

CHAPTER 5

Village Politics

The historical legacy of orthodox Hinduism in terms of stratified social structure and caste segregation, an exploitative economic structure, and uneven resource distribution has continued to define the politics in Diyargaon. While the political structure has, over the decades, evolved along with other changes taking place in Diyargaon's life and economy, it has primarily been conditioned by the two elements of population growth and a dwindling resource base. Although the principles and ideology of the larger national political system and changes therein have also influenced the mode of politics in the village, their democratic and egalitarian impact have not been strong enough to transform the traditional forces that continue to shape its inherent 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 *mukhiya* continues to exercise considerable power by virtue of his duties, namely, collecting land taxes and certifying and recommending land deeds. He is dreaded mostly because of his misuse

of this authority, for example, withholding of tax receipts, appropriating other's land for himself or for somebody else for a bribe, refusing to authenticate or issue certificates of inheritance and transfer of property, and these services are rendered only upon the extortion of money and free labour from his illiterate and poor tax payers.

The *mukhiya* also performed many regulatory functions in the past as the government-nominated village chief. These included authorising the felling of trees for building houses or for making ploughs and clearing land for agriculture, among others.

But, after the introduction of elective local government bodies in the early fifties and their reinforcement during the erstwhile partyless *Panchayat* System in the sixties and seventies, the regulatory functions were effectively transferred to the president of the village *panchayat*, the *Pradhan Pancha*, who was elected from the entire *panchayat* area based on adult suffrage, and, for all practical purposes, emerged as the principal representative of the Government and as the village decision-maker.

The area of the then village *panchayat*, of which Diyargaon is a part, consisted of nine wards and several villages, including two at higher altitudes inhabited by the *Khas* people. Twenty years ago, Diyargaon represented three wards, including one segregated ward which consisted of three non-contiguous *kamsel bado*. Currently it consists of only two secular wards. Of the other wards, the two high altitude villages consist of five wards, representing a total of 685 voters or some 47 per cent of the total voters (1,413).

After the abolition of the *Panchayat* System, the village *panchayat* has been renamed the Village Development Committee. The secretary of the Village Development Committee of Diyargaon is a government official, a non-local person domiciled in the district who is mostly absent from meetings.

The basis for the increased legitimacy and power of the elected head of the village is the wide range of functions entrusted to the village *panchayat* through the legal statute of the Village *Panchayat* Act and its by-laws. While those powers and functions have steadily increased over the years, the statute of 1988 had provided for 115 different functions, covering eleven different areas, e.g., education and culture,

health and population, agriculture, irrigation and land reform, works and transport, forest, soil conservation and environmental protection, industry, commerce and tourism, fuel, social welfare, and *panchayat* and general administration (Ministry of Law and Justice 1988: 61-70). These broad functions have been retained more or less in the revised act for the establishment of Village Development Committees (Ministry of Law and Justice 1992: 9-12).

Although this list of functions was unrealistically lengthy, the village *panchayat* of Diyargaon did perform a large number of them. For instance, it built or renovated bridges, drinking water and irrigation systems, schools, trails, ponds, embankments, and temples. It also sought to introduce programmes in afforestation, health and sanitation, food security, livestock development, cottage industries, and apple cultivation. It even wanted a commercial bank and succeeded in getting a police post established in the vicinity.

The village *panchayat* also sent recommendations for many local projects to be included in the Seventh Five Year Plan, handled development grants given by the Government, formed and supervised user groups for project implementation, made preparations for the King's visit to the local temple, considered introducing vital registration laws in the village, and certified distances between places in the *panchayat* area for use by government officials in making their travel claims. They endorsed the code of conduct stipulated by the centre for *panchayat* members, supported central political bodies in the denunciation of terrorist activities in Kathmandu and elsewhere in the country, sometimes complained against corrupt officials in the district, wrote letters of recommendation for local citizens with business in government offices, arbitrated local disputes, and received visiting officials from the district capital and outside. In short, the jurisdiction of the *panchayat* and its officials was extensive, making the office of the *Pradhan Pancha* the most powerful and coveted position in the village.

