

JIRELS, JIRI, AND POLITICS: AN OVERVIEW

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Introduction

The Jirels are the indigenous population occupying the Jiri Valley in the Dolakha District of Eastern Nepal. The Jiri Valley falls within the jurisdiction of the Jiri Village Development Council (VDC), which is a geographic unit defined politically by the central government in Kathmandu. There are a number of other ethnolinguistic groups in the Jiri VDC as well, including Sherpas, Sunwars, Surels, Tamangs and a Hindu caste population, predominantly Chhetris and Brahmins (Bista, 1980).

According to the official Nepali Census of 1991, the total population of the VDC was 7,138. The Jirels constitute 3,067 people, or more than 40 percent of the population of the VDC. Despite this, historically they have had less influence in the local politics than many of the other ethnic groups. Furthermore, they are also on the lower rung of the socioeconomic hierarchy. Given this, the question might be asked: Why have the Jirels been unable to assume a more prominent role in local political, economic, and developmental activities?

The purpose of this paper is to describe the position of the Jirels within the local political structure and to determine some of the factors that continue to keep them at the bottom of the political and economic hierarchy.

Traditional Jirel Political Structure

Prior to the construction of a paved road that connected the Jiri Valley to Kathmandu, Jiri was a five-to-seven days walk from the seat of Nepali political power. The Jirel people were more or less isolated and left to their own devices. They had developed an indigenous political system based on clan reciprocity. Rules of clan exogamy and strong pressure toward group endogamy produced a pattern of marriage exchanges between clans that

involved a complicated structure of balanced reciprocity in spouse exchange and in ritually defined economic obligations (cf. Williams-Blangero, 1990). The clans were also required to perform periodic sacrifices to their various clan spirits. Members of other clans would also participate in these ritual occasions. These rituals produced a pattern of reciprocity and offered a context for intra-clan negotiations in which political decisions were made. These events also functioned to redistribute wealth because wealthy Jirel people were obliged to share their surplus resources with members of their community, whether or not, they were clan mates. Clan leaders functioned as arbitrators and decision-makers for their own descent groups, as well as settling disputes which developed between clans and sub-clans (cf. Shrestha, 1997: 79-81; Blaikie et al., 1980:235). (For a more detailed description of Jirel social organization, see Sidky et al., "Social Organization, Economy, and Kinship Among the Jirels of Eastern Nepal," in this volume.)

Jirel clans were corporate in as much as each clan held communal rights in a land tenure system called *kipat* (M. Regmi, 1976). Individual families within the clan had rights to farm *kipat* land; but they had no rights to sell or otherwise alienate it from control by the clan leadership. These families had the right to keep all of the produce of the land, having been sanctioned to use it by the clan leadership. Thus, clans were the predominant political and economic force in the daily lives of the Jirel people.

This traditional political system was articulated to the national government through a system of taxes paid or collected in butter. The central government had appointed a single clan, the Serba, to serve as tax collectors, and this clan had become, in essence, the representative of the Monarchy in the valley. The Serba also represented the entirety of the valley to the central authority in Kathmandu. The Serba clan still today enjoys some prominence among the Jirels. This is well illustrated by the fact that one of the only Jirels elected to public office is from this clan. Additionally, one of the two men in the valley to have multiple wives is a member of this clan.

Jiri in the Panchayat Period

In 1961, the King of Nepal banned all political parties and instituted a new party-less political system known as the Panchayat. It was based on indigenous village councils whose aim was to build democracy from the grassroots up. Election to the National Panchayat, or Parliament, was indirect, proceeding through a hierarchy of village, district, and zone levels (D. R. Regmi, 1969; Rose et al., 1980; Profenberger, 1980; Joshi and Rose, 1966).

The Jiri Village Panchayat was divided into nine wards and each ward had its own chairman who was elected by the ward members. Until 1980, each ward chairman had the authority to select four individuals from his respective ward to serve as the representatives of the ward at the Village Panchayat. The Village Panchayat chairman and vice-chairman were voted into office in a general election in the Jiri Village Panchayat as a whole. After the third amendment of the Panchayat Constitution in 1980, a direct election on the basis of adult franchise for four ward members and one ward chairman was introduced (Maharjan, 1999). This was a significant change given that under this amendment, theoretically a greater number of Jirels could be elected into office to represent the Village Panchayat. The Jiri Panchayat, however, was continuously dominated by the Hindu castes. The chairman of the Jiri Village Panchayat, almost throughout the entire period, was always a Chhetri. Some Jirels were members of the village Panchayat, but the chairman was consistently of Hindu caste and he wielded superior decision making power.

