

# Unexplored Nepal

by **Geoffrey Clarfield** (November 2014)

## The Remote West

Until the early 1950s Nepal was a closed Himalayan Hindu Kingdom ruled by a hereditary monarch, whose subjects believed he was a God. When the Chinese occupied Tibet in 1959 and once again sealed this former Buddhist kingdom off from the rest of the world, Nepal began to open its borders to visitors. Of a sudden the West saw Nepal as a buffer zone against the Chinese communist north and began to engage it at a number of levels.

Anthropologists flooded the northern borders of Nepal to study the mountain cultures of Tibetan speaking peoples while trekkers climbed Everest in growing numbers and tourists arrived from the south. Soon after, the major donors, including the World Bank began to establish development projects across the country while villagers began receiving Peace Corps volunteers in remote areas. Kathmandu, the capital city, went from being a remote backwater to the final destination of trekkers and hippies with their magic buses. At the same time, it became one of the counter cultural capitals of the youth revolt in the 1960s.

After the cold war, Nepal's royal family self-destructed and Nepal itself descended into a ten year civil war that pitted moderates against radical Maoists, a conflict that ended only in 2006, followed by its first legitimate national election in 2014 which defeated the Maoists and marginalized them substantially. Nepal now hosts just fewer than one million tourists a year and that number is set to rise. So, one would be hard put to find a significant swathe of the country that is rarely visited by foreigners or Nepalis and is therefore "unexplored," but that is not the case.

The far west of Nepal, bordering India is an area that receives few visitors. It is a vast region of hot plains, cool and forested hills that rise up to 16,000 feet and sparsely inhabited mountains, which are the Himalayan sources for its main river the West Seti and which flows through various districts as it reaches the lowlands. Given the industrial revolution that is now gripping both India and China, the West Seti river valley is thought of by so many donors and higher ups in the Nepali government, as a perfect recipient for a massive hydro electric dam; except for the fact that it is geologically unstable, dams silt up after fifty years, and hundreds of thousands of peasants will have to be displaced in order to build the dam.

Given the fragility of the present Nepali government, the remoteness of the area and the history of the high handed behavior of the large corporations who have expressed interest in this kind of project, it is hard to tell whether a dam will ever be built, or whether it should be.



If the dam is built, this village disappears

And so this region and its people live in limbo. It receives few resources from the central government, its roads are few and far between, impassable during the monsoon and, its people are among the most isolated and traditional of Nepal's Hindu majority. Despite the fact that they are the dominant ethnic group in the country, they are remarkably unstudied. Tourists do not travel there nor do trekkers trek there. Western Nepali peasants and towns people live in many ways the preindustrial peasant existence that characterized Nepal when it was closed off from the world during the period before WWII. It was therefore my privilege about 18 months ago, to be invited to join a team of Nepali anthropologists and rural surveyors to get the measure of the land and people to find out just what they expected from the dam, while visiting and living among what is still, unexplored Nepal. For the sake of the people involved

I have changed their names. The following narrative of my first trip out West are based on my field notes.

I managed to make it to the airport in Kathmandu on time, having been informed that the flight was delayed. I eventually checked my bags at the Buddha Air counter and was ushered into the waiting room. Soon after I called Siva, the team leader and found that he was sitting across the waiting room from me. We had a short chat and waited for the plane. We were ushered on to the plane and got into our seats. The plane was full to the brim of Nepali businessmen making their runs from Kathmandu to Dhangadi, the city in the lowlands of the Terai in the far Western region of Nepal, so close to the Indian border.

It is a short flight made pleasant by seeing the high Himalayas at eye level on the right hand side of the plane facing north. We soon landed and our bags were effectively handed over to us after having presented our baggage tags. So I could rest easy about that.

We met our driver, a young man in his late twenties named Bikash. He was driving a four-wheel drive jeep made in India that Siva had rented from a local agency in Dhangadi. For the first few days I was somewhat mindful as to its every sound, as having driven jeeps up and down the East African Rift valley, I have become accustomed to the sounds of vehicles when they are in mechanical or electrical stress. Throughout the trip I detected little noise and I found Bikash to be a highly focused and safe driver.

The Terai is a flat lowland, a semi tropical area, with wide, dried out river beds which no doubt flow strongly during the monsoon as they get both the rain and the run off from the hills and the mountains to the north. The vegetation and trees of the Terai are what we would call "jungle like," the towns have substantial buildings, there are schools everywhere, markets, and of course as we saw from the plethora of white Land Cruisers at the airport, a sign of significant NGO and UN project presence.

