
habitat himalaya[®]

A RESOURCES NEPAL FACTFILE * VOLUME VI NUMBER I 1999

THE BURDENS OF DEMOCRACY

Chandra Gurung, Ph.D.
Research Associate, Resources Nepal

My experience about the burdens of democracy takes place in Sikles, the second largest Gurung village in Nepal with a population of 2,500 people, where I was born and raised. In my early days, travelling some 50 km to Pokhara, the nearest market center, was not easy, especially in rainy season as flash floods would wash away trails and bridges. The only linkage to the outside world then, was through the 'home boys' who grew up to become the legendary Gurkhas. In Sikles, a very few could read and write and many had to go around the village to find one who could read the letter for them. For salt, my elders had walked for almost a month to Manang Village and beyond the Tibetan border, crossing over the 6,000 m Namun La (a high mountain pass), which was accessible two months a year. In those days of uncertainties and hardship, Sikles was governed by a strong sense of *riti-thiti* (local tradition) whereby the *mukhiya* (village headmen) and elders would decide together on community issues that affected their village. Their decisions were communicated through the *mhina* (village messenger) who would inform villagers. Sikles as a village then, was divided into six *thar* (neighborhood). Each of the *thar* had been given certain tasks such as building or repairing bridges or maintaining trails, and other social and cultural responsibilities. For example, every year three major bridges between Sikles and Pokhara, had to be built or repaired for the rainy and dry seasons, and had to be sturdy enough for cattle crossing. If some households had problems with their paddy plantation, the village community would volunteer, as per the *riti-thiti*. Although forest resources and forest products were not scarce then, collection of bamboo, honey and firewood was regulated and well-governed, suggesting sharing of common resources, was collective.

In the Eighties, the Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), was implemented by the King Mahendra Trust for Nature Conservation, with an intent to empower local communities to conserve their natural resources. As Sikles lies in the Annapurna Conservation Area (7,629 km²), notable achievements were the '*Ama Toli*' (mothers' group), evolved as the most effective group to carry out conservation-related programs and community development activities including a small micro-hydro electricity plant. With one high school and several primary schools established, there are more literate people around. Unlike in the past when everything had to be carried on man's back, now mules carry supplies. It appears that Sikles is fairing well as there are three rice and flour mills, several stores and tea shops.

Despite the Gurung *riti-thiti* and the long-term benefits accrued from the ACAP, a gradual decline in bonding the community was noticed after 1990s. With three general –and two local elections, Sikles is different and divided. The families have aligned themselves amongst several political parties not because they identified themselves with a set of political ideology but primarily for the reason that their relatives who had party membership, had asked them to do so. Now, belonging to a party means status and a break-up of their age-old relationship with their friends or neighbors. For example, two families living together for generations sharing a

common front yard, have now stopped be-friending as they belong to different political groups. Thus, Sikles, once guided by *riti-thiti* for generations, is now jealously guarded by some exotic politics. Unlike in the past, community issues connote political bearings. Worst of all, the politicians have divided the Gurungs of Sikles community into two groups based on their clan. The Gurungs, for example, have two major clans: *char jate* (four castes) and *sora jate* (sixteen castes). The politics have divided these two clans so strongly that *char jate* and *sora jate* are supposed to belong to democrats and communist parties, respectively. Such a division have led to a major conflict in the community and there are more interests now on individual gains rather than community benefits. Naturally, decisions on conservation-related programs and government supported community development projects are much influenced by party affiliation.

After the restoration of democracy in Nepal in early Nineties, it was thought a change would do good as past bureaucrats had little or no interest in the well being of Nepal's rural societies. But, the new order is also not robust enough. As a result, today's bureaucrats have become merely the pawns of politics. Individual interests, inter-party conflicts, and intra-party feuds, have made democracy as if it were an exotic species with loads of prospects and hidden cryptic plague. Sikles, my village, is a testimony. For example, when the government decided to install a community telephone service in Sikles, it was given to a Gurung family whose house is far away from the village but he belonged to the then ruling party. A couple of years later, when the government decided to provide four additional telephone sets under the community development scheme, the same family had flexed their political muscle to recall the decision as such would cut-down their monopoly and income from telephone services.

A constitutional government does not only mean the change of governance from one party to another or sharing of authority and trying to stay for a total control. In a country where poverty is widespread because mismanagement of natural resources and abuse of authority, the down-to-earth democracy is enabling village communities to share their resources wisely. But, that is not happening. Watching a delegation from a particular district to meet ministers and government officials in Kathmandu to get roofing materials for a school or cables for a suspension bridge suggest institutionalizing a democratic system is a long way for Nepal. Unless decisions and resources are decentralized, the economic disparity between Kathmandu and outside districts and between the urban elite and rural masses will continue to widen. These ill-usages and after-effects have undermine vitality of many traditional societies and village communities in Nepal. Now, many villages like Sikles are fleetingly down but not out of hope !

Resources Nepal is self-governing organization concerned with the well-being of the Himalayas. We examine issues on resource conservation on the grounds of human experiences and self-governance to have their applicability far beyond the circumstances in which they originate.

RESOURCES NEPAL
GPO Box 2448, Kathmandu, Nepal
habitat@resourceshimalaya.org
www.resourceshimalaya.org

HABITAT HIMALAYA, Volume 6, No. 1

- Pralad Yonzon, Ph.D., Team Leader, Resources Nepal: Biodiversity: Mistaken Identity & Unfinished Business.
- Chandra Gurung, Ph.D., Research Associate, Resources Nepal: The Burdens of Democracy.