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RESOURCES ANI POPULATION

A Study of the Gurungs of Nepal

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It certainly appears that a superabundant population in an unfertile country must be the greatest of all calamities, and produce eternal warfare or eternal want. Either the most active and the most able part of the community must be compelled to emigrate, and to become soldiers of fortune or merchants of chance; or else, if they remain at home, be liable to fall a prey to famine in consequence of some accidental failure in their scanty crops.

[Turner's Embassy to Tibet, part ii.c.x. p. 351; quoted in T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on Population* (Everyman edn., no date), i, p. 122.]

The distinctive note of Chinese agriculture, he observes, was 'economy of space, economy of materials, economy of implements, economy of fodder, economy of fuel, economy of waste products, economy of everything except of forests, which have been plundered, with prodigal recklessness, to the ruin of the soil, and of the labour of human beings, whom social habits have made abundant and abundance cheap'.

[R. H. Tawney's *Land and Labour in China*, p. 48, quoted in Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Peregrine edn., 1969), p. 190].

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Preface and acknowledgements

The fieldwork upon which this book is based was carried out mainly in the village of Thak, some twelve miles north of Pokhara in central Nepal. Perched on a steep ridge at six thousand feet, the village was overshadowed by the Himalayan range known as the Annapurna mountains. The inhabitants largely consisted of a tribe called in Nepali the Gurungs, famous throughout the world as fighting men in the Gurkha regiments of the British and Indian armies. The aim was to carry out an intensive analysis of a particular community, with a stress on the economic and demographic aspects of life. The Gurungs were chosen on the advice of Professor C. von Furer Haimendorf, my supervisor and a specialist on Nepal. The village of Thak was chosen because it seemed a convenient distance from the market town of Pokhara.

A number of previous and subsequent studies have been made of the Gurungs and these are listed in the bibliography. In the nineteenth century Brian Hodgson collected material on the Gurungs as well as other groups; much of this is unpublished but is deposited at the India Office Library. For most of this century Nepal has been closed to outside investigators, but the flow of army recruits provided army officers with informants. Thus the sketches of Gurung customs made by John Morris, an officer with anthropological training, give us a valuable picture of certain aspects of the culture in the 1920s. There are also useful comments in the general description of the Gurungs by Dor Bahadur Bista. By far the most important contribution to the study of the Gurungs, however, is that made by Bernard Pignède in his work *Les Gurungs* (Mouton: Paris, 1966) and in his unpublished field notes. Pignède spent some seven months among the Gurungs in 1958, the major portion of which time he spent in the village of Mohoriya. Despite his short visit, lack of any previous anthropological training, and tragic death soon after his return, he was able to collect and analyse a very large amount of material, posthumously published under the direction of Professor Louis Dumont. Although one is bound to find small mistakes of fact and interpretation in such a long work, my experience with the Gurungs amply corroborated most of his material and underlined its great accuracy and value. Since he covered almost all aspects of Gurung society in considerable detail it is difficult not merely to repeat his work. I have therefore tended to concentrate on particular

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aspects of the society, especially those which need quantitative data. Although Pignède gave a general account of these topics, a longer period in the field, plus the existence of his prior description as an invaluable framework, enabled me to go into certain questions more deeply. But it should be stressed that the following chapters, although intelligible in themselves, are designed to complement his work. My chapters omit a number of obvious topics, particularly politics, kinship, social structure and religion, and these omissions can be understood only if we realize that Pignède has already covered the ground. Cross-references to his work are frequently made in order to prevent duplication. A short visit to Mohoriya in 1969 and the use of his unpublished field notes has made it possible in a number of cases to see whether Thak is unique in certain respects and also to compare the situation in Mohoriya in 1958 with that in 1969.

Two unpublished theses have also been found helpful. One is by N. J. Allen and is a general account of Nepalese societies. Though based on secondary sources, it has some valuable suggestions concerning the Gurungs, particularly respecting their origin and cross-cousin marriage system. A thesis by D. A. Messerschmidt, based on research among the Gurungs to the east of Thak, came to my attention after this text was completed, but some of the many useful analyses contained in the thesis have been referred to below.

The methods used in fieldwork were basically the 'participant-observation' techniques upon which most anthropological work is based. General surveys and a census were combined with observation and questioning of key informants. Special stress was laid on collecting historical documents, particularly those of landholding. These records are described in the text. Undoubtedly the most interesting aspect of the Gurungs from a purely anthropological point of view is their complex religious life, in which Hinduism, Buddhism, and a local form of animism, derived from old Tibetan *bon* religion, are blended. I observed many propitiatory rituals and with the help of the local diviner (*poju* in Gurung) I was able to collect over sixty myths, of which only a dozen or so had been noted by Pignède. The rituals were often long and complex and extensive notes were taken on these. Material was also collected concerning beliefs about causation, the after-life and other topics including witchcraft.

The fieldwork was financed by the London Committee of the London–Cornell Project for East and South-East Asian Studies (financed jointly by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Nuffield Foundation in England). The School of Oriental and African Studies, London, provided a Governing Body Postgraduate Exhibition which made it possible to undertake full-time writing for one year. The Provost and Fellows of King's College, Cambridge, provided further time by an election to a Senior Research Fellow-

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ship. Further support was provided in connection with a project entitled 'The Study of Non-Industrial Communities: Three Case Studies', one of which was Thak, financed by the Social Science Research Council. I am deeply grateful to all these institutions for the support without which, of course, this study would have been impossible.

