.

Environment is often used in its plural form in this issue (as in the title of the issue itself). Our usage is closer to Barth’s when he states that for any ethnic group, the environment “is not only defined by natural conditions, but also by the presence and activities of other ethnic groups on which it depends” (1981: 3). Also, when we refer to environmental change, we are not talking only about changes in the physical environment (i.e. changes in the conditions of the forests). Thus changes in the environments refer to changes in the social, political, economic as well as physical environment (resulting from human interventions). Therefore, the construction of roads or the connection of a given settlement to a highway, or building of dams and airport, etc., constitutes environmental change in the area. Finally, the term livelihood is used by the authors in these papers to refer to ways or means of earning income.

Key Features of the Study Sites and Peoples

The research findings presented in this volume address the issues related to environmental change, ‘development’ and the adaptations in livelihood

strategies of selected groups of people. All of the papers included here are based on recent field research carried out by the authors, often using both quantitative and qualitative techniques of data collection. Three of the papers are based on research carried out in the Pokhara valley while one paper each represents western Tarai and the eastern hills (Map 1 shows the location of the research sites).

One of the common features of these sites, as revealed by the case studies, is that the inhabitants of these places belong to a number of caste/ethnic groups. The people selected for research are among marginalized janajatis (Kumal and Tharu) and Dalits (Jalari or Pode, Kami, Damai and Sarki). Besides, these places have also become part of the markets for factory/industry made goods and services of various kinds as reported in the papers. Some development projects (e.g. construction of roads, dams, airfields, etc.) have been completed in most of these sites in the past few decades. Moreover, these places are now characterised by population mobility, including in/out migrations of people for various reasons. Finally, in the process of environmental changes, people in these sites have experienced changes in traditional occupations (see Table 1). The above noted processes and features of course could also be observed among people in other places in Nepal.



Table 1: Summary of Key Features of the Peoples and Sites under the Study

Name of group	Sites	Number of households under study	Proportion of Nepal's 2001 population	Mother tongue	Social category/group	Traditional occupations	Development projects and/or changes in the sites (since the 1950s)
Jalaris	Begnas/Pokhara valley	34	Lumped with Newars	Newar Dialect	Jamajati (Newar Dalit?)	Sweeping and cleaning; Fishing; Care takers (of shrines/temples)	Coming of market, Urbanization, Dams and hydro power, Fisheries, Road, Airport, NRM projects, Irrigation Canal, Changes in farming technology, Access to land (past and present), Access to education, Jajmami relations, Migration (new settlers in the study sites and labour migrations from the sites)
Kumals	Begnas/Pokhara valley	73	0.44	Newar	Jamajati	Pottery; Farming	
Kami	Begnas/Pokhara valley	45	3.94	Nepali	Dalit	Blacksmith, Farm labour (Hail)	
Damai	Begnas/Pokhara valley		1.72	Nepali	Dalit	Tailoring, Playing music (Panchat baja)	
Sarki	Begnas/Pokhara valley		1.40	Nepali	Dalir	Leather works, Farm labour (Hail)	
Kumals	Tumlingtar/Sankhuwasabha	163	0.44	Newar	Jamajati	Pottery, Farming	Coming of market, Road, Airport, NRM, Access to land (past and present), Access to education
Tharu	Parsawal/Nawalparasi	64	6.75	Tharu	Jamajati	Farming, Farm labour, Animal husbandry	Coming of market, Urbanization, Road, Changes in farming technology, Access to land (past and present), Access to education, Migration (new settlers from the hills)

The 2001 Census lists a total of 103 Caste/Ethnic groups including 'unidentified Dalits'. Whether the Jalaris/Podes are included with the Newars or the unidentified Dalits (0.76% in 2001 census) is not clear from the available statistics (see CBS, 2002).

