

CHAPTER 1

Background

Introduction

Jumla, one of the most dreaded postings for Nepalese civil servants, is the district headquarters of the remote Karnali Zone in western Nepal. An old official milestone in Jumla states that it is situated at a walking distance of three hundred and forty-two miles northwest from the traditional Royal Palace of Hanumandhoka in Kathmandu. However, most civilian traffic from Kathmandu was detoured over the Indian railroad system re-entering the country at the border town of Nepalganj from where Jumla would still be at a distance of over fifteen days' journey on foot. Currently, however, it takes an hour and twenty-five minutes by Twin Otter flight from Kathmandu, but, for most inhabitants of Jumla, it is still a good six days' walk from the nearest bus-stop in the Surkhet Valley in southern Bheri Zone.

Diyargaon consists of two of the nine wards of one of the thirty Village Development Committees (erstwhile village *panchayat*) of the Jumla District and is in the northwest. It is situated at the head of the Hima or Sinja River Valley which is normally two days' walk over

river valley trails or one day's walk over high altitude mountain passes.

Unlike in most other countries of the world, mountain and hill areas predominate in Nepal and they represent 48.5 per cent and 28.5 per cent respectively of the country's land area (Chapagain 1976) and 8.7 per cent and 47.7 per cent respectively of its population (CBS 1984). According to the preliminary estimates of the 1991 population, the two regions continue to retain their numerical dominance with 7.82 per cent of their population in the mountains and 45.56 per cent in the hills (The Rising Nepal 1991). Therefore, given the country's topography, pattern of population distribution, and inter-regional dynamics and dependencies, the mountain area will continue to be a subject of priority concern in the larger scheme of national integration and development in Nepal.

Although the Karnali Zone joined the mainstream history of Nepal only after its annexation in the late eighteenth century, it was, for centuries earlier, a part of the scene of migrations and conquests that took place in the adjoining parts of present day Tibet in the north and India to the west and south. A Malla dynasty ruled and flourished in this region from the twelfth to fourteenth century and had its summer capital in Sinja and its winter court in Dullu in Dailekh District. Its break-up in the fourteenth century saw the rise of the Kalyal dynasty which ruled the Zone until the Gorkha conquest of 1788 (Bishop 1990: 51-129; Joshi 1971).

It was primarily the historic significance of the Sinja Valley that motivated the Royal Nepal Academy to undertake a multidisciplinary study of Diyargaon (a pseudonym) during the summer of 1970. The study covered history, geography, linguistics and folk music, literature and art, and included an ethnography of the *Thakuri* families of that village.

Although the study covered a very limited area in the Karnali Zone, it yielded a body of information which provided valuable insights into the life and economy of an otherwise little known region in the country. As a matter of fact, the existence and functioning of traditional irrigation user groups was first identified here (Shrestha 1971: 28-29) - a concept that later found its way into the government policy for local development nationwide and into the Decentralisation Act of 1982.

Rationale and Objectives of the Current Study

International and national concern about the proper management and development of mountain areas has been increasing for some years now. It is inspired by a number of important considerations such as the need for their conservation as part of national and human heritage, for enhancement of the quality of life of the people living in these environs, for ensuring a more productive and optimal use of mountain resources, and for preventing disruption of downstream areas. Specific problems afflicting the mountain areas, such as poverty, deprivation, rapid population growth, and an increasingly over-burdened carrying capacity in the absence of alternative employment and income opportunities, are beginning to receive more serious attention (Tacke 1990:2).

Furthermore, Nepal's national development planners have long recognised the need for a holistic frame of reference through the medium of a regional planning approach in which inter-regional dynamics and integration have been the continuing theme since the Fourth Plan (National Planning Commission 1985: 229-237). A large number of studies too have been undertaken by both national and foreign scholars, providing information on different aspects of life and economy in the hills and mountains of Nepal (e.g., Bishop 1990; Seddon 1987; Mahat et al. 1987; Bajracharya 1983; Macfarlane 1976; Shrestha 1971; Caplan 1970). Several development programmes, e.g., the Canada-aided Karnali-Bheri Integrated Rural Development Project, have also produced specific information pertaining to the priorities of these interventions.

However, these studies notwithstanding, the sources of information remain rather scanty with regard to the nature and direction of changes in them and to the documentation of how different forces interact with one another at the micro-level to produce them. Hoffpauir (quoted in Fox 1983:15) has rightly observed that "[while] a number of writers have offered general comments on the agricultural and environmental problems being faced by the mountain villagers of Nepal, the details of the processes at work still need elucidation." Therefore, the present study represents an attempt to shed some light on the nature of these processes towards developing an understanding of the dynamics of the mountain environment and its communities in Nepal. This information, it is hoped, will also be helpful in achieving the desired development goals in mountain areas.

Objectives of the Study

This study, therefore, is designed to generate information on the changes in a mountain village in west Nepal over a span of two decades and to describe the underlying processes and the direction of these changes. While the frame of the study itself is intended as an approach to the study of dynamics in a stratified Hindu mountain community - that incidentally predominates the Karnali Zone (Bishop 1990: 159) - it is hoped that it will also provide useful insights for the formulation of ecologically-sound strategies for mountain development in Nepal.

In specific terms, the study has been designed:

1. to examine the changes in population, settlement patterns, socioeconomic structure, and services available in the community;
2. to understand the perception of the local people of the forces and direction of change and their pattern of response to them;
3. to assess the changes in the nature and extent of the use of natural resources, particularly the forest, by the community, and to examine the possibility of developing typologies for their user-based management; and
4. to try to derive some guidelines for designing interventions for the sustained development of mountain communities in Nepal.

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

The conceptual postulates that have guided this study are discussed below.

Firstly, the Karnali mountains, while being physically quite remote, largely form an open system in that the subsistence of its inhabitants is possible based only on a continuous exchange of goods and services with economies at different elevations, including trading with Himalayan regions to the north and seasonal migration to the southern plains in Nepal and India to the south. This phenomenon has been sufficiently documented by previous studies in the region

(Shrestha 1971; Singh 1971; and Bishop 1990) and in similar geographical settings in India to the west (Sanwal 1989)¹.

Two additional attributes have made it necessary for the Karnali communities to remain an open system. On the one hand, given the nature of the terrain, the agricultural land base is very small and, on the other, because of climatic conditions and the topographical situation, it is also characterised by a high degree of specificity. For example, Whiteman (1985: 159), writing about agriculture in Jumla, concluded that temperature, more than other factors, was the most limiting factor and that, in order to increase the efficiency of resource use, agricultural output per unit of this resource must be maximised.

Similar internal diversity has also been noted in Indian mountain situations based on the aspect, slope, and altitude of a particular location (Moench and Bandhopadhyay 1986: 6).