In the past the Terai was lightly populated and filled with malaria. But with the rise of anti malarials and the rise of Nepal's population, it has become the last frontier and has received the majority of Nepal's internal migration, with the exception of the capital city of Nepal, Kathmandu, whose explosive growth and high real estate prices were counter intuitively driven sky high by people fleeing the Maoist uprising and losing themselves in the anonymity of the big city. In an earlier version of the West Seti dam project, and which has been officially ditched by the Nepali government, it was thought that people displaced by the dam would resettle on land in the Terai, but that has become more contentious as the years have gone by. It may no longer be an option as the people of the Terai have formed ethnically based

political parties that are vying for a piece of the action in a Nepal that may adopt an ethnically and geographically based federal model and which will be based on the dominant ethnic group of any one area. So, there will be little room for the new immigrants in the Terai. This lowland frontier seems to have reached both its maximum demographic and political carrying capacity.

### **Into the Mountains**

It was late afternoon and soon we were driving along a paved road up the sides of steep forested hills. These "hills" in any other country would be considered mountains, but in Nepal they are not, as the Himalayas have six to seven of the highest peaks in the world. We ascended without stop, often driving along roads that were simply slightly more than one way lanes with sheer drops of perhaps a thousand feet on any one side. It is customary to honk before you round a corner and when vehicles meet face to face, the drivers work out a well rehearsed dance where they slowly move their vehicles in such a way so that one passes the other, often with barely an inch between them.

There were few jeeps of our caliber on the road. There were however many buses, including van like buses and men on motorcycles with women or children in tow, sometimes both, where at best the man may have been wearing a helmet. The women and children almost never did. As one ascends the mountain the kinds of forest change. At the mid levels there are bursts of Rhododendron trees with their bright red flowers and just at the edge of the road, young children selling them for whatever money they can get to passing travellers. One can often see shepherds, both male and female, with herds of goats crossing the road.

My Nepali colleagues were excited to be going to the field as was I, but as we ascended the mountain roads, they got narrower and narrower until they were as wide as the jeep we were in with those sheer drops of thousands of feet on one side. I found the steepness disorienting and could not help but imagine the possibility of slipping off the road to a quick death, something that I later read in the papers happens far more than it should. I managed to keep up with the banter in the car but my eye was on the edge of the road and I admitted to myself, if not to my colleagues that everything in the Himalayas was larger than I had imagined it to be, including my own anxiety.



### West Nepal Mountain Forest

As you climb higher in this thickly wooded part of Nepal, with literally millions of cedar trees spreading up and down the mountains sides and valleys all around you, you will often see

cut logs on either side of the road, evidence of community forest management. The other anthropologist, Krishna, told me that West Seti had over 143 cases resting in the national courts on illegal cutting of forests, with accusations that forest users groups, businessmen and members of the local government are often in cahoots in the illegal selling and cutting of this precious resource. No doubt it is connected to the fact that West Seti has the highest percentage of highland crown forest in the country, so supply seems to trigger demand. I imagine that given that many government officers have moved from the highlands to administrative and trading towns like Danghadi, and they happen to be from the Brahmin/Chetri upper castes, facilitates this trade substantially, but I may be wrong.

As we climbed higher and higher I noticed the presence of monkeys. Later in the trip Krishna pointed out that in the areas of the West and around Dadeldhura, there are a surviving group of nomadic hunter-gatherers who hunt these monkeys. They are called the Rowti and a female American anthropologist studied them. I suspect that they are the last group of ancient hunter-gatherers who first settled Nepal in ancient times and who survive in the most remote part of these alpine forests. Although they comprise only four to five hundred people, they too have joined the national debate on ethnicity and there are newspaper articles about them that help them express their desire to maintain their nomadic forest dwelling life style.

Krishna was already in the field for a different project and donor when we met him on the drive up from Danghadi, for unfortunately, most research in Nepal is donor driven. There is no systematic national ethnographic survey and there have been no resources put aside for such a needed initiative. The anthropological sciences must be opportunistic and are "donor driven."

We met Krishna at a small pit stop, had tea and then proceeded to Dadeldhura. We arrived there late at night a couple of kilometres outside of town (the bazaar in Nepali refers to the town centres that are clusters of shops that serve the surrounding and largely rural agricultural countryside). We had our dinner of dhal bhat and a beer while the TV broadcast Indian Bollywood films and shows featuring Indian comedians. I was told that most Nepalis understand Hindi as it is as close to Nepali as Italian is to Spanish. Add to this that so many Nepali men migrate and work in India as night watchmen for Indian families, and then one can only conclude that the Nepali notion of the "good life" must somehow be strongly influenced by what they see on Indian TV. It is a modern life style, but it is not a Western lifestyle.