The Jalaris today live in Begnas area (around Begnas and Rupa lakes) at the north-eastern corner of the Pokhara valley (studied by Chhetri). They have not given up their traditional occupation (fishing) yet. But, in order to keep up, they have moved away from their earlier settlement (their homes were passed on to them by their parents and grand parents) and their erstwhile Poda Tole of Pokhara has disappeared from the map of this municipality. That place goes with a new name 'Naya Bazar' (new market) which is mostly occupied by migrants from the adjoining hill villages. The Kumals have been studied in two different places. While Kattel studied them in Tumlingtar of Sankhuwasabha district in east Nepal, the Kumals discussed by Bhurtel and Chhetri live in the Begnas area itself. In both study sites, the Kumals are reported to have given up pottery (their traditional occupation). The Damai, Kami and Sarki people are also the residents of Begnas area (see Pokhrel and Chhetri). Just as the Kumals, they too have experienced changes in their livelihood strategies today. While the groups mentioned above live in urban or semi-urban areas in the hilly region of Nepal, the Tharus (see Pandey's paper) live in the Tarai. The Tharu group reported here are from a village called Parsawal in Nawalparasi district (western Tarai). A number of youths in these study populations are also among the labour migrants from Nepal to the Arab countries in particular.

Emerging Propositions: Changes in Environments and Life-ways

One of the primary interests of anthropologists has been to understand and explain the cultural similarities and differences in human societies across time and space. The discussions on the changing environments and the livelihood strategies of various groups of people from the hills and the Tarai of Nepal is certainly a contribution towards such a broader goal of anthropological inquiry. Whether it is in the Pokhara valley, Tumlingtar, Parsawal of Tarai, or anywhere else in Nepal, one could find people of various caste/ethnic backgrounds living in mixed settlements. But all of these groups tend to have their own 'predominant' form of interaction with each other as well as with the biophysical and socio-economic, political as well as cultural environment of the area. Such special forms of interactions too seem to account for similarities and differences in social and cultural forms as well as changes in social relations and livelihood strategies of people.

Elsewhere I have raised some questions like: "What makes people to change their life-ways? What triggers social and cultural change? Why do different groups of people respond (therefore change) in different ways to similar dynamics in the total environment?" (see Chhetri 2006b: 92). These are the kind of questions the authors of the papers in this issue are also addressing. They are suggesting that social and cultural change in a given place could be the result of changes in a number of practices prevailing or being adopted by different groups of people. For instance, the empirical

materials presented in each of the papers suggest that the adoption of new occupation (i.e. other than their traditional professions) by a caste/ethnic group of people could also result in social and cultural change at the wider societal level. The papers also make it evident that there are still other processes which seem to influence changes in society and culture. These case studies on changing livelihood options for groups of people in different social and physical spaces in Nepal present some interesting findings even though not all of them are unexpected. In this section I intend to highlight some of the propositions and or arguments that emerge out of the case studies presented by the authors.

In a provocative book on development in Nepal, Dor Bahadur Bista set out to examine "aspects of cultural and social organization of Nepali society, as they have an effect on Nepal's development" (Bista 1991: 1). In contrast, the papers in the present collection are documenting how 'development' and environmental changes have been responsible (among other factors) for altering the aspects of traditions as well as 'cultural and social organization of Nepali society'. In this way, the essays in this collection suggest that the cultural/social facets and development or environmental changes tend to influence each other rather than one of the two having a determinant effect on the other.

The environmental changes that follow urbanization or other 'developments' (mainly building of infrastructures like roads, dams, airfields or other amenities, etc.) have received reasonable attention from scholars and lay people alike in Nepal. Generally, such environmental changes or 'developments' are believed to bring positive effects on the lives of people in their proximity. The papers in this volume dispute this common belief because the empirical evidence shows that environmental changes and the so-called developments may benefit some people but also bring serious challenges in the life-ways of others. Moreover, the discussion in the papers makes it evident that such changes also tend to influence societal/cultural organizations as well by way of impacting directly on the lives and livelihood choices of individuals and groups of people.