Because of the highly specific nature of mountain situations, the local inhabitants, in order to ensure their subsistence on a continuing basis, have to engage in a range of economic and social interactions at any given point in time with communities and economies beyond their immediate ecological 'niche'.

Such inter-locational and inter-regional exchanges and interactions constitute an integral part of what Bishop has otherwise termed "*the homeostatic state of life in the insular upper Karnali basin*" (1990: 350). However, the fact that such homeostasis is basically a dynamic concept has also been observed by Poffenberger (1980: 2) who stated that "*Social systems possess a tendency to re-establish some form of balance when confronted by changes of pressures that are systematically disruptive. This homeostasis has been variously termed as "stationary equilibrium process" (by Kurt Lewin), "structural functional equilibria" (by Talcott Parsons) and "steady state" (by Gregory Bateson).*"

¹ Berreman (1970: 84) has characterised an Indian *pahari* village as "a very closed system", because of the villagers' attitude towards strangers, i.e., "to studiously avoid and ignore" them. However, he also notes (1970: 95) the intensification of contact with the plains' people resulting in emulation of the plains' culture which he has termed "Plainsward mobility".

A process of change is a built-in phenomenon whether it is internally generated or externally imposed, and people continuously engage in the process of adjusting to the consequences of such changes. In this connection, Poffenberger further observes that *"while major demographic, ecological and socio-economic changes are recognised to varying extents what is clearly recognized is the impact of such changes in the form of grain deficits, alienation of land and so forth. It is these changes that the villagers know only too well and with which he has devised a multitude of measures of coping* (Poffenberger 1980:54). Thus, while changes in any community setting are constantly occurring, the people react to them by adopting a combination of options to maximise their gains, or otherwise minimise their losses, in their bid to continuously ensure their subsistence.

The choice of option, however, is a function of individual and collective perception of constraints and possibilities and of their own socioeconomic competencies. This is what would explain, for example, the differential attitudes of different people towards forest in different mountain situations either as potential agricultural land (Bajracharya 1983) or as a subject of proper management and maintenance (Mahat et al. 1987).

However, the perception of socioeconomic competencies is largely conditioned by the stratified nature of the orthodox Hindu social structure. Each individual household occupies a certain position in the socioeconomic hierarchy as defined by the social structure and internalises the competencies and disabilities enjoined upon it as a guide to its behaviour and responses to changes in the environment. Thus, in the traditional Hindu context such as that of Diyargaon, the hierarchical structure of society remains a major determinant in the choice of options in its bid to cope with those changes over time.

Furthermore, while caste hierarchy is an ubiquitous phenomenon in Nepal (Furer-Haimendorf 1966: 11-24; Bista 1967: 1; Shrestha 1973: 10-20), in a traditional Hindu enclave, such as that of the Karnali Zone and Diyargaon, due to historical reasons both caste and class have largely converged to become the dominant form of manifestation of stratification. Such phenomenon is also manifest further west in India where because of the caste-based disabilities enjoined upon the low strata, the higher castes are also economically dominant (Berreman 1970).

Corollarily, it is further in evidence that, in stratified village situations, political power tends to follow economic power, and this is also the case in Diyargaon. And this convergence of economic and political power then affords its wielder the prerogative to allocate scarce community resources, often for the promotion of his own vested interests (Shrestha 1971: 78-87).

Thus, the analysis of changes in Diyargaon is based on the concept of a "homeostatic state" which is understood as a moving equilibrium in which forces of change, both internal and external, confront the specificities of the local situation (such as a limited resource base and highly specific natural conditions), and in which the local people - their perceptions conditioned primarily by their station in the local social and economic ladder - continuously move through a range of options which is ever expanded in their bid to cope with the consequences of those changes.

The methodology of the study is based on the assumption that such changes in a community can be properly understood only through a holistic and in-depth method of investigation. Different aspects of life and economy in a household are mutually interactive with each other within the confines of the specificities of its social and economic competencies. The challenge, therefore, is to capture the dynamics of this at the level of the households and to try to identify and analyse the larger pattern involved. So the study has been conducted based on an in-depth anthropological method of enquiry. Given the objective that it is the study of change in a structurally stratified Hindu community, the sample of households for study was selected to reflect the social and economic diversity of the community. To that end, 42 households, consisting of five caste groups, namely, *Brahman*, *Thakuri*, *Kami*, *Sarki*, and *Damai* were selected for investigation.

In terms of method of investigation, household data, such as those on population, household economy, and social characteristics, were collected through detailed structured questionnaires which were substantially supplemented by in-depth interviews to generate additional information on the dynamics of those aspects.

Extensive interviews were also conducted with local officials to gather information on local development programmes. Office records were gone into wherever possible and pertinent (such as the decisions of the then village *panchayat*, etc).

The Setting

Diyargaon is situated at an altitude of 2,600masl on the valley floor of the Sinja River, comfortably ensconced into a depression in the mountains range flanking it from the north. Thus, surrounded by mountain on three sides, the village has been built right at the foot of the hill with irrigated and unirrigated agricultural lands stretching out to the south all the way down to the banks of the river and making it one of the most impressive expanses of farmland and, by food-deficit Karnali standards, an important granary for the region.

With increase in population and the need for more farm land, the villagers gradually terraced the northern slope until about twenty-four years ago when, due to monsoon rain, a gushing torrent of mud and water engulfed a few houses in its trail, making it necessary to relocate them to a safer place. Ever since then, the pine forest further up the slope has been guarded zealously, and this includes a treeless ridge which some poor, untouchable households would like to cultivate.

The Hima or Sinja River is crossed by a wooden bridge that leads on to another stretch of farmland which, however, happens to be less fertile because of the shade from another pine-forested mountain that rises immediately to its south.

The Village Development Committee, of which Diyargaon is a part, is surrounded by the high cliffs (*lek*), like Ghurchi and Chuchemara to the north, Dori or Dor Patan to the east, Jaljala to the south, and Malika and Bare to the west (Singh 1971: 23) which are in the range between 3,000 to 4,500 m in altitude (Bishop 1990: 24-25) and remain snow-covered during winter and spring. They are further enclosed by what are called the Great Himalaya (northern arm) to the north and the Great Himalaya (southern arm) to the south (Bishop 1990: 17). Thus, for the people of Diyargaon, most movements outside of the village involve trekking over high altitude passes whether they be going up to Mugu and Humla to the north, to the Seti Zone in the west, or Dailekh and Jajarkot or beyond in the south (Singh 1971:239).

The climate here is "markedly dry and warm", characteristic of *"the low open intermontane basins of Karnali zone that lie in the rain shadows north of the Api-Saipal Himal and Chakhure-Mabu Lek"* (Bishop 1990:32). The closest meteorological data come from the station in Bumra village, about two kilometres upstream from Diyar-

gaon, according to which, in 1969-70, 9.6°C had been the mean annual temperature, warmest month July (16:1°C), and coldest month January (1.6°C). Total annual precipitation had been 1,225 mm of which 78 per cent occurred in summer and 20 per cent in winter. November had been the driest month without any precipitation (Bishop 1990: 37).