The Village Political Base

Although the office of the *Pradhan Pancha*, the centre of village politics, was an elective position based on adult suffrage, the choice was dictated more by the oppressive forces supporting the traditional village power structure than by free democratic forces.

To start with, the village was all along riddled with factions, based on a wide variety of considerations. Although caste is an important basis for mutual alliance, the *kamsel* are far too dependent on the *chokha* to organise themselves as a political force. Although intra-caste mutual sympathy and assistance do exist (such as a *Sarki* lending money to another free of interest), each of these individual *kamsel* households are too closely aligned economically to one or more *chokha* households and, therefore, too weak to build more aggressive solidarity among themselves.

It is, therefore, the *chokha* who (barring a few who are very poor) have the liberty and ability to indulge in village factionalism and politics. And they have many criteria. Since the inception of the village *panchayat* in the fifties, five *chokha* have become *Pradhan Pancha*, of whom four came from *Bahun bado* and one from Jachauri. Of the former four, two have held office only for one term each. The one from Jachauri held office only for a part of the term. The rest of the term was again shared by two brothers from a rich joint family in *Bahun bado* (*Bahun bado A*). Of them, the elder brother held the post for two successive terms and, after he was promoted to an even more important position in the district capital, the mantle, after a brief interlude during which it was filled by the person from Jachauri (Jachauri A), was passed on to the younger brother who kept it until the abolition of the *Panchayat* System in 1990, at which time the local *panchayat* was also disbanded.

Of the two earlier *Bahun bado Pradhan Pancha*, one held the post only briefly and was succeeded by the son of a local *talukdar* (we will call him *Bahun bado B*) whose tenure was marred by the same atrocities that characterised the term of his father. So the emergence of *Bahun bado A* as *Pradhan Pancha*, after being elected following a contest with the predecessor, was seen as a respite for the people. The story of Jachauri A, who is a self-made man and one of the wealthiest in *Jachauri bado*, is similar. Although a member of a different (and rival) caste, he was not only a close relative of *Bahun bado A* but also an important member of the latter's faction. However, when he found his long-cherished accession to power ending abruptly as a brief interlude, he became a sworn enemy of *Bahun bado A*. Thus, in the next election five years later, he contested the election, only to be badly beaten. The incumbent garnered more support from the constituent wards outside the village. The vote count was 853 against a mere 105 for Jachauri A.

The Jachauri *bado* people, although mostly of modest means or downright poor, have an inflated opinion of themselves as *Thakuri* having "royal" descent from the Kalyal kings of the *Baise* period. Thus, although they are very jealous of the economically more successful *Bahun bado* neighbours, they look down upon them because they are either *Bahun* who, although superior according to the Hindu caste system, were ruled by the *Thakuri* kings, or Hamal *Thakuri* who are of mixed parentage (*Bahun* father and *Thakuri* mother) and are, therefore, considered to be only marginal *Thakuri*. Thus, when it came to intra-village issues, the stand-off would invariably be between these two mutually opposed caste groups.

In the last *Panchayat* election five years ago, the voters in the highland villages, who until then had always managed to hold only the office of the Deputy *Pradhan Pancha* for themselves, wanted to contest the higher office. After having held the position for so many terms, the incumbent apparently found it hard to persuade his highland friends and supporters of many years not to contest the office, and, therefore, in a controversial move, he opted out of the fray.

Capitalising on this opportunity, the Jachauri aspirant decided to try his luck once again. In order to ensure the undivided support of the entire village against the possible contender from the highlands, a unity meeting was organised on his initiative and was also attended by the incumbent. The meeting itself was held under the auspices of *Bahun bado* B who, following the death of his father, had succeeded as the *talukdar* himself, and had continued to be at loggerheads with *Bahun bado* A. This arrangement was opted for to assure the total solidarity of all the factions in the village in favour of the new candidate.

As planned, a consensus was reached in the meeting that Jachauri A would be the sole candidate who, then, offered a goat for sacrifice on the occasion not only to celebrate the decision in his favour, by distributing small chunks of mutton to all the households in the village, but also to seal the pact by having everyone swear by the animal's sacrificial blood.