In general, during the Panchayat regime, the Jirels as a whole had very little input into the Panchayat political system. In part this was due to their severe isolation from the national political scene as well as migration and limited social mobility. Furthermore, an extremely low literacy rate, lack of modern communications, language barriers, and limited knowledge of national and international events also played a part in preventing them from becoming aware of their political and socioeconomic situation.

Economic factors also appear to have had political ramifications for the Jirels. The bulk of the production in agriculture undertaken by Jirels had a primary objective to provide enough for their own consumption. Only a few wealthier Jirels employed some labor. They were not under pressure to develop their farms through investment of capital. Instead they were more inclined to use the surplus generated to advance their own socioeconomic situations. Those with little or no land worked as laborers providing services for a fixed monthly payment. Until quite recently, minute proportions of these farmers were involved in some form of outside employment and this has had important political consequences.

While it is true that the Jirels may have benefited from working for the Panchayat Talim Kendra (training center), the Swiss-built Jiri Hospital, and the Nepali government, these jobs, however, were lower level and low paid positions. With Swiss development activities, education was made available to Jirels because of the central government's emphasis on education. Government-funded public primary schools were established, giving the Jirels access to at least four years of education. Subsequently, secondary schools and high schools were established. Thus, a number of the Jirels

gained some literacy in Nepali and English. Many saw the importance of education and consequently today there are 14 institutions of learning, both governmental and private in the Jiri Valley. During the Panchayat period, a handful of Jirels, including one woman, did achieve higher education, becoming physicians and engineers. But these individuals, who benefited from the initial economic development efforts in Jiri, left the valley to enhance their own careers. Consequently, they did not make any contribution to the uplifting of their group's political and/or economic status. Hence, the Jirels remained at the lower rungs of the socio-political and economic hierarchy of Jiri and weakened their indigenous political structure.

In general, it appears that the Jirels failed to recognize the political changes taking place around them and could not take advantage of any of the significant opportunities that had evolved during the Swiss-initiated development activities. Their failure to take advantage of these opportunities led to further disenfranchisement. Nevertheless, economic development and access to education did have some positive effect on their political consciousness, as evidenced during both the last local election of the Panchayat regime (1986/87), and elections under the Multiparty system.

However, despite their relative socio-political and economic powerlessness during the Panchayat regime, the Jirel community itself, relatively isolated as it was, still had considerable group solidarity and cohesion. Based on interviews with numerous clan elders, our study revealed that clan leadership held sway, clan leaders still wielded a degree of political authority, and the clans were still following their traditional interrelationships based upon reciprocity. There were a few marriages outside the Jirel clans, but their cultural traditions, clan rituals, and clan structure remained firmly intact. Today, however, all of this has changed. Out-marriage is preferred, if not common; clan leadership has neither authority nor access to resources, clan cohesion has begun to crumble, and clans are no longer responsible for important community rituals.

This phenomenon can be understood, in part, by the macro-political structure of the nation during Panchayat regime. For example, one of the key factors that kept all of Nepal's 75 diverse ethnic groups together was the king himself. Respecting and obeying the King was regarded as part of one's moral duty, a precept deriving from the Hindu belief that the King is an incarnation of Lord Vishnu (the Hindu god of prosperity). Showing dissatisfaction or disrespect to the "Crown" was viewed as a moral failure. As a result, the vast majority of the people, in general, had great faith and respect for the king and accepted the Panchayat political system. At a micro-level, the same cultural pattern of respect for clan elders seemed to hold true

amongst the Jirels. Although the Jirels are Buddhists, for centuries they have been highly influenced by Hindu beliefs and practices. For example, historically, Jirels, while professing Buddhism, have celebrated all the major Hindu religious rituals and festivals, such as *Maghe Sangkranti*, *Saune Sangkranti*, *Chaite Dasain*, *Dasami Tika (Dasain)*, *Bhai Tika (Tihar)*. Thus it is reasonable to expect that the idea of filial piety continued to be dominant among the Jirels. This traditional and pervasive cultural pattern accounts for the cohesiveness and group solidarity during this period.