History

Karnali Zone, despite its physical harshness, has been the scene of human occupation over the millennia. It is said that the present distribution of Himalayan peoples is the culmination of a long history of penetration by Mongoloid tribes from north and east and by Caucasoid groups from south and west (Bishop 1990: 61). Although the early history of the Karnali Zone is obscured prior to the eleventh century A.D., based on references to *Markandeya Purana* (an early Nepali text), Grierson (quoted in Bishop 1990: 68) suggests that the *Khasa* people reached western Nepal by the third to fifth centuries A.D. and may have absorbed numerically inferior indigenous hunters and gatherers, thus accounting for the absence today of any discrete non-Tibetan, Mongoloid group in the Karnali Zone (Bishop 1990: 68).

Historical developments in Western Nepal are closely associated with those in Kumaon and Garhwal in India rather than with those in central and eastern Nepal (Bishop 1990: 68). Beginning with the twelfth century, the cultural history of the Karnali Zone becomes increasingly clear. In the early twelfth century, Nagaraja founded the *Khasa* Malla dynasty with his capital in Sinja. His successors extended their kingdom to Kumaon and Garhwal in the west with a winter capital at Dullu in Dailekh district. Military incursions into the Kathmandu Valley were made on three occasions between 1287 and 1289, rampaging the place and temporarily occupying Nuwakot to the west of Kathmandu (Joshi 1971: 60-61).

The Malla Kingdom reached its zenith during the time of Prithivi Malla whose domain encompassed a territory as extensive as that of present day Nepal (142,000 sq. km.) and included Kaski to the east, the Tibetan provinces of Auge and Purang to the north, the Indian districts of Kumaon and Garhwal to the west, and the Dang and Surkhet valleys to the south (Bishop 1990: 76).

By the late fourteenth century, Prithivi Malla's reign was followed by the break-up of the kingdom and the emergence of what was known as the *Baise* (or twenty-two) kingdoms in its place. This process was assisted by the infiltration of Hindu Rajputs from northern India who moved into the Karnali region through Kumaon as well as into other parts of Nepal to escape the sustained strife and persecution perpetrated by Muslim invaders in India. At Sinja, a king called Jalandhar is believed to have ruled thereafter (Joshi 1971: 83) and the local Shahi *Thakuri* of Diyargaon claim that the word Jachauri is derived from the word Jalandhar.

The rule of Medini Verma, another *Khasa* king, is a historically recorded fact and he ruled in Sinja between 1393 and 1404, after which he moved his capital to Chhinasim. This, in turn, was later incorporated by a neighbouring Rajput interloper, Baliraj, who then controlled a territory further down the Tila River. For fifteen generations, from 1404 to 1788 A.D., Baliraj and his line of successors, known as the Kalyal kings (of the Shahi *Thar*), ruled Jumla, the largest, most populated, and most powerful of any of the *Baise* or *Chaubisi* (twenty-four) principalities (Bishop 1990: 112-113). It is interesting to note that the Shahi *Thakuri* of Diyargaon claim descent both from King Jalandhar as well as from the Kalyal dynasty.

The Kalyal line of succession continued until 1789 when the Jumla principedom was annexed to the kingdom of Nepal by Bahadur Shah after a battle that lasted more than a year. Following the conquest, a district governor (*subba*) with wide military and civil authority was assigned to rule over the place. Under the Shah rule, a compulsory labour system called *jhara* was introduced to meet increased labour requirements. A relay postal system called *hulak* was introduced. *Dharma shala* (rest houses) were built over high trails to ensure safe travelling. Land tenure and taxation were refashioned primarily to generate increased revenues. Farm lands were surveyed in 1805 and again in 1830-37 and *mato-muri* (0.0127 ha) and *ropani* (0.0509 ha) systems for irrigated lands (*khet*) and *serma* (cash assessments based on estimates) for *pakho* (unirrigated) lands were introduced. The district was subdivided into 18 *davas* for administrative purposes and revenue units (*mauja*) were created. Local influential people were installed in each of them as *jimmawal* for predominantly irrigated (*khet*) lands and *mukhiya* for predominantly unirrigated (*pakho*) lands and their authority touched all facets of village life (Bishop 1990: 128-136).

After the Rana Prime Ministers usurped power in the country from the monarch in 1846, for Jumla, as for the rest of the country, it meant "a 104-year continuation of exploitative and nefarious management by preserving the labour, land, taxation, and legal systems employed by the Shahs. Abuse, bribery, and corruption continued to be systemic." The civil component of district government grew in size and importance. A small permanent bazaar, the only one in the zone, was established by the *Newars* from Kathmandu who initially went there as civil servants (Bishop 1990: 143-145). This state of affairs continued until 1951 when a popular revolt overthrew the Rana regime and laid the groundwork for a representative system of governance in the country.

The post-1951 decades saw a number of reforms introduced in the country, including land reform, which, among other things, created better land records based on systematic cadastral surveys and abolished the *talukdar* system of land management and revenue collection. However, these measures are still to be implemented in the remote Karnali Zone with its extensive geography, relatively small population, and limited agricultural land. Thus, the *talukdar* system continues to reign in the area with all its attendant exploitative attributes, although its administrative powers have since been taken over by elected local bodies.

The people and culture of Karnali Zone today are largely the outcome of the historical processes of assimilation and absorption that have been active here for more than two millennia between the indigenous population, the non-Hindu *Khasa* migrants from earlier times, and the latter-day Hindu migrants from northern India. Except for the *Bhotia* population of Tibetan origin on its northern fringes, the rest of the inhabitants are Hindus belonging to different castes with variations representative of the distinctiveness of this process. While the Hindu caste structure and stratification, as elsewhere, consist of the *Brahman* at the top, followed in descending order by the *Thakuri*, *Chhetri*, and *Dum* or *Kansel*. The *Chhetri*, being the previous *Khasa* commoners, are the most numerous - 76,392 in a multi-caste population of 185,996 in 1969-70 in the Karnali Zone (Bishop 1990: 89.176) - and include the segment of *matwali* (or alcohol-consuming) *Chhetri* who "retain in their distinctive social and religious beliefs and practices the most vivid pre-Hindu tribal *Khasa* vestiges of any *Pahari* group or caste in Nepal" (Bishop 1990: 91).

Thus, despite the remoteness of the region, the people of the Karnali Zone have a very long history of interaction primarily with people coming from as far away as the plains of northern India and the areas north of the Himalayas. As a result, a cultural milieu unique to the region has evolved over the centuries which, as rightly observed by Connel (1991), a visitor from within Nepal or outside cannot fail to notice.

