

CHAPTER 4

Trade and Migration

Despite the remoteness of the Karnali Zone, intra- and inter-regional trade have all along been integral parts of its economy. As early as the twelfth century A.D., trading between western Nepal and Tibet was firmly established under the western Malla Kingdom. While salt, wool, animals, and other goods of Tibetan and Chinese origin flowed southwards, food grains and other items of Nepalese or Indian origin flowed northwards (Bishop 1990: 300).

The limited range of goods and services produced locally resulted in what Bishop (1990: 158) called a "symbiotic exchange" between different 'niche' and altitudinal belts becoming an ecological necessity. Thus, the people of Diyargaon, like their neighbours, have engaged in barter and trade for generations, linked in a complex network of economic and social relationships with people from areas like Mugu and Humla to the north and the border towns to the south.

This economic network has traditionally involved a three-way movement of people and goods. The border people in the north, primarily the *Mugal Bhotia* of Mugu district, specialise in Trans-Himalayan trade with Tibet and import salt, wool, woollen products, animals, and other Chinese consumer goods and move through the

lower Karnali villages, including Diyargaon, with the help of horses, yaks, and the latter's cross-breeds, bartering (or selling for cash) goods in exchange for foodgrains, mostly rice, which are exported to Tibet (Shrestha 1971: 56-57).

The *Mugali* traders have lately extended their area of operations to include the northernmost village of Limi in Humla district where they buy wooden bowls for export to Tibet. They also visit the mountain districts of Dolpa and Baglung where they sell sheep and goats from Tibet, and then they move on to Kathmandu to buy watches and electronic goods, such as radios and tape recorders, for export to Tibet. Nevertheless, they complain of bad times because these days they do not make more than one hundred per cent profit, unlike the two hundred per cent profit realised in the past.

Similarly, the *Khas* from highland villages, who have large herds of sheep and goats, also trade with the northern areas and the southern town of Surkhet. They deal mainly in grains and Indian salt.

The people from the river valleys, such as Diyargaon, in turn, without the help of bovines, ovines, or equines, travelled between Humla and the Tibetan border market of Taklakot in the north, the trading post of Joljibee on the western border of Nepal, and the southern border markets of Nepalganj, Rajapur, and Dang. They exported mainly horses, herbs, and woollen products and imported consumer goods such as clothes, yarn, utensils, and condiments. Most of these exchanges were conducted through the immense network of the indigenous institution of *ista* which spread over the entire zone and beyond.

However, while the limited changes in the transportation network in the region and outside provided new directions and opportunities for trade, population growth with a limited resource base created its own pressures on the local economy. Consequently, expanded seasonal and long-term migrations and extended extra-regional trading became increasingly indispensable components of the subsistence system for a majority of the local population.

Extent of Seasonal Migration for Trading and Manual Work

Trading trips and seasonal migration are coordinated with the annual agricultural calendar, in that they occur mostly between the months

of *Mangsir* and *Magh* when there is little agricultural activity that require men's labour or presence. Therefore, most able-bodied men leave the village to engage in large-scale trading, small-time trading in Indian villages, or work as labourers in the remote areas of northern India. Of the three possibilities, the first one requires the capability to invest and the second, good salesmanship.

The number of people in the sample who left the village during the winter of 2047 (1990-91) is given in Table 18.

Table 18: No. of People on Trading or Working Trips in 2047

<i>Bado</i>	Sample households	Households with people leaving the village	No. of persons engaged
<i>Bahun</i>	10	4	5
<i>Jachauri</i>	8	5	6
<i>Od Kami</i>	9	6	6
<i>Sarki</i>	9	6	7
<i>Dhobi</i>	6	4	4
<i>Total</i>	42	25	28

Source: Field Study

Most able-bodied men and youngsters leave the village during winter, unless they are hindered by compelling reasons. Of the men from the sample who stayed back, two from *Bahun bado* had regular government jobs in the village. Others did not go because they were either too old to take the rigour of the journey and task, or were too young to venture out, or had young and female children to take care of in the household. Other reasons included the death of a parent, or recent separation from a brother, or the need to have a house built that very winter.

However, there are also two or three families in the village whose destitution, resulting from paucity of landholdings, forces them to lock their house and bring their wives and young children too to the warmer southern town of Surkhet to do odd jobs. Food is much cheaper there and scant clothing and bare feet are not uncomfortable in Surkhet's warm climate.