As I went to sleep I thought of how tenuous the road system had been so far. I expected it to get worse (and it did) and I could not imagine that it would easily support the lorries and heavy equipment that the dam builders would need to bring in to this area to successfully build their sites. I also imagined myself as a local peasant or trader trying to get from one

place to another while waiting for convoys of project lorries monopolizing the roads and holding up traffic for long periods of time, or closing the roads because a lorry gets stuck in the dry season, or more obviously during the wet seasons, when the rains turn these unpaved roads into slippery, dangerous mud. Towards the end of my four months in Nepal and when the monsoon hit, I read in the papers that this area had indeed experienced floods with loss of life.

But Asia is an ancient civilization and traders are no stranger to each and every route, no matter how remote. I made a mental note of this and vowed to find and interview some of the local entrepreneurs for I felt that herein might lie the kernel for the future economic development of the region.

### **The Expatriate Guest House**

The Rato Gurans means Rhododendron as we could see Rhododendrons in the forest all around us. It is a small guest house with a large restaurant with glass windows and a bamboo roof. The owner is a man named Dulal, who is from the area and worked for various NGOs over the years including Action Aid. With the money that he saved working for this British NGO he built the Rato Gurans on land that he had inherited from his father. It has only six or seven rooms and despite a range of stainless steel taps which are arrayed on the bathroom wall, you either get very cold or very hot water in the mornings. At night there is no chance of hot water which is either a function of the solar water heating system or, a remnant of the Hindu custom of bathing after rising in the morning. I suspect that when the West Seti project comes the Rato Gurans will be in high demand and I do not doubt that Dulal will expand it substantially.

Having my morning tea I looked north from the Rato Gurans and could see the outlines of the Himalayas above the foothills that spread out before me. Close by, just across the road, were deep, deep valleys that were terraced for wheat and other crops with houses here and there appeared in what looked like a dispersed settlement pattern. Later on, as we approached and entered the area where the proposed dam wall be built and where the “directly” and “indirectly” affected people live, we would see more clustered settlement patterns which are visually conjured up by the Western word “village.”



### West Seti Villagers

I had only met Krishna and Siva in formal meetings in Kathmandu, and at their consulting firm's offices there. These were working meetings where the TORs (terms of reference) and the roles and responsibilities that they would fulfill were worked out with my European supervisor

and myself. Given that money was and is involved, they could not act in an informal way. Siva by choice or necessity is the somewhat reserved director of an active research and consulting institute. He has briefed the various democracies on Nepal and the Maoists. His colleague Krishna is an experienced field anthropologist who is warm and gregarious and puts people at ease. As we had read and studied much of the same anthropological literature and speak a similar field language we bonded easily.

Krishna has a network of field assistants and PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) facilitators in the region and we met two of them that morning, one by the name of Nari Ram. Nari Ram is a Dalit (former untouchables) who speaks some Basic English. He is extremely deferential as the anthropological literature on untouchables suggests is often the case, and which is a function of their low social and ritual standing. He was to join us for the whole trip and I found him to be gracious and friendly, within the role that society has allotted him.

He and other colleagues have been trained to do PRA techniques and have applied them in a wide range of contexts and projects. Their last workshop was just two weeks ago, for Oxfam. They told us that the records of these PRAs were often kept by the local NGO if at all, but were not distributed or collected at any one point. We also heard that the PAF (a World Bank sponsored project called the Poverty Alleviation Fund) had been working in the area and had carried out PRAs in the four districts around West Seti river and that students at the national university were about to see if there had been systematic changes for the better or worse among those studied and effected by this project.

When I asked Krishna and Siva how evaluators could distinguish between direct social improvement from one specific project without taking into account the effect of overlapping or even earlier projects, they explained that it was simply not taken into account, as each organization must report progress, so by pointing out the influence of other projects on their results could impact further funding. Again, it is a donor driven process and donors are often at cross-purposes.

I asked Krishna and Siva if Nari Ram's Dalit status would affect the participation that we wanted from the PRAs, focus groups and ethnographic interviewing that we intended to carry out across 8 sites in the four districts of West Seti. They explained that one of the positive impacts of the plethora of projects and NGOs that were working across rural Nepal during the last twenty years, and, the near ubiquitous and sometimes inconsistent application of PRA in various project contexts, had all contributed to the opening of new social spaces that had previously not existed in traditional rural Nepal.

So, putting it simply peasants and the administrators who largely come from the upper caste Brahmins and Chetris now happily attend workshops and seminars run by Dalits. This is no doubt a step forward. However, they explained to me that Dalits were still not welcome to visit and eat in the houses of the upper castes, suggesting, as if often the case, that social inclusion is a gradual, often generational process of change that can be legislated at best, but rarely enforced.

Before setting off that day we took an hour to look at the work plan and the methods that we had chosen to use. As so much development work in Nepal and Asia has been dependent on “outside in” surveys which do not take into account the daily life and social categories of peasants, we agreed that our four fold approach would mitigate that.