Despite the domination and exploitation of this Hindu caste for decades, the cohesiveness and solidarity among the Jirel clans, and the 1980 constitutional amendment noted above, enabled the Jirels to elect, for the first time in the history of the Panchayat, one of their own to the office of chairman of the Village Panchayat. Unfortunately, this occurred towards the end of the Panchayat era in 1986-1987. Prior to this no Jirel was ever elected into any major offices at the local, district, or national levels. It could be argued that the 1980 constitutional amendment was a landmark, along with the development activities, that promised to uplifted the Jirels politically and economically. But the changes in the political system did not allow this to come to fruition.

Post-Multiparty Period

The Panchayat system changed to the Multiparty system in April, 1990. The demise of the Panchayat system was the result of a so-called revolution which had been initiated through the combined efforts of all the leaders of the previously banned political parties, the urban elite, and students, all of whom had perceived the government as undemocratic because of the "party-less characteristics" of the system.

Nationally, it meant a constitutional monarchy, with people now running for office under their respective party banners. Various parties became active throughout Nepal; the major parties included the Nepali Congress Party, the Communist Party, and the National Democratic Party. The Office of the Election Commission during the 1991 elections (Maharjan, 1999), however, officially recognized forty-three parties. In the Jiri Valley, the Communist and the Nepali Congress Parties have been by far the most visible and active. In part, this may be because, with the wave of so-called democracy sweeping the nation, those sympathetic to the Panchayat system, who were labeled a part of the old guard, felt themselves to be under the threat of persecution. Members of the Panchayat regime, however, were able to constitute themselves into parties and won four seats of the 205 seats of the House of Representative in the first national election. Although they have since gained greater popularity and strength

elsewhere, they have been unable to gain a foothold in the Jiri Valley. As a consequence, the inhabitants of the Jiri Valley began to identify themselves either with the Communist or the Nepali Congress Party. The traditional community-based Jirels now find themselves confronted with, and divided between, two new alien political ideologies.

Village Development Council/Committee

Under the new system, the Jiri Valley is a part of the Jiri Village Development Council, a local level political unit. In Nepal, all such political units are divided into nine wards. The Council itself nominates two individuals as members, one of whom must be a woman. All eligible members within that political unit (men and women, 21 years old and older) elect the chairman and vice-chairman of the Council. The Council contains within it a committee, known as the Village Development Committee (VDC). This committee is composed of the chairman and vice-chairman of the council, the chairmen of the nine wards and two members, including one woman nominated by the Council. The chairman, vice-chairman, and one individual elected by the VDC, are automatically members of the District Development Council and Committee at the district level (Maharjan, 1998).

An examination of the results of the first election, which took place in 1992, gives insight into the internal political dynamics of Jiri VDC. In this election, the total eligible voters of the VDC directly elected the chairman and vice-chairman. On the other hand, voters of their respective wards elected the nine ward chairmen. Of these eleven people, eight were Jirels and three were non-Jirels. These elected officials then appointed 36 individuals as ward members from the nine wards respectively; of these, 26 were Jirels. They appointed 11 other members from the village, all of whom respected or distinguished members of the village; hence, the total membership of the Village Council totaled 58. Of these positions, Jirels occupied 34, and 24 were occupied by Newars, Chhetris, Biswokarma (a Hindu caste considered untouchable by the upper castes), and Sherpas.

As a result of this election, eleven elected members, close to 90% were Jirels, and 59% of the people appointed from the wards were also Jirels. Furthermore, the elected chairman and the vice-chairman were Jirels. Therefore, for the first time in the history of Jiri Valley, the Jirels dominated the institutionalized local political scene. Thus, the Multiparty system gave the Jirels a chance to become a key factor in the VDC politics and the opportunity to increase and strengthen their political power.