Destinations, Purposes, and Wares in the Past

While trading and migration have all along been integral components of Diyargaon's household economy, the changes that have taken place in the village and its surroundings have had concomitant effects on the trading pattern. The people who engaged in these pursuits could be classified into three broad categories, namely, those who traded seriously, those who masqueraded as healers, and those who migrated seasonally for manual work.

Traders sold or bartered a range of local products which generally included horses; medicinal herbs; woollen goods, such as sweaters and shawls; and, occasionally, yak tails, musk, turpentine, wax, and a geological product called *shilajeet* - a sticky black hydrocarbon similar to tar - that oozes out from rock outcrops and is used in ayurvedic medicine and as an aphrodisiac (Bishop 1990: 278). Much of these wares were obtained in Humla where local traders went to sell Indian products, mainly clothes.

Regarding horse-trading, in the past, the *Byansi*, a people from Darchula district in the west, came to Jumla to buy horses which were sold at the eight-day fair in the Joljibee border mart. But three generations ago, an enterprising man from Diyargaon decided to follow the *Byansi* to Joljibee and, ever since, the local traders have travelled to the fair themselves.

On trading trips, the traders carried most of the goods and also hired local porters. The herbs were sold in towns along the Indo-Nepal border, such as Nepalganj, Bishunpur, Koilabas, and Balarampur, and horses and shawls were marketed primarily in Joljibee in the west and the *Terai* towns of Butwal, Dang, and Deokhuri in the south. They did not travel to India.

There were other villagers who also needed the kind of income to be made from such seasonal trips, but they did not have the required capital. Their inventory included articles like fake musk, oil extracted from the trunk of the deodar tree, and a white geological substance called *toro*, which was scraped off the mountain sides and which expanded in the heat. These people travelled to Nepali and Indian villages selling these items as remedies for a number of ailments that the plains' villagers suffered from.

The fake musk was sold as a talisman which, on being kept inside a paddy heap overnight, greatly increased in quantity. The deodar oil was sold or exchanged in small quantities, for grain, as medication for "cooling one's body" or for curing aches. But the *toro* itself was sold in precious little pinches as (dried) tiger's milk, useful for driving off the evil spirits that tormented the village children. In one case, a *Jumli* "healer" even custom-tailored a leopard skin on a monkey and released it with a small bell hanging from its neck as a remedy against infestation of its too numerous brethren in a religious settlement in India.

These are some examples of the infinite number of "remedies" that the *Jumli* were capable of selling as they moved from one village to another in the region. Payment for these would be in small amounts of cash and grain. While they used the latter for sustenance, they would save a few rupees from the former to pay land taxes back home, and the remainder would be used for buying essential household supplies such as clothing and condiments.

Some people, mostly from the *kamsel* castes, preferred to go to the remote regions of north India, such as Nainital, Bhimtal, Ranikhet, Almora, Hardwar, Pithoragarh, and the like, in search of manual work which required no capital, was more in line with what they traditionally did in their home villages, and provided them with a more stable source of income than the occupation of an itinerant small time "trader".

The *kamsel* migrants worked on varied jobs such as building roads, constructing houses, felling trees, carrying stones, digging earth, loading and unloading vehicles, or otherwise working as *coolies*. Most spent the winter months between *Mangsir* and *Falgun* in India and returned home at the latest by early *Chaitra* for the new cycle of agricultural work. But some would stay on for a few years in a row saving up some money before returning home.

Forces of Change in the Trade Regime

Certain changes in the infrastructure of the region, coupled with the increased pressure of population on local resources, and the greater diligence with which they apply themselves to conducting business in Indian villages, among others, have brought about some basic

alterations in the patterns of trade and migration of the people of Diyargaon.

After Humla was included in the Royal Nepal Airlines' network in the late seventies and local traders began to import clothes by air, it was no longer possible for traders from Diyargaon to compete, because their merchandise was priced higher due to the portorage involved in the process of walking from a southern border town to the most remote northern district. The abrupt end to their near-monopoly in the cloth trade not only deprived them of the one hundred per cent profit they made on their investments, it also ended their long-standing practice of buying local woollen products and medicinal herbs for export to the southern border towns. Presently, there is only one trader from Diyargaon who still goes to Humla and Mugu to set up wayside stores and sell homespun clothes imported by air from the textile village of Lubu in the Kathmandu Valley.

The other important factor that restricted export was the establishment of two police posts on the trail to Surkhet, one in Jumla and the other in Kalikot district. The police, for unexplained reasons, harassed and forbade the traders from bringing medicinal herbs with them, and even those who brought oil extracted from the *Deodar* tree were taken into custody.