The first stage was looking around which is what we would be doing this week, sometimes called “nose in the air” or in ethnography, “grand tours,” meaning getting the lay of the land, the settlement patterns and picking up issues through casual conversations. The next stage would be to use the tried and true methods of PRA to gain group understandings of the cultural ecology of the people that will be affected by the dam. From these groups we would select those “lateral strata” of society given the horizontal nature of caste based society in rural West Seti, and explore and verify the data from these different social perspectives in focus groups. We would then use ethnographic interviews to situate personal narrative within the larger social system. From this we should be able to make ethnographically grounded observations and recommendations to the project with regards to benefit sharing.

We planned to add a formal survey but that would somehow be linked with national and other survey data that would provide a baseline, which our efforts may complement.

All of this was done towards finding out how the project will one day share its benefits with displaced and affected peasants and townspeople, before, during and after the dam is built. Benefit sharing is a World Bank euphemism, which means that a small amount of project money will be put aside to compensate or support the people who must be, often, forcefully moved by the national governments in the wake of the development of national infrastructure.



#### Village Children in West Seti

Because so many men and women in development no longer believe in the property rights that are the basis of Western democratic practice, they willfully disregard the fact that the building of a dam in a remote rural area, would normally hugely augment rural real estate and therefore allow the owners a generous purchase opportunity or to be offer of shares in the company, if



normal market forces were allowed to function. But they are not. Both the donors and the national governments across industrializing Asia argue that these infrastructure projects are for the "national benefit."

However, when one realizes that elite capture characterizes national governments just as effectively as it does local economies, it is the national elites and the companies who work with them who benefit most. Critics, usually come from the left, and as the Maoists of Nepal are now morally and politically discredited there is no common sense movement that suggests that peasants need to be paid the real value of their land and be made serious shareholders in these new infrastructure projects.

If the World Bank and the Western donors really believed that the creation and widening of a national middle class was in the best interest of the country, and the world, they would act otherwise, but to a man and woman, they do not. And since conservatives in the US and Canada do not take an interest in international development, the peasants in countries like Nepal have no political force on the face of the earth who can intervene in their best interest.

### **A Bazaar In the Mountains**

We packed up and started driving north. Three kilometres later we had stopped in the Dadeldhura Bazaar, a concentrated collection of shops of all kinds selling all kinds of things and no doubt serving the wider needs of the dispersed villages that radiate out from Dadeldhura in the classic settlement pattern of well watered, pre-industrial agricultural villages, characterized by a form of terrace farming that moves up the mountain sides from rivers below in the gorge to close up to the tree line.

Siva explained that in times past it was the Newars who established pan Nepali trading towns, trading centres and trading routes across the country. These itinerant traders were called Sauris (The Newars are an ethnic group of Kathmandu valley whose Kings ruled medieval Nepal before they were conquered in the 1700s).

I asked if this bazaar was Newar and he explained that it is a more recent phenomena, whereby people from this area had migrated down to the Terai or plains when there was still land to be had, some twenty or thirty years ago. They then got some wealth, came back to their home areas and opened these shops. He explained that it was an imitation of the Newars in a way, but the Newar trading towns had all been bypassed by the national road system of the last twenty to forty years and as a result their trading towns and their systems had declined, being replaced by more "indigenous" imitations that correspond to the new highway and rural road system of

20<sup>th</sup> century Nepal and which we witnessed here in Dadelhdhura.

As we searched the shops for the scarce rolls of toilet paper that we had not brought with us, a group of Buddhist monks started walking down the street that was just up the street on our left. I walked over and saw a group of youngish looking Buddhist monks, mostly male with hand drums with a ball on a string that they flicked back and forth to make noise. A young woman with a loudspeaker was announcing their presence. Some of them had plastic tags draped across their neck. They would then stop in front of a shop and beg for alms. I noticed that these were largely Hindu shopkeepers who gave them alms. I was told that there is a Buddhist monastery nearby, but had not read about it in the project literature. I wondered whether there were others in the area.

### **Caste Raises Its Ugly Head**

As it was early in the morning we followed the road north and made a number of pit stops at roadside teashops, most often positioned perilously at the edge of the drop over sheer cliffs. On one occasion we all went inside a tiny shack and sat down on the benches. Nari Ram stood outside hesitating to go in. Clearly he can pick up when he is welcome and when he is not. Slowly Siva realized what was happening and suggested we all stand outside and take our tea together, which we did.

He explained that given the changing attitude towards Dalits in rural Nepal, it is often challenging for them to know when the old rules of religiously based social exclusion are still in force, and when the new rules of social inclusion are to be trusted. Not a happy situation to be in, but clearly an improvement over structural and religiously sanctioned exclusion which was the unquestioned norm of times past and enforced by the Muluka Ain, a legal/caste based document which the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Kings and their minions supplied Nepal with its caste based social charter before modernization.