The highland villagers too, on their part, had counted on the support of *Bahun bado* B in their 'bid for the office against his antagonist incumbent. But when word of the agreement spread to the highland villages, they saw little possibility of winning against the totally

united force of the Diyargaon voters. However, in withdrawing from the race, they let it be known that they would rather support the candidature of the incumbent *Bahun bado A* than support the Jachauri.

With the majority of the highland voters on his side once again, the incumbent changed his mind and decided to re-enter the fray, irrespective of the consensus and the oath to which he, too, was a party. The Jachauri contestant suddenly saw the carpet removed from under his feet and, reminded of his ignominious defeat in the previous election, he decided to withdraw from the race. Most people viewed the incident as a master stroke on the part of *Bahun bado A*.

In the district itself, it was one of the rare uncontested elections for the post of *Pradhan Pancha*. The Jachauri candidate, having lost not only what was almost within his grasp but also having lost face and an expensive goat (for which, despite his claim, he was not compensated by the *Pradhan Pancha*), continues to nurse his wound and prepare for the next bout.

The factions, however, are not limited only to these two groups. In *Bahun bado* itself, a member of another wealthy family and a close relative of the clan (*Bahun bado C*), who had been a member of the in-group of *Bahun bado A* twenty years ago, has since become alienated because of similar competition. He had counted on the magnanimity of *Bahun Bado A* to share that coveted office by giving him a chance to preside over it.

Although it had been a partyless polity in the country during the pre-1990 period, underground party affiliations were rather widespread. In Diyargaon itself, *Bahun bado B* headed the Congress leadership in the village and had also been a district level Congress leader. Although A and B are closely related, they have been at odds for decades because of their comparable economic status, disagreement over misappropriation of the property of a heirless relative, the latter's defeat in the PP election in the early sixties at the hands of the former, and the latter's entry into the then opposing political force, the Congress Party.

Similarly, the head of still another *Bahun bado* household, a man of medium economic standing in the community, has been more or less a one-man faction representing a leftist splinter group called "*Rohit*"

and counted on the support of the *kamsel*, mainly the *Sarki*, to whom he has been occasionally helpful. But one of his brothers worked as an official in the local *panchayat* and was close to *Bahun bado A*. Another brother was an official in the Congress Party at the sub-district level. In sum, while political alliances have been quick in being forged and dissolved in Diyargaon, they have been based not so much on the understanding and convictions or differing ideologies as on the persistent tradition of inter-personal rivalry in the village.

Multiparty Politics and Village Factions

With the disbandment of the *Panchayat* polity and the re-establishment of the multiparty system in 1990, the political parties once again became legal and functioned openly also in the villages. But this new situation turned out to be more useful as a formal, institutional device to accommodate the fluidity of widespread factionalism that characterised the village politics of Diyargaon.

Even before political parties became legal, most of the villagers in Jachauri under the leadership of Jachauri A had been solidly behind the Nepali Congress Party. But with the dissolution of the *Panchayat* System, and the reputation of the *ex-pancha* largely discredited in the eyes of the public, they too have been in search of a new identity. A large number of them thus joined the Congress Party, as did the *Bahun bado A* brothers too after some hesitation.

But this development upset the balance of factions in the community. While it did little in warming their relations with their long-time foe, *Bahun bado B* (who even saw this as a possible threat to his position as a Congress leader at the district level), Jachauri A, who had so far been quite active in Congress ranks and a sworn enemy of *Bahun bado A*, was outraged by their induction into his party. It was impossible for him to share the same political party with them. So he reacted by issuing a statement alleging that it was no longer appropriate for honest workers like him to continue as members of the Congress Party "because of the recent infiltration by corrupt elements". Then he crossed over to the Communist Party of Nepal - United Marxist-Leninists (CPN-UML), followed by almost all the households of Jachauri *bado*.