Thus, the only trade that has been continued is the export of horses through Joljibee trading post on the western border where Indian traders buy them to resell in the remote mountainous hinterlands of India. Until some twenty years ago, approximately five thousand horses were sold during the eight-day fair in early *Mangsir*. But, with the increasing cost of horses and the expansion of road networks in India, the number offered for sale has now declined to some eighteen hundred horses per year.

In Diyargaon itself, three horse traders have been going to the fair, including a major one who brought twenty horses. However, a certain amount of trickery is involved in horse-trading. Some good-looking horses are sold for inflated prices by advertising them as those rode by the District President or Member of Parliament from Jumla. But this is not the only type of trade trick. Not all of the horses offered for sale are bred in Diyargaon. Most of them are bought on credit from wayside villages as the traders pass through on their way to the trade mart. On the way back, the trader complains of having incurred a loss

on the horses and pays the owners mostly in carpets bought in Joljibee, inflating the prices, of course, in the process.

Despite such profiteering, the end for horse trading too, is in sight. A couple of years ago, the traders were surprised to find the fairground in Joljibee ploughed by the local people and under standing crops, another instance of population growth. But after a scuffle in which their tents and utensils were thrown out by the local people, and during which the *Jumli* traders let their horses graze on the crops, the Chief District Officer negotiated a settlement whereby the trade mart would remain unploughed up to the eighth of *Mangsir* every year. However, the major horse trader from Diyargaon, given his advancing age, has decided to retire after a year or two.

The Current Trading Pattern

As is evident from the preceding discussions, changes have been brought about in the trading pattern by forces beyond the control of the villagers. But migration and trade are necessary because the agricultural resource base is simply too inadequate to make ends meet for most people.

Bereft of what little geographical advantage they had in terms of exporting local products, the current trading pattern is now entirely dependent on the only remaining asset - artfulness. Most people today bring cash from the village - their own or borrowed for exorbitant interest rates - in different amounts, from 150 rupees to about a thousand for the journey. Those carrying smaller amounts supplement their capital by borrowing from one of the four *baniya* (shopkeepers) in Nepalganj who have had long standing business relationships with these clients from the Karnali Zone.

The seasonal migrants invariably travel to the town of Gorakhpur in India by rail. There they purchase a kilogramme or two of the lowest grade of asafoetida at Indian Rs 20/kg. They move through the Indian villages in small groups of two or three, loudly peddling their ware as something that came from the great big trees of the mountains and a sure remedy against fever and measles and as giving cooling comfort to little children. This same asafoetida is stored in two different pockets, or containers, of the trader to satisfy the needs of a

discriminating buyer. If the latter is dissatisfied with the quality of the spice from one pocket, he is offered the merchandise from the other pocket for a higher price.

There are three grades of asafoetida, costing 80, 40, and 20 rupees per kg. The latter two will be pre-adulterated with flour by the seller himself. If the visiting trader intends to peddle his goods in an urban area, he uses the best of the three grades.

The asafoetida is sold in *tola* (11 gram = one *tola*) for cash or foodgrains. While the latter is useful for sustenance (vegetables are obtained for free), they can make a cash profit of about four times the principal in one sale, and this lasts for about a week.

After a run or two in asafoetida trading and the resulting enhanced capital accumulation, they replace their merchandise by going for synthetic sweaters that are manufactured in Ludhiana in the Punjab but which are locally bought in Gorakhpur. The sweaters are often marketed in rural areas as "handwoven woollens from the mountains". They lure the buyers in broken Hindi by tempting them to "wear this and be like Mithun (meaning Mithun Chakravarty, a popular Hindi cine star), "wear this on a bicycle and be a hero", or "wear this to an invitation and be better received". They regret that they do not know Hindi better.

The more enterprising ones also market hats (woollen padded on the outside), shawls, and blankets in Uttar Pradesh. Shawls and blankets are marketed as genuine goods from Kashmir. They are skilled salesmen, have the knack of maintaining sustained contact with customers, and make repeated trips to the latter.

There are still others who adhere to the profitability of traditional trickery. This has to do with the selling of *shilajeet* in India. Although the export of this geological product is prohibited, the imaginative traders from Jumla still persist in satisfying the strong demands for it in India. As they proceed with their journey to India, they manage to smuggle with them a small piece of this black and hard natural product. Once in Gorakhpur, however, they buy a kilogramme or so of sugar and boil it hard to produce a dark and thick concentration which, once dried into small uneven pieces, compares favourably with the genuine *shilajeet*, both in colour and shape, and can be sold to the trusting villagers of Uttar Pradesh.