### **We Enter The Valley**

Eventually we went off the tarmac onto narrow, winding, unpaved mountain roads for some hours, going higher and higher. As we approached the Seti river valley we could see variations of settlements where the villages were clustered just above the river or way up, high on the ridge. Some were smack in the middle of a mountain side, connected by steep foot paths that fall away at a 90 degree angle for hundreds of feet. Women would often be seen cutting forage at angles that I could not quite fathom, and then carrying it back to their villages on their backs which made them look small, as the amount of fodder was in some senses bulkier than the

woman who carried it.

The crowns of the hills were still quite thick with trees but as we approached the Seti river valley itself we noticed that in some areas there were almost treeless slopes which Krishna explained were probably not deforested, but a function of their being in a rain shadow; such is the height of these Himalayan "foothills." As we rounded bends in the road we would often see small roadside Hindu shrines called Tan, which reminded me of similar shrines that can be found in the rural Mediterranean whether Christian or Islamic.

As I contemplated these roadside shrines I recalled the argument by the French classicist, Fustel de Coulange, who first pointed out the geographic and family based system of ancestor worship that underlay classical Greek and Roman civilization, its geography and social organization. The sacralization of geography with national, regional and localized shrines usually mirrors the hierarchical social organization of what was once in Nepal a Royal centre with regional centres and local shrines. Although the King is gone, I suspect that this social and religious hierarchy is still solidly in place and a major impediment to social change. Any mention of its existence is curiously absent from the NGO literature that I have come across, but perhaps features in reports on knowledge, attitudes and belief in the health sector. It is too early to say and I need to read more.

As we descended into the Seti river valley we drove down to the river side where there was a road that paralleled the river sometimes by one hundred or two hundred feet and that finally led down to the a road by the riverside. As we descended, on either side of the river, we could see clearly delineated villages and we began to consider them as possible research sites.

When we got to the bottom we stopped at a "mini bazaar" and immediately attracted a crowd. Siva and Krishna engaged them in discussion while I just blended in. Everyone, quite rightly assumed, that we were there because of the West Seti project. They had heard that it was on again and of course from their point of view we were living proof that that was the case. Siva said that he tried to be non-committal and explained that what we were trying to do is to move among the communities in and around the Seti River so that we can help the government understand their development needs. He said that we would follow that line throughout our trip and during the PRAs and interviews, but it soon became clear that there was little understanding of different kinds and levels of institutional practice.

It reminded me of my experience facilitating rural development projects in East Africa. Regardless of translations, explanations, documents and meetings, local peasants and traders

often label the project manager as the project. Thus people will eventually talk about Bob's project or Max's project. The anthropological point is that the local and even national patron client mental grid is projected on to almost all and any development projects by peasants. And as the days went on and Siva, Krishna and I discussed the "lessons learned" papers and the West Seti documents we agreed that this can only be mitigated with communication and representation of the communities effected at both the lowest level (family, household) as well as at "higher levels" such as local government or indigenous NGOs.

As we travelled on we drove past a public school where we happened to witness a delivery of World Food Program supplemental cooking oils and foods, which would no doubt be picked up by registered families. (In the Kathmandu Post March 12, 2013 edition, there are two articles on food security that are relevant here, one arguing that donor use of rice is changing people's food preferences and growing patterns and contributes to food imports in Nepal and a decline in local production).

Given that some of the literature suggests that with able-bodied males outside of the family and country, and not always able to send home money, there is a calorie deficit in many villages. Part of the evidence for this is stunted growth rates for many children in the West Seti area. Siva suggested that WFP food aid may also serve as an incentive for kids to go and stay in school as they get a free meal when they do so. So from the project point of view compensating peasants who live in a food deprived situation may present a bit of a challenge and demand some creative thinking using best practices from rural development in other parts of the country or in Asia.



## Dadeldhura -The Town

We also saw evidence of road improvement and road renewal being done by work teams under the auspices of the World Bank's PAF program. Inevitably, a fair number of the work crew would consist of local women, anywhere from the age of 20-40 involved in back breaking road work that included sitting by the road side with a hammer crushing larger stones in smaller stones. There was something sadly Pharaonic about all this. Later in the trip we passed by a vocational school.

Krishna pointed out that those who go to these schools do much better than those who go to academic schools as they all have a trade and a job. A lesson learned for the project as one way out of poverty is a shift up the skill scale, from untrained agriculturalists to trained artisans. As we visited many bazaars and district capital and saw a fair amount of indigenous

construction going on, this was and remains food for thought.

Local conversations suggested that much development work had been stopped in the area during the last decade as everyone had expected the West Seti project to take on that role. Given the fact that it was delayed the local governments are now becoming more active. And, given the fact that there have not been local elections for some years, the executive/civil service branch of the local DDC's or district development committees seem to be coordinating anything and everything that they can. On the other hand, later on during the trip we heard various complaints that local and international NGOs and UN projects do not necessarily inform or coordinate their activities with the local DDC's (District Development Coordinator) in the four districts that concern us.