Similarly, one of the brothers of *Bahun bado D*, who, as mentioned above, was an official in the local *panchayat* for many years, and had

been close to *Bahun bado A*, had his own score to settle with the *talukdar* (*Bahun bado B*) who apparently had transferred the title in a land transaction concluded by the former only after he had been bribed with 500 rupees. So, when he found out that *Bahun bado A* had joined the Congress Party - the same party as *Bahun bado B* - he was furious and disappointed. Therefore, even at the cost of straining his cordial relationship with *Bahun bado A*, he decided to align himself with the Jachauri faction, becoming, in the process, one of its principal strategists.

Then there was *Bahun bado E*, a "Rohit" supporter, and his son, a "Marxist-Leninist". This, however, posed no problems in their aligning with the "partyless" leaders of *Bahun bado A*, for they were opposed to the Congress supporters of *Bahun bado B* and Jachauri A, although not necessarily for reasons of ideological conviction. *Bahun bado E*, himself, had cultivated some five *muri of jyula* claiming that it was his share of the inheritance from the heirless relative mentioned earlier. There were no papers to support his claim and *Bahun bado B*, the *talukdar* himself, had consistently disputed it, implying that he was the rightful recipient of this inheritance. However, *Bahun bado E* had the support of *Bahun bado A*, for the latter too had forcibly appropriated the rest of the inheritance without legal entitlement.

Therefore, in this stand off against *Bahun bado B*, the continued blessing of *Bahun bado A* was absolutely indispensable for *Bahun bado E*. Following *Bahun bado A*'s entry into the Congress Party, *Bahun bado E*, along with his son, suddenly became hard core supporters of the Congress Party.

Bahun bado C held different views regarding alignment to political parties. While he did not become a formal member of any party, he hoisted the election symbol of one of the *Panchayat*-leaning candidates who had been an opponent of *Bahun bado A* when the elder of the two brothers served in the district capital. But, at the same time, he was also in league with another contending '*Panchayat*' candidate. He represented the interests of both candidates in the village - for a price.

Thus, almost every national political party of any significance was represented in the village and all embraced one existing faction or the other. While political activities, such as organising processions (like the one on the day of the announcement of the new constitution) or holding mass meetings in preparation for general elections, are carried

out, political affiliation is fundamentally determined by the endemic factionalism in the village. This, in turn, is largely motivated by the competition over scarce resources and the search for power to influence their allocation.

Factions, Caste, and the General Election

When the General Election approached, each of these "political" leaders targetted their canvassing, not so much on the *chokha* households, most of which were already aligned to one faction or the other, but on the *kamsel* households, almost all of which traditionally depended on richer *chokha* for their sustenance and survival.

All means were employed; the threat of eviction from their homesteads in the case of a *Sarki* failing to vote for the Congress, offer of money on behalf of some *Panchayat* candidates, invocation of traditional affinal relationships by the leaders' wives in begging for votes to make compliance ritually compelling, holding out hopes of resource redistribution in the village, and door-to-door visits by important leaders.

The *kamsel* found themselves in a great dilemma, and they finally resorted to "safe voting". More than being influenced by these appeals, they found it expedient to keep the powerful men in the community in good humour and, therefore, split their household votes among several candidates. The households without many votes were the ones who had to make a very difficult choice.

Of the *kamsel*, the *Sarki* had a very strong case for voting en bloc and against the Congress Party. Some two years previously, with loan assistance from SFDP, they had tried to purchase a fallow tract of land a little outside the village to build houses which would, at long last, have made them owners of their own homesteads. But the bid was foiled by the refusal of a local *chokha* who shared its ownership with another willing *Bahun* from a nearby village. The *chokha* incidentally was supported in this negation by another local *chokha* - who happened to be the former's adversary in an inheritance-related dispute but had his eyes on the land as the future homestead for his many sons. The imperatives of the village factionalism had lined them up together as protagonists of the Congress Party. But at the time of election, however, the *Sarki* vote too apparently split.

In the end, the United Marxist-Leninists garnered 115 votes, the Nepali Congress 110, the *Panchayat*-leaning independent candidate 45, 'Rohit' leftists 16, and the (ex-*panchayat*) National Democracy Party one.