In the 1997 election, the direct election of ward member representatives was introduced with the stipulation that each ward elects at least one woman representative. During this election, the voters elected a Sherpa as chairman

and the vice-chairman was a Jirel. Of the 11 committee members, 90% were still Jirels. This committee appointed two officials, one of whom was a woman. Of these 13 individuals, elected and appointed, 10 were Jirels. On the council level 36 ward representatives were now elected, rather than appointed. Four were from each ward and an additional six individuals were appointed by the council of 36. Thus the total membership of VDC was 55; of these 32 were Jirels and 23 were non-Jirels.

It may be noted that the Jirels still retained the majority in the VDC; however, the chairman was replaced by a non-Jirel. Why did the Jirels elect a Sherpa instead of one of their own? In order to answer this question we must look at Jirel history.

Throughout their known history, the Jirels have been subjugated and exploited by the local Hindu caste elites. It was these elites who established themselves in the eastern hills of Nepal and the Jiri Valley systematically taking *kipat* lands in exchange for money lending services (Regmi, 1976:95; Rose and Scholz, 1980:20). With the means of production in the hands of these upper castes, the Jirels and other ethnic groups became subservient and were subjected to considerable exploitation throughout the Panchayat system, while the Hindus were in charge.

This is not to say that the Jirels were not a cohesive group unable to take advantage of political opportunities. In fact, we have seen how they seized the first chance they got after the 1980 constitutional amendment, demonstrating that they could function as a cohesive political unit. They demonstrated the same capacity in the 1992 election, which occurred with the introduction of the Multiparty system. Once again, a Jirel assumed the office of Jiri VDC. However, the Jirel were in the midst of the economic development that impacted their social, economic, and political environment. This transition to a cash economy that eroded the traditional-communal-based reciprocal economic exchange system, must also be taken into consideration.

This transition was accompanied the arrival of party ideology. Together, these two forces literally tore up the social fabric of the Jirel community and divided it along political and economic lines. Now the Jirels' allegiance is towards party and dogma rather than filial piety organized around community, clan, or family, and Jirel values emphasize individual success, rather than ethnic solidarity.

As is true throughout Nepal, there is no relationship between ability or competence and political power. As Subedi has (1995:1) pointed out "the accession of political power is more of a function of attaining a popular support based on individual personality and party ticket rather than support of policies/ideas of a party for societal development. An individual's

identification with a party has become a substitute for the more traditional [ethnic identity]. " While it is true that the Jirels have been exploited by other interest groups, one must not forget that most Jirel political leaders are educated and some are quite capable of maneuvering in the political arena. Instead of trying to develop their community they have pursued their own political and socio-economic interests and have in fact become "clones" of the Hindu caste. For this reason, the first VDC under a Jirel Chairman was unable to accomplish anything because everyone had their own political agendas, rather than a concern for Jirel welfare.

The depth of this rift in the Jiri community became evident in the 1997 election, when a majority of the Jirels voted for a Sherpa for the Chairmanship rather than one of their own. There are in fact widespread rumors that a certain wealthy Jirel man spent no less than 50,000 rupees (by no means of small sum in Jiri), in order to undermine the incumbent Jirel VDC chairman.

Conclusion

All this suggests that the Jirels are manipulated by various interest groups, each with their own agenda and an unstated policy of divide and rule. In following party politics without a clear understanding of its implications, and the pursuit of individual status, based on a cash economy, the Jirels are losing their ethnic solidarity, cohesiveness, and ethnicity.

If this trend continues, we believe that the Jirels will not only regress to their previous subordinate position, but they will also lose all prospects of ever improving their political and economic positions. They are playing in a game in which the cards are already stacked against them. Only if they come together as a community with common goals, and shed their dogmas for genuine concern for their community will they have a chance to win or at least improve their conditions.

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Acknowledgments

The generous cooperation of the Jirel people and the staff of the Jiri Helminth projects is gratefully acknowledged. This research was supported by the Phillip and Elaina Hampton Fund for Faculty International Initiatives, Miami University (Ohio) USA; the Continental Trading Social Science Research Award, Kathmandu, Nepal; the National Institute of Health under grant number R201 AI37901 to the Southwest Foundation for Biomedical Research, the Founder's Council of the Southwest Foundation for Biomedical Research, San Antonio, Texas, USA; and Miami University (Ohio), USA.

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