Settlement Pattern

Diyargaon itself is a village of five castes and 113 households with the *Brahman*, or *Bahun* in colloquial terms (10 households) and *Thakuri* (35 households) together belonging to the *chokha* or 'clean' category and the *Kami* (42 households), *Sarki* (17 households) and *Damai* (9 households) belonging to the untouchable *kamsel* or *dum* category. The *Kami* households also include six of the *bitulo* or "polluted" households who were either excommunicated from *Thakuri* status in their own life time because of sexual liaison with untouchable *Kami* women or because they were the offspring of such union. The caste-wise population distribution is given in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Caste Distribution of Population 1990

Caste	No. of Households	Population
<i>Brahman</i>	10	49
<i>Thakuri</i>	35	214
<i>Kami</i>	36	200
<i>Sarki</i>	18	84
<i>Damai</i>	8	41
<i>Bitulo</i>	6	36
Total	113	624

Source: Fieldwork.

The village is divided into several neighbourhoods, locally called *bado*, which together surround and protect the centrally-located, sunny paddy seedbeds and are mutually segregated along caste lines. The Shahi *Thakuri* claiming descent from the Kalyal kings live in the central part of the village in *Jachauri bado*. It is flanked on the east by Acharya or *Bahun bado*, or the neighbourhood of the Acharya *Brahman*, and the Hamal *Thakuri*, the latter being the offspring of

unions between Acharya fathers and *Thakuri* mothers. The *Od bado* or the *bado* of the builder *Kami* (carpenters and masons), as distinct from the ironsmith *Kami* called *Lohar* and goldsmith *Kami* called *Sunar*, is situated on the northern periphery, *Damai* or *Dholi* (drum-beating) *bado*, or the *bado* of the tailor and musician caste, on the western fringe, and *Sarki bado*, or the *bado* of the cobblers, on the southwestern edge of the village. Interspersed among them are also the small, but still distinctly segregated, *Bitulo bado* or the *bado* of the polluted, *Mukti bado* or the *bado* of the *Brahmans* who originate from *Muktinath* in *Mustang* district and *Rachi bado*, another *Thakuri* neighbourhood.

However, the *bado* system based on residential segregation has undergone some changes in recent times. While the Acharya *bado* has now extended southwards along the trail called *Thado Goha*, which is emerging as the main thoroughfare to move in and out of the village, some impure (*bitulo*) families have also set up their residences in this expanded neighbourhood. Although the *bitulo*, because of their *pre-bitulo* ancestry and hereditarily stronger economic status, continue to receive from their *chokha* neighbours a manner of dealing similar to the one accorded to fellow *chokha* families, their status of being polluted requires them to avoid physical contact, including the exchange of food and drink. But the fact that they are no longer limited to the *Bitulo bado*, but instead have set up residences in neighbourhoods adjoining *Jachauri* and *Bahun bado*, represents a relaxation of sorts in the otherwise stringent caste rules in the village.

In recent years there has also been another kind of shift in the local settlement pattern. A few households from *Jachauri* and *Bahun bado* have constructed new structures for residential and commercial purposes in a new locality called *Chakha* on the south-eastern fringe of the village on the main trail between the *Sinja Dara* downstream and the high altitude *Jaljala Pass* to the district capital of *Chhinasim - Khalanga*. Fourteen such structures have been built. Three of them also house small stores selling stationery, soap, candies, cigarettes, noodles, and even local beer, although many more have closed down in the past because villagers bought things on credit and defaulted. Some such bankruptcy victims even wait for defaulters to set up their own stores, so they too can pay them in the same coin.

One of the important attractions for the emergence of this new "commercial" neighbourhood is the Multipurpose Service Centre which

houses Agricultural Extension and Animal Husbandry Sections, a Cooperative Society, and the Small Farmers' Development Project which was built under the Canadian-aided Karnali-Bheri Integrated Rural Development (K-BIRD) Project. In addition, other services, such as the government sub-district Health Post and Post Office, have also been established in this neighbourhood. Because of the creation and convenience of these services in this locality, people are willing to take risks and remain undaunted by others' failure. They predict that this growth trend will continue. This optimism seems to be widely shared and the prices of this trailside land have already escalated far in excess of the going rate for normal agricultural land in the village.

In contrast to this new settlement, consisting entirely of dispersed dwelling units, the *bado* settlements in the village consist of *pagri*, an unbroken row of two to seven dwelling units locally called *dhwang*. However, there are also a number of recently-built single houses which too, after the separation of brothers, will most likely have a new house added to them at either end turning them into *pagri* too. A *pagri* is invariably inhabited by members of the same lineage, and death in any one of the households pollutes the whole population of the *pagri*.

Because the region is in a rain-shadow area and because the winters are extremely cold, roofs are low and flat and are made of layers of insulating and waterproofing materials such as birch leaves and dried pine needles. But the roofs and houses need to be regularly rebuilt. In Diyargaon, while thirty-four new houses have been built in the last twenty years, thirty-five have been rebuilt during the same period. However, it is predicted that not so many new houses will be built for a few years to come, because at present among the villagers there are not many boys of marriageable age who will get married and set up new domiciles.

All the houses in the village have two storeys and are built facing south against the slope of a land terrace at the back. The ground floor is for the livestock and is divided into several rooms, one leading to the next with the innermost (normally the third and devoid of any windows) being the warmest and, therefore, allocated to the calves.

The outer-most room without enclosures is normally used for feeding the cattle and, if sufficiently large, also for storing some firewood. The next room is used for cattle (and also buffalo if any) and occasionally also for other religious and social purposes such as performing *yagna*

rites (in which offerings are made to the fire) and as a place for women to spend their nights during menstruation. Sometimes, boys and girls meet at night for stealthy singing rendezvous. Larger and richer households have more rooms like this which are used separately for sheep, goats, and horses.

On the first floor of the house, the outside terrace (which is the roof of the first compartment of the cattleshed) is used as a thoroughfare between houses of the *pagri* and also as a place for informal neighbourhood congregations. The first room in the house, called the *ubra*, is an open place and used as a living area for visitors. If there is space, one or two large wooden containers in which grain is stored are also kept there.

The next room is the *borso*, also called *majh khand*, i.e., the central room of the house; this is the kitchen. It has storage space for more wooden bins and there is also space for sleeping around the fire in the middle of the room. Beyond this, the innermost room is the *bhandar*, literally the store, where more storage bins, some made of mud, are kept.

The size of the house, however, differs according to the economic status of the owner. Bigger houses provide more rooms and facilities such as separate bedrooms for married sons (and often also for a resident teacher who teaches in a local school and is provided with room and board in return for tutoring the school-going children in the family). As distinct from twenty years ago, when only one household had a latrine, which was used by only a few of its members, today, the village boasts of eighteen private latrines in different premises, two of which remain unused for fear of their becoming dirty. But a large number of people still have to defaecate in the open. The village lanes, which are the main play area for children, remain as filthy as ever.