Development and changes in the environment also bring about changes in the centrality and importance of places—in different ways to different types/groups of people. People therefore respond differently. The case studies together make a distinct statement that environmental changes and development are likely to dispel some groups of people away from such sites of developmental activities while attract others towards their centres. The case studies presented in this book also reveal that some people have also been further marginalized in their own homelands. Tharus in the Tarai, the Pode/Jalari people of Pokhara, and the Kumals of Tumlingtar stand out as the best examples here (see case studies below for details). In all these sites, the

people under study have been alienated from their traditionally owned land and other vital resources.

Development is not a neutral occurrence (see Escobar 1995, Ferguson 1994) and it is known to come with pay offs (see Kottak 1983). In Nepal, ever since planned development began about 50 years ago, the country and its people are believed to have benefited from 'development'. A well known Nepali anthropologist acknowledged more than a decade ago that "Nepal has made impressive progress during the past forty years" (Bista 1991: 133). But Bista quickly turns around and draws the reader's attention to the pay offs of development in Nepal. Talking about foreign aid and development he cites examples of the improved condition of Nepal in statistical terms but then he warns that such development "is beginning to destroy the gracefulness, charm, generosity and hospitality even among the rural people... People are paying their prices in terms of some positive human values which once lost will not be that easy to reinstate for generations to come" (Bista 1991: 133). Bista's observations are corroborated by the authors in this volume by pointing out that some of the very popular cultural traditions (e.g. *panchaj baja*, pottery, etc.) are either being given up or the youths in the concerned communities are apathetic to the dying cultural markers of their people in the face of 'development'.

Bista also alludes that the path for moving forward (i.e. development) does not appear to be equally friendly for all kinds of people in the country (1991: 133-134). Our case studies also make it evident that not every one has been able to reap the benefits or reach for their share of the bread and thus the "improved condition of Nepal in statistical terms" is certainly misleading. Contrary to the common expectations, some marginalized groups of people seem to be paying most or all of the costs of the so called development that has come to their door-steps so that others living around them could gain. The story of Kumals in Tumlingtar is an apt illustration of this since the coming of an airfield there has turned them into porters from the potters and farmers that they were previously.

The authors of the papers indicate that erosion of traditional skill, crafts, or certain aspects of culture and social organization may have also occurred while the country moved on with environmental change and development. For instance, the papers by Bhurtel and Chhetri, and Kattel report that due to the availability of containers (e.g. jars, pots, etc., used for storage of water and cereals at homes) made out of metal or other synthetic materials in the market today, Kumal's earthen jars, pots, pitchers, etc., are in less demand these days. Similarly, factory-made shoes and agricultural implements are gradually replacing the home-made shoes made by (the Sarkis) and the plough blades, sickles, etc., (the Kamis) in the villages. Also the traditional dresses like Bhoto, Choli, etc., made by a village Damai have become rare items although they were popular dress items until the 1970s. The

discontinuities in the production of these traditional items of daily use could mean the imminent loss of some of the bits and pieces (or aspects) from Nepal's total cultural baggage (see G. Chhetri 1989, Tingey 1994).² As a consequence of such processes, the erstwhile dense or close interactions between households of various caste/ethnic groups within the village that resulted from their need to exchange each others' specialized production or services are also attenuating.

Pottery provided a secure livelihood for Kumals in the past. But today, hardly any Kumal household either in the Pokhara valley or in Tumlingar earns its income from pottery work. This profession has been abandoned by most of them and the skills are not being passed down to the younger generation. Kumals could have adapted by making clay products that are still in demand (e.g. flower pots and other items used in internal decorations by hotels and middle class households). But the difficulties involved in obtaining the raw materials needed for production also seem to have inhibited the continuation of the profession. The youth are not interested to learn the skills from their elders let alone adopt pottery as a profession for making a living.

The discussions in these papers also hint that the village societies today may not be the simple and close-knit ones any more that they were supposed to be in the past. In the past, most of the households in any village would have been part of a social and economic network—with frequent and intimate interactions through exchange of labour, services and materials. The end of Parma, Bali, Pareli, etc., now signals the disappearance of some relations. Perhaps this also is an indication that the unfolding social, economic and cultural landscape of Nepali society will be very different and the principles governing emergent interactions among people in the days to come may not necessarily be based on caste/ethnic ties.