While in Nepal I was assisted by a number of people, especially Mr. M. B. Pant of the British Council Library, Pokhara, and the staff of the Nepal Research Centre, Thyssen House. The research was undertaken in collaboration with Tribhuvan University, Kathmandu, and this made access to central Nepal possible. I am especially grateful to Dr Upraity for his assistance here. Warren and Jessie Glover of the Summer Institute of Linguistics helped us to learn the Gurung language. But, above all, deepest thanks are due to the villagers of Thak and Mohoriya who made us so welcome, especially Bohansing and Prembahadur Gurung and their families. The privilege of living with such tolerant, humourous, relaxed and intelligent people was a very great one.

I am also grateful to Professor Louis Dumont, Professor A. W. Macdonald and the staff of the Centre D'Etudes Indiennes in Paris for their help in locating Pignède's manuscripts and for permission to use them in this work. Professor C. von Furer-Haimendorf first aroused my interest in Nepal. His wide knowledge of Himalayan peoples has been of constant value and I am most grateful for his sympathetic comments on my thesis. Doctors Lionel and Pat Caplan have added to many kindnesses by reading the whole work and making numerous useful criticisms. Their suggestions on restructuring the argument have been especially valuable. Nicholas Allen has also greatly helped by reading and commenting on the typescript. Chris Langford of the London School of Economics gave time to check the demography. Dr Gerald Turner of the Shining Hospital, Pokhara, helped to carry out a short medical survey and has read the passages on medicine and mortality. Sarah Harrison commented on the whole text and helped check the figures. Professor Jack Goody, Geoffrey Hawthorn, Iris Macfarlane and Dr D. Parkin have also read and commented on the whole manuscript and Dr E. A. Wrigley commented on the final chapter. To all of them, my warmest thanks. My greatest debt, however, is to Gill, who spent fifteen months in a Gurung village with me and helped in the collection and analysis of data. Amoebic dysentery was only part of the price she paid for this help; her support and ideas have influenced me very greatly.

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Abbreviations and conventions

All references to rupees (rs.) are to Nepalese currency, unless otherwise stated (for their value see below).

Several Nepalese and Gurung terms are frequently used because there is no real English equivalent; they are italicized. A *poju* (spelt *pucu* by Pignède) is a local diviner and magician. A *panchayat* is the local area of government, roughly equivalent to an English parish. The Gurungs are split into two strata, the *carjat* (four *jat*) and *sorajat* (sixteen *jat*). The words ‘class’ and ‘caste’ do not either of them exactly translate *jat* for it contains and omits elements of both. Where possible the word *jat*, meaning an endogamous group with certain restrictions on eating with other *jats*, is employed. Where it is translated as ‘class’ or ‘caste’ the misleading nature of such translation should be borne in mind. It should also be stressed that when *sora* and *car jats* are translated as ‘upper’ or ‘lower’ in the following pages, this implies nothing concerning their relative status, but only reflects the fact that the *carjat* tend to be wealthier in most Gurung villages.

Throughout, the term Gurung is used, though in the Gurung language itself (*tumul-kwi*) these peoples know themselves as *tumul-mae* (*mae* = a plural suffix). I also write of the village of Thak (pronounced Tark), though it is known in Gurung as Tolson.

All Nepalese and Gurung terms are italicized and, wherever possible, the spelling follows R. L. Turner’s *A Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language* (1931). Gurung words that do not appear in Turner’s book have been spelt as they are pronounced. The only stress added in such words is to the letter ‘e’ when it has the same sound as an *é* in French.

Castes as opposed to occupations are indicated by a capital letter; thus Blacksmith caste, blacksmith occupation.

As indicated below, a *muri* can be a measure of either area or volume. When it is used as a measure of land area it is written *sa muri* (*sa* = earth).

The word ‘rice’ is generally used for husked grain; paddy or unhusked grain is described as ‘unhusked rice’.

Full titles of all works cited in abbreviated form in the notes will be found in the bibliography.

Cambridge University Press

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Alan Macfarlane

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Weights, measures, and conversion factors

Monetary (Nepalese 1969)

1 mohr	=	$\frac{1}{2}$ rupee (rs.)
1 rs.	=	4p (approx.)
24 rs.	=	£1 (approx.)
10 rs.	=	\$1 (approx.)

Weight

Tola	=	one third of an ounce (approx.)
Dharni	=	3 kg (approx.)
1 kg	=	2.2046 lb
1 lb	=	0.4536 kg

Metric equivalents of weight, grains (from Nepal, Ministry of Economic Planning, Physical Input–Output Characteristics of Cereal Grain Production . . . Nepal, 1965/6)

Unhusked rice, 1 <i>muri</i>	=	50 kg
Rice (husked), 1 <i>muri</i>	=	68.6 kg
Wheat, 1 <i>muri</i>	=	67.3 kg
Maize, 1 <i>muri</i>	=	62.7 kg
Millet, 1 <i>muri</i>	=	67.3 kg

Volume of grain

1 <i>muthi</i>	=	handful (closed)
1 <i>mana</i>	=	10 <i>muthi</i> (about 1 pint or 57 cl)
1 <i>poti</i>	=	8 <i>mana</i>
1 <i>muri</i>	=	20 <i>poti</i> (Nep. <i>pāthi</i>)

Measures of area

4 <i>pathi</i>	=	1 <i>anna</i>
16 <i>anna</i>	=	1 <i>ropani</i>
1 <i>ropani</i>	=	0.13 acres
1 <i>ropani</i>	=	4 <i>sa muri</i>
1 <i>ropani</i>	=	0.051 hectares
1 hectare	=	2.4711 acres
1 sq. mile	=	640 acres

There is a parallel system employing some identical terms, the *sa muri* measurements, as follows:

10 <i>muthi</i>	=	1 <i>mana</i>
8 <i>mana</i>	=	1 <i>pathi</i>
20 <i>pathi</i>	=	1 <i>sa muri</i>
(4 <i>sa muri</i>)	=	(1 <i>ropani</i>)