Long wooden poles, which are intermeshed at wide intervals by horizontal poles, stand in front of each house. Paddy straw is stored on them for the consumption of cattle during winter. The size of these stands is a good indicator of the land-owning status and, consequently, of the relative economic standing of the household in the village. Also stored in front of the house are the piles of firewood which women collect regularly from the nearby forest, more so during the winter months when there is no agricultural work. Men and women alike generally believe that it is highly inauspicious for a woman to be

sitting or standing idle. Even an old woman with many daughters-in-law to assist her will still spin wool while she carries a youngster on her back. At the same time her attention will be on the household chores which her daughters-in-law are carrying out.

Population Changes

Twenty years ago in 1970, Diyargaon had 89 households, with a population of 474 persons, and an average household size of 5.3. In 1990 the number of households was 113 and the population 624, representing an increase of 27 and 32 per cent respectively and a household size of 5.5.

Occasionally, out-migration of one or two households has been reported in the past, but this has not contributed significantly to a reduced growth of population in the village. There have been only two households in the last twenty years, one *Sarki* and one *Damai* household, which have moved from the village for good. Another thirteen *Kami* and *Damai* households have a member or two in India who have been gone only for a year or two working as labourers on construction projects, afterwards returning with some cash.

The death rate in Jumla is higher than the national average. The infant mortality rate in 1987 in selected communities was 189 deaths per 1000 live births (Pandey et al. 1991: 996) compared to the national rate of 144 for 1981 (CBS 1985). Similarly, the under-five child mortality was 313 per 1000 live births in 1987 (Pandey et al. 1991: 996) compared to the national average of 213 for 1985 (Ministry of Health and WHO 1988: 71). Therefore, the indications are that, because of these high mortality rates, the population growth rate in the study area has been relatively low.

Despite the slow growth rate, the people are generally aware of the unsustainability of an expanding population, because of the limited land for agriculture which remains the mainstay of the local household economy. Within the last four years, around twenty-six men (thirteen each of *chokha* and *kamsel* groups) have undergone vasectomy operations, although most of them have done so only after having fathered an average of at least four living children. More men are now waiting for another vasectomy camp to be held here. However, three deaths resulting from complications during such operations in the past

have also scared a number of potential acceptors. People are also scared of the possible loss of physical strength resulting from such an operation, because hard work is the sole basis for making ends meet. Some *Kami* and *Sarki* men even rationalise their disinclination for birth control - they feel that while girls are to be married away anyway, the boys, once grown up, can always find *chokha* land to till and make a living.

These excuses notwithstanding, the fact that the village is much more crowded nowadays can be seen from the mixed nature of many *bado* which otherwise were characterised by caste homogeneity. *Thakuri* households have infiltrated the once exclusive *Brahman* enclave of Mukti *bado*, and they have also moved towards the periphery of the untouchable *Dholi bado*.

A number of *kamsel* households have too little land to extend their houses or build new ones when their many sons come of age and get married. While they avoid the problem by saying that it is more the concern of the boys themselves, the only possibility they see is for some of them to move into the cattle shed or into the attic, or else to go to one's *chokha lagi* who, according to village tradition, should provide a small homestead for them.

For poor people, mostly the *kamsel* again, the problem is not only about a homestead but about the very means of livelihood. With limited land and less chance for clearing the forest, the obvious alternative is to move to the *Terai* or to India - a trend which is slowly gaining popularity, even with the reasonably well off. The situation is a cause of concern. While the rich traditionally exploited the poor and the helpless, the process has become even more intensified in recent times in the bid to assure for their children a reliable future. Public lands are increasingly being appropriated, if necessary by forming temporary coalitions even between otherwise long-standing adversaries. This is done to assert their strength and to vitiate any possible challenge from other less-organised aspirants in the village. Further pauperisation and ejection of the poor can only be expected to accelerate in the future.

In the past, the Malthusian solutions are said to have taken care of the problem of over-population beyond the carrying capacity of the habitat. Most people know about the cholera epidemic of 1975 B.S. (1918 A.D.) which was estimated to have taken a toll of some fifty to

sixty lives in the village. Because of the sudden drop in their food requirements and in labour power, the people were forced to abandon cultivation of the surrounding high altitude farm lands. While people could surmise this event based on the visible contours of the old terracing there, all these lands have now been cultivated once again, except for some parts, such as the plateau immediately above the village, where cultivation has been forbidden by a community decision in order to prevent the recurrence of the flooding that occurred in the village twenty-four years ago.

Bishop (190: 146), quoting Davis, has referred to this incident as the influenza pandemic of 1918 that spread from India. Local people further maintain that the region was regularly subjected to such epidemics. They recall the livestock epidemic of 1947 which, too, decimated the cattle population.

However, due to recent health interventions carried out in the area, a drastic reduction in the infant and child mortality rates has been achieved and a further aggravation of the population problem is now in the making. The Acute Respiratory Infection (ARI) Intervention trial or, more appropriately, the Community Based Antimicrobial Treatment of Pneumonia, carried out between 1986 to 1989 (Pandey et al. 1991: 993) detected and effectively treated 80 per cent of the childhood pneumonia cases, resulting in a 28 per cent reduction in the risk of death from all causes combined over the three year period. However, the claims of the people of Diyargaon are much higher. It seemed to them that the infant and child mortality in the village was reduced by some seventy per cent. The field worker responsible for Diyargaon reports that 246 cases were successfully treated in 2046 B.S. (mid-April 1989 to mid-April 1990). He claims that there have been no more than eight to nine deaths during the last four years of intervention. The project has now proposed an even more comprehensive intervention designed *"to overcome the cumulative burden of disease responsible for much of the remaining mortality"* (INTERCEPT: 2). The population of Diyargaon should, thus, record a sharp increase in population in the years to come.

Division of Labour

A longstanding division of labour between sexes exists in Diyargaon. According to this division, men engage in trading, acquiring more

agricultural land, and providing women with clothing and golden ornaments for the nose, ear, and neck. It is said that men become the subject of ridicule if their wives are not properly clothed. However, a cursory glance at most village women cannot fail to tell a visitor that this part of the men's task is not taken very seriously.

Women, on the other hand, concern themselves with land cultivation and increasing food production. To this end, they undertake planting and manuring of seedlings, transplanting them, and preparing food for the large contingent of labourers for the planting operations in which they also participate. They also collect and carry huge loads of pine needles from the forest to be used as bedding for animals and eventually as fertiliser; carry manure, which is applied in very high doses, to the outlying fields; weed the fields; pound rice at home; or bring sackloads of other food grains for grinding to one of the water mills in the vicinity. Their jobs also include carrying implements and day-time meals to the field, breaking sods, and of course, bringing the harvest home. A sublime observation of one of the many card-playing men in the village has it that women in Jumla are a system of "free transportation". In the house, cooking, cleaning, cattle feeding, tending the cowshed, piling manure, pressing oil, washing, and winnowing are all carried out by women. Younger and stronger women are mostly assigned to field and forest jobs, although this does not preclude extensively assisting the older ones at home. Going to bed late and getting up early, as well as staying away from men and husbands in public, are appreciated.