It is also becoming evident that individuals and households belonging to a particular caste/ethnic group in any place tend to differ from each other in terms of their engagements in economic activities or livelihood strategies. In the past, for instance, the primary economic activities of people within a community of Kumals or Damai, Kami and Sarki may have been similar (along the lines of traditional occupations). This does not seem to be true any more. The traditional occupations are being given up and households appear to be adopting multiple livelihood options—i.e. individuals from a single household earning income from different sources (see also Fricke 1986). The new professions adopted by the people under study, of course, seem to be the result of individual choice, acquired skills or qualifications, as well as connections and other factors.

The case studies presented in these papers also make it evident that some of the existing niches (i.e. livelihood options) could disappear for certain groups of people as the "total environment" gradually transforms over time.

Furthermore, in the process of change in the total environment, two or more groups of people could also compete for a given niche previously occupied by one particular caste/ethnic group.

There also seems to be a noteworthy change in people's attitude and/or their values towards occupations. For instance, some occupations like fish farming are open to all now. If fishing was considered an "impure or polluting" job in the past, fish farming is not regarded as such any more. Today, as the Jalaris in Pokhara have revealed, many others including Bahun-Chhetri elite are into fish farming. Similarly, other traditional caste-based occupations are not controlled only by certain caste/ethnic groups anymore.

As indicated above, there is certainly going to be competition among people from different caste/ethnic backgrounds in some professions or occupations. Competition itself is not bad. However, we have to bear in our mind that the Janajati and Dalit people discussed in these papers did not have access to education in the past, and therefore, were not able to acquire diverse skills in order to be able to take on other jobs available in the market now. Thus, the conditions created by the changing environments and developments in Nepal seem to present formidable circumstances for the type of people under study.

We often repeat that a fundamental feature of culture (which constitutes of skills, knowledge, etc) is that it is learned. However, situations in Nepal were historically such that some people were denied opportunities for learning certain types of skills or knowledge and were thereby prevented from adopting the occupations or professions of their choice. Instead of an open environment for learning, it was a very constraining one (e.g. the case of a Jalari reported in Chhetri). In reality, certain skills proscribed (and others were proscribed) for any individual to learn by means of rules and regulations (under the pretext of dharma and karma!) and that seems to have resulted in the so-called caste-based occupations.

A question that remains open now is whether the marginalized groups such as the ones discussed in this volume will be able to withstand occupational competition resulting from recent developments and changes in the environments in the country. For instance, will the Jalaris of Begnas be able to remain in the fishing and fish farming business when others with larger investments and more elaborate business networks enter the niche/intervene? If they decide to take on new jobs, the simple question is: what can they adopt easily? They do not have education, skills, land resources, etc., and cannot start tea shops (because of the unlawful practices of caste based untouchability). Many Kumal and dalit youths in the study sites have chosen to go overseas as labour migrants (see the papers on Kumals and Dalits in the Begnas). But the empirical evidence again reveals that most of such migrants are loosing whatever little farmlands they owned or had inherited. Until a time when the youths among these or similar groups

of people also become educated (or have better access to education) and prepare themselves for the changing job market (i.e. livelihood options), in the country and beyond, such groups of people are likely to remain in a vulnerable situation in spite of "improved condition of Nepal in statistical terms" (see Bista, 1991: 133).

On Cultural Change: Implications for Research

The empirical findings reported by the authors here on the basis of their research on selected marginal groups of people may not constitute a true and representative sample of the many caste/ethnic groups living in various parts of the country. Notwithstanding this, I feel that the findings of all the papers in the book together allow us to point to some common patterns—or talk about some generalizations or discoveries—in relation to changes in environments and life-ways of the people in Nepal. Some propositions have already been noted in the previous section. In this section, let me mention some of the conceptual and/or theoretical implications derived from the case studies presented in this book.