We drove along the riverside road a few kilometres farther on and arrived by foot at the gorge where the dam wall is to be built at its northern most point. We got out of the car and walked around. We were at a turn in the Seti River and it was flowing briskly under a pedestrian suspension bridge that crossed the river. To the right began a gorge and Krishna and Siva pointed out that the dam wall would rise in front of us and fully submerge the area that we had just driven through and were standing in.

Way up the hill was a freshly white washed school, which they explained would remain but most probably find itself a few score of yards away from the edge of the lake created by the dam. There were farmed fields in and around the edge of the river and men tending cows. At the bend in the river was a unique Hindu shrine that Krishna told me was called a Masani. It was and is unique to the West Seti and has something to do with protecting the villagers from some sort of harm connected to the river spirit. He said there could be anywhere up to thirty or forty of such shrines, in the area but he was not sure.

Eventually we got back in the car and weaved in and out of site of the Seti on low and high mountain roads, noting villages that we believe may be indirectly or directly effected by the village and we mentally prepared to come back the next day and hike through part of the Seti Gorge that was inaccessible or harder to get to by vehicle.

### **The District Capital of Chainpur**

We continued in this manner, looking at villages, negotiating the roads, stopping at pit stops, Krishna and Siva engaging here and there in conversation till during the late afternoon we arrived in the northern District capital of Chainpur at the foot of the Himalayas. In order to enter the town we had to cross a flowing river in our four wheel drive and I imagined what this must be like during the height of the monsoon when the river is in full flow. We arrived

in Chainpur just as it was getting dark.

We booked in to our hotel/restaurant called the St. Tropez Hotel. I was taken to my room which was small, stuffy and dark and looked like it had not been washed down for quite some time. We ate at their rooftop restaurant (which had its own Hindu temple just above the eating area) and I fastidiously avoided anything that was not well cooked, drinking bottled beer and bottled water.

I spent much of the evening asking Krishna and Siva questions about the social organization, economics and politics of Nepal and the secondary literature that does and does not describe it. They agreed that given the phenomenal ethnic diversity of the place and despite the many particular studies that have been carried out, there is as yet no agreed upon macro sociological model for rural Nepal.

They explained that in the past there was a monarchial and government tendency to deny ethnicity and so ethnic and identity politics is a very new thing for Nepalis. They also pointed out that many of the "animist" tribes lean towards Buddhism as this gives them a formal and respected identity. As Krishna explained, paraphrasing a famous anthropological book called *Pigs for the Ancestors*, it is not a great advantage to enter the national and international political arena from an ethnic group confined to the periodic sacrifice of pigs for the ancestors.



#### West Seti Shaman

I also tried to draw them out about Suresh Sakya's book *Nepal Unleashed* which is the best known and only popular book by a Nepali economist aimed at providing a blueprint for what he hopes can become a capitalist welfare state for the future of Nepal. As they know him well, they were polite in their comments but, they said that he underestimates politics and traditional practices in the rural areas, which will take much longer to change than Sakya believes. However they were both modestly optimistic about the social change that resulted from Nepal's tendency to sign up to what are in their eyes the most progressive international agreements (via the Nepal Treaty Act) thus providing those in Nepal who want a more egalitarian society to use this legal framework to "move it down the system." No doubt, as education and literacy increases, we will eventually see the results of this at the rural level.

That night I managed to fall asleep using my own pillow and sleeping bag to protect me from the bedsheets in my room. Early in the morning the jingling of bells woke me. Later on I found

that these belong to mules that mountain dwelling peasants used to transport their purchases up the mountain side to their villages after their visit to the bazaars. They are owned by bazaar dwellers and the peasants pay them to haul their things upland. I fell back to sleep only to be awoken at dawn by an electronic recording of a Hindu priest chanting the Vedas, religious hymns.

That morning we walked around town as Krishna had hoped to find some local documents and stats at the offices of the local government. He explained that every year the 74 district governments are ranked and those that do well are rewarded. Those that do not do well are neglected and that had been the case in Chainpur. Not surprisingly he could not find what he was looking for.

Then Siva showed me some data that he had collected through his office and that had been sent to his phone. He pointed out that it could be added to existing data to update our districts baseline. Krishna showed me more detailed data from a project ten years ago that could be used to upgrade the quantitative data. There is a recently published statistical update of all districts in the country published and update for 2013, which I suspect they and we will also consult and modify to suit our purposes.

In Chainpur we saw evidence of World Food Program activity, PAF and a branch of the National Dalit Association which was selling sweets on the street which suggests that caste based purity and eating taboos may be declining in towns and cities, if not in the countryside.