Castes and Inter-caste Relations

According to the standard *Varna* model of Hinduism, the caste system has four castes, namely *Brahman* - priests and religious teachers; *Kshatriya* - kings, warriors, and aristocrats; *Vaisya* - traders, merchants, and people engaged in other similar professions; and *Sudra* - cultivators, servants, and so on (Sen 1961: 28). But a five-fold division with untouchable castes coming at the bottom of the hierarchy is also recognised (Ghurye 1961: 7). In the case of the Jumla caste system, however, Campbell observes that it is a kind of modified version of the *varna* system of the Sanskritic model. While the relative caste (*jat*), ritual status, and occupational traditions derive from the *varna* model and are comprised of the fourfold division of

Brahman, Kshyatriya, Vaisya, and Sudra, the Jumla model itself has, over the centuries, undergone a considerable amount of adaptation (Campbell 1978: 87-110).

In the hilly regions of Nepal, mostly in the more remote western mountains, such a modification or adaptation has been expressed in the caste hierarchy being divided into two major segments, namely, the high caste *Bahun* and *Chhetri* (the colloquial versions of the otherwise more esoteric terms of *Brahman* and *Kshatriya*), on the one hand, and the untouchables on the other. The occurrence of a similar division has also been observed in the lower Himalayas west of Nepal where it is comprised of "the dominant high or twice-born castes ('big caste' in local parlance) made up of *Brahman* and *Rajput*, and the 'untouchable' (*achut*) low 'small' castes" (Berreman, 1970:77).

Despite this divergence, however, the essential features of the caste system, generally understood to consist of the segmental division of society, intercaste hierarchy, restrictions on feeding and social intercourse, civil and religious disabilities, lack of unrestricted choice of occupation, and restrictions on marriage (Ghurye 1961: 2-17; Srinivas 1969: 265-269) continue to be valid for characterising the hill variant of the two-fold system. It is against this background that the castes and the inter-caste relationships in Diyargaon can be properly understood.

The Jachauri *Thakuri* families represent the oldest inhabitants in Diyargaon. Their lineage mostly consists of members of the exogamous Shahi clan, but it also includes some Malla clans, another *Thakuri* clan who, although potential affinal relatives to the Shahi clan, observe for all practical purposes the same rules and norms of behaviour as agnates of the Shahi clan, because their ancestor was imported from Mugu district a few generations earlier in matrilocal marriage to a daughter of Shahi parents without a male offspring.

The Jachauri families who, as stated earlier, claim their descent from the *Baise Kalyal* kings, historically claimed considerably large tracts of forest land and enjoyed the annual tribute in cash and kind paid by the beneficiaries for permission to cultivate them. They treated farming as something beneath their "royal" status and, instead, found glory and reward in more sporting pursuits such as hunting in the forest for prolonged periods during winter, or snaring, training, and exporting falcons.

However, the changing times saw the alienation of their title to the forest and the tributes therefrom, cessation of hunting rights by the Forest Department, and the abrupt end to the demand for their birds of prey following the domicile of the falcon-sporting Nawabs in Pakistan after the partition of India. All these resulted in the rather rapid erosion of their economic and political prowess, apart from in the case of a few families who, having read the writing on the wall, made their fortunes through trade between Indian border markets in the south and the remote mountain hinterlands to the north, including the trans-Himalayan trade marts on the Nepal-Tibet border. But the fact that they had such a glorious past has not been forgotten in their dealings with the rest of the community, primarily in those with their more successful neighbours and relatives in the *Bahun bado*.

The Acharya or *Bahun bado* consists of members of the Acharya lineage, which also includes the Hamal *Thakuri* who are the offspring of unions between ritually superior *Bahun* fathers and politically powerful *Thakuri* mothers. The progenitor of their lineage came from a place called Baralamji in Dullu in Dailekh district, during the Malla period many generations ago when Dullu was their winter capital. The Acharya *bado* has eighteen households, and these include ten Hamal households, seven Acharya, and one Shahi who, as is the case with the Jachauri lineage, has been brought into a Hamal family in a matrilineal marriage for want of a male offspring.

Basically a farming population, the progenitors of the Acharya and Hamal families in Diyargaon, based on their ritual superiority as members of the twice-born caste, political power, and the culturally-determined subservience and obeisance of the *dum* castes, considerably benefitted from what Barry Bishop (1990: 116) called "*the Brahman-Thakuri consortium*" to intensify and entrench "*all facets of Hinduism*." The Acharya families have been some of the principal beneficiaries of the system of land grants in the past, and their advantage has continued in terms of their claim to cultivable forest lands. Consequently, the Acharya and Hamal families together enjoy a distinctly higher economic and political status in the community, and included in their ranks is a family of government-appointed, hereditary revenue officials with considerable power to oppress and exploit tax payers.

The third caste category is that of the *dum* (also called *kamsel* in local parlance), who, in turn, consist of three non-interdining endogamous

occupational caste groups, *Kami*, *Sarki*, and *Damai*. The *Kami* are further divided into sub-groups such as the *Od Kami*, i.e., carpenters and masons, *Lohar* blacksmiths, and *Sunar* goldsmiths. Similar divisions exist also among the *Sarki* and *Damai*.

The *dum* too are hierarchically stratified and come under the same order of *Kami*, *Sarki*, and *Damai*. In Diyargaon, the *Kami* are the most numerous, representing thirty-six households and two hundred people. Their progenitor had accompanied the aforementioned Acharya ancestor from Dailekh. Without them, life for the Acharya and *Thakuri* families would have been unthinkable, because the twice-born castes of *Brahman*, *Thakuri*, and *Chhetri* are ritually forbidden to plough the field. The *Kami* and *Sarki* of the *dum* population, therefore, constitute the indispensable agricultural labour force in the orthodox Hindu context. The *Damai*, however, traditionally do not plough for others.

As masons and carpenters the *Od Kami*, whose inventory of tools is limited to an axe, big and small chisels, and a tiny pointed scraper (except for one who recently obtained a saw and a plane) have been relatively better off than other occupational caste groups. This results from the increasing population in the region and the need for more houses. While not all *Kami* are builders, a good number of them who are have a clientele spread over a wide geographical area. In distant locations they remain in residence until the building is completed. Winter and spring are the building seasons when farm work is limited, and most other males are absent from the village for seasonal migration and for the annual procurement of basic necessities in Nepalganj. The builder *Kami*, however, meet their needs either by buying from fellow villagers or from the itinerant traders from Mugu. Often the client for whom the house is being built brings the needed supplies upon his return.