The transaction begins with the holding of a demonstration to establish the genuineness of their ware in which, first, the piece of real *shilajeet* is shown as the fake version and, to prove the point, is dropped in a glass of water in front of the curious on-lookers. As explained, nothing special happens; it just sinks to the bottom of the water. It proves beyond doubt that the stuff is devoid of any of the much-heralded powers of *shilajeet*. Then they pull out a small piece of their new invention, the sugar "shilajeet" and subject it to the rigours of the same test by dropping it in the water. But, this time, because of the inherent porousness of the material involved, it leaves a visible and sparkling trail of bubbles behind as it sinks downwards. The buyers are sufficiently impressed, and the sales are transacted forthwith.

By the end of the three-months' sojourn, each trader will make quite a substantial profit. For example, two brothers, who had set out with 500 Nepalese rupees, amassed a sum of 1,800 Indian rupees or about 3,000 Nepalese rupees after three rounds of trade lasting three months. Similarly, another person with 1,500 rupees made, after three months, a fortune of 4,000 Indian rupees equivalent to almost 7,000 Nepalese rupees.

Their calculations include not only the actual cash profit made but also the foodgrains saved at home while spending three long months in India.

Trading versus Manual Labour

There are a number of households in the village which, as stated earlier, send their able-bodied men and boys to remote places in northern India, west of Nepal, to spend three to four winter months working in various manual jobs. Apart from those who occasionally fall victim to fraudulent contractors, the rest earn about a thousand to one thousand five hundred Indian rupees during the period, and they use this to purchase annual supplies for their homes.

Since manual labour has been their traditional occupation, most men in the *kamsel* castes of *Kami*, *Sarki*, and *Damai* travel to northern India to perform manual jobs during the winter, although a *chokha* or two have also been known to accompany them to do the same. About four *Damai* families have even settled there permanently over the

decades and two families have been there for over a year. Occasionally, one would learn of a man or two who had gone to India for a number of years and from whom the relatives had not heard.

More recently, a definite shift has taken place in the pattern in favour of trade and away from manual jobs, although a number of people have also wavered between the two vocations. Today, most *Sarki* are engaged in trading, which the elderly *Kami* too find physically less demanding than building houses.

For the people of Diyargaon, trading today is a more attractive proposition, especially for those with some sense of enterprise. It is physically less arduous and, with some luck, they make very handsome profits in addition to living quite luxuriously by indulging in "such delicacies as eggs and *jilebis* (a confectioner's preparation of sugar and butter)" while in India.

In one case, some three years ago, a person borrowed two hundred rupees and left the village. Of this, he used 100 rupees for travel expenses and another 100 as initial capital. He ended up earning a colossal sum of 14 thousand Indian rupees in five months. During the time spent he had graduated from trading in asafoetida to sweaters and then finally to blankets. The lender too was quite happy, not only because of the prompt repayment of the loan but also because of the generous gifts of a canister full of mustard oil (about five litres), a steel plate, and a *panyu* (a large spoon) for the kitchen, all of them costing far more than the principal sum but given in gratitude.

However, not all goes well with these trading trips. Many complain that only "two out of ten" are good people in India. Many look down upon them as having come to India for want of food in their own country. Many take the asafoetida free of cost on the pretext of sampling it. Sometimes, they have to face the problem of pickpockets and they might even fall prey to robbers. Some traders simply detest having to lie and to, sometimes, even swear by one's mother and children.

On the way home, they have to travel through a place called Dillikot in the Kalikot district of Nepal, and this is very hazardous because some people in the locality regularly rob them, mostly at night. Over the decades, however, they have also developed defense mechanisms. To start with, they always move in groups - small ones in India - on

peddling trips through villages, and large ones while trekking back home. In India, they hide their money by sewing it inside a quilt. Once when a small party fell into a robbers' trap while smuggling Indian goods into Nepal through a wrong border point, one of them still managed to sneak away and give the police an instantly fabricated account of the incident claiming the dacoits had robbed them of 14 thousand rupees in cash. The police immediately swung into action and coerced the robbers to return the alleged sum of which the police kept eight thousand and the *Jumli* victims made off with the rest as well as their belongings.