### **I Travel on a Local Bus**

As we drove back south towards the Seti we looked at villages at different altitudes and returned to the gorge area. We packed our camping equipment and started into what was to be a day and half walk down the gorge towards those three or four villages that we intended for our PRA and subsequent studies. Due to an inner ear condition that I have had for the last few years I could not join them on the narrow foot trails as it affects my balance, so I turned back to the road with our Dalit assistant Nari Ram. We took a six hour local bus ride back to Dadeldhurra and agreed to drive out on the secondary road the next day to pick them up from their trek.

The bus was bigger than a van and smaller than a school bus. It took off from our point in the road only when all the seats were filled and then some people were left standing in the aisle. It was a noisy, somewhat run down machine, whose front tires had good treads but whose back tires were a bit worn. The seats did not move and it looked like it had not been hosed down for some time. There were times where people with dogs and goats got on and off. There were

one or two men who were completely drunk and tried to talk to me, until I asked them to sit down and the crowd of sympathetic travellers made sure that he did (I suspect there is a fair amount of rural alcoholism that goes unreported in the NGO world here and which many Nepalis later confirmed). As we did most of our travelling at night I noticed a fair amount of villages off the mountain road with lights, whether this was solar or rural electrification, I do not know. The radio was set at an ear splitting volume and played Nepali folk songs throughout. Occasionally, I could make out the names of key Hindu Gods such as Ram and Sita and I quietly asked them politely for a safe journey. We stopped at a place called Khorpe where everyone got out and ate. I had carried nuts, cheese and water and this sufficed for my needs until at around eleven in the evening we arrived back at the Rato Gans.

Although the vehicle was neither the safest nor the most secure it was a humbling piece of participant observation as this kind of transport beats walking and it is the only one available to local people. And, I later heard that these vehicles do not have a great safety record. The people who use them live a hard life and for my own and my own family's sake I realized that next time we go to the field we would need two vehicles for back up. I drank a beer and went to sleep wondering whether tomorrow's morning shower would be hot or cold.

Nari Ram and I had our breakfast; for me it had become bread and rice with the occasionally cooked fish or chicken curry. I had a cold before the trip and the doctor asked me to be super strict. I actually got better. I took part of the morning to go through some of the project and ethnographic literature to begin a list of kinds of work or workers that I want to inform our ethnography. I am sure there are more and no doubt people do many of these jobs in different capacities, as well as rise from one to another but it is a start.

These local units of "livelihoods" and are spread across the local caste system. They include but are not limited to:

- Tailor
- Blacksmith
- Goldsmith
- Leatherworker
- Shoemaker
- "Hallodo" leather rope maker



- “Chalno” leather screener
- Shoe repair person
- “Theki” wooden pot maker
- Carpenter
- Prostitute
- Kaimaya/Hailaya-a form of group based bonded laborer connected to working off inherited debt
- Stone quarry worker
- Wage laborer
- Fixed contract farmer
- Seasonal migrant worker to India
- Sand screener
- Soil carrier for construction
- School teacher
- Employee of NGO
- Employee of community managed electricity system
- Livestock keeper (male and female shepherds)
- Farmer
- Sharecropper
- Porter
- Businessman
- Land mortgager (?)

These can no doubt be ranked and clustered according to caste, class, gender and age and could form a variation of a PRA or fall within a PRA exercise. I promised that I would take it up with Krishna when back in Kathmandu. I am also hoping that our roster of articulate key informants that will emerge from our fieldwork will run and express the full gamut of the local division of labor.

### **Meetings Meetings Meetings**

This was a day dedicated to meeting government officers and projects. Although I speak almost no Nepali I have in the first few weeks become familiar with the intonation and body language in order to fake a good meeting. I can greet people and introduce myself saying my name when people go around the room and start the meeting.

I joined Bikash and Nari Ram on a drive down to the river where they washed their clothes. I walked around the local farmed terraces to get a feel for what they are like and found that most of them were at neck level and sometime higher and so I would have to find the paths that led from one to the other. I did ten to fifteen and realized that locals probably know every inch, but for me it was quite a discovery process. I noticed a lot of cow dung and realized that these terraces probably double as grazing land for local livestock.

### **Into the Interior**

We drove back to the Rato Gurans and then drove off the main highway on to a side road, what in Canada I would have called an unpaved secondary road. We managed about three hours of driving on these strong but perilous roads, passing one or two motorcycles and a tractor. At a certain point the driver stopped the car, walked ahead and declared the road unsafe. We stopped at a tiny out of the way mountain tea shop and micro general store and Nari Ram walked ahead for a couple of hours. Somehow one or two telephone calls made it through and we awaited Siva and Krishna who came up the road on a borrowed tractor. As we drove back they told me that they had found four good village PRA sites but that the hiking had been harder and more difficult than even they had suspected, complaining with humor that when a villager tells you a place is two hours away, it could be four or even six and some of the paths may be extremely narrow. They confirmed that they had travelled to about four villages in the area where people would be replaced and resettled and said that about four villages were available for PRA and other work.