Houses are not built on a daily wage basis but through a traditional mode of contract under which, once completed, the total cost is estimated by the owner and the builder with third party arbitration. The builder receives half of the amount thus agreed in cash, kind, or even deferred payment, and the other half is retained as the owner's share represented mainly by meals provided during the construction period.

They also specialise in making ploughs and local wooden containers for storing grain. The latter are made of wide planks from the trunks of big trees for which, because of continued depletion in forests closer to

home, they have to trek increasingly longer distances involving several days' transportation. While incomes from these trades and building contracts still amount to relatively small sums of money, given the scarcity of employment and income opportunities in the village, a number of *Od Kami* have economically distinguished themselves from a large number of less fortunate fellow *kamsel* and a number of *choka*, mainly the *Thakuri*.

The *Sarki*, the second largest *kamsel* group, specialise in hides and leather products such as shoes, snow shoes, wooden snow shovels, sieves made of entrails, and flails for threshing. They also perform dances during marriage festivities in the village. They have been in the village for eight generations and come from a village about a day's walk downstream. Initially they lived on the northern edge of the village next to the *Kami*, but, with increasing population and limited space, they sold the land and moved to the western edge of the village on to the property of a rich landowner to whom they are completely beholden.

A few years ago, they too took up the building trade, which one of them learned from a *Kami* friend, and rapidly disseminated it to a few fellow *Sarki*. However, most able-bodied *Sarki* go to the south in early December in search of food and money and return home early April for the next agricultural season.

The *Damai* (smallest of the three groups) have the most difficult time. While their occupation involves tailoring and playing music at religious and social ceremonies, because of the change in taste of their clients, they have lost much of their former business to the tailors and readymade stores in the urban areas of Nepalganj and Kathmandu. Unlike the *Kami* and *Sarki*, they have remained steadfast in not taking up ploughing for others, despite pressures from the richer *Brahman* and *Thakuri* families. Consequently, they are the most oppressed in the village. Three households have permanently left for India, and it is normal for them to have able-bodied males working in unskilled jobs in India for a year or two at a time. They too, like the *Kami*, have clients in surrounding *Chhetri* villages up north which they like better and where they remain in residence as tailors for several weeks in a row. Occasionally, they have even threatened the high caste villagers that they will move to other villages, resulting in, by implication, the possible loss of music for their rituals - only to be told that the services of a tape recorder would be used instead.

The *dum* population in the village, as in the district, is the poorest of all, although poverty is not limited to them. Service to the high castes has been the *dharmic* role prescribed to them (Campbell 1978: 214) and they are to render necessary ritual and other occupational, often unholy, services (such as dealing with hides, or putting a yoke around the holy bullocks for ploughing) to their holier, twice-born masters. In return, the masters are to take care of all their necessities. The basic manifestations of this relationship are still in existence today; for example, in the institution of *lagi-lagitya* under which each *chokha* household in the role of a *lagi* hereditarily retains at least one household each of the three occupational castes of *Kami*, *Sarki*, and *Damai* as *lagitya*. A number of *chokha* households also have a *Sunar*, (goldsmith), who as a *lagitya* lives in a village next to Diyargaon.

In the capacity of *lagitya*, the *kamsel* render to their *lagi* the specialised services mentioned earlier, in addition to three or four days of labour that they contribute during each of the winter and summer harvests. In return, each of them traditionally receives fixed amounts of grain twice a year following the barley and paddy harvests. It is said that, in the past, *lagitya* used to be even bought and sold as slaves.

A number of richer households also keep a few of these households in a special *haligado* relationship, under which robust and diligent *Kami* or *Sarki* are given a plot or two of paddy land to cultivate for themselves, in return for commitment to work exclusively as their ploughmen. Under this arrangement, during working days the ploughman receives meals but no wages. The amount of paddy land leased out to him depends upon the size of the estate of the *chokha*. It is the fear of having land confiscated that prevents the able-bodied *Sarki* and *Kami* men from attempting long-term migration to India.

A *haligado kamsel*, as claimed by the *chokha*, has to be treated as a member of one's own household and is the beneficiary of largesse in terms of used clothing; interest-free loans; gifts after trading trips; bigger gifts, such as a cow or a goat, on the occasion of a marriage in the *lagi* household; seasonal fruits such as apples (for the *kamsel* have none); a place to build a house if he has no house; and even interest-free money for marriage ceremonies.

But most *kamsel*, however, are exploited by the rich *chokha*. While a few *kamsel* households have some unirrigated land in the village, most have a little more land at higher elevations. But these are meagre

holdings and, therefore, substantial supplements from the *chokha* in the form of land or wages remain an indispensable necessity. Interests on loans are uncontrolled and are over 60 per cent a year. The three *kamsel* groups, although more numerous than the *chokha*, are endowed with mutually different socioeconomic attributes locking them into a situation of competition against each other that undermines the possibility of *kamsel* solidarity. But all of them, along with the poorer segments of the *chokha* population, however, agree on one point that, in terms of the goodness of its inhabitants, Diyargaon is one of the worst to be found anywhere in the Jumla district.

Family, Kinship, and Extended Social Relations

In all the caste groups in the village, the nuclear family pattern continues to predominate and accounts for around sixty per cent of all households. Such a family would normally consist of the parents, the unmarried children, and occasionally also an unmarried brother and sister. Extended families consist of parents of a widowed mother, other married or unmarried male siblings, unmarried female siblings, and children. There are also a few joint families in which usually a younger unmarried brother or sister lives with the older one. Richer families generally tend to be larger and there is one instance of a joint family existing for the express purpose of capitalising from the specialisation of responsibilities between brothers - one managing the household and the other local and district politics. Otherwise, establishing a new household following marriage is considered the norm. There is only one instance of a polygamous marriage with two wives living together.

The households in each *bado* are generally the members of an exogamous lineage and, therefore, most women are married out of the village. However, the Hamal-*Thakuri* of the Acharya lineage do marry Shahi girls of Jachauri *bado* or a *Brahman* may marry a Shahi girl in a hypogamous marriage. Matrilateral cross-cousin marriage is condoned but not preferred.

Given the dearth of markets and the limited monetisation of the economy, the institution of *ista*, literally meaning bosom friend, represents an important extension of the social relations in Jumla with significant economic implications. A person, usually male, enters into one of the half a dozen possible forms of such a relationship with

different degrees of mutual warmth and cordiality. But the underlying motivation for such a relationship is the reciprocal exchange of goods and services between different altitudinal zones and geographical regions, the latter necessitated by regular trading trips (Shrestha 1971: 68-77).