Traditional Social Order and Accountability of Leaders

Although all local *Panchayat* leaders had been chosen democratically, at least in form, based on adult franchise, people did not find the behaviour of those elected sufficiently accountable. Although, in extreme cases, they did resort to the option of rejecting an atrocious candidate for the post of *Pradhan Pancha* in favour of a person not considered as bad, as had happened in the early sixties, most of the time local politics was the monopoly of the *chokha* elites. The results of the election were influenced by machinations among different factions, the make-up of which continuously changes, depending on considerations of mundane gains, traditional enmity, and strategies for survival.

The villagers complained of gross misuse of government resources on the part of local leaders. For example, they mentioned a project in which only twenty thousand rupees were paid to local labourers and most of the remaining twenty-four thousand rupees was misappropriated by the leaders. They also pointed to the installation of an exclusive water tap giving 24 hours' supply in front of the house of *Bahun bado A*, whereas the rest of the village shared another system supplying water only for a few hours in the morning and evening.

It was also common knowledge in the village that the money granted for land terracing was used for turning *ghaderi*, cultivated by *Sarki*, into *gyula*. Afterwards the *Sarki* were told to shift to inferior land. To the villagers it was a case of clear-cut forcible misappropriation of land on the part of the local leader. Similarly, if one leader is known to charge exorbitant compound interests on loans, another will be suspected of having surreptitiously registered a local forest in his name.

Therefore, a credibility gap exists. On one hand, the local leaders boast of the number of development projects undertaken during their tenure in the village which, they claim, could have been eventually designated as a "model *panchayat*" by the government, had the villagers been only

more cooperative. So incensed are some of them, that they even dare to compare the local people with some species in the animal kingdom who refuse to go to heaven because they can not find there the filthy things they eat in this world.

But on the other hand, the *kamsel* are convinced, as are the poor *chokha*, that politics is a rich man's game and that, if the Government really meant to help them, resources would be delivered to them directly, bypassing national political representatives as well as district and local representatives who invariably misuse government funds at the first opportunity.

They also perceive a collusion between the district leadership and the local *thalu* (a traditional term denoting a member of the local elite who is publicly recognised and who, feared for his wealth, status, and legal prowess, invariably emerges as an elected leader), the former entrusting resources to the latter who misuses them for his own benefit. Others again point to certain well-dressed leaders and ask how they can afford expensive cashmere coats when they themselves, working so very hard, find it difficult to make ends meet.

Most district government officials have been no help to the poor, for they tend to be corrupt and side with the local *mukhiya* or other oppressors who provide them with graft. The land revenue office in the district capital (which appointed the *talukdar*) is the most notorious in this respect. Thus the possibility of an accountable and responsive political system for the people of Diyargaon, as for most of the Karnali Zone, remains quite remote, considering the fact that the local social order is deeply embedded in widespread and extreme poverty, unequal distribution of limited resources, caste segregation, illiteracy, and a highly exploitative structure of inter-personal relationships.

Local Political Leadership and User Groups

However, when it comes to managing the local infrastructure, or protecting crops, forests, and grasslands, the leaders do cooperate with each other and with people across factional, caste, and class boundaries to create institutional mechanisms which, in esoteric terms, are known as user groups. The entire process of identifying and selecting local functionaries, fixing their remuneration, supervising

them, and evaluating their work is primarily carried out with the involvement and participation of distinguished local leaders, among whom *Bahun bado A* is very important.

In contrast to the secretive nature of the functioning of factions and political offices, user group management is more open and resources are mobilised in an egalitarian manner. Most development projects operational in the village, such as the irrigation scheme and the barley, grassland, and forest management systems discussed earlier in the relevant chapters, have indeed been implemented under the system. Recently, non-traditional development projects, such as a local drinking water system, have been managed along these lines and will be discussed in the following chapter.

One notable point, with vital implications for sustainable local development, is that the same local leaders, who have invariably been at the forefront of controversy, for having mismanaged external development funds, for having misappropriated public and private lands, for having lent money at exorbitant interest rates, or for having oppressed the *kamsel*, emerge as an indispensable galvanising force in the functioning of user groups on a sustained basis. Therefore, one important lesson that can be learned from this situation is that transparent and participatory management is critical for a more beneficial and egalitarian utilisation of development resources in rural communities, in general, and in stratified communities in particular.