### **More Meetings**

We put aside this day to go to Dadel dura, have a meeting with the secretary of the district

and meet with UN and Ngo personnel. I was able to introduce myself and follow the tone and focus of the meeting although I understood little. Afterwards I got a short debriefing of the bare bones of the discussion. With the VDC it became clear because of postponed elections that any activity in the district was under the authority of the civil servants and not the elected representatives and, they complained mildly that although they welcome the UN and other NGOs, often they are neither consulted nor informed as to their activities making a rational use of resources hard to achieve. They also expressed interest in a vague sort of way of facilitating any resettlement that may come about because of the dam. At the end of the meeting we were sent to the library where Krishna explained that there were many pamphlets and surveys that may be of use to our study. He was asked to help himself, which he did.

We then met with the local Oxfam rep who told us of their activities which sound impressive. These include training of para legals, seed coops to support microlivelihoods, helping landless peasants lease and use marginal land, creating rain-harvesting groups with locked water tanks that are accessible to villagers and members for daily use. He told us that locally it is the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) who tries to coordinate all the development activities in the area. He promised to send us a complete list of donors and NGOs at work in the area.

Then we met with some of the eight partner organizations that are working under the umbrella of the World Bank's Poverty Alleviation Fund. These include a Dalit representative and include projects that deal with social mobilization, income generation and coop training. From these few meetings we recognized that there are a lot of institutional players and projects already at work in the area of West Seti. I concluded it would be wise to consider them in an integrated approach to the rural development of the West Seti areas as a new way of planning rural development but as this had not yet been done there were probably good reasons for it, namely competition for scarce donor funds.



#### A Hindu Cremation on the West Seti River

We then drove east to Silagadi and passed by a number of village sites while we sat in on a village development committee meeting beside a bridge just above a bend in the river and where we noticed a Hindu cremation was ongoing at the edge of the river. It was international women's day and we realized that we would not be able to speak to the local government officers in Silagadi. We heard that the day was being used as a campaign to move against the tradition of secluding women in menstrual huts. We then drove on to Silagadi where we visited

the historic hilltop for where the police still monitor the area, in case of return of the armed Maoist uprising which Siva believes is unlikely, but from the readiness in the fort gave a different feeling. We then stayed in a small guesthouse on the mountainside outside of town.

### **We Return to Dadelhura**

We drove back to just south of Dadelhura and stopped across from two villages across the river at lower altitudes and that may be good downstream village sites worth including in our study and survey.

Siva pointed out that the higher-level houses belong to the higher castes and the ones closer to the river are for the Dalits and the lower castes. He assumed that many of the men would be abroad working but they would be representative sites.

As I looked at the village I asked myself what forms of culture and social organization have continued there during the last twenty to forty years since the key ethnographies of these cultures were written.

I wondered how a social organization that is based on patrilineal and patriarchal hierarchies of lineages and families is effected by the out migration of able-bodied males. I wondered to what degree polygamy has survived and to what degree extended families and households (parivar) still own and work the land.

Siva pointed out that he suspects there may be local landowners who own a disproportionate share of the pie. I wondered how the local caste system functions here with its Brahmans, Chetris, Thakuris, Thimbu, Dalits and "matwali" which used to mean all others including Newars and Europeans. I asked myself what kind of information will we be able to elicit from local categories of land use and crops.

Ultimately, I wondered if the general consensus that land is getting scarcer, food more expensive and labor scarcer (because of outmigration of males) will suggest that any replication of this system may be non viable. What may be needed is some form of rural transformation and that this approach must inform the West Seti benefit sharing plan which our proposed study is supposed to inform.

But one thing stood out above all from this short, first visit to undiscovered Western Nepal. In this untouched part of this modernizing state, although the villages look traditional and there is little outward sign of development, I concluded that the 21<sup>st</sup> century industrial revolution that is engulfing India had left highland Nepali villages such as those that we had

visited, functional, traditional but almost empty of their young men who were off to sell their labour south of the border. I am sure that my Nepali colleagues knew this from the start. But there is nothing like a short field visit to hammer home the point.

Could any project or any form of “benefit” sharing ever bring these migrant labourers back to their villages? I had my doubts.

The drive back to Dhangadi was uneventful. Our flight was on time. As I sat in my seat, facing the Himalayas to the north of me, I imbibed some of the serenity that came from my first trek to the field and that was reflected in the name of the company, Bhudda Air. I took a cab back to the hotel in Kathmandu and began writing up my notes the next morning.

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