To begin with, I feel it useful to mention a lesson for the idea of holistic study and models used to understand social and cultural processes. In Nepal where cultural, religious, caste/ethnic pluralities have remained ubiquitous at all levels (national, regional and all the way down to the villages), the idea of 'holism' may need to be seen from a new vantage point. In particular, if our objective is to understand social and cultural processes, the idea of isolating one particular group of people (i.e. a particular caste or ethnic group) residing in a given locality may not allow us to explain the social and cultural processes adequately. The other groups (not selected for study) will come into the picture time and again, and therefore, they will need to be considered as part of the whole under study.

It is not a single community occupying a given spatial environment. In reality, a number of groups/communities live together in any given space—by co-operating, competing, and interacting with each other. Such realities, therefore, will have considerable bearing on the social and cultural processes in general—including how each of the groups of people think and behave. Therefore, models that claim to explain cultural and social processes in contexts characterized by caste, ethnic or religious plurality need to be honestly accommodative to such known realities.

A basic question that is yet to be fully resolved in anthropology is: do individuals or groups of people simply pass through a culture that is *sui generis* or do they also mould the culture they own and practice? This question comes up in my mind as I read these case studies and also think about what has been going on in the society and culture of Nepal. The idea that cultures are dynamic has had a wider acceptance among anthropologists. But what consists of culture or how to define culture has remained a

contentious issue and has received a lot of attention. There is so much variety in the way these questions have been answered that there is no ready-made, simple and quick answer to the question.

A careful reading of the case studies on environmental change and livelihoods in this volume makes me think that a distinction could be made between (a) cultural elements that enable interactions among groups, and thus become public in intra-group interactions/engagements (two individuals or a larger group) of various types and levels (norms, values, beliefs, etc.); and (b) those that are identified with a given group of people (caste/ethnic groups in the case of Nepal) but become enacted (public) in relation to other groups of people. Examples of the first type include any group of people performing rituals and rites of various types. In other words, there are cultural practices and norms that enable intra-group interactions/engagements and those that are identified with a given group but become enacted (or observable) primarily in relation to other groups of people around them. For instance, the visits paid to seniors during Dashain (by those who celebrate this festival in Nepal) in order to receive tika and blessings, are one example of intra-group-level enactment of cultural norms, values and beliefs. The second type mentioned here includes exchange of services based on the specialization of each group in question. Besides, the traditional occupational specializations among caste/ethnic groups in Nepal (e.g. Kumal's pottery, Damai's panchai baja, etc.) may also be regarded as examples of this.

In a way, there are cultural norms, values, beliefs and practices (and artefacts) that are (i) part of the livelihood strategies of a group; and (ii) part of social and 'other' strategies. The second category may be said to include caste/ethnic markers, among other things. The first category too helps groups to keep themselves distinct from the others but may not be held tenaciously by the group members. Changes seem to come about more easily in this area. Besides, changes in this aspect are not always volitional—as suggested by the empirical findings in the essays presented in this book. The people belonging to a particular group (e.g. Kumals, Damai, Sarki, etc.) may not by themselves be able to perpetuate/maintain or change this aspect of their culture. The Bali, Majuri, Parma, etc., discussed by the authors in this volume constitute good examples of this. The panchai baja of the Damai (see Tingey 1994), the narrative songs sung by the Gaijans with Sarangi music (see G. Chhetri 1989), etc., have not remained as common and popular as they were some time before. Other groups of people (that is, the receivers of such services) do not seem to demand the traditional music as much. This suggests that continuity or change in some aspects of culture of a particular group of people therefore is not to happen only at the will/strength of the group in question. The other groups of people (non Kumal, non-Dalits, etc.) present in the 'total environment' also seem to have a powerful influence in determining what stays and what changes (i.e. in the process of social/cultural change).