While a *heetko ista* is a *ista* relationship established between two individuals following a good turn done by one to the other, a *dharma ista* is a more hallowed relationship and is characterised by a high degree of mutual respect, love, cordiality, and selflessness. A *mate* (meaning earth) *ista*, in contrast, is a relationship established by a high altitude farmer with another from the valley floor, such as Diyargaon, where the former grows paddy in the field owned by him and lets the latter keep its straw, as well as grow winter barley in it, of which the former has plenty in his own village. In exchange, the latter provides the former with bullocks for ploughing and manure for the paddy crop.

Sangi, literally a fellow traveller, is another form of *ista* and is an honorific term used to address the other person. It connotes a degree of special friendship between the two which can also be ritually sanctified by the giving of *tika* (an act of worship on the forehead) to each other.

Similarly, if two persons happen to have identical names and like each other, they enter into a *baisali* relationship which is formalised by either a simple exchange of *tika* or more elaborately by having a priest preside over the function.

However, the most serious of all the *ista* relationships is the *mit* relationship which is entered into only after a long probation. Each confers upon the other the status of a family member in each other's family, evoking a high degree of mutual consideration and respect, and this relationship is inevitably sanctified by an elaborate ritual.

Whatever the form of the relationship, however, in the environs of Diyargaon, as stated above, it thrives basically on the exchange of goods and services. While mostly agricultural and cottage industry products are exchanged between the *ista* at different elevations, for those who trade, *ista* come in very handy as hosts in distant locations. They know that they have to have friends in different places because strangers are not helped. The *Jumli* are certainly not known for

hospitality. Thus, while everybody has a *ista* of one kind or the other, those having to travel a lot have many. New *ista* relationships are easily made. Since the relationship is economically valuable, every *ista* makes a studied effort to nurture and sustain it by strictly adhering to the underlying rules of reciprocity. As the local saying goes, if an *ista* is served a cup of curd, he should take it only after quietly measuring it with a bamboo shred.

Religious Tradition

The village, as in the rest of the Karnali Zone and beyond, is steeped into a highly distinctive religious tradition of its own. While being professedly Hindu, it does not give prominence to the standard members of the Hindu pantheon such as Shiva, Vishnu, and Ganesh who in the context of Jumla have been characterised by Campbell as "*hidden gods*" (1978: 199). It is presided over by a cult of incarnating gods called *Masta* who in turn are considered to be the sons of the Hindu god Indra. Local people also classify the two pantheons of *Masta* and Hindu gods as incarnating versus non-incarnating or possessing versus non-possessing. The *Masta* pantheon, in popular belief, is composed of "twelve" *Masta* brothers and their nine *Bhāwani* sisters, although there is hardly any consensus, amidst a much longer list of their names, as to the composition of the membership of the former. The *choka* and the *kamsel* worship a different set of *Masta*.

The distinctive characteristic of the *Masta* brothers is that they have no images, unlike the Hindu gods. Instead, they manifest themselves through their oracles, called *dhami*, by temporarily incarnating them. As proof of this the oracle goes into a state of possession, dwells on the life history of the god being possessed and his heroic deeds, and performs a miracle called *bhed garnu* to impress the audience of the authenticity of the incarnation. The author himself has witnessed one of the oracles rubbing a pinch of rice between his two palms, and this was later found to have turned into a black paste. Another one too, having also taken a pinch a rice, turned it into a *saligram* stone (amorite).

Once possessed, the *Masta*, or the possessed oracle, consults the devotees who have propitiated or "summoned" him to seek redressal for one or more of their problems such as sickness in the family; persecution by enemies; forcible eviction from one's land; theft; robbery

and arson; wife or cattle having difficulty in delivery; being without issue or son, drought, business losses; buffaloes not yielding milk; abduction of one's wife; or other similar misfortunes (Shrestha 1971: 97). Each of the devotees are given specific prescriptions. However, people have become more ambivalent about the *Masto*, once a highly feared deity because of the power to send merciless retribution to offenders, and the deity has suffered a set back in recent times.

Despite this tradition, however, Brahmanic Hinduism also remains significant in that the life cycle rituals are appointed by *Brahman* astrologers and performed by *Brahman* priests, except in the case of the *kamsel* who, being untouchable, are not served by *Brahman* priests, and, therefore, have one of their own relatives perform the rituals.

Conflict and Cooperation

Given the highly limited cultivable land base, the utter poverty of most of its inhabitants, the need to continuously struggle just to survive, and the extreme harshness of the environment from which they eke out a living, inter-personal relationships have, for generations, been characterised by the paradox of mutual competition, conflict, and cooperation at the same time. Although most go out for seasonal or extended migration in order to supplement their meagre incomes from the land, the belief that the enhancement of one's wellbeing depends, to a great extent, on the successful short-changing of one's neighbour has been deeply ingrained in their attitude towards fellow villagers and strangers alike. While not all resort to such methods, loan sharking, swindling, land grabbing, craftiness in trading, and feigned humility towards the strong and the powerful have been some of the manifestations of this conviction. Alliances, explicit or implicit as occasions demand, are easily forged, sometime even between long-time antagonists, and are dissolved just as conveniently depending upon the expediency of the situation.

On the other hand, however, the village is also the home to an encompassing network of traditional participatory institutions that cut across such cliques, castes, and other groupings and pertain primarily to the management of community assets, infrastructures, or general economic pursuits and services.

Such cooperative arrangements are reflected in the *parma* system of agricultural labour exchange, a local beneficiary group for irrigation management, mutual winter crop protection arrangements, forest protection arrangements, a bi-annual system for community collection of pine needles, a cooperative system for joint grazing of livestock at high altitudes, and so on. While most of these institutions are traditional and have been handed down through the generations, new ones are also created and sustained as in the case of the recent drinking water system in the village. Thus, the ubiquitous incidences of strife and rivalry do not preclude continuous mutual cooperation among the people, without which the larger goals of existence simply cannot be realised in this remote and harsh rural setting.

The Economic Scene

The Diyargaon economy, like that of most of the Karnali Zone, is a highly complex subsistence system. While it is dominated by an annual cycle of farming punctuated by transhumance, its paucity in terms of size and production makes it necessary for most households to supplement it through a number of other non-agrarian pursuits within their immediate environs and farther afield. Some of these are highly demanding of the inhabitants' traditional capacity for enterprise, wit, charm, and craftiness, if not also exacting in terms of sheer physical endurance.

Agriculture

The quest for extending their meagre holdings over the years has brought the people of Diyargaon to higher and remoter elevations from the village. Their farming land today is of two major kinds, the first consists of the irrigated paddy lands generally called *shar* (irrigated rice land) but locally referred to as *yuia* and the unirrigated land generally known as *pakho* and locally called *shuwa*. The second category is the *lekali bhuzia* (more frequently called only *lekali*), i.e.,