Returns from Working and Trading Trips

Apart from a handful of households that are engaged in trading for profit, all the people in Diyargaon who migrate seasonally for trading, or manual jobs, do so to meet the essential household needs for which they would otherwise lack resources. After having earned what they could in India, they stop in Nepalganj to buy their necessities from those shopkeepers from whom they either have borrowed their initial capital or with whom they traditionally transact.

It is not by accident that the migrants work in India but come back to Nepalganj to buy their household supplies. The first reason is, of course, their loyalty to these lending shopkeepers. Secondly, it is the Nepalese custom officials who customarily harass these small time traders. It is said that duties are levied even on the clothes worn by them if they look new.

When it comes to clothing, however, there is an added incentive to buy in Nepalganj. With the construction of the east-west highway, many *Jumli* traders, after coming back from India, make another trip to Kathmandu to buy a stock of garments, either imported from Bangkok or locally manufactured, which have become fashionable more recently also with the youth of Jumla. They then return to Nepalganj to set up store in the Bageswari temple premises for a few days to sell them to other returning fellow *Jumli* before they themselves head home.

In order to capitalise on this market, some of the *Damai* from Diyargaon also go to Nepalganj with their sewing machines so that they can make dresses for their *Jumli* clients. A recent trend is to wear new outfits, such as pants, and, as far possible, to have them

tailored in Nepalganj. Whatever the source of supply, a normal inventory of purchases by such returnees consists of garments for family members, shoes, occasionally a coat, *patuka* (a wide cloth tied around the waist by women), vermilion, fabrics, bangles, ribbons, socks, oil, spices, sugar, utensils, soap, blankets, and sweaters. Depending upon the immediate income and economic status of the households, this package can be big or small. But if one is swindled by a fraudulent contractor in the Indian mountains one could end up coming home with a newly-purchased but empty box.

Those who stay in the village perform odd jobs, such as building houses and making storage bins and leather articles, depending upon their caste. The income derived from the sources is used to purchase their minimum necessities from returnees. Some rely on their *ista* to bring them the necessary supplies, for which they pay in advance. However, even without advance payment, some returnees do bring gifts, mostly spices and sugar, for their *ista* who invariably might have given them a departing gift of foodgrains or walnuts (believed to bring good luck to the traveller).

Seasonal Migration: An Indispensable Safety Valve

As is evident from the preceding discussions, seasonal migration and trading occupy a very important place in the life and economy of the people of Diyargaon, as elsewhere in the zone. They recall that previous visits were limited to the markets of Nepalganj and only a few made it across the border. But, today, many people migrate to India. They acknowledge that actually their trade just amounts to going there "to be fed". "We do not represent anything more than the bread and clothing we earn in a foreign country". So heavy is the dependence on it that "even a boy of five or six now accompanies the father".

Seasonal migration to India for trade and work is acting as a safety valve for the limitations of the local economy. Even during the Indian embargo against Nepal in 1989/90 (2046), thirteen persons from an equal number of households risked going to India, despite mistreatment and insults at the border and in the railway trains. In the case of one migrant, when he was stopped at the border near an Indian checkpost, he was suddenly haunted by the spectre of having to trek back home empty-handed with all its adverse consequences for

him and his family. He was too desperate not to enter India. So he decided to take whatever the risk and made a dash across the border.

Mushroom Gathering: A New Opportunity

About eight years ago, one person, returning home after having worked in India for about twenty years, brought along wild mushrooms *marcela* (found in Kashmir) which were valued as an aphrodisiac and sold in Delhi for a very high price. In the beginning, he kept it to himself and made lots of money by assigning people to collect them in the local mountains, after which he exported them to Delhi. Soon it became public knowledge. Today, there are a large number of traders from different villages in the valley who buy the wild mushrooms from the thousands of men, women, and children who collect them during the two spring months of *Baisakh* and *Jestha*. These wild mushrooms were once eaten only by the *kamsel* and not even touched by the *chokha*. It is said that a kilogramme of the dried plant fetches nineteen hundred rupees in Indian currency which means that even one plant earns a rupee or two for the collector. Because of this valuable find, some people sum up the future prospects for a *Jumli* as lying in *chyau*, *syau*, and *hyau* which translated into English means mushrooms, apples, and enterprise respectively.

to transform the traditional forces that continue to shape its structure and character.

The Political Structure of the Village

As a result of the continuation of the *talukdar* system discussed earlier, the political structure of the village has remained bipolar in that the local *mukhya* continues to exercise considerable power by virtue of his duties, namely, collecting land taxes and certifying and attesting land deeds. He is dreaded mostly because of his status