It is not within one single group's capacity to keep or change its cultural traditions. External forces including others around them (i.e. the total environment) seem to have a powerful influence on what stays and what changes. When we accept that thoughts or beliefs, behaviours, practices, etc., constitute culture, we should have no problem in the idea that culture of one group of people could change because of its interaction with other peoples around it. That is, new behaviours and practices that have come in from the larger Nepali society which themselves may have been influenced by global processes of change can be said to have also influenced changes in the cultures as well as the livelihood strategies of Kumals, Podes, Damais, Kamis, Sarkis, and many other groups of people in the country. In this way, the forces influencing changes in a group's cultural practices seem to come not just from decisions of people from inside (i.e., those belonging to the given culture) even though it may appear to be so. The other groups of people with distinct cultures of their own seem to have a strong influence in what stays and remains intact in a given group's culture and what should change.

Finally, let me move on to another point that needs to be highlighted even though it may appear to be an obvious one. There are places in different parts of the world that are inhabited by various groups of people 'living together' but still practicing distinct cultures, religions and speaking their own mother tongues. Nepal is one such place. Empirical information presented in the papers collected in this volume allow us to confirm the idea that cultures, languages and religions of any caste/ethnic group can remain distinct even when a number of culturally distinct groups of people live together and continue to interact in different ways (see also Chhetri 1990). Barth's idea of ethnic groups maintaining their boundaries is one example of theorizing this empirical reality (see Barth 1969).

Change has been highlighted in the essays in this issue. But continuity in culture also tends to be a rule. Empirical reality has made it evident that even a numerically small group of people are able to maintain their distinct language, culture and identity in spite of living within a single social, physical and economic environment with other kinds of people (e.g., see Chhetri 1990). How different groups of people live together, interact with each other in certain spheres and are still able to maintain their key social and cultural features (while at the same time undergoing changes in some other spheres) demands further attention from sociologists and anthropologists.

Notes

1. This list includes development, environmental management, sustainable development, people's participation, livelihoods, poverty alleviation/ reduction, gender equity, ethnicity, dalit, social inclusion and exclusion, etc. Concepts and themes such as these seem to have become part of common vocabulary in Nepal also one after another within the past four to five decades.

2. In a study of the Damais in Nepal, Tingey concludes on the basis of her field material "that the futures of the pancai baja and nagara baja are unpromising" (1994: 244).

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DEVELOPMENT AND LIVELIHOOD CHANGES AMONG THE KUMALS IN THE POKHARA VALLEY, NEPAL

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Introduction

This paper attempts to relate the livelihood changes among the Kumals of the Pokhara Valley in the Western Region of Nepal to the kind of 'development' being experienced within the region as well as within the country during the past couple of decades by different groups of people including Kumals themselves. The changes in the livelihood strategies of Kumals are seen here as their way of adapting to the changing natural, socio-cultural and economic environments around them in general. In order to explain the strategies adopted by Kumal individuals and households, a brief discussion of general changes in the environs of the area will also be useful. However, the main thrust of the paper is to explore and explain the state of the traditional occupation of Kumals (i.e. the making of the clay pots, which may have earned them the identity as *kumaal*) and the new economic activities or strategies adopted by them today.

The data used in this paper was collected during a fieldwork between mid-November 1999 to mid-January 2000 as a part of an ongoing research project on Environmental Change and Livelihood Strategies in the Hills of Nepal. In line with the main research project, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. The quantitative data was felt to be necessary in order to understand the socio-economic aspect of Kumal society such as changes in primary occupation, education and economic activities. A household census and survey was administered in the 73 Kumal households of Kumal Gaun in Lekhnath municipality. The ethnographic data (i.e. the qualitative and more contextual information) required for the study were collected by employing conventional anthropological methods. A check-list (developed earlier in the project) was used to guide the interviews—with the key informants and groups in formal interviews—and field observation as well as for informal interviews.

After giving a brief introduction of Kumals in the study area, we will note some of the environmental changes that have taken place during the last couple of decades in association with the developmental activities in the region. An attempt is made to identify the incidents and events that have played momentous roles in prompting changes in the natural, socio-cultural or economic environs of the region. In the next section, the main findings of the study in relation to the changes in the livelihood strategies will be presented. In the case of the Kumals, we want